

## Ultra Wrong, Ultra Offensive

After days of heavy promotion promising torrid revelations, Channel 2 aired a two-part investigative report that encompassed about ten minutes on sexual cheating among chassidim. The report was shown during a sweeps period that determines TV ratings, the obvious intention and hope being to attract additional viewers, presumably mostly from within the Jewish community. I imagine that Channel 2 succeeded in this goal; as journalism, the report was no better than an infantile flop. We now know that there is at least one former chassid from Williamsburg who has had extra-marital affairs and there apparently are others whose behavior isn't kosher.

According to Richard Huff, TV critic for the Daily News who sharply criticized the report, the station "spent three months – a quarter of a year – uncovering this so-called scandal." The significant investment of time and money resulted in our being told, in Huff's words, that "there are some married Hasidic men and women who sneak away from their ultra-religious lives." I do not know how religious they actually are. What I do know is once more we are the chosen people, with those who are identified as ultras being the primary choice.

The ultracizing of a large portion of the small number of Orthodox Jews is an interesting phenomenon. The term, Orthodox Jews is an interesting phenomenon. The term, by now a media staple in reports about religious Jews, has two intrinsic meanings, referring either to Jews who are very Orthodox or to those who are extreme in their religiosity. As the proper noun has evolved, it primarily conveys an image of extremism, even fanaticism. As sociology, the usage is bush league, though there are third tier sociologists of Judaism who cling to it for dear life. In its journalistic invocations, it is plain offensive.

There are, of course, Orthodox Jews of various shadings of religiosity, in much the same way as there is diversity among adherents of other religious persuasions. Sociology is a bundler, packaging people who are not quite alike into convenient categories that are given labels and which facilitate scholarly analysis. This is justified when the la-

bels reflect reality. When they distort reality or are intended to promote a negative view of the group, whatever justification there may be for the label vanishes.

In any case, Orthodox Jews exist along a continuum of religiosity, with an abundance of nuances. Yeshiva-world families in Israel and here are routinely designated as ultra-Orthodox, although there are significant differences between the two groupings. As an example, modernity has had a far greater impact on American families so designated, as should be expected and as is evident in the approach to secular studies and higher education. Put otherwise, many American yeshiva-world families would not be designated as ultra-Orthodox in Israel. Orthodox Jews who are not labeled as ultras also display substantial divergence in attitudes and behavior.

The ultra appellation for Orthodox Jews may be contrasted with the scholarly and journalistic treatment of other religious groups, as well as ethnic groups. Although extremism in belief and practice is now a common experience among many such groups, only the Orthodox are ultracized. There are a large number of Catholics around the world who rigidly reject Vatican reforms and liturgical changes and they are not called ultras. Nor are Fundamentalist and Evangelical Protestants or Mormons who insist on polygamy or Hindu sects that engage in violence or Sikh extremists or fanatical religious groups in Japan or an array of Chinese groups that display behavior that may be regarded as extremist. I have not mentioned Islam with its hundreds of millions of adherents because obviously by no stretch of the imagination can any of them be called ultras.

So, we Orthodox – or some of us – are alone. There is no brotherhood of ultras, only Jews who practice religion in a traditional way are herded into a single category that identifies them inaccurately and offensively.

Why the determination to adhere to an inaccurate and offensive term? To put the issue differently, Blacks – many

of whom now insist on being called African-Americans – vehemently resisted being called Negroes and now that term is surely as gone with the wind as the Tara Plantation. Why should there not be comparative sensitivity to the sensibilities of religious Jews?

I do not delude myself into believing that a switch in terminology will rescue Jewish journalism from the inclination to depict Orthodox Jews unfavorably. As in all bigotry, nastiness has taken root and unless there is a strong determination to bring about change, no matter what terms are used, the product will not be much different.

For years, Haaretz had a staff reporter named Shacharlian whose principal beat was to beat up on the Orthodox. Without let-up, he fulfilled his assignment, to the apparent delight of the newspaper's editor-in-chief. With a change in editorship last year, there has been some improvement.

There is a great need for improvement in Jewish journalism on these shores, but the prospect is not promising. When a Reform rabbi hired a killer to murder his wife, the story received far less attention than the space allocated to allegations of sexual abuse by an Orthodox teacher. This newspaper publishes articles by a writer whose primary assignment appears to be to expose alleged Orthodox sexual abuse, with story after story presenting allegations as proven facts. Under its new editor, the Forward has in recent weeks lurched further in the direction of intense hostility to the Orthodox.

The likelihood is that the bottom hasn't been reached, that a small community that is the guarantor of Jewish survival will remain under constant attack. Yet, I offer the modest proposal to proscribe the use of ultra when writing about the Orthodox. It is a wrongful term and it is an offensive term.

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