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Behind the Veil of *Tzniyut*: Using Religious Modesty to Block Women as Ritual Leaders

Rabba Sara Hurwitz

President and Co-Founder, Maharat

American Jews, secular and religious alike, have been united in their rejection of Jewish extremists' headline-grabbing attempts to keep young girls and women out of public spaces in Beit Shemesh, Israel on the grounds of religious modesty.

Observers, journalists and pundits have rationalized these actions to be little more than the misguided work of self-fancied *Haredi* Jews known as *Sicarii*. The *Sicarii* is a group much like ancient religious zealots bearing the same name, who drove Judaism to near destruction with their radicalism and uncompromising benightedness in 66 A.D. These latter-day, rebels, who notoriously spit on a modestly dressed eight-year old girl on her way to school, screamed epithets, and removed benches from public bus shelters, are indeed fundamentalists.

Their misdeeds, however, bring to light an extreme manifestation of a subtler, yet deeply rooted perception of *tzniyut*; it also reveals how the interpretation of religious modesty has cultivated an underlying resistance to and exclusion of women assuming ritual leadership roles in Jewish synagogue life in Israel and America.

Thankfully, most women are not spat on and harassed in public; however, female spiritual leaders are not welcome as bona fide members of Modern Orthodox rabbinic and professional networks. Female scholars are not featured in scholarly journals, nor are they invited to speak on public, mainstream panels. Currently, there are only two female heads of coed Orthodox Jewish day schools in America. And, with some notable exceptions – notable because they are exceptions – women for the most part do not have roles in synagogue lay or religious leadership.

Far too often, *tzniyut* is cited as the reason for the imbalance. In June 2010, after being graciously welcomed to speak at the Young Israel of Hewlett, Long Island, a rabbi in the Long Island community, who would likely never identify with the *Sicarii*, wrote an acerbic essay lamenting my very presence as an ordained Rabba, or spiritual leader: "Leading Torah scholars have condemned the appointment of a woman to a rabbinic position as 'a breach of *tzniyus* [modesty]' ...because of the event, this coming Tisha B'Av, we will have something else to cry about."

Modesty is the *halakha* or Jewish code of law, most readily summoned upon as the basis to exclude women from public leadership roles. Yet it is fairly typical for certain Modern Orthodox congregants to also be regular consumers of "immodest" television programs, films, and entertainment. These individuals deal with women in the secular boardroom and courtroom, but they do not want women standing before a shul because, well, it's immodest.

When taken to an extreme, it is considered a "breach of modesty" for women to appear on billboards or to travel with men; when walking outdoors in certain communities, it is deemed immodest for girls and women to wear clothing that does not cover their bodies from head to toe.

But should the same principle of *tzniyut* be invoked in Modern Orthodox communities as a way of preventing women from offering a few words of Torah from the pulpit, from announcing the time for mincha on Shabbat afternoon, from reciting *Kaddish*, the mourner's prayer, or from even holding a fully adorned Torah for a few precious moments?

In fact, *Halakha* does not support the eradication of women from public leadership and ritual life. The concept of *tzniyut*, with regard to women's dress and conduct has its origins in Psalms (45:14), "The honor of the daughter of the king is within..." and therefore, there are those who suggest, women must remain hidden.

However, responding to a question about women assuming leadership positions in Israeli society, Rav Uziel, the first Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, wrote that women can and should become leaders in Israeli society, "...for all Israel are holy people, and her women are holy, and are not to be suspect of breach of modesty and morality." (Responsa Piskei Uziel Siman 44).

What's more, the concept of *tzniyut*, according to *Derekh Eretz Zuta* 7, teaches that *tzniyut* extends beyond the way women dress. "A Torah scholar should be modest in eating and drinking...in his walking, in dress..." Modesty is a fundamental value. But modesty is not limited to women. Men and women alike must strive to conduct themselves in a modest, humble manner.

Tzniyut, therefore, cannot be brandished as the reason that women cannot hold public leadership roles. *Halakha* should not be manipulated into a smokescreen shielding men and sidelining women who have the potential to enhance our community. It's imperative that the Modern Orthodox community come out from behind the veil of *tzniyut*, and actively seek out ways for women to not only be seen and heard, but to serve and to lead.

Advancing opportunities for vibrant women's leadership is our goal at Yeshivat Maharat. By providing women with a vigorous spiritual and textual education, we are creating a path not only enabling women to be recognized as religious authorities, but to help combat religious gender inequality. Certain women, just like certain men, have the skills and aptitude for Torah study, and should be afforded the opportunity to serve the Jewish community as *halakhic* and spiritual leaders and role models. And yet, with a few exceptions, women are not encouraged to pursue authoritative positions of religious leadership. Yeshivat Maharat, is working to change the status quo.

In addition to Yeshivat Maharat, there are a few other enclaves emerging as inclusive and courageous supporters of women's advancement into public religious leadership roles: Beit Hillel, which describes itself as "Tolerant Torani Leadership" is an Orthodox network of men and women that has just formed in Israel with the explicit mission of "promoting the status of women" as well as combating religious fundamentalism. In addition, a group of American Orthodox women recently came together to form a network with the purpose of advancing women's leadership in the Orthodox movement. There are of course, individual rabbis and communities— the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale is one example— that have helped forged a path for women like myself to become full members of the clergy, despite tremendous criticism and political pressure.



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Yeshivat Maharat is working to develop and train a cadre of knowledgeable, forthright women who have already begun to emerge as spiritual leaders. We are already witnessing the impact these talented women have begun to have on Jewish communities around the world. One of our second year students, Rori Picker Neiss, is an intern at Beit Chaverim, an Orthodox synagogue in Stamford, CT. When asked about her internship experience, she says: "Some people are interested in talking with me because I'm a woman; others want to learn Torah and Judaism not because I'm a woman, but because they want to discuss different perspectives. I love the fact that I'm not just viewed as a female presence, but as a member of the team."

To think that the voices of our graduates may be muted because the community is unjustly afraid to grant them authority to serve Clal Yisrael is disheartening and frightening. I am so grateful that we live in a country in which women have equal access to many aspects of our society. And yet, under the guise of halakha, women are being stopped from asserting religious authority. It's time for us to come out from behind the veil of *tzniyut*.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.