

Rabbi Genende Keeps in Touch  
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The digital erasure of the two women (Hillary Clinton and Audrey Tomasen) from the iconic photo in the Situation Room at the White House raised hackles but also some interesting issues. It got us thinking about the image of women in the Chareidi world, its ramifications for Orthodoxy (if not Judaism) in general. It also has implications about the boundaries between private and public, respect for the truth and the Chareidi mindset.

While modern Orthodoxy has long-championed the greater inclusion of women in Jewish public life, the Chareidi (ultra-Orthodox) world still struggles with, if not outrightly rejects it. While they have the right to read the Torah through their lenses, they don't have the right to impose this on others as the "Torah-true way". I don't have a problem with the Chareidi world wanting to maintain standards of tzniut or modesty (and we could all do with a little more modesty and a lot less exhibitionism). I do have a problem with their zealotry, their conviction that they have the G-d given right to make women sit at the back of the bus or pressure them to move out of their allotted seats on an El AL plane because they don't want to sit next to them. I have a problem with those Chareidim who are so obsessed with the depiction of women that they minimise essential Jewish and Halachik concepts like "*kavod habriyut*" (respect for humanity created in G-d's image).

To airbrush out pictures of women (which is done regularly not only in *Di Tzeitung* but also in other Chareidi publications) is a distortion of the truth which in Halacha is called *gneivat da'at* (being deceitful) and *midvar sheker tirchak* (keep away from falsehood). The apologetic statement of *Di Tzeitung* Issued after the event does little to assure me: "Our photo editor...did not read the 'fine print'...forbidding any changes in the photo (by the White House)...The readership of the *Tzeitung* believe that women should be appreciated for who they are and what they do, not for what they look like". I am not assured by this because the *Tzeitung* producers and readers are 'fine-print' *shmekkers*; they often focus on the most stringent minutiae of Halachik practise. And I am not assured by their reverence for what women do because this is usually restricted to a very narrow area. And anyway shouldn't men be entitled to the same appreciation for they who they are rather than what look like?

More worrying is the attitude of a large segment of the Chareidi world towards women and modesty in general. A group of Chareidi women and girls in Bet Shemesh have begun to wear Muslim garb covering their whole body (including their heads and faces) with rabbinic approval. There is an increasing tending in the Orthodox world to separate the sexes at schools, weddings, funerals and shule events. This was not the norm in the Orthodox world in the past. While modest, respectful, appropriate behaviour between men and women is what the Torah expects, it does not expect a total separation of the sexes. Total isolation leads to a warped worldview and ironically an unnecessary emphasis on sexuality as the defining mark of humanity. As Rabbi Marc Angel has recently remarked: "It reduces all humans to sexual objects unable to conduct themselves with propriety, decency and morality...this philosophy is grotesque...if we do not stand up against these tendencies to isolate the genders, then don't be surprised if they become accepted among the rest of Orthodoxy." He also notes that such views cause more Jews to become alienated from Orthodox and Halachik practise.

The *Zeitung* debate highlights a wider issue: the breakdown in the walls between public and private. In an internet world you can no longer hide behind the walls of your community; anything you print goes viral immediately. As the wise rabbis of Pirkei Avot advised long ago: "Be careful with your words". Hopefully the Chareidi world will become more sensitive to this and to the recognition that their views and opinions are impacting on all Jews and our relationship with society.

Let us in the modern-Orthodox world encourage them to be more inclusive in their ways and views. You need fences for protection but you also need gateways and openings so that you can grow and move freely in Hashem's varied and colourful world.

Shabbat Shalom

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