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Children at Work

It's stunning to follow newspaper coverage of Orthodox Jews, the ten percent of American Jewry who get ten times the coverage of Reform and Conservative Jews combined, much of it unflattering. In this newspaper, we learn regularly about trivial happenings in Brooklyn shuls, but we don't read that there are data showing that the Conservative movement is losing members at an accelerating rate or that membership figures for the Reform are largely fantasy or that the Federation world is going downhill fast. When one of the Orthodox is indicted or convicted, we are likely to read about it, but it's apparently not relevant that the chairman of the International Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency is awaiting trial in federal court on charges involving hundreds of millions of dollars.

Just when I thought that reportage could not sink lower, along came last week's front page story - yes, front page! - on sheitelmachers and domestic abuse among the Orthodox. It was at once sick and silly. I will limit my criticism to a single point, it being that when a story describes in considerable detail a person's divorce battle as this one did, a minimum respect for journalistic and ethical standards requires that it not be one-sided.

What I or others say about the phenomenon of yenta journalism will not bring about improvement and there is some prospect that criticism will result in further deprecations as those who wield the pen will use it as a sword to inflict gratuitous pain. There is growing anger, especially among modern and centrist Orthodox, over how this community is being covered in this important newspaper.

Is it possible to get the message across that yenta journalism is

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not journalism as it should be practiced, that like other groups there are Orthodox who do silly things and others who do wrongful things and yet there is a far larger picture that is being lost among the reams of gossip that now serve as a surrogate for news reporting? Can it be understood that gratuitous pain is sinful and a form of abuse?

Perhaps I am too harsh. Yentering is not solitaire. It's a relationship among people trafficking in tidbits and gossip. Yenta journalists rely on being fed and when the feeders (and those being hurt) are themselves Orthodox, the pain is self-inflicted. If a silly person who happens to be Orthodox gives a reporter a silly story on a silver platter - which I think usually is the case - can we blame the reporter for running with it?

One benign example of this tendency was on display several weeks ago in a New York Times article on the alleged reaction of Orthodox Jews to the kosher certification status of Stella D'Oro cookies, especially the high calorie chocolate fudge. We read that initially there was great despair among the Orthodox who feared that the company would no longer seek certification and then there was joy when the news came that the kosher status would be maintained. This bit of infantilism did not come out of thin air. In one way or another it was generated by persons within the community, presumably with a yen for chocolate fudges.

The sheitelmacher article is far more serious business. Whatever its precise origin, it essentially arose out of an environment in parts of Orthodoxy that gives priority to that which is tendentious and foolish. In fact, Borough Park has just been blessed with a conference on the role of sheitel makers in family issues, held in the "Grand Ballroom" of a wig emporium and sponsored by a Task Force that proclaims, "it has come to our attention that many women feel comfortable talking to sheitel machers about personal family crisis issues."

Alas, women - Orthodox and others - who are not bewigged are being deprived of a vital communal resource that may protect them against their husbands and others. The Task Force should consider a special conference for milliners.

Domestic and other forms of abuse is dangerous and must not be ignored or explained away. The current obsession with abuse is also dangerous, if only because it heightens the risk that innocent

people will be wrongfully accused. The involvement of wigmakers sounds like a sick joke. Worse yet, harm can be caused in homes where an ordinary, but certainly regrettable, marital dispute will receive undeserved attention and will thereby be transformed into a serious incident of domestic abuse.

Why stop with these women? Why not train the mikveh ladies and also friends, neighbors, relatives, classmates, personnel at fitness clubs and swimming pools, store clerks and others to be on the lookout for signs of abuse and to become part of an ever-vigilant anti-abuse network?

The sad thing about the emerging scenario is that the Orthodox are more alert to abuse issues than other Jews. In some perverse fashion, their alertness is being translated into evidence of a greater incidence of domestic abuse in Orthodox homes, primarily because the media are invited to get into the act by organizations and individuals with a stake in abuse issues.

They can gain public funding, which has become more abundant post-September 11 as grants are being made to an array of agencies that specialize in psycho-babble. This issue deserves public scrutiny because as workers are being laid off and there are cutbacks everywhere in public services, huge sums are available for sham exercises allegedly aimed at addressing all kinds of emotional problems attributable to September 11.

The Orthodox - and notably the dynamic yeshiva-world sector - needs to show greater restraint in dealing with the media and government, else there will certainly be a continuing flow of self-inflicted wounds. Prospects for this are not bright because there is a paucity of leadership and far too little discipline among these Orthodox. Contrary to the familiar view that sees these religious Jews as being led from the top by respected rabbinical figures, the reality is one of near anarchy. A price is being paid, although that scarcely seems to be a deterrent.

@ 2:27 PM

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