

What To Do About The Women*

(*with glossary on page 15)

By Talya Jankovits

The main sanctuary of the synagogue was packed full of rabbis. Seventy to be precise, and these rabbis were very precise. Seventy of the greatest leaders and scholars from around the world gathered, shvitzing and stinking up the room with the pungent odor of sweat. It was August and the air conditioning unit of the synagogue was on the fritz. Black hats were removed and placed on laps. Velvet kippahs slid around balding heads beneath wide palms, mopping up gathering rivulets that threatened to cascade down hair-lined cheekbones. They blended into a mass, the lot of them in shades of white and black. Varying lengths of beards and peyus. All signs of their unequivocal qualifications to be in that room.

The shvitzing was a problem. A distraction. One that needed dealing with. Something these men knew much about; how to eradicate distraction. One of the Rabbis used his kosher phone to call a relative who was in HVAC. Word spread amongst the men that help was on the way. The room erupted in mutterings of *shkoyach*. Quick successions of hands patted the back of the fast thinker, spreading the heat amongst each other's bodies.

They passed around cold bottles of soda and seltzer. Poured the cool beverages for each other in too-small flimsy plastic cups, likely bought in bulk to serve at weekly shabbas kiddushes. The kinds of cups a child would fill to the top with a bubbly pink sweet drink that they would inevitably grasp too tightly, spilling the unnaturally colored liquid over their shabbas dress or shirt. Even now, a few cups spilled over from the wobbly tables

after several arthritic knees accidentally bumped into a corner or edge, the cheap cups knocking over like dominoes. They mopped up the spills best they could, but it was hot. And they were all a bit irate at the issue at hand. At the delicacy of why they all came together in the first place. They were all married. Or widowers. Most had daughters of their own and granddaughters, sisters, and aunts. This was a topic dear to them all, everyone was invested. The fact that they all gathered from around the world, Israel, United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, was a testament to how seriously they took this matter. They were the leaders of these plagued communities, burdened with the responsibility to resolve the issue of the women.

A fist pounded on a table. The noise traveled across the room. A call for silence. The zealous fist continued, pounding without rhythm but with distinct direction. The robust baritone chatter of the men slowly receded to a low buzz until the only sound at all was the hammering of a fist. Who exactly made Rabbi Haredi the MC of the summit, no one knew. He was a macher. Part of Brooklyn Hatzalah. Founder of one of the largest kosher soup kitchens in the New York Tri State. A pilot. A singer with two albums. A father to thirteen children, seven of whom were daughters. He was also the one who had called the relative in HVAC, earning him more respect at this point than his other qualifications.

He stood in front of a row of three chairs, behind which sat Rabbi Binah, Rabbi Mishpacha and Rabbi Ami. These three prestigious rabbis were the holy of holies. Having them here was an indication of the seriousness of the threat at hand. The three leaders were given a stage to sit on and a table at which to place their cheap plastic cups. Rabbi Binah continued to wear his shtreimel despite the heat, while Maran Mishpacha,

wore only his white turban and Rabbi Ami placed his black hat on the table before himself, precariously close to said cups.

“If I can have your attention, please! Please, settle down. It’s nice to have a schmooze, to connect and network but we really have to stay focused. We are here to address an important matter. To use Torah and halacha to decide what we are to do about the women!”

The men nodded their heads with their whole beings. A vibration of confounded agreement that emanated in groans of pain. They *were* in pain! These men hurt at the *sakana* placed before them. Never before had anyone ever been confronted with such a mysterious ailment in the Orthodox Jewish community. But if anyone could figure out how to solve this, it was surely these men.

“We have here with us, the greatest leading minds, the *gedolei hador*! We are all humbled to be in each other’s company, leaders of communities, *talmidei chachamim*! And under the supervision and leadership of Rabbi Binah, Maran Mishapacha and Rabbi Ami, our goal together is to find the source of our predicament and develop the proper guidelines in order to help eradicate whatever this terrible...terrible, um, illness, that has stricken our wives, mothers, and daughters, may they all live long and healthy until 120!”

The verbal agreements reverberated up and down the rows of men. A sea of black and white. A wave of muted tones dedicated to a life of piety and spirituality. Their faces each distinct yet similar. Varying beards of size, length, and color. Sideburns bushy or long and curled. Hair trimmed and neat in trendless cuts. At a quick glance, with their unspoken uniform of similarity, one might mistake one for another. Not just a stranger, but a young child seeking his father in a crowd or a wife eager to find her

husband at the end of a simcha. A brief glimpse might confuse one man with another. Yet, their faces were bare and exposed. Open for scrutiny. The variation of one eyebrow's shape from another. A scar on a cheek leftover from a childhood playground incident. A fuzzy mole on a jawline. A pair of blue eyes or green. Thin pink lips versus a pronounced thicker lower lip. A deep wrinkle on a forehead. All their faces, bare and wonderous, celebrated before crowds such as this one. Standing at a bimah before a congregation of praying congregants. Singing on stage at a wedding or bar mitzvah. Enlarged on giant screens in Metlife stadium. These were the faces of the G-d. Likened in His image.

And right now, their faces wore expressions of concern. An easily discernible emotion displayed for others to see in knitted eyebrows. Sunken eyes. Clenched mouths. Pale skin. And lately, it was only each other's faces they saw. Their own. Their son's. Their father's. Their friend's. No one, not a single person in that room, or in any room at all, whether it be there in that synagogue or France, Latvia or Kalamazoo, had seen the face of a woman for several weeks.

It begs explaining, that none of these seventy men had ever sought out to look at a woman's face to begin with. In fact, it was these very men, these great leaders who all had the foresight to do everything in their power to assure that no one would unnecessarily see the face of a woman unless on a need-to basis. A husband and a wife. A mother to her son. A daughter to her father. If need be, if circumstances should require it, perhaps an unintentional glancing of a female relative. Maybe there is a family seder. Maybe someone needs to drop off mishaloch manot to a neighbor. But certainly not to unnecessarily view a female face. In fact, wasn't it their own foresight to create proper gates and boundaries to assure a female face

would not be gazed upon! Wasn't it these worthy individuals who gathered to draft the letters of public defamation of the publications whose pages were corrupted with the offensive images of a woman's face! It was because of their hard work and dedication that all the publications began to phase out the inclusion of any photos featuring the faces of women.

At first, it seemed a coincidence that an issue from one magazine or the next had no particular need to feature a woman. Yes, the women noticed. They've been known to read too. At first, they were perplexed, but not concerned. But then the lack of representation no longer felt covert, or coincidental. Issue after issue, there seemed to be an auspicious absence. A deliberate one. Where were the women? The mothers? The girls?

During one call to another, mention of it arose. Did you happen to notice? Isn't it strange? The women were confounded. They were a huge portion of the subscribers. Some of them even contributed little letters featured to the editors. Some were actually full-time staff on the editorials themselves. Yet they remained faceless, their physical identities hidden. Only a name accompanying their publication. But the men, their photos appeared alongside everything. Even advertisements for long tznius shabbas robes! And the little girls. Their faces were scribbled out on public advertisements. Pixilated, blurred until entirely removed from publications as well. School libraries sifted through picture books with thick-tipped permanent markers, blacking out any images of girls, even in all-girls schools. The movement was spreading. But who, they all wondered, was orchestrating such mass efforts to remove the images of girls and women?

Statements began circulating in Yiddish, Hebrew and English, then translated over and over to native tongues.

It is not enough that the daughters of Israel dress modestly, the manifestation of their modesty must extend to all visual aids, including and not limited to printed photographs. What is plaguing the Jewish people - how is it that attacks against Jews have increased exponentially? It is because of the photographs. The women in magazines, on the internet, even when modestly dressed and well-intentioned, it stirs the evil inclination and beckons the evil eye. All Jewish publications should refrain from any images of women and girls, including illustrations.

The document that circulated was signed by prominent rabbis, including the very three heading the current summit.

The reactions were mixed. Some women were outraged, taken to the streets, holding posters of their own faces in their hands, demanding not just to be seen but to be heard. Other women held the very permanent markers that blacked out the faces of cartoon drawing of little girls washing negel vasser or dressed in a princess costume for Purim. But no matter how the women reacted, they were all plagued just the same.

They had come for their stockings.

They had come for their wigs.

They had come for their cross-body bags.

Now, they had come for their faces.

The first reported incidence was in Kiryas Yoel, New York. Seventeen-year-old Baila Shipovitz was arriving home from the market Friday afternoon with bags full of last-minute shabbas groceries. She walked home modestly, never peering into windows

at her reflection, trained not to view even her own face. She greeted her mother as she made her way to the kitchen to unload the groceries when she was met by her mother's ear-splitting cries followed by the thud of her body collapsing onto the freshly mopped kitchen tile floor. Baila rushed to her mother, trying to revive her. Her younger siblings, all seven of which were home, hurried to assess the commotion but the moment they saw their sister they too cried out, screaming, and running to hide from their beloved eldest sister.

Baila was unable to rouse her mother, so she called Hatzalah. When EMT volunteers arrived, they found Mrs. Shipovitz on the floor, now conscious but crying, reciting psalms as her eldest daughter hovered over her. If Baila was crying, no one knew. If Baila was frightened, no one could tell. If Baila had green eyes or brown or purple, no one would be able to verify, because Baila Shipovitz had no face.

Hatzalah, unsure whom to tend to first, the hysterical mother or the faceless daughter stood in the entryway of the home mute and dumb until finally, someone thought to ask, what happened!

Mrs. Shipovitz calmed herself enough to say that upon looking up from her cooking in the kitchen to greet her daughter, she saw her eldest, her firstborn, walking casually into the kitchen without a face! No nose. No mouth. No eyes. No eyebrows. No defining cheekbones. Just a completely blank canvas of skin. Upon relating the events, Mrs. Shipovitz once again lost consciousness. Next to her, her daughter sat, frozen, unmoving and unexpressive in facial expression.

A member of Hatzalah crouched down on one leg to the level of the girl. He dared to study her face, or where her face should be. He asked her name. When she spoke, he saw no mouth, but her voice was distinguishable in the room. *Baila*, she answered, though from where she answered, they knew not. The man asked if she could smile, could she breathe? Baila nodded her faceless head. The man asked if she had looked in the mirror recently. The faceless girl shook her head. Then, as if she had been invited to, she got up, finding her way easily despite having no evidence of eyes and walked to the mirror. Then, a second body fell unconscious to the floor.

The first reaction was to take Baila to the emergency room, to which confounded and terrified doctors simply hooked her up to fluids and took vitals and called every single expert in any field spreading the medical anomaly across the globe within hours. Then the second case was reported in Tel Aviv. A professor at Tel Aviv University in the field of physics lost her face during a lecture, sending a room full of panicked students spilling out into hallways, calling for police, for the army, for anyone. Next, in Los Angeles, an entire classroom of Pre-1 A girls, sitting in plaid uniforms, practicing the penmanship of the letter Alef, lost their faces. Then Belgium. France. Brazil. Atlanta. A slow steady spread.

Women with social media accounts immediately acted. Spreading awareness, warnings, and calls for response. *We have lost our faces*. Soon, Instagram accounts featuring women who baked challahs with intricate designs, who led cooking lessons on quick and easy meals for yom tov, who danced with strangers in the street,

who shared words of Torah wisdom, who sold wigs, who sold makeup, who crocheted their own baby blankets, who wrote books, who painted scenes of biblical Jerusalem on canvas, who litigate in court, who owned businesses, who conducted open heart surgeries, all filled their feeds with their faceless faces. Around the globe, the plague spread, but only to the women.

When the very faces of the wives and daughters of the greatest leaders of the Jewish nation dissolved to featureless slats of skin, it became clear to the Rabbis that this was not an illness of the world, this was an illness of their people.

An immediate response was issued, advised by the sages that the women stay home. Stay home and out of the limelight, away from the world's curious and critical eye until the rabbis could meet, deliberate, and decide. Most women were doing this, anyway, confused and frightened by their own appearance. Other women were actively showing their faceless faces. They gathered in the streets with signs; *Can you look at me now?*

And that's when the summit was called.

The rabbis in the Synagogue breathed a little easier. Rabbi Haredi's relative had saved the day, the air conditioning was now running. Cool, lovely air pumped out through the vents, drying the sweaty heads and moist armpits that momentarily forgot the peril of their women in their moment of extreme discomfort. But now, now they could really focus. Now they could sit a little easier in their chairs beneath the layers of tzititz, dress shirts and suit jackets. Now they could decide what to do about the women.

“It’s clear what we are all doing here. This sickness is not of a usual nature. It is not sourced in medicine. It is not afflicting all people. It is not even afflicting all women. It is only afflicting the women of our communities. I think it is clear to all of us, this is a holy illness, one purported not because of a bodily sickness but a sickness of the neshama, a sickness of the spiritual soul. We are not here to convene like doctors. We are not doctors. But each of us, in our own way, we are healers of the neshama, we need to determine where the spiritual sickness lies so we can obliterate and heal the women of our community, may G-d see it so”, Rabbi Haredi said.

A rumble of agreement made its way down the room.

“So, with that said, we must now consider the sources. Why is this happening?” Rabbi Haredi quieted down, inviting those gathered to offer their thoughts.

“They wanted to be in the center of it all! Women on the internet, these phone programs that they video themselves. They put pictures of themselves. They wanted everyone to look, look, look at me, and now, look at them, look at what happened to them,” A rabbi from Brooklyn, spoke boldly.

“The internet? You think it is the internet that erased the face of my pious wife who has never even held a cell phone! If it was only some women, maybe, but why my wife? My daughters?”

“The action of one can be the downfall of all!” Another called out.

“Then why not our faces?” Another asked, stroking his visible beard.

“Our faces? Because this a Kareth of the women, this is their punishment sourced in a holy transgression.”

“Okay, so some of us think this could be a result of the filth of phones and the computers.” Rabbi Haredi summarized.

“Or the brazenness of the faces! These new wigs, with the lace front, a shandah! We’ve told them time and time again. First, it was the hair from idol worship now it is a worship of the hair, trying to make it look like it’s growing right out of their heads!”

“Alright, alright, so maybe it is their wigs,” Rabbi Haredi repeated.

“It’s this new orthodoxy, this new idea of frumkeit, women calling themselves rabanit, offering halachic rulings, stepping into a public sphere that doesn’t concern them.”

“It’s their dress. Even women who think they are abiding by laws of modesty but are dressing in eye-catching ways. Tight clothes. Trendy fashion. It’s always their dress.”

“It is the mechitza! Some shuls, they lower it down, or they have mixed kiddushes after shul. Some institutions have mixed seating at the dinners.”

“So, what is the answer? What do we do? The fate of the women is in our hands! This is an issue of pekuch nefesh, they are in danger. Without a face! I mean, how can you function without a face. What do we propose our women do to heal?” Rabbi Haredi asked.

A letter was drafted, one that would be revised and signed by all seventy rabbis in attendance. The letter was copied, distributed,

and printed in a multitude of publications alongside the seventy photographs of seventy men.

After much deliberation it has been decided by the *gedolei hador* that the source of affliction that has plagued the women of our communities is one of a spiritual nature. A woman's dress. A woman's hair. A woman's desire to interact publicly. A woman's presence in public forums, be it a shul, kever site, or banquet. The sheer desire to inhabit the spaces, spheres and roles of the men of our great communities is a factor in this downward spiral in spirituality. It is the ruling, under halachic precipices, like that of those plagued by *tsaras* in Biblical days, that all women should be separated from the kehilla. Effective immediately all women should disappear from any kind of public presence until the Holy one, blessed be He, has pity and grants forgiveness for grievances rendered. All girls should stay home from day schools, women should refrain from attending work, the supermarkets, or any gathering whatsoever. All women should shelter in their homes and do *teshuva*. In the merit of such sacrifice, may all those afflicted see a speedy *refuah*.

The statement made its way across the globe and into the hands of husbands and sons until it made its way to the faceless

women. The women wept. They tore their clothes. They sat low. They recited psalms. They recited mantras. Then. They disappeared.

It didn't happen slowly, like the faceless Baila Shipkovitz in upstate New York. It happened collectively. All at once. The entirety of the Jewish women disappeared like the quick switch of a light. One moment they were there, inside their homes, bathing the children, cooking dinner, reading a book, preparing a strike, preparing a revolution, inciting each other to take to the streets, flood the faceless faces for all passersby to witness, to see. And the next moment, a bubbling pot is left unattended, a young male child is left alone in his bed mid shema, a self-portrait drawing of a young girl is left unfinished.

The men roamed their empty streets. They checked their empty homes. They gathered their young sons as they peaked under beds for missing daughters. They were gone. They were all gone.

The rabbi's reconvened. Back they were in a new meeting location. This time, no one noticed whether it was hot or cold in the room. They had bigger problems to deal with. They weren't just bewildered, they were panicked, stricken. Their wives! Their daughters! Their mothers!

The men moaned. They cried. They called out to the heavens! *Our women! Give us our women!* They stroked beards. They leaned in close. They pondered. They analyzed. What could possibly be the source now? With the women gone, the shtetl, the immorality it was removed so who then could be the cause of this latest affliction.

One rabbi stood before them all, his face contorted in pain. “My son was at the chupah! He was about to slip the ring onto his bride’s finger when she disappeared. She and her mother and my wife and my daughters and the entire left side of the room, rows and rows of women gone! My son is alone. How now will he fulfill his obligation of *peru orevu*!”

The man fell to his seat in tears. Beside him, a man rubbed his back, but then abruptly stopped, the hand slipped off, struck by a realization that slowly trickled down the room, infecting each rabbi as it dawned upon them, one by one the most horrific realization of it all, so causally pointed out by one man’s woe-to-me moment.

Peru. Orevu. Be fruitful and multiply.

Without the women, the entire Jewish people were in threat of extinction. Without the matrimonial line, there could be no more Jewish babies.

One Rabbi stood up and cried out *We need the women!*

It was true. They needed the women. How to bring them back?

Rabbi Haredi took lead again. “Nu?” He asked his terrified fellow rabbis, “What do you propose we do? Who now do we direct atonement?”

That was easy. The Women.

“They left the shtus behind! We must cancel their social media accounts. Burn their lace front wigs. Dissolve their businesses. Anything they used to corrupt themselves.”

Like men with pitchforks they returned home, they instructed everyone to eradicate anything the women had. A trendy headband.

A sequin gown. An influential Instagram account. A business made of selling human hair. Photographs. Drawings. They purged it all. Every last trace of them until there was nothing left. Not even a fleeting image to remember them by.

***Glossary:**

Gedolei hador – leaders of the generation

Halacha – Laws pertaining to the torah

Kareth – punishment

Macher – a big shot

Mechitza – a physical divider between men and women, usually in a place of prayer

Negel vasser – the mitzvah of washing ones hands with a two-handled cup each morning

Pekuach nefesh- the concept that the preservation of a human life supersedes any other torah commandments

Peru orevu – the mitzva of having children

Peyus- sideburns/sidelocks

Sakana - danger

Shkoyach - thanks/appreciation

Shtus- nonsense

Talmidei chachamim – a torah scholar

Tznius – modesty