

Layers Upon Layers

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This article by Akiva Novick about Israeli Haredi "Taliban Women" who cover themselves (and their daughters) from head to toe seems, at first glance, to be simply a portrait of a small, radical fringe group well outside the mainstream of Israeli Haredi society. But there are a number of elements of the story which offer glimpses of much larger problems within Israeli Haredi society, far beyond the confines of this small group.

It is troubling enough that anyone feels the need to invent a new restriction upon Jewish women being seen. Such a move, *as a sudden, contemporary innovation*, takes on a very different flavor from a Muslim woman's decision to follow an ancient practice which has been in her family, or at least her faith, for many generations. (This is not to take a position regarding Islamic discussions over modesty standards; it is only to assert that this Haredi fringe group is doing something entirely different since they are not operating on the basis of a well-established custom.) And it is good to read in the article that the majority of Haredi society opposes this new, restrictive decision.

But the manner of some of the opposition is equally troubling on its own. "'Taliban women' and their daughters are outcasts on haredi streets," Novick writes:

They encounter looks of disgust, bullying and constant humiliation. M., a member of the anti-Zionist Hasidic movement Toldos Aharon... has seen young men come up to these women trying to pull off their head covers. "There are guys who will approach a woman and say things like: 'You look like a suicide bomber' or 'I guess your face is ugly if you keep it hidden.' There are also those who spit on them and curse at them, or just badger them with cameras so they'll run away."

Yes, there's no better way to stand up for the dignity of women than by cruelly bullying women. How nice that we can also pull in a stereotype of all Muslim women who dress a certain way as being terrorists.

Speaking of terrorism, I am also troubled by the "Taliban women" label itself, implying an equivalence between women who are seeking to start a new custom within a religion to a regime which used extreme violence to enforce their restrictive dress code against all women in the territory they controlled.

Novick goes on to write that some of the Haredi opposition to this trend comes from the mere fact of its being an innovation:

"We can accept young girls who returned to their faith as long as they accept the rules and speak Yiddish," said [a Haredi] businessman. "What worked for our fathers for hundreds of years still works today, and no newly-religious person can change that."

Yes, this new light-of-day-phobic dress code is in the same category as the terrible transgression of speaking modern Hebrew instead of Yiddish. But wait! There's more...

A Neturei Karta delegation approached haredi rabbis and presented them with findings regarding the "Taliban women." They said these women refused to have sexual intercourse with their husbands or take off their head covers even when they walk around the house or in the mikveh.

Now here is Neturei Karta, a different radical fringe group, a group which often seems to have no objection at all to Holocaust denial or genuine terrorism. But women holding back sexually from their husbands? *This* is unacceptable. (Paging **Aristophanes?**)

So let's recap: some women want to restrict women from being seen, but they are being opposed violently by men who insult them by way of stereotyping Muslim women as terrorists. Some of these men are upset that the women are doing *anything* new (Heaven forbid), and others are upset because they are withholding sex from their husbands. All these crimes, to some of the men in question, are worse than Holocaust denial or terrorism, which is to say equal to the crime of not speaking Yiddish, but don't worry, because to some others they are only as bad as the Taliban.

To be clear, the above paragraph is a gross oversimplification. It is unfair, and is meant to be tongue-in-cheek. But like the voluminous clothing worn by the women in this story, the story itself is many-layered and heavy. I wish I could conclude it was not worthy of attention. Too often the media tends to play up negative aspects of the Haredi world, and downplay the positive sides of living in an insular community. I would like to avoid jumping on the bandwagon of criticizing Haredim. Orthodox Judaism has many interpretations, and includes many conceptions of gender which are a far cry from the impulse on display in this group. See, for just one example, **this 1995 article by Rivkah Myers Shifren**, which argues that traditional (Orthodox) gender roles in ritual do not in any way constitute degradation or "inequality" for women.

But just as an observer of Orthodoxy would be unwise to ignore the liberal/traditionalist perspective represented by Myers Shifren, it would be unwise to ignore this group of far-right Haredi women, small though the group may be -- and it would be even less wise to ignore the larger issues and questions indicated by the *reactions to* that group from the Haredi mainstream.