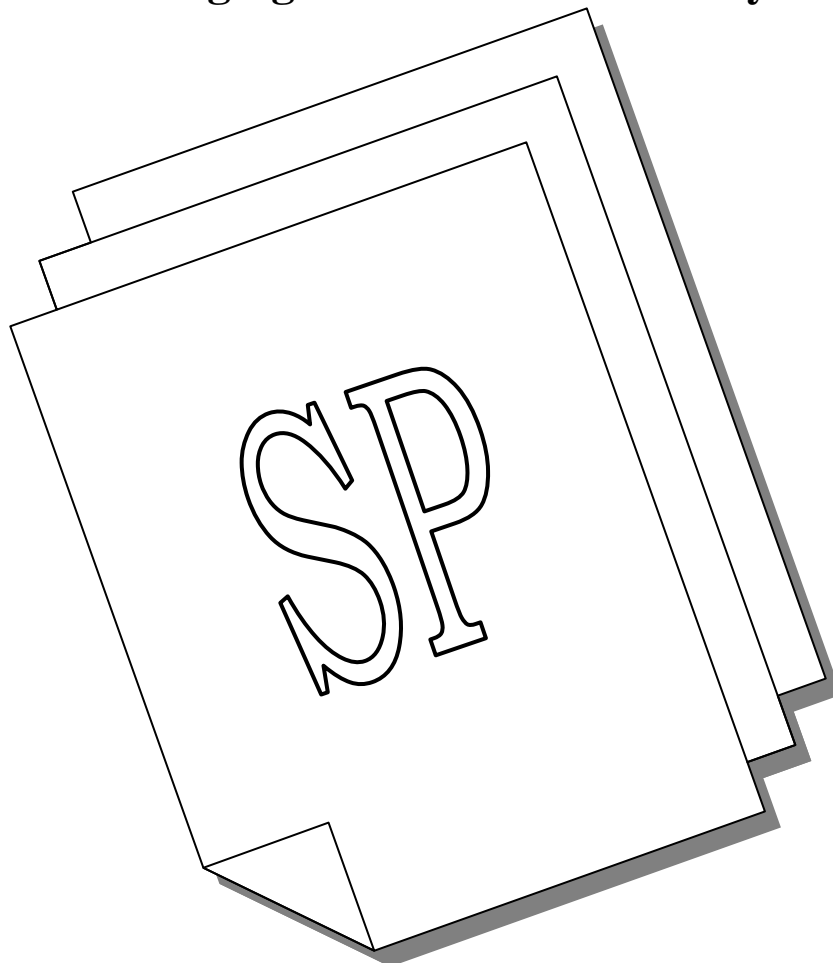


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Dress and Appearance among Women in Israel's National Religious Community¹

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Abstract

Women and girls of Israel's national religious (Modern Orthodox) community, who are located at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, must balance their religion's strictures with today's fashions. The religious world demands that they dress modestly and demurely—in clothing that conceals their sexuality and feminine contours thus keeping men's desire in check. Western culture, on the other hand, encourages them to be unashamed of their bodies and choose clothes that accentuate their figures and show their skin. To explain how they style their personal appearance, we have mapped and analyzed the characteristics of their dress. Our visual anthropology database includes 2,000 photographs taken in locations where the subgroups within the national religious population congregate, mainly in Jerusalem. Our study shows that the uniform dress code that for years characterized this community has dissolved. The dress, hair style, and other elements of external appearance are manifestations of a dialog taking place between the national religious community and the rest of the Israeli public, as well as in-group negotiations of identity and boundaries. This discourse is indicative of the dynamic state of the national religious community, in which there are many ideas, currents and identities without a central consolidated set of rules.

Introduction: Mapping and analysis of clothing

Women and girls of Israel's national religious community (*Leumi Dati*, also called Modern Orthodox) located at the crossroads of Jewish tradition and modernity, must balance their religion's strictures with contemporary fashions. The religious world demands that they dress modestly and demurely—that is, in clothing that does not underscore their sexuality and feminine contours and thus does not arouse the desire of men around them. Western culture, on the other hand, encourages them to be unashamed of their bodies and choose clothes that accentuate their figures and show their skin. The wardrobe choices made by women in this community are therefore indicative of their coping with the tension involved in walking a narrow line between the two worlds (Seigelshifer, 2006).

To explain how they style their personal appearance, we have mapped and analyzed the characteristics of their dress - just as the members of this community, both men and women, map and analyze them themselves, even if unconsciously. Each aspect

¹ This study was conducted as part of the project "People of Israel: A Guide to Israeli Society," sponsored and funded by the Samuel Neumann Institute for Advanced Studies in Science and Technology of the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa.

and item of clothing, and the ensemble they compose on each woman, may serve as markers, of one sort or another, of that woman's level of piety, the religious and social "circuit" to which she belongs, and sometimes her ideological outlook. The key variables include: the extent of the body's exposure, colors, fabric textures, accessories and makeup, and compliance with the mainstream fashion.

Together, these variables constitute a "modesty metric" that can be used to place a woman into one of the community's constituent subgroups. As a general rule, greater exposure of the limbs, bolder colors, the fabrics that blur gender and age distinctions, more numerous and prominent accessories and makeup, and more fashionable items of clothing and hairstyle, together declare a woman's affiliation with the modern world, her concern for her body and material values, and the belief that she may legitimately advertise her sexuality. Women who adopt Western dress styles label themselves as belonging to the more liberal and pluralistic part of the national religious camp, known for its openness and religious flexibility.

Methodology

We have taken a semiotic approach to analyzing the elements of external appearance. Such analysis makes it possible to penetrate into the recesses of the culture's "soul" through the system of associations and connotations common to the members of the society under study. We consider articles of clothing and external appearance not only as simple objects, but also as the bearers of indirect messages. Every visual stimulus can bear such a message: color, texture, the length of a garment or of hair.

Our total database includes 2,000 photographs taken with a digital camera in locations where the principal subgroups within the national religious population congregate, mainly in Jerusalem. We based our data collection on the typology of these subgroups (identity and characteristics) that appears in Almog and Paz (2008)². An element of clothing was considered representative (that is, part of the informal group's "uniform") for the purposes of this study if it appeared in more than 20 percent of the photographs that show people who, in our estimation, belong to the national religious public.

The semiotic analysis was accomplished through deconstruction into a chain of signifiers and signifieds. The meanings conveyed by the signifier (in our case, items of clothing and the ensemble as a whole) were apprehended by answering the question: "What are the possible meanings created by the sign?" The meaning of the sign is conveyed via a hierarchical chain of connotations and associations³. To put it differently, the signified derived from the first signifier can itself become a signifier and produce additional meaning, in the form of another signified. This results in a signifying chain—a hierarchy that conveys meanings in the form of first-level signified, second-level signified, and so on. The analysis of the signifieds is intuitive, and therefore ostensibly subjective. But if the investigator's intuition is simple and immediate, and if a given connotation or association recurs in the analysis of a variety

² Oz Almog and David Paz, "Zeramim Idiologim ve-Signonot Hayyim be-Migzar ha-Dati-Le'umi," on the website *Anashim be-Yisra'el—Madrish la-Hevra ha-Yisra'elit*, 2008, [http://www.peopleil.org/Details.aspx?ItemID=7711&searchMode=2&itemPath=\[0\]\[7602\]\[7603\]\[7711\]&index=2](http://www.peopleil.org/Details.aspx?ItemID=7711&searchMode=2&itemPath=[0][7602][7603][7711]&index=2).

³ Almog, Oz (1992). "Israeli War Memorials: A Semiological Analysis." *Megamot* 34(2): 179-211 (Hebrew).

of signs from the same and adjacent fields (shirts, pants, socks, coats, hats, etc.), the empirical validity of the conclusions is strengthened.

It is important to note that we are well-versed, from first-hand acquaintance, in the national religious conceptual system, which made it easier for us to decipher the codes concealed within this sector's way of dressing. In this sense, this study was conducted as participant observation. To supplement our own observations, we interviewed a number of people with direct and indirect knowledge of the subject, among them researchers, rabbis, boutique proprietors, and fashion designers.

Influences on national religious dress codes

Classical European influences

Classical bourgeois European clothing has, historically, been a major influence on the way religious Israelis dress. For men, this means the outfit of suit, tie, pressed white shirt, topped with a homburg (men who did not wear a suit and tie generally wore a beret). For women, this means a skirt or dress, pressed shirt and hat. In both sexes, shoes and socks are *de rigueur* and the general appearance is clean, neat, respectable, and solid.

The youth movement culture

The religious public of pre-state Israel and the country's early years (many of these Jews were affiliated with the large bourgeois Orthodox-Zionist movement) were influenced by the culture and dress of the *halutzim*—the largely socialist, secular and even anti-religious pioneers who founded kibbutzim and other kinds of communal agricultural settlements around the country. The mores of the pioneering Zionist youth movements (such as *Ha-No'ar Ha-Oved*, *Ha-Mahanot Ha-Olim*, *Ha-Tzofim* [Scouts], *Ha-Tenu'a Ha-Meuhedet*, and *Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir*) were an integral part of this culture, and their dress code was demonstratively proletarian and informal. The national religious community had its own pioneering youth movement, *Bnei Akiva*, and some of its soldiers served in the *Nachal* Corps, a branch of the army that combined military service with the establishment of new settlements. The young religious men and women who belonged to these groups adopted in large part the style of dress of their non-religious contemporaries, such as khaki pants or shorts, leather ("biblical") sandals, and uncombed, mid-length hair.

For national religious youth, their way of dressing distinguished them from the generation of their parents, who had grown up in the Diaspora (the "Exile," as it was called by both religious and non-religious Zionists) and who sought to keep up their European appearance. This often led to tension within religious families, which was later reflected in the national religious community's political incarnation, the National Religious Party (NRP).

Religious rigor and the *Merkaz Ha-Rav* school

Pioneer codes dominated in the Religious Kibbutz Movement, *Bnei Akiva*, and the younger generation of the NRP for many years, until a new trend of increasing religious rigor began to come to the fore in the 1970s and early 1980s, bringing with it changes in external appearance. This new trend centered around students and graduates of the *Merkaz Ha-Rav* Yeshiva in Jerusalem, under the 30-year leadership, beginning in 1952, of Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook. He was the son of the institution's founder, Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook. Under the younger

Rabbi Kook's direction, *Merkaz Ha-Rav* became a thriving center of learning that attracted many young national religious men, in particular members of *Bnei Akiva*.

Among other things, this school of thought produced a revolution in that community's view of what counted as modest dress. The elder Rabbi Kook's metaphysical system, which stressed the inherent sanctity of the Jewish nation, and viewed the state of Israel as an essential part of the process of Messianic redemption, soon became accepted by most of the national religious community. In this view, members of the Jewish nation should express, in their way of life and their external appearance, the sanctity of the Jewish people. The outcome was a process of increasing strictness in observance, especially among young people, including their manner of dress. The discourse of modesty was augmented by a number of other relevant terms, such as "Israeli sanctity" and "Israeli modesty." Together, they contributed to a movement toward meticulous and rigorous observance that attracted many followers, in particular young men and women (Dombrovsky, 2004). Among women, this took the form of longer, elbow-length sleeves, hems that fell well under the knees, and in the case of married women, covering the hair with a kerchief so that little or none of it showed.

The influence of secular fashion and feminism

While one stream of the national religious community was swept by increasing religious strictness, another part of it has been heavily influenced by modern secular fashions and feminism, especially over the last ten to fifteen years. In the past, members of the community were easily identifiable by their unfashionable and sloppy clothing. Today, however, more and more of them follow the fashions of Israeli society at large. This trend began with the younger generation, but quickly spread to their parents as well.

While this phenomenon is evident among men and women, both single and married, it is most prominent among single women of the community. Many of them now eschew clothing that they see as dull and old-fashioned, and have no qualms about radiating sexuality, style, and elegance, just as non-religious Israeli women do. Feminism has led to another change in the way national religious women dress: Many of the younger cohort, whose mothers covered their hair, do not themselves do so on a daily basis. Moreover, there are married women who have stopped covering their hair after years of doing so. This phenomenon results from the view that the head covering is a manifestation of patriarchal repression. In addition, since one of the manifestations of religious feminism is the study of religious texts by women, some national religious women have ceased to follow rabbinic rulings blindly. Instead, they study the *halacha* (at least those parts that impinge on their personal lives) on their own and reach their own, more lenient conclusions.

The fashions of pre-army seminars and women's *midrashot*

The end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s was the time of the establishment of religious pre-army seminars that offered a year of informal education and preparation between high school and enlistment. Increasing numbers of young religious men enrolled in them. Most of these seminars are located in religious settlements on the country's periphery and in the occupied territories, bringing their students into close contact with nature and encouraging stronger emotional attachment to the homeland. Their curricula stress spirituality and seek to strengthen the students'

inner selves and serve as a transition between a highly structured secondary education (for most of these men, in a high school yeshiva) and the rigors of military service.

These three characteristics of the seminar—geographic, educational, and social—along with New Age ideas that grew increasingly popular in Israeli society—have added some elements of “secularism,” slackness, scruffiness, and atavism to the appearance of young religious men. This includes long, uncombed hair, burgeoning curls, long side locks, long shirt fringes hanging outside, and loose-fitting shabby pants. Long hair and its New Age style have led to a change in the *kippa*, which is generally very large and colorful and made of wool, or alternatively tiny and barely visible within the tangle of hair.

Similar elements have appeared among young religious women as well. The feminist tide has led many of them to enroll, after high school, in women’s religious seminars called *midrashot* (sing. *midrasha*). Many *midrashot* are also located in rural areas, kibbutzim, and settlements, close to nature, and often in the vicinity of a pre-army seminar for men. *Midrasha* studies introduce these girls to the world of the Torah and Jewish spirituality and distance them to some extent from materialism. For them too, the *midrasha* serves as a transit zone between high school or *ulpana* (a boarding high school for girls) and military or alternative national service, or between service and university studies. For young women, this transitory stage of life, combined with New Age trends, has brought with it changes in dress. For example, loose-fitting Indian-style shirts and pants in floral patterns worn in patchwork layers are very popular, as are long skirts, or shorter skirts worn over pants, and scarves and kerchiefs in a wild display of colors.

Religious trekkers

Young non-religious Israelis often take a year off after army service to trek through remote parts of the world, with the Indian subcontinent, the Far East and South America being the most popular destinations. Many religious young people do the same, and this has been a significant force in the spread of Indian and New Age styles through the national religious public.

National religious women’s dress codes: General characteristics

The way a national religious woman dresses is influenced by her religious identity, the religious current or subgroup with which she affiliates, that community’s standards of modesty, her place of work and its dress imperatives, place of residence, prevailing fashions, personal taste and style, and—to no small extent—her financial resources. Rather than being monolithic, the national religious community is composed of a number of subgroups that differ in their norms of modesty. Their dress codes differ accordingly, from family to family and individual to individual.

Consequently, it is not uncommon for a mother and daughter to dress in different styles—one may have long sleeves and another short ones, one may wear pants while the other refuses to wear them, one may button her shirts up to the neck while the other shows some cleavage, and one may prefer a loose fit while the other goes for a tight one.

The layered look

The layered look has in recent years become fashionable in national religious circles. Women wear one shirt, skirt and kerchief over another. In the case of shirts, this

involves a t-shirt or cotton shirt, topped by another shirt from any of a variety of styles, with the lower layer peeping out from under the upper one, above the neck, below the waist, and at the sleeves. Short skirts are worn over longer ones, or the skirt's lining extends below the garment's outer fabric.

The layered look developed in response to the difficulty these women were having in finding, in fashionable stores, shirts that fit their communities' standards of modesty. The shirts on sale had necklines that were too low, sleeves that were too short, and were cut so high that they exposed the lower belly and back. In response, women had to wear another layer under these shirts. Donning more than one layer has another advantage—it makes the breasts less prominent.

These women also need skirts longer than those they found in their stores, so they purchased stylish skirts and lengthened them by wearing a simpler and longer skirt underneath. These layers quickly turned from improvisation into fashion.

The layered look was invented by young women living in settlements of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and was influenced by New Age and Indian-Oriental fashions. These young women sought to project a biblical appearance, so the layered look also made them look rooted and primeval. Furthermore, it turned out to be functional—many of the women who initiated the fashion lived in small settlements with few structures, exposed to the strong winds of the Judean and Samaritan highlands. Layers offered warmth and made the transition between settlement and city and between home and outside easily managed, with no need to change clothes to adjust to temperature differences.

The tunic

Another fashion, somewhat less innovative than the layered look, consists of a loose tunic or overgarment, sometimes with buttons down the middle, and a matching long skirt of the same cloth. Alternatively, swatches of the cloth from which the skirt is cut are sewn on the shirt. The material is generally of muted hues with small touches of gayer and more adventurous color. For example, a khaki skirt may be ornamented on the side with a small red flower.

Women's clothing in the *Hardal* community

Haredi influences

The term “Hardal,” a contraction of “*haredi le’umi*,” or “national ultra-Orthodox,” denotes a sector of the national religious community that accepts the prevailing messianic nationalist theology of the community but which, in its observances, rejects modernizing influences, secular and Western culture, and feminist trends. Its tendency to isolate itself from secular society resembles that of the non-Zionist *Haredi* sector. Accordingly, its standards of modesty are stricter and many young women's dress codes are more conservative than those of their mothers. This stricter standard is learned in more Orthodox schools attended by these women and their youth movements; it also depends on the demands of their husbands, the yeshivas in which they study, husbands' occupations, women's own work places, and their social milieu.

Economic factors

Beyond standards of modesty, the financial resources of *hardal* families are a major influence on its dress codes for women. Many women in this community have

husbands who study full-time at religious seminaries rather and do not work for wage, making their families' budgets thus very tight. Practical considerations also play a role—these women, especially those with small children, seldom wear white clothes, out of fear that they will soil quickly.

The central-liberal current

A broad and varied spectrum

Women from the more liberal section of the national religious community display a rich variety of styles that reflect, in part, a broad range of outlooks, ways of thinking, and lifestyles. Some are demonstratively slipshod, others display elegance, wearing styles “straight from the fashion pages;” some dress almost identically to *hardal* women, while others in styles nearly identical to that of non-religious women.

Most of these women do not make a rule of wearing elbow-length sleeves, skirts significantly below the knees, and high necklines. Some, especially from the more liberal wing, wear pants, and many display the New Age-style layered look. However, the most typical outfit in this group is the dress or skirt worn over pants (see below).

The Habakuk style

Many women of the central and liberal currents in the national religious community dress in New Age style. This look is especially common in rural communities and settlements such as *Bat Ayin*, *Tekoa*, and *Kochav HaShachar*, as well as in the well-off pastoral neighborhoods where religious “bobos” (bourgeois bohemians) abound, such as Jerusalem’s *Baka* and German Colony neighborhoods. Many of those who prefer New Age dress belong to the Habakuk current—an acronym for Habad, Bratislaver, Carlebach, and Kook (the first two referring to Hasidic communities; the third to the late rabbi and musician Shlomo Carlebach, who taught a Hasidic-Aquarian style of Judaism; and to Rabbi Kook, founder of Merkaz Ha-Rav). Habakuk signifies a kind of non-denominational New Age Hasidism that made its first appearance in the 1990s.

The style includes the layered look, from head to foot. The garments are made of Indian-style fabrics. Broad skirts are worn over loose pants, skirts over skirts; a large scarf or cape over everything, one head kerchief over another, socks of one color topped by another pair of a different color, and so on.

Some women restrict themselves to fairly restrained hues, while others give free rein to an entire palette of colors, including loud and bold ones. They make lavish use of kerchiefs and scarves, with the multiplicity of layers creating an artistic and vivacious collage of color and form.

Shorter, tighter, and more revealing

The layered look preferred by women of the more central and liberal ends of the national religious community includes shirts that are much tighter, sleeves that are much shorter (above the elbow), and necklines that go considerably lower than allowed in *hardal* fashions. Many wear shirts with a relatively large opening at the neck. But underneath them, to reduce the cleavage, they wear a thin strapless undershirt with a lacy neck or bib. When not using the layered look, they wear close-fitting t-shirts.

The tightness of their clothes also depends on girl's or woman's figure and self-image. Since many adolescent girls are in conflict with their bodies to one extent or another, some wear broad, loose shirts that conceal their feminine development, while others go for a provocative tight and revealing look, reflecting youthful rebellion, and an attempt (whether overt or covert) to anger their parents, attract attention at school, and declare their individuality in their youth movements.

Women from the central and liberal wings of the national religious community display an almost infinite number of shirt styles, much like that found in Israeli society at large. But certain bounds of modesty are observed. The fabric, cut, and colors are a matter of a woman's tastes and prevailing fashions. Only a small number of women will, however, wear a sleeveless shirt or t-shirts with very short sleeves. Even they, however, would not appear in synagogue or in any other sacred space without sleeves.

The skirt in the central and liberal currents

Women in these sectors wear pretty much the same skirts worn by *hardal* women, with one important difference—some of the skirts are tighter and shorter, and have a long slit. Similarly, many women, especially young ones, wear frilled skirts, which are acceptable to only a small number of *hardal* women. The colors are also more varied and brighter, and can even be bright—red and orange, for example, colors that few if any *hardal* women would wear. Long skirts in bold colors offer another way for these women to maneuver between the demands of modesty and their desire to display their femininity and fashionable taste.

The skirt/dress and pants combo

This fashion is a version of the layered look. Pants are topped with a skirt or dress, generally one with a high hemline. This look has become popular in recent years, especially among settlers, but it is also accepted in broader circles. The combo signals that the woman in question is religiously observant but also enlightened, liberal, and part of Israeli society as a whole. A huge number of variations can be seen, depending on personal taste (some are more elegant, others more casual) and on the personal standards of modesty. This latter consideration determines the length of the skirt and its tightness, just as it does with pants and shirts.

Socks

In the choice of socks, women from the center and left wing of the national religious community resemble their non-religious peers. The more liberal women (especially older ones) wear simple, functional socks. Others, primarily younger women, do not hesitate to don sexy and fashionable stockings. Some of these women wear fairly short skirts (sometimes a bit above the knee) so that the stockings are emphasized. Such an appearance allows them to conform to the technical demands of keeping their legs covered while at the same time calling attention to them.

Girls and young women from the more modern and liberal wing of the community sometimes wear knee-high socks in bold hues under a short skirt whose hemline reaches the top of the socks. This look also makes it possible for women to enjoy both worlds—it meets their standards of modesty inasmuch as it covers what needs to be covered, but it displays both their femininity and their liberality.

Shoes

Many young women from the central and liberal wings of the community wear mule-type sandals, with no strap in the back, flat or with a very low, sharp heel. Thongs have recently become very popular.

In the winter, many who prefer elegance wear platform shoes, platform boots, leather boots, moccasins, high heels and, more recently, flat Mary Janes the uppers of which resemble ballet pumps. Older women seldom wear platform shoes or boots, but sport a large variety of heel styles, of differing heights and thickness, depending on what image the woman wants to project (the higher and narrower the heel the more feminine and erotic the look).

Quite many women in this group wear mid-length skirts together with sheer and elegant hosiery and shoes with high, narrow heels. Their priority is to stress their femininity and sexuality, but they do so without violating the technical requirements of modest dress. While their hems reach the knee, the skirts are fairly short and reveal a fair amount; though the legs are covered with stockings, the stockings accentuate the shapeliness of the legs and hide any flaws. The shoes may be closed but they bring out the contour of the female foot. Similarly, some women wear long, ostensibly modest skirts, but with a deep slit in the back, along with high heels and provocative stockings.

Dress codes for school girls

Pupils at national religious institutions are required to adhere to their schools' dress codes or wear uniforms. The codes of some schools are parts of their bylaws governing behavior. Few religious schools allow girls to wear pants or sleeveless shirts, and in general they demand that their pupils abide by the codes outside school grounds as well. However, most schools permit girls to wear sweatpants or track suits in physical education classes. Some schools, generally the more liberal ones, allow girls to wear pants under their skirts.

School dress codes also include other restrictions. For example, heavy makeup is usually forbidden; so are clogs and overabundant and noisy jewelry. Schools identified with the *hardal* sector (for example, the Tzivia school network) require girls to wear socks as well. Most national religious girls belong to youth movements such as *Bnei Akiva*, *Ariel*, and *Ezra*, which also forbid girls to wear pants. Despite these strictures, a minority of girls refuse to abide by these dress codes outside school.

Schools and youth movements generally allow girls to wear pants, or at least pants under skirts, on the nature hikes that are an integral part of school and youth movement field trips.

Dress codes in the army and national service

Religious girls who enlist in the army dress in uniforms. However, while most female soldiers receive a single skirt and two pairs of pants, religious girls can request skirts in place of pants. The standard military skirt is knee-length, but religious girls can request longer skirts that reach down to the ankle. These longer skirts are straight, flat, and tight, so to walk freely the girls must cut a slit in the back. Some of them slightly shorten the skirt and exchange the standard army tunic, the sleeves of which reach below the elbow, for a long-sleeved version.

Among religious women in the army, then, ostensibly uniform dress is in fact graded according to the level of modesty they wish to observe, as exemplified in the length of

their skirt, the depth of its slit, and in whether or not they wear pants. The message the long army skirt conveys to non-religious Israeli society is: Even though I am a religious girl, I serve in the army. To the religious community, it says: Even though I serve in the army, I have not “gone bad” and continue to be strictly observant. However, the positions held by some women soldiers do not allow them to wear skirts most of the time, and in many cases girls in these positions do not believe that *halacha* forbids them to wear pants. In either case, the message their way of dressing conveys is that their level of religious commitment cannot be measured by their clothes and they do not wish to be labeled as belonging to one or another religious category.

Fashion accessories

Background

Halacha does not specifically address accessories, but the standard that guides the religious public as a whole is: “It is the way of the woman to beautify and adorn herself—but her duty is to refrain from beautifying herself in such a way that attracts and provokes, which is likely to cause those who see her to sin” (Hafetz Hayyim, *Geder ‘Olam 4, Beit Yehezkel* p. 308).

Wedding rings

In national religious society, as in *Haredi* society, it is customary for a man to give his fiancé a diamond engagement ring. Sometimes it belonged to the bridegroom’s grandmother, and the bride has it refitted for her finger. It is not uncommon for her to take the jewels from the grandmother’s ring and to have them set in a new ring of more modern style. In doing this, she declares that she is carrying on the family tradition, and that previous generations and her heritage are an integral part of her life.

Some brides prefer not to receive a diamond ring, either because it is not consonant with their personal style, or because they prefer to dress simply and to disassociate themselves from material and ostentatious values.

Other accessories and jewelry

“Modern-elegant” women all across the national religious spectrum sport a wide variety of accessories, from expensive designer purses (or imitations thereof) to belts and scarves in a wealth of hues and fabrics, including silk, pashmina, and linen. Many of them follow trends in jewelry and invest considerable sums to procure fashionable accessories. For many of these women, shopping is a form of recreation.

Conservative national religious women minimize their use of jewelry. Most generally they display only a modest wedding ring to indicate their marital status. They make little use of accessories, and when they use them the items are generally simple and unostentatious. New Age women make prolific use of accessories, especially Indian scarves, ethnic bead necklaces, and hanging handmade earrings decorated with beads and coins. Those in this group who adhere to stricter standards of modesty avoid loud colors. Notably, the fashion of swathing oneself in a scarf (instead of a long-sleeved shirt, or over a short-sleeved shirt or one with a low neckline) ostensibly to enhance modesty, is viewed by many *hardal* mothers as a sign of slack observance of the strictures of modesty. They would rather see their daughters wearing more modest shirts—that is, ones that cover up more of the body, without resort to scarves that can fall off or move around.

Head coverings

Head covering as a symbol of belonging

The issue of head coverings for women has been addressed at length by *halachic* authorities over many generations. While there are different approaches, it is a time-honored Jewish custom that married women cover their hair. The matter of which sorts of coverings are permissible and which forbidden has lain at the center of many power struggles between different Jewish sects (Fuchs, 2007).

As in other religions, in Judaism the covering also marks a woman's marital status. A woman whose hair is covered is married; she "belongs" to a single man, and is forbidden to other men (Shilo, 2001). The covering distinguishes religious from non-religious women, and its type and style labels them as belonging to specific social, cultural, and political subgroups within the religious community.

Increasingly stringent standards of modesty

The prevailing tendency among classical Orthodox Zionists in the pre-state period and the early years after independence was to seek to appear outwardly much like their non-religious Zionist contemporaries. This was the case with regard to women's clothing as well—and in the prevailing Zionist fashion, married women did not cover their hair. Most national religious women thus went bareheaded on a daily basis. Some others covered their hair with a kerchief. This typified the women of the Religious Kibbutz Movement, members and graduates of *Bnei Akiva*, and women associated with the National Religious Party until the 1970s. That decade saw the beginnings of a process of increasingly stringent observance, and one expression of this was that more and more women of this community began to cover their hair (Ahituv, 2006). Today only a small proportion of married national religious women do not cover their hair, but this small group has certain influence within the community.

Each type of hat or kerchief bears its own message. The "inverted pot" is conservative but elegant; the knitted skullcap is simple and casual. The ethnic skullcap is fashionable, berets are businesslike, while cotton hats are worn, according to a well-known Jerusalem hatter, by "serious women, less fashionable, genuine saints." Classic hats are worn by some women on special occasions. Mesh hats are considered attention-grabbers; baseball caps are preferred by many women of American origin. Hat styles reminiscent of those of the 1920s and 1930s coexist with the bandana and *kaffiyeh* (the traditional Arab head covering).

Wigs

Halachic authorities differ on whether women may use a wig as a means of covering their hair. Some believe that the wig is an appropriate solution to the halachic requirement that women cover their hair (R. Moshe Isserles [Rama], *Orah Hayyim* sec. 75:2; R. Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe*, Even Ha-Ezer Part II, 12; R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, even preferred wigs to kerchiefs). On the other hand, other *poskim* reject the wig on the grounds that it looks like a woman's natural hair, and observers will think that women wearing wigs have not covered their hair (*Shaddai Hemed*, R. Ovadiah Yosef, and others).

National religious women generally cover their hair with a hat or a kerchief. The small number who wear wigs are for the most part older women of German ancestry,

or women who grew up in *Haredi* families associated with the *Agudat Yisra'el* or *Po'alei Agudat Yisra'el* parties—some of them graduates of the *Haredi Beit Ya'akov* system of girls' schools—who as adults affiliated with the national religious community. A small number are women of *Mizrahi* extraction (that is, women born in Islamic countries, or whose parents were born there), in their sixties or seventies. Most of these are teachers or women who married teachers. Most *Mizrahi* national religious women refrain from wearing wigs. In all cases, those who wear wigs almost always put on short ones that leave the back of the neck exposed.

Other women who wear wigs are professionals, business executives and university faculty members. In this case, the wig keeps them from standing out among their non-religious professional colleagues. Some of them change the manner of covering their hair in accordance with their surroundings—in Israel they wear hats or kerchiefs, but when they go overseas, attend scholarly conferences, or in similar circumstances they wear wigs.

In recent years it has become more common to see wigs on *hardal* women, especially those who came to Israeli from English-speaking countries. The most popular style sports bangs in front and, behind, shoulder-length tresses; a hair band, bandana, or kerchief is worn on the wig. The major stylistic influence comes from American *Haredi* women. Some wear a hairpiece that covers the lower part of the head, and place a kerchief or small bandana over the exposed hair on top. Some young Israeli-born women have been influenced by this trend, and have adopted long, flowing wigs.

Conclusion: Dress as a representation of an ideological quest

Our analysis points to significant diversity in external appearance norms and the lack of uniform dress code among the women of the national religious movement (which is also true of the men). The multiplicity of fashions found in this sector of Israeli society is an expression of the dynamic state of this movement and continuous search of its political and spiritual identity over the last twenty years.

The national religious community today is not cut from a single cloth. It is composed of a variety of subgroups and currents that differ in their attitudes toward modernity, secular education, the state of Israel, and the Land of Israel, as well as in their thinking about religion, the religious establishment, the official rabbinate, the proper role for rabbis, and about the position of women in their society. Different approaches to these issues entail different beliefs about the rules of modesty, including what constitutes normative clothing. The uniform behavioral code that characterized the national religious community in the past has dissolved, and one of the most obvious manifestations of this is the way people dress. The lack of uniformity in the external appearance of members of the national religious public testifies to the lack of consensus and multiple internal divisions that have pulled apart what was once called by its members “the Sector” into a number of sub-sectors and groups that differ more than resemble each other.

It is difficult to point to any rules of dress that unite these groups. In recent years, more and more national religious women dress in ways that display no trace of classic measures of modesty or observance. For example, one can now see women who dress in long clothes of solid colors—yet do not cover their hair; or women who are careful to cover their hair but dress in tight and even, to a certain extent, revealing clothes. The multiplicity of fashions and their sources of inspiration as well as the attempt to blend together styles whose elements at times contradict each other testify to the state

of flux, lack of clear identity, and search of new forms. Even though the different dress styles can be mapped out in accordance with religious, social, political, and ideological identity, this typology is not unambiguous, and the task has become more difficult over time.

A concrete expression of this state of flux is that many individuals avoid labeling themselves as members of any socio-religious category. More than anything else, they can be characterized by the lack of clarity of their identity and their religious affiliation. Notably, when many national religious Israelis, both women and men, are asked about their identities and their religious and social affiliations, their reply is some variant of “I don’t represent any sector,” or “I can’t be tagged and I don’t want to be tagged,” or “I don’t belong to any current.” These statements, like their appearances, constitute a declaration that they are blurring and testing boundaries. Since they themselves have difficulty delineating their world-views, and since they want to keep others from labeling them, they have adopted a “new” fashion, one that includes elements that send contradictory messages about their level of modesty and religious observance. Their look seeks to blur their religious and social identity and does not allow them to be labeled. Paradoxically, however, this attempt to avoid categorization has itself become a fashion that typifies a specific socio-religious category.

In conclusion, dress, hair style, and other elements of appearance may be seen as manifestations of a dialogue taking place between the national religious community and the rest of the Israeli public forming their external social environment. This discourse may signify a certain crisis that the national religious community is facing, with diversity of competing ideas and forms of leadership and a search for the clear and consolidated set of rules of conduct.

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