

Belz and Women Drivers

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There has been much neurotic outcry about the Belz Chasidic yeshiva in London (note, not in Israel) for issuing a ban on women driving and threatening to expel children from its schools if their mothers arrived to drop them off or pick them up in cars (which, under pressure, has now, thankfully been withdrawn).

Forget that most Chasidic dynasties around the world and leading rabbinical experts disagree with those Belz rabbis. National newspapers got their knickers in an orgasmic twist over what they are describing as Judaism's answer to Saudi Arabia. Non-Orthodox Jews claim to be offended by association. The UK Minister of Education declared she would open an inquiry into this abuse of women's rights. She didn't need to, but I assume she will now also open an inquiry into Muslim women being forced to cover up from head to toe or marry men imposed on them by their parents or not being allowed out at night. But of course they won't. Imagine a community of Saudis and Omanis living in London forbidding their wives to drive. You really think the government would intervene? Or in the USA they would try to insist that the Amish be allowed to drive cars? I don't think so.

Why do they care? Surely what Charedi Jews freely do amongst themselves is their business even if I personally disagree? And if there are women in Belz who are unhappy about it (and all my information tells me that most are not), it is for them and their supporters to intervene.

Every religion contains those who choose to live lives different, holier or more ascetic, than the people around them. Indeed in most societies there are groups, of a social or financial character that choose to live in segregated or gated communities. Such communities provide security and safety, whether physical or moral. They often distinguish themselves from other groups through distinctive dress and custom and regulations. But they are all voluntary in the sense that in theory one can always walk away from them. The amazing fact is that most do not. They enjoy the charity, security, and the support of the closed community, even if in many cases they are neither equipped mentally or financially to leave if they wanted to. Most human beings opt for their status quo. Rebels are always a minority.

Ultra-Orthodox Charedi Judaism fits these generalizations. The laws of free lands respect their choices of dress and behavior, just as they respect the right of Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist men and women to wear their specific styles of dress and those who choose to become celibate or refuse to watch television, or to go to movies, or deprive themselves of watching porn or gambling or going to strip clubs. We say, in our free societies it is their right.

The state only intervenes usually (though not always) to ensure that the Law of the Land is obeyed. I believe it should. IT should do so fairly and

consistently. But very often religious and other minority interest groups lobby for exemptions and sometimes get them. And the state is usually selective and politically motivated as to when, where and against whom it acts. I think of New York mayor De Blasio's refusal to deal with their specific custom that some Charedi communities insist on for circumcision. Both in the UK and the USA there is a current issue over how society can or should coerce religious people to follow state laws that they find offensive or disagree with.

There is a blurry line here between allowing people choices to refuse to do things that offend their religious attitudes, like gay marriage and adoptions, or allowing females to function in what some consider to be exclusively male roles, and the extent to which exemptions can be tolerated for religious values. But the debate is out there. If I have a gripe against Charedi extremism it is that they usually tolerate no debate. And if I criticize the outcry it is because it is clearly motivated by animus.

My problems are with religions when they try to impose too much on often reluctant followers or on nonbelievers. I object to the way in which secluded societies tend to protect their felons and abusers and the way they often limit the opportunities open to women.

Despite appearances to the contrary, the Charedi world is going through a process of change and adjustment as more and more of its followers refuse to accept many of its social nostras. Increasingly the voices for change are female. Because most men were required to remain life long students of Torah, Charedi women were always encouraged to go out and work. As a result, they are often better educated and more worldly than men, occupying top jobs in commerce, education and administration.

But they still cannot hold positions of power in Charedi parties, and they cannot stand as candidates for the Knesset. You might think they happily accept this, but if you have seen the recent TED talk by Esty Shushan in Jerusalem you will know that many Charedi women are very unhappy with their sense of disempowerment, subordination, and victimization. And she herself admits that many Charedi women object to her outspokenness as much as men. The pressure of conformity is very powerful.

The problem that religious women face everywhere is simply male chauvinism that often disguises itself in religious terminology. The most obvious is in divorce where men have to give it and often refuse to unless paid off. If a woman does not mind leaving the community, she can go to civil courts for her freedom. But if she wants to stay within the community, she is trapped. The same goes for many religious Muslims and Hindus. The subordination of women has been the default position of all societies until very recently. Religions are, by nature, conservative and very slow to adapt.

The secular, love to highlight religious abuses. But too many of them are willing to turn a blind eye to what is wrong morally in their society. They will complain about women being restricted in Charedi communities, but minimize the pressures exerted on women as a result of the issues and tensions that a modern society imposes. They bridle at the hijab, take

France's policy for example, but have no problem with the skimpiest of mini skirts and dressing children as sexual objects.

In principle we should not refuse people the right to their strictnesses. But what we can do is to help those who want to see change from within. First, we have to establish refuges and support structures for those who refuse to accept discrimination and second-class status. Secondly, we must fund and support those women who are willing to campaign against inequality from within. And finally, we have to tackle hard line Charedi male chauvinists, either by making financial support contingent on changing their attitudes or by subjecting them to critique.

In Israel, where Charedi power is strongest and most pervasive, Charedi women have more opportunity than ever before. The law has supported their rights, whereas politics has tended to hold them back. If enclaves will not willingly address their internal problems, those of us who care about them must not desist from engaging. And if none of this works, we can always turn to satire. Double standards will not help anyone.