

Musings

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Negative Effects of Extreme Standards of Sexual Modesty and Gender Separation

Jewish law instituted prohibitions, guidelines and safeguards regarding the interaction between men and woman- prohibitions of abiding alone with, touching and looking at a person of the opposite sex. It did not institute separate sides of the street for men and women to walk, or separate hours for men and women in supermarkets or obligating women to sit in the rear of busses.

Menachem Shloss, a haredi psychotherapist in Beit Shemesh claims that “a clear result of extremes in tzniut (modesty) is ironically, pornography. People with such mindsets (that women should be hidden from view) are far more likely to perceive normal human drives as an addiction issue.”

Dr. Nachum Klafter, a prominent orthodox American Jewish psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and academic, wrote in an unpublished article:

“I have spoken to therapists who work in the Hassidic communities of Monsey, Williamsburg, and Boro Park, and I have been surprised to hear these therapists express the same distinct impression about the consequences of the extreme measures which have been implemented in their communities to enforce gender separation: These severe standards for tzniyut (modesty) and gender separation have lowered the threshold for sexual stimulation, which has led to an increase in sexual problems. These therapists assert that, compared to the same communities twenty years ago when standards for modesty were less severe, there is now an increased frequency of sexual obsessions, compulsive viewing of pornography, and forbidden sexual behaviors including adultery and homosexuality. Gender separation, when it becomes so extreme, causes a shift in the locus of control from internal to external. With this approach, we no longer aim to produce a community of pious persons. Rather, we are striving to engineer a community where men simply never see women.

As a result of this approach, young haredi men absorb the message that women are primarily sexual objects and one has to be always on guard not to fall prey to their temptations and do not have the opportunity to learn how to interact respectfully with women or to appreciate and value them as for their intelligence, personality traits, talents and contributions to society. Many young haredi men feel uncomfortable speaking to females and they avoid looking at them even though these women are modestly dressed.”

Ultra-orthodox publications do not include pictures of modestly dressed women and even altered the photograph of the new Israeli government so that the faces of the female ministers were either pixellated or removed entirely. A sign for a Bet Shemesh Women’s Health Clinic was spray-painted over the word “Isha” (woman).

I recall an amusing incident that occurred many years ago that has relevance to the effects of indoctrination of extreme modesty standards. While climbing into her highchair, the skirt of my four year old haredi granddaughter was accidentally lifted above her knees. When she noticed this she began crying hysterically, “I am not tznuva” over and over again. After several minutes, her haredi mother finally calmed her down and asked her to put on her pajamas. Several minutes later she exited from her room completely naked and ran around the house singing, dancing and laughing until her mother succeeded in dressing her.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, z”l, one of the most respected decisors of the 20th century, in response to a question regarding sitting next to a woman in public transportation stated that, “There is no prohibition to come into contact with women since it is not done in a sexually arousing manner”.

Rabbi Haim of Volozhin (18th century), one of the outstanding Talmudic scholars of his day, discusses the paradox of lustful thoughts, maintaining that when a man commits to never looking at a woman, his desire will burn like fire. The very thing he seeks to avoid will come to dominate his mind.

Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch, (19th century), a prominent scholar and spiritual leader, in discussing the basics of education, makes

the point that if we wish that our children to be protected against extreme weather conditions, we should accustom them while they are still young to be exposed to harsh weather conditions in order to develop resistance and be inoculated against severe storms and torrential rains. This is true for physical health and also true for many aspects of life.*

“Gedolim Are Human”

Several years ago I sent an article to a haredi periodical which included the following interesting anecdote:

Karlinisk (1984) recorded an incident that took place in Warsaw in 1877. Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, an outstanding Talmud scholar, religious personality, and leader was overcome by a deep depression upon the incarceration of his highly revered and beloved mentor, Rabbi Joshua Leib Diskin, on false charges by the anti-Semitic authorities. On the Sabbath Rabbi Soloveitchik ate only the minimal amount of food necessary to fulfill the requirements of Jewish law. He isolated himself in his room and refused to receive any visitors, not even his closest students and colleagues. He discontinued going to the synagogue and teaching. A specialist who was called in to treat him recommended total rest, but added that if by chance the rabbi's spirit could be

*R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, Educational Foundations pp. 51-53:

If we want to make sure our children do not catch a cold when they leave the house the first time to breathe air, we have to keep them guarded from any contact with the air and the wind. But if we want our children to be protected against winds and storms and develop immunity even in the face of bad weather, we must get them used, while at a young age, to go out and walk the streets despite the strong winds, and let them develop resistance against storms and heavy rains. This rule pertains to guarding one's physical health, and is even more pertinent regarding the field of spirituality and ethics. We can not be satisfied with teaching our children to observe Torah and mitzvot inside the house and the family, amongst people who share the same views and outlook on life. ... Our children will not remain forever under the wings of our household upbringing. A day will come when they will come into contact with the members of other nations and with Jews who maintain foreign views from their own. We must strive and endeavor that even in a foreign environment they will remain faithful to the education received at home, to the ethics of the Torah and to its mitzvot. ...

suddenly stimulated, healing would take place in a matter of minutes.

Attempts by his family, friends, students, and colleagues to pull him out of his depression failed. Even the efforts of the renowned scholar and hasidic leader, the Master of Gur, failed to lift his colleague's depression through encouragement, support, and intellectual stimulation. One day, upon hearing about Rabbi Soloveitchik's deteriorating mental and physical condition, Rabbi Meir Simha Ha'Kohen, a brilliant scholar and student of Rabbi Soloveitchik, hurried to visit his teacher. Rabbi Meir attempted unsuccessfully to engage his rabbi in a talmudic discussion, as the latter was totally engulfed by worry for his beloved colleague. At one point, Rabbi Meir quoted some of the Torah novella that he had heard from Rabbi Diskin when he had visited him in jail some months previously. As Rabbi Meir discerned some reaction from his teacher, he began to challenge and criticize Rabbi Diskin's new insights and interpretations on certain talmudic topics and vigorously disputed the conclusions. Upon hearing criticism of his beloved teacher, Rabbi Soloveitchik began to defend him by quoting texts and rabbinical authorities and explaining and analyzing his teacher's Torah. Instead of remitting, Rabbi Meir continued to challenge Rabbi Diskin's Torah, which prompted Rabbi Soloveitchik to raise his voice and marshal all his brilliance, analytic skills, and energy to refute his student's arguments and prove that his mentor was correct. Rabbi Meir soon began to raise other talmudic topics to which Rabbi Soloveitchik also responded in an increasingly intense manner.

After concluding their talmudic deliberations, Rabbi Soloveitchik accompanied his visitor to the synagogue, where he had not gone for a long time. Shortly afterward, Rabbi Soloveitchik resumed his teaching and regular activities as the spiritual leader of his community.

(Karlinsky, C. *The First of the Brisk Dynasty* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute, 1984, Hebrew).

The editor informed me that he would be interested in publishing the paper on condition that I changed the wording regarding Rabbi

Soloveitchik's emotional state from being depressed as Karlinski wrote, to being distressed regarding his beloved pupil's situation. He explained that it is disrespectful to describe a "Godol" as being depressed (even though the description of his behavior and emotional condition clearly pictured a man suffering from a deep clinical depression).

Dr. Nachum Klafter, in a posting on the Nefesh International inter-serve, opined that psychotherapy treatment should be conceptualized as separate from and therefore not conflicting with Torah beliefs and observance of halacha.

"Torah study and Torah observance are not treatments for psychopathology. They are the path given to us by G-d and our sages to refine ourselves for the purpose of greater awareness of and service toward our Creator. Individuals suffering from personality disorders, mood disorders, severe anxiety disorders, psychotic disorders, and other significant psychopathology are impaired in their ability to serve G-d and study Torah. This may be because of straightforward cognitive limitations or behavioral problems. Or, more likely, it may be due to impaired ability to engage in meaningful interpersonal relationships. Relationship problems, in turn, severely impair a person's ability to take advice, benefit from spiritual direction, make friends, work or hold jobs, get married, provide effective parenting for their children, and participate in community responsibilities. Such patients will not benefit from a *mussar schmooze* (ethics talk) or a *humra* (strict interpretation). Such patients need *treatment*. After they have received successful treatment, they will be more capable of pursuing Torah and mitzvot, if they wish to. After they have received successful treatment, they will be more likely to benefit from mussar. In other words, their free choice is limited by their psychological difficulties. With successful treatment, their free choice is expanded. ... Torah and mitzvot are not mental health treatments. Torah study and strict adherence to the halacha do not automatically protect us from leading lives that are unbalanced, unhappy, and unfulfilled. ..."

Rabbi Simcha Feuerman, president of the Nefesh International organization and a psychotherapist published an excellent article entitled, "Are 'Gedolim Stories' Good for Chinuch", (Ideas,

December 1, 2010). Discussing “Difficult Emotions and Mental Illness”, he writes: “Not every sage was successful in managing his emotions. Learning about this can be a great source of strength and comfort to young people and adults who struggle with this as well. The Gemara Bava Metzia (84a) discusses the great despondency felt by Rabbi Yohanan subsequent to the death of his star student and study partner, Resh Lakish. Rabbi Yohanan felt that he had a hand in causing Resh Lakish’s death as there was a disagreement between them involving decorum and respect, which may have incurred a Divine wrath. Rabbi Yohanan lost his sanity as a result of his intense unresolved grief for Resh Lakish. Despite all the efforts of his colleagues to soothe and comfort him, Rabbi Yohanan would tear his clothes crying, “Where are you, son of Lakish, where are you son of Lakish?” Ultimately, the rabbis prayed that Rabbi Yohanan die, possibly so he no longer suffer or perhaps to limit the disgrace of a *talmid hakham*.

Bava Metzia is a staple for any aspiring Torah scholar; so this illuminating *aggada* is not some obscure *medrash pelia* hiding in a rarely studied tome. Why is it then that this story is so rarely discussed? Is it threatening that a great sage could suffer from mental illness? Perhaps it is even more threatening to consider that this was not an illness brought on by some hidden disease or a “chemical imbalance”. Rather, it was due to no more and no less than the passionate longing and powerful emotions that beat within Rabbi Yohanan’s heart. ... This passion was beyond reason and Rabbi Yohanan’s ability to manage, which eventually made Rabbi Yohanan insane with grief.

A *frum* person suffering from depression and mental illness could find much comfort in knowing that even the greatest of sages struggled with his emotions, and dare we say it, ultimately failed.”

In the winter of 1902-1903, Rabbi Shalom Dov-Ber Schneersohn, the 5th Lubavitcher Rebbe (known by the acronym RaSHaB), from a scion of Chassidic Rabbis, travelled from Russia to Vienna to consult with the famous Professor Sigmund Freud for a bout of depression.

Liubov Ben-Noun, in his article, “What was the Mental Disease that Afflicted King Saul?”, discusses the case of the biblical King Saul, the first King of Israel, who ruled the country 3,000 years ago. Evaluation of the passages referring to King Saul’s disturbed behavior indicates that he was afflicted by a mental disorder. Among many disorders that could have affected the King, manic episode with psychotic phases, major depression with psychotic features, mixed episode, bipolar disorder I, dysthymic disorder later developed into bipolar disorder, or nonspecific psychotic disorder are the most likely. And among these diagnoses, bipolar disorder I is the most acceptable. (Clinical Case Studies, October, 2008, 2, 4, 270-282).

Rav Yitzchak Hutner, ZT”L, in a letter to a talmid who was depressed from his failures, was highly critical of gedolim stories that only spoke of their great stature, without relating any of their personal struggles and missteps on their way to greatness. See Pahad Yitzhak, Igrot #39; khtavim, #128.