Listening for Zebras

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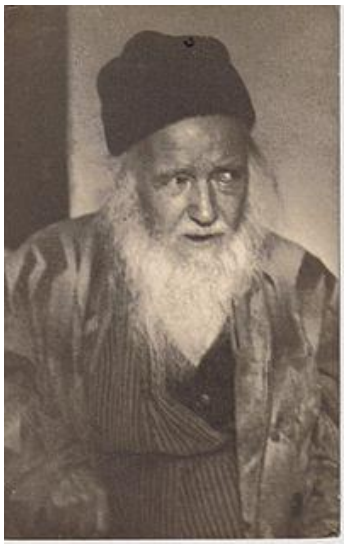
The men known both pejoratively and affectionately as “The Zebras” are easily identifiable in the chareidi strongholds of Jerusalem. It is their attire that gives them this vivid sobriquet- dark blue and white striped caftans, vests and knickers with a flat-topped black hat during the week, and on Shabbos, they wear gold and blue striped caftans and a white sash underneath a long brown overcoat and a shtreimel. This is the uniform of the men affiliated with the Eidah haChareidis, the umbrella religious council that administers the religious needs of some 40,000 anti-Zionist chareidi Jews from Jerusalem and Ramat Beit Shemesh. Under its auspices are a constellation of communities, many of whose members have lived in Jerusalem for centuries. The story behind this attire is even more fascinating.



My great-great-grandfather, Rav Chaim Mann of Jerusalem (1867-1944), in traditional Yerushalmi attire

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The Jewish community in seventeenth and eighteenth century Jerusalem was entirely dependent on money from European communities for sustenance. The Ashkenazic community borrowed money to rebuild a shul that had collapsed in 1692, and construction began in the year 1700. That year, a large and diverse group of Jews arrived from Vienna under the leadership of a Rabbi named Rav Yehuda Chassid. In this group were members of various ideological factions, including followers of the false Messiah Shabtai Zevi. Through the force of his charisma and his considerable diplomatic skills, Rav Yehuda Chassid was somehow able to unify the 100 people who arrived with him on Rosh Chodesh Marcheshvan of that year, but tragically, he passed away six days later at the age of 41. With no one to hold them together, the community that came with him fell apart. They were faced with the immediate need of a leader, and another serious problem: cash flow. In the several days between his arrival in the land of Israel and his death, R' Yehuda Chassid had managed to acquire that shul and the connected buildings- a complex that included some 40 residences, a Beit Midrash, wells and even a place for the poor to take meals. He had borrowed a great deal of money from Moslem financiers to pay for the complex, and the members of the community had taken no steps to repay the debt. The Moslem creditors rapidly lost patience with the delinquent Jews, and in the year 1720, they razed the shul and the surrounding buildings to the ground. Henceforth, the area became known as the Churvah, the "ruin", and more specifically, the "Churvah of R' Yehuda Chassid." The magnificent shul in the old city known as the Churvah Shul is named after the ruins atop which it has been twice reconstructed. As a result of this default, the Ottoman authority prohibited Ashkenazi Jews

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from living in Jerusalem, a prohibition that was in effect for 100 years. As Rabbi Moshe HaYerushalmi said, quoted by the historian Avraham Ya'ari (1899-1966)

"No Jew from our country of Poland or other European, Ashkenazic countries, is permitted to enter Jerusalem unless he is wearing Turkish clothes and speaks the Turkish language, to the degree that they don't know he is from an Ashkenazic country. All this is because of the group of Chassidim that came with the second Rabbi Yehuda HaChassid.[1]*"*

History is full of delicious ironies, isn't it? The Ashkenazim adopted a dress code to blend in with the Sehpardim, who *themselves* adopted attire based on that of the Ottomans. 300 years later, there are no Ottomans and certainly no one else who dresses like them- only the descendants of those Ashekanzim. How many members of the communities realize that their defiantly *distinctive* dress code was originally a form of cultural camouflage?

In this week's Parshah, there are two scenes that are quite similar. At the beginning, we find Avraham, the legendary host, begging guests to stay at his home despite his considerable personal discomfort.

Bereishit 18:4

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אִם־נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אַל־נָא תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדֶּךָ׃

he said, "My lords,[a] *Or "My Lord."* if it please you, do not go on past your servant.

[1] Avraham Ya'ari, *Mas'ot Eretz Yisrael*, p. 449

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יֻקַּח־נָא מְעַט־מַיִם וְרַחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם וְהִשָּׁעֲנוּ תַּחַת הָעֵץ׃

Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree.

The Talmud[2] tells us that Avraham was exceedingly careful about having his guests wash their feet first. Perhaps they were idolaters who worshipped the ground, and he did not want to chance bringing in anything idolatrous into his home.

A little later in the Parshah, Lot also welcomes guests, again at great personal risk. Despite the angry mob that threatened to kill him for welcoming travelers, Lot insists that they stay with him

Bereishit 19:2

וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֶּה נָא־אֲדֹנַי סוּרוּ ׀ נָא אֶל־בֵּית עַבְדְּכֶם וְלִינוּ וְרַחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם וְהִשְׁכַּמְתֶּם וַהֲלַכְתֶּם לְדַרְכְּכֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹּא כִּי בָרְחוֹב נָלִין׃

He said, “Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house to spend the night, and bathe your feet; then you may be on your way early.” But they said, “No, we will spend the night in the square.”

Rashi and others take note of Lot’s insistence that his guests wash their feet, but point out that he allowed them to sleep first without doing so.
Why did he bother to make his guests wash their feet at all, when he clearly didn’t care about idol worship? Indeed, and more fundamentally, why did Lot bother to extend himself like this for guests?

[2] Bava Metzia 86a

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Rav Chaim ben Attar, in his commentary Ohr HaChaim, offers an insightful interpretation. Lot recognized that his guests were not mere mortals, and that is why he was prepared to extend himself for them. But he made them wash their feet because he learned how to welcome guests from Uncle Avraham, from whom he learned that *washing feet is what guests do*. He didn't know, or care, *why* Avraham made them wash their feet- he just knew that this is what his uncle did, and this is what you must have your guests do. For him, hospitality was not so much an act of kindness as it was an act of mimicry.

This seems to be a criticism of Lot, who parroted his uncle's behavior without understanding it. How else could you explain his thoroughly rebarbative behavior in sacrificing his own family to protect his guests? The only kind of person who would behave this way is someone engaged in a grotesque tableaux of kindness, while having no concept of what it actually means. For Lot, kindness and welcoming guests was likely little more than a cultural marker, a form of identification and affiliation- but it was because of this kind of superficial, imitative kindness that his life was saved!

This analysis of the Ohr HaChaim represents a powerful challenge for us, particularly those of us who scoff at superficial, external and cultural displays of Judaism. We criticize those who dress like *chareidim* but may show less concern for interpersonal relationships. We scoff at those who adopt the dress code of 18th century Ottomans, or 19th century Polish gentry, as one of the first markers of identification when they begin to identify with Orthodoxy. We look askance at those who revere ascetic or zealous spiritual figures, while themselves living

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profligately materialistic and religiously lenient lifestyles. A colleague of mine described a certain Modern Orthodox community where he worked by saying, "everyone there has the number of a Rebbe or a Baba (A Sephardic religious leader) in their phones." While we may deride this kind of superficial and performative religiosity, there *is* a value to these cultural markers. Reportedly, someone once asked the Satmar Rav why his adherents dressed in such an anachronistic style. He replied, "That's exactly the point! What normal non-Jew wants to talk to, be friends with or marry someone who dresses like that?" This kind of distinctive dress is a bulwark against assimilation, a mark of identification that keeps people affiliated and serves as a cultural and religious compass. Of course, this kind of affiliation can be abused, as a form of bullying into silence. Furthermore, when excessive emphasis is placed on externalities, those who abide by those externalities become conferred with a *chezkas kashrus*, a presumption of virtue that might not be warranted. Just on Thursday, the story broke about a family that had been living in various Jewish communities throughout the United States, including Dallas, who passed themselves off as Chassidim but were, in fact, Christian missionaries. A similar story was reported about a family in Israel a few months ago. When people *look* the part, the communities they affiliate with often don't look further to determine if they are heretical, hypocritical or predatory. But by and large, behaviors that are inherited as part of a rich cultural and communal heritage have a powerful positive effect, providing a sense of identity and purpose to those who perpetuate them. As Modern Orthodox Jews who prize our heritage on the one hand, and our involvement in the outside world on the other, it behooves us to ask what religious and cultural markers we have that serve the same purpose. Are our boys proud to walk in public with a kippah and tzitzit

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outside of school grounds, and do they see their fathers doing the same thing? Around this time of year, many Jewish schools send out notes to parents about trick or treating. How do we address this issue with our children if it comes up? Is it just an American practice that all kids engage in harmlessly? Or do we emphasize to our children that we have it much better on Purim when we go around *giving* to others, instead of engaging in pagan practices rooted in *taking* from them? Are there Torah expressions we use in their regular conversation that identify us as *avdei Hashem*, or do we speak the same as everyone else does? This past Sunday, as we danced the Rebbetzin Annette Wolk z"l memorial Torah through the Schultz Rosenberg Campus, the teens began dancing and singing a song, a Chabad tune to which more contemporary lyrics were added a few years ago. The words are *Geshmack to be a Yid*- it is delicious, amazing, wonderful to be a Jew. I hope every one of the kids who participated believes that. But even if they don't- or don't always- there is a value to them *demonstrating* that they do. It gives them, and us, a sense of identification, and we need more of it, not less.

We must strive to be deep, and not superficial, in our connection to Torah, to Mitzvos and to Jewish behaviors, understanding why we do what we do. But let us never underestimate the value, and the far reaching ramifications, of simple, external, Jewish identity markers. They establish who we believe we are, and charter a course in who we hope to become.

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