

The modesty campaigns of Rabbi Amram Blau and the Neturei Karta movement, 1938–1974

This chapter discusses the influence of Neturei Karta on the status of women in Haredi society in Jerusalem. The modesty campaigns initiated by Rabbi Amram Blau sought to gain power and control not just over women but also over the entire Haredi enclave. I will review the campaigns from their initiators' perspectives and consider their overt and covert agendas.

On the level of principle, as we have seen, Haredi society rejects the innovations of the modern world and demands that its members live in a manner similar to that of the Jewish shtetl of Eastern Europe.¹ One of the most prominent innovations of the modern era is the change in the status of women and in relations between the sexes, and accordingly this social development has become one of the main challenges faced by Haredi communities.² In this chapter I will examine modesty campaigns led by Neturei Karta circles from 1938 through 1974.

GENDER CONTROL IN RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

Gender control is one of the hallmarks of modern fundamentalism. Many religious traditions view the observance of religious commandments in the family and the education of children to the religious lifestyle as key

¹ Menachem Friedman, "Jewish Zealots: Conservative versus Innovative." In: Laurence J. Silberstein (ed.), *Jewish Fundamentalism in Contemporary Perspective – Religion, Ideology, and the Crisis of Modernity*. New York: NYU Press, 1993, pp. 148–63.

² Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman, "Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews: The Case of the Haredim." In: Martin E. Marty and Scott Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalism Observed*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 197–264.

components of religious behavior. Accordingly, changes in the family unit will also impact on religion. Fundamentalist movements have seen one of their central functions as the struggle against any threat to the traditional family unit. In order to avoid such threats these movements have not hesitated to restrict the leeway open to women and children. These positions thus constitute a reaction to openness and modernization and to the concept of the advancement of the status of women in society.³

From the end of the nineteenth century the feminist movement began to question the traditional roles of women and hitherto-accepted definitions of femininity.⁴ The American fundamentalist movement was founded in an age of anxiety surrounding gender relations. For American Protestants the traditional family came to emblemize the ideal social order, and Christian fundamentalism placed a return to these values at the center of its religious objectives.⁵

Islamic fundamentalist movements emphasize male superiority and reaffirm the moral authority of men, as supported by the Koran, to oversee their wives and children. Fundamentalists claim that gender superiority forms the kernel of Islamic religious doctrine. Thus, for example, the first constitutional step taken by Ayatollah Khomeini after consolidating the Iranian Revolution in 1979 was to nullify laws granting rights to women, and particularly a law introduced in 1967 permitting women to divorce and to receive alimony.⁶

The control of norms of dress is another key characteristic of Islamic fundamentalism. This control is intended to prevent the sexual excitement of men. Radical movements have sometimes used coercion to impose these rules. Thus Khomeini imposed the penalty of caning on immodestly dressed women after the revolution.⁷ The fundamentalist movements pay

³ Charles W. Peek, George D. Lowe, and L. Susan Williams, "Gender and God's Word: Another Look at Religious Fundamentalism and Sexism," *Social Forces* 69(4) (1991), 1205-21.

⁴ Margaret L. Bendorth, *Fundamentalism and Gender 1875 to Present*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993, pp. 31-53.

⁵ Helen Hardacre, "The Impact of Fundamentalisms on Woman, the Family, and Interpersonal Relations." In: Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalism and Society: Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family, and Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 132.

⁶ Shahla Haeri, "Obedience versus Autonomy: Women and Fundamentalism in Iran and Pakistan." In: Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalisms and Society: Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family, and Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 181-213.

⁷ Hardacre, "The Impact of Fundamentalisms," pp. 139-40.

particular attention to issues of feminine sexuality, which is perceived as dangerous, polluting, and capable of ensnaring men, leading them to lose their self-respect and destroying the family. These movements saw the campaign for modesty as a key component of their struggle against modernism.⁸ In the Islamic world, the veil became the emblem of a struggle. While secular Islamic nationalism encouraged the modernization of women, including more revealing clothes, one of the symbols of the return to religion has been the adoption of modest clothes by women, including use of the veil.⁹

The Orthodox Halakhah (Jewish religious law) does not grant equal status to men and women. Women are not permitted to hold the status of legislators or judges and are excluded from the law-making process.¹⁰ Although women enjoy inheritance and property rights in several instances, they are denied the right to study Torah – the central ethos of Jewish culture. Throughout Jewish history women have lived in a world controlled and defined by men.¹¹

Orthodox Jewish society was organized on a voluntary basis and included a particularly strict approach to processes of social supervision in order to prevent the loss of the younger generation. In Israel, this community adopted a particularly strict approach to modesty from its inception.¹²

MODESTY CAMPAIGNS IN THE HAREDI ENCLAVE

Haredi society followed a traditional modesty code practiced by the Old Yishuv.¹³ Once Neturei Karta made modesty one of its major activities,

⁸ Andrea B. Rugh, “Reshaping Personal Relations in Egypt.” In: Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalism and Society: Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family, and Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 151–80.

⁹ Hala Sukrallah, “The Impact of the Islamic Movement in Egypt.” In: Darlene M. Juschka (ed.), *Feminism and the Study of Religion: A Reader*. London: Continuum, 2001, pp. 180–97.

¹⁰ Leonard D. Gordon, “Toward a Gender-Inclusive Account of Halakhah.” In: Tamar Rindavsky (ed.), *Gender and Judaism – The Transformation of Tradition*. New York and London: NYU Press, 1995, pp. 3–12.

¹¹ Jay M. Harris, “Fundamentalism: Objections from a Modern Jewish Historian.” In: John S. Hawley (ed.), *Fundamentalism and Gender*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 137–73. See also Tamar Ross, “Orthodoxy, Halakhah and the Challenge of Feminism.” In: Yosef Salmon, Aviezer Ravitzky, and Adam Praziger (eds.), *Jewish Orthodoxy: New Aspects*. Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2006, pp. 255–96 (in Hebrew).

¹² Heilman and Friedman, “Religious Fundamentalism.”

¹³ Margalit Shilo, *Princess or Prisoner? Jewish Women in Jerusalem, 1840–1914*. Waltham MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005, pp. 69–107.

gender supervision became a prominent hallmark of this movement. A distinction can be seen between two key phases in Neturei Karta's modesty campaigns. In the first stage, mostly in the 1930s and 1940s, the campaign was waged within the Haredi neighborhoods in an effort to combat lax public attitudes toward women's clothing. This campaign was characterized by insulation, the closing of chinks in the armor of the community itself, and the separation of the Haredi community from the general public. Thus this stage was essentially an internal process within the Haredi community. Blau's role in the modesty campaign reflected initiative and leadership and the strict rules he imposed concerning women's dress are still followed to this day. Blau established the modesty patrols, which operated as an internal police, to enforce these rules. The patrols operated under an instruction from the *Beit Din Tzedek* [the Court of Justice] of HaEdah HaHaredit and gained a reputation for their willingness to use forceful means to impose their authority.¹⁴

From the late 1940s, and particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, the modesty campaign was expanded beyond the confines of the Haredi neighborhoods. The main goal now was to prevent mixed cultural and sports activities in the secular part of Jerusalem. This approach represented a break with the traditional approach of Neturei Karta as a body devoted to defending the borders of its community. This campaign might seem illogical, since the opposed activities took place outside the Haredi neighborhoods and involved individuals whom Neturei Karta did not even consider to be proper Jews. I would suggest that this phase was intended mainly to reinforce Neturei Karta's leadership position among the Haredi public in Jerusalem at the expense of Agudat Yisrael, a movement that was a partner of the Zionist state. Moreover, the modesty offensive by Neturei Karta took place alongside another major campaign by the movement – the campaign over the Sabbath. In this case, too, its activists went out from Meah She'arim to protest against the opening of the Edison Cinema on the Sabbath.¹⁵

The modesty campaign of Neturei Karta under Blau's leadership is consistent with the efforts of fundamentalist movements in general to restrict the status of women. The campaign began as a response to increasing laxity and openness; it strengthened male authority within the family unit, since the man was defined as responsible for the modest

¹⁴ Ehud Sprinzak, *Brother against Brother: Violence and Extremism in Israeli Politics from Altalena to the Rabin Assassination*. New York: Free Press, 1999, pp. 87–112.

¹⁵ Friedman, *Neturei Karta*.

appearance of the women in the household; it imposed severe restrictions on the external appearance of women in order to prevent externalized manifestations of sexuality; it established a strict system of enforcement in the form of the modesty patrols; and it imposed restrictions on women's education. As discussed in the previous chapter, Neturei Karta fiercely attached the education system of Agudat Yisrael, which permitted certain innovations regarding women's education.

THE MODESTY CAMPAIGN: THE DEFENSIVE STAGE

The earliest evidence of the existence of modesty patrols can be found in an anonymous letter from 1938 preserved in the Blau archive. The letter reveals that once a week people would pass through the markets and distribute propaganda on the subject of modesty.¹⁶ A notice from that period written by Blau complained that women were deliberately walking through the Haredi neighborhoods in immodest dress and that there was no one who could oppose this.¹⁷ A few years later the term "modesty patrols" appeared for the first time in a letter written by Blau, in which he demanded that guards be placed on the streets of Meah She'arim on Mondays and Wednesdays from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m.¹⁸

An important milestone in the elaboration of the function of the modesty patrols came in 1945, when the *Beit Din Tzedek* of HaEdah HaHaredit issued a warning to the residents of the Haredi neighborhoods to pay strict attention to the dress of their daughters and wives:

With heavy, sad, and broken heart we turn to you, our dear ones, with a merciful request and plea. Our hearts have been broken with shame to hear and see how far we have deteriorated and how, in many homes of those who keep the Torah, the impure plague of immodesty, Heaven protect, has spread in indecent clothes, short dresses, failure to ensure long sleeves, and so forth. This hellish custom corrupts from tip to toe and removes the Divine Presence from Israel, G-d forbid, and the spiritual woes bring in their wake physical woes, Heaven protect. All this has come upon us because of our negligence and silence, which have led to the widening of the opening in such an awful manner, Heaven protect. Thus we have come to ask each father and household to dedicate themselves to removing this appalling ugliness from your homes and to restore your former dignity. Let each man take the harness of supervision in his hand and supervise the daughters of the house, to ensure they are dressed in modest garments (and particularly to supervise the sewing of dresses). We are also obliged to supervise neighbors and

¹⁶ Unsigned, untitled, Box 1, File 10, Doc. 43 (hereinafter "the Modesty File").

¹⁷ Modesty File, Doc. 16. ¹⁸ Modesty File, Doc. 49.

relatives, to warn and to protest, so that we may not bear responsibility. [...] This is particularly so since once this opening has occurred, it is no easy matter to uproot it, and we must adopt strident means, to awaken from the general slumber and silence, and to awaken ourselves and others [...]. To explain the depth of ugliness of this matter, and the gravity of the prohibition in accordance with our holy Torah be a holy educator, and there can be no punishment unless a warning is given, lest we be forced, G-d forbid, to take unpleasant steps against the violators. Happy he who listens, takes heed, and warns others; his reward shall flow as a river and he shall dwell securely and safely, in blessing and calm, with a fair livelihood and all good in spirit and soul.¹⁹

The leaflet carried a warning to the residents of Meah She'arim to pay attention to modest dress, including the threat of sanctions. The call was for the husbands to be responsible for their wives and daughters' behavior. The declaration echoes Maimonides' ruling that it is the male's responsibility to supervise women and children in their household.²⁰ In order to enforce the rules of modesty it was first necessary to determine what constituted desirable dress. To this end, Blau formulated a dress code including a series of stringent conditions:

1. The dress of a Jewish woman must be long, reaching at least to below the knees in such a manner that even if she is seated her knees will not be visible.
2. The dress must be wide and not excessively tight on the body.
3. The sleeves of the shirt must be long and reach almost to the hand.
4. The dress must not be made from transparent or red cloth.
5. Slippers must not be transparent or flesh-colored.
6. The obligation of modesty applies to girls from the age of three.
7. A married woman must cover her hair with a head kerchief, and shall also wear a veil on leaving the house.²¹ In May 1964, a prohibition was added to the modesty code forbidding the wearing of the "peruk"-type wig, with hair that appears natural – "which desecrates G-d's name, so that many cannot distinguish between immodest hair and a wig, causing many improprieties."²²

¹⁹ Rabbi [Zelig R.] Bengis, Rabbi Pinchas Epstein, and Rabbi David Jungreis, "Notice and Warning," 20 Sivan 5705 (June 1, 1945), unnumbered, Modesty File.

²⁰ Shilo, *Princess or Prisoner?* p. 85.

²¹ Amram Blau, "Instructions on Modesty to the Jewish Woman," undated, Modesty File, Doc. 28.

²² Selection of Articles of the *Patrol of Our Walls* from the Members of Neturei Karta, 17 Sivan 5724 – 1964, 156 (in Hebrew).

Blau explained that the reason why Jewish women must cover their bodies modestly is in order not to lead men to improper sexual thoughts. He argued that a Jewish woman who dresses immodestly causes the public to fail and is considered a “pursuer” (*rodef*); as such, according to the Halakhah, she is liable to the death penalty imposed by God.²³ Moreover, immodest dress constitutes a “turning of the back on the Holy One, blessed be He”; “a public desecration of G-d’s name”; and a phenomenon that will lead “to the removal of the Divine Presence from above the Jewish people.”²⁴ Thus Neturei Karta’s regulations were aimed first and foremost at ensuring men’s moral conduct, guarding them against any possible temptations. The easiest way to do so was by restricting women’s behavior. Women’s code of dress was established in order to prevent any chance that men’s desire might be aroused.

Since Haredi society views itself as the guardian of righteous traditions dedicated to the worship of God, modesty became as one of its outmost values. According to their perspective, a woman wearing immodest clothing was committing not only a personal offence but also a public one. Since the Divine punishment for immodesty will be imposed on everyone, it is a communal duty to fight it.²⁵

In July 1950 the subject of the modesty rules gained further prominence after Blau convened a special gathering of Jerusalem rabbis to discuss the problem. During the meeting a clear and binding code was drafted for setting and enforcing standards of modesty. The code served as the foundation for a protracted modesty campaign that was not confined solely to the Haredi community but extended to other parts of the city without any Haredi presence. It also consolidated Blau’s position as a leader in the Haredi community: He determined that the community would be mobilized on this issue; he pressured rabbis, who needed only to support his work on this matter of principle; and he even dared to engage in an offensive relating to the character of Jerusalem as a whole,

²³ *Din rodef* (the law of the pursuer) is based on the precept that “If a man comes to kill you rise early and kill him first.” This law applies whenever a person’s life is endangered and the “pursuer” may be killed in order to remove the danger. This law of self-defense applies whether or not a Sanhedrin is in existence. The obligation and right to save life applies at any time and to any person who recognizes that his life, or that of others, is endangered. For further discussion, see Eliav Shuchtmann, “Jewish Government Cannot Be a ‘Pursuer,’” *Tehumin* 19 (5759 – 1999), 40–8 (in Hebrew).

²⁴ Amram Blau, “Instructions on Modesty to the Jewish Woman,” undated, Modesty File, unnumbered.

²⁵ Shilo, *Princess or Prisoner?* p. 70.

rather than confining himself to maintaining modesty within his own neighborhood of Meah She'arim.

The summary of this meeting is a fascinating document. Decisions were taken on a range of subjects:

- A. *Avoiding the immodest*: The community was urged to supervise women and girls in order to ensure that they dress and act modestly to the highest possible standards; to distance women from their friends who do not observe these rules and who visit theaters and cinemas – behavior considered indecent for religious women; to distance women from any place where there are immodestly dressed women; and to bring together women who dress modestly in order to strengthen them in their modesty.
- B. *Reproach*: On the High Holy Days, after the reading from the Torah, a special blessing was to be recited for women who dress modestly; reproach must be used to create social pressure – each man must be urged to scold his brothers, neighbors, and relatives; in the case of the “offenders” themselves, the reproach should be indirect, through a parent or relative or person able to exercise influence.
- C. *Protest and support*: The community must protest and take a scornful and humiliating attitude toward “these wild hussies (*prutzot mitpartzot*) who darken the world through their arrogant and ugly dress.” Conversely, ways must be found to strengthen the “might and force” of those who dress modestly.
- D. *Public protest*: The community should take to the streets and proclaim, “We do not wish hussies and wild and naked women, Heaven protect, on our streets.” Notices should be posted bearing slogans against immodest dress; educational material should be published to alert the public and recruit it to public protest.
- E. *Implementation*: A committee dedicated to improving modesty standards should be established in each neighborhood; women should be recruited to the committees to encourage and connect modest women and to distance the immodest; educational means should be used in the women’s galleries of the synagogues.
- F. *Worthy proposals*: The *gabbai* (the rabbi’s assistant) should make “pleasant” comments to those whose daughters and wives fail to conform to the modesty rules; all invitations to celebrations should emphasize that women must come in modest dress and that the immodestly dressed are not invited.

In order to enforce the modesty code gabbais were asked to announce the code in the synagogue and to organize elections for modesty committees. The gabbais also raised funds for this purpose. A group of twenty to thirty young men went from one synagogue to the next in the city and helped organize the local committees. In the short term it was agreed that propaganda and notices should be used to recruit public support. In order to mobilize the community around the campaign a mass petition was launched and the campaigners decided to organize “noisy protest marches of ‘brigades of demonstrators’ to parade through the streets of the Haredi neighborhoods from time to time shouting slogans against immodesty.” The ultimate purpose of the campaign was to prepare the foundation for demonstrations on this issue.²⁶

The establishment of the modesty committees in the early 1950s was the first time that women were recruited to participate in a public campaign. Women have only rarely participated in the campaigns of Neturei Karta (another case is that of Ruth Ben-David, as discussed in the previous chapter). Women’s participation was intended to create social pressure and to present a united community stance on the issue.

It is unclear at what stage the modesty patrols began to use violence in order to secure their goals. During the British Mandate it seems probable that Neturei Karta activists preferred to turn to the police in order to solve modesty issues that it could not resolve without recourse to violence. An example of this appears in an incident described in Blau’s archives in 1938. After learning that a home in Meah She’arim was being used as a brothel where prostitutes met with their clients at night, Blau asked the police to close the place before the matter “leads to public outrage.”²⁷ By contrast, in a testimony from 1966, some thirty years later, concerning an incident in which merchants from Meah She’arim asked Blau to “purify their neighborhood” of Mandel Green, they claimed that the soda salesman was a secret missionary who placed crosses on the walls of his shop and publicly desecrated the Sabbath. By this time the modesty patrols had come to resemble an internal police force that did not confine its attention solely to modesty issues.²⁸

²⁶ Modesty File, Doc. 29, Summary of Meeting, 5 Menachem-Av 5710 – 1950.

²⁷ Amram Blau, “To the Commander of the Jerusalem Police,” 10 Adar 5698 – 1938, Box 1, File 6, unnumbered. On the general topic of prostitution in Jerusalem at these times see: Haim Avni, *Clients, Prostitutes and White Slavers in Argentina and in Israel*. Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2009, pp. 162–70.

²⁸ File 6, unnumbered.

As the leader of the modesty patrols Blau was able to achieve an authority that placed him on the same level as the spiritual leadership of the Haredi community. Whereas the rabbis gained their authority from their rabbinical knowledge, Blau gained his power from his activities in the field of inspection and enforcement.

The defensive stage focused strongly on a separatist approach that negates any imitation of the secular way of life. This campaign emphasized that the supervision of clothing of Jewish women is a collective duty, and women's dress, ostensibly their private affair, came to be considered a communal symbol. Therefore women's modest garbs were to be considered for the entire nation's sake, while immodest cloths were viewed as a desecration of God's name that might bring God's punishment. The archive yields little information on the subject of men's dress. The modesty campaign focused on women's clothing and made no mention of men's clothing. A few references to men's garb can be found, however. In a leaflet entitled "Ours – Not Ours," Blau emphasized the external differences between Haredi yeshivah students and those from the Mizrahi stream of Religious Zionism:

Ours have long earlocks; those who are not ours have clipped earlocks and short hair in hoodlum style; ours wear head coverings in awe of their Maker; those who are not ours wear blue and white head coverings or with the emblem of the State of Israel, may the name of the evil rot.²⁹

This leaflet emphasizes the Haredi opposition to any change in clothing, including that of men. In another case Blau was asked whether it was permissible for a man to continue to wear the same clothes as his ancestors, even if these differed from the clothing customs of Jerusalem. Blau replied that if the clothes reflect the customs of the man's ancestors and are not a form of "dandification or progress," this does not constitute immodesty. He noted that Rabbi Yitzhak Zev Soloveichik did not alter his dress after arriving in Jerusalem, yet his presence glorified the city.³⁰

Not all members of HaEdah HaHaredit agreed with Blau on this matter. In 1924 the Slabodka Yeshivah emigrated from Russia to Hebron in order to avoid the draft of its members to the Russian army. In 1929 the yeshivah moved to Jerusalem after the Arab riots and the massacre in Hebron, when 69 Jews were murdered by an Arab mob. The students of this institution did not adhere to the Old Yishuv's dress

²⁹ Amram Blau, "Ours – Not Ours," undated, Modesty File, Doc. 78.

³⁰ Amram Blau, untitled, undated, Modesty File, Doc. 93.

code: they wore modern suits, grew forelocks, shaved their beards, and wore black hats.³¹ Rabbi Yeshayah Asher Zelig Margaliot (whom I discuss at length in Chapter 6) sharply criticized their appearance and penned an entire book devoted to an attack on this new fashion in yeshivah circles. He argued that the traditional appearance, with long earlocks and an unshaven beard, embodies a proper image of God and is therefore immutable. He regarded the shaving of beards by the Slabodka Yeshivah students as the product of incitement by the *Sitra Ahra* (Satan) who blinded their eyes to their own transgression. He also claimed that the growing of the forelocks by these students could be perceived as an attempt to look like women, which is a grave sin.³²

The modesty campaign was one of Blau's main spheres of activity, allowing him to demonstrate authority and leadership. The patrols he established became the practical instrument for imposing strict codes of dress on the Haredi population in Jerusalem.

As Margalit Shilo clearly demonstrates, Haredi women were a weak force in the old Yishuv community, and modesty prohibitions were strictly enforced upon them.³³ Therefore they were vulnerable targets for Blau and his modesty patrols. Since the Haredim view themselves as embodying a unique spiritual nature, they were willing to accept more restrictions and regulations.

THE OFFENSIVE STAGE

In 1946 a mixed swimming pool was opened in Ramat Gan. The opening of the first pool in the Zionist Yishuv aroused the wrath of the zealots in Meah She'arim and Blau launched a public campaign on the issue.³⁴ It might seem strange that Blau would launch a campaign concerning a pool situated far from Jerusalem, established by those whom he already regarded as heretics and rebels. The reason for his outrage was his concern that the opening of this swimming pool might set a precedent

³¹ Shlomo Tikochinski, "The Transfer of Lithuanian Yeshivot to the Land of Israel: The Story of the Hebron and Ponivez Yeshivot." In: Immanuel Etkes (ed.), *Yeshivot and Batei Midrash*. Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center Press, 2006, pp. 273–314 (in Hebrew).

³² Yeshayah Asher Zelig Margaliot, *Amudei Arazim*. Jerusalem: Maarav Print, 5692 – 1931, p. 2 (in Hebrew).

³³ Shilo, *Princes or Prisoner?* pp. 70–5.

³⁴ On the development of swimming pools as leisure resorts and a place of integration of sexes and races, see Jeff Wilste, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2007.

for further mixed pools – a concern that proved accurate. As Blau feared, just a few years later a mixed swimming pool was also opened in Jerusalem.

Neturei Karta activists engaged in various actions in an effort to prevent the opening of the pool in Ramat Gan.³⁵ They secured 4,000 signatures on a petition opposing the opening of the pool (this number represents almost all the adult members of the Haredi community in Jerusalem at the time.)³⁶ The petition, submitted to the High Commissioner, demanded the cancellation of the opening of the swimming pool in order to protect young people from depravity and defend the honor of the Land of Israel.³⁷ According to Blau's perspective, immodesty detracted from the Land of Israel's sanctity. The High Commissioner denied their request.³⁸

Neturei Karta activists also undertook other actions in an effort to close the swimming pool. They submitted a request to the Ramat Gan council and organized meetings and protests in Jerusalem and Ramat Gan with the assistance of the council of Bnai Brak, a Haredi city adjacent to Ramat Gan. Contacts were also made with factories in Ramat Gan, asking for their support in closing the pool and threatening a consumer boycott of their products.³⁹ Although the campaign against the pool was unsuccessful it illustrated Neturei Karta's organizational strength and its ability to mobilize protests.

Some ten years later Blau's fears materialized: preparations began to open a mixed swimming pool in the German Colony neighborhood of Jerusalem. He was concerned about the possible temptation and attempted to act preemptively. In January 1958, after news of the plan emerged, Jerusalem rabbis held an emergency meeting. They decided to hold various protest actions: in addition to demonstrations, a boycott of municipal taxes was organized, as well as boycotts of all those involved in the construction of the pool.⁴⁰ Neturei Karta published its boycott in

³⁵ Unsigned, "Protest March against Galei-Gil," *HaHomah* 23, 28 Iyar 5707 – 1946, p. 4; unsigned, "Jerusalem," *Davar*, September 17, 1946, 4 (in Hebrew).

³⁶ According to a census conducted in 1947, the Haredi community in Jerusalem included 4,445 men and women above the age of 18. See Yuval Frankel, "Haredi," 247–89, and particularly 256.

³⁷ Unsigned, "His Excellency the High Commissioner," undated, Modesty File, Doc. 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Unsigned, "Preparing for the Meeting against Galei-Gil," undated, Modesty File, Doc. 112.

⁴⁰ Resolutions of the Public Protest Meeting, Modesty File, Doc. 90.

several languages – English, German, Arabic, and Spanish – in an effort to apply economic pressure on the owner of the pool, Chaim Schiff, who was also the owner of the President Hotel in the city, by encouraging consumers to avoid the tourism services he marketed.

Neturei Karta even employed sorcery, imposing curses on Schiff and Jerusalem Mayor Gershon Agron:

They shall light a wax candle with the name of the evil one, the above-mentioned individual, and if there is no wax then another candle, and they shall all recite Psalm 109 and direct their intentions to the above-mentioned head of evil, and after finishing the psalm they shall overturn and cast off the extinguished candle and say that just as this candle has been extinguished, so shall the candle of the above-mentioned individual be extinguished, Amen Selah, etc.⁴¹

The candle is preserved in the archive, inside a folded piece of paper bearing the names of Schiff and Agron. According to anthropologist Mary Douglas, sorcery is a source of authority. Those holding the powers to bless or curse are considered uncontrolled and dangerous, and their mystical powers give them social control.⁴² This is yet another example of Blau's hunger for power.

Neturei Karta was eventually forced to admit that its campaign had failed. The pool opened and operated without incident, although Schiff was ultimately obliged to sell the pool to Kibbutz Shoresh after the Chief Rabbinate removed the Kashrut certificate from all his businesses.⁴³ This incident illustrates the moral force of the Jerusalem zealots and their ability to influence the Chief Rabbinate, a state-sponsored organ, which acted against Schiff according to the approach dictated by Neturei Karta.

Neturei Karta was more successful in a further campaign against mixed swimming. In 1961, a plan was initiated to open a beach in Tiberias. A private buyer reached an agreement with the Tiberias municipality to remove a sewage pipe that had channeled waste into the Kinneret for many years, thus enabling the establishment of a beach on the site. Religious dignitaries in Tiberias, not all of whom were identified with Neturei Karta, asked Blau to launch a public campaign against the plan on the grounds that the road to the Tiberias cemetery passed through the planned bathing beach, as did the road to the grave of Rabbi Meir Ba'al

⁴¹ Modesty File, Doc. 105.

⁴² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York and Washington: Psychology Press, 1966, p. 99.

⁴³ Unsigned, "Ministry of Finance is willing to Loan 100 Pounds to Agudah for Purchasing the Pool," *Heruth*, May 29, 1958, 8 (in Hebrew).

Ha-Nes.⁴⁴ In addition to the usual demonstrations, Blau also contacted a wealthy philanthropist, Yaakov Pinchas Gewirt, whose donation of 90,000 Israeli pounds enabled the purchase of the beach from the promoter and closed, removing the threat.⁴⁵

The strategy of resolving tension between religious and secular Jews by purchasing the property in dispute was employed in the case of the “Club Affair” in Jerusalem. In 1954–1955, a fierce debate erupted between the secular and religious communities in Jerusalem. Neturei Karta organized turbulent demonstrations against a club operated by the Working Mothers’ organization. The club, situated on the edge of the Meah She’arim neighborhood, held joint after-school classes for boys and girls.⁴⁶ Neturei Karta claimed that mixed dancing also took place there. Approximately 170 people were arrested at the demonstrations, held on a daily basis over almost a year, and arrested for periods of up twenty-eight days. Blau himself was detained for twenty-one days for participating in an unlawful gathering. He rejected a proposed compromise by which a wall would be constructed to separate the club from Meah She’arim.

In his vitriolic attacks against the club, Blau argued that:

All the sum of humanity might find its place in the holy city of Jerusalem; any scoundrel, and dirty or filthy one, any base and despicable adulterer, all the people of the lowest circles will come to spread their filthy abominations in the holy city of Jerusalem. To deface and pollute Jerusalem and to foul and poison the air with all manner of wantonness and depravity.⁴⁷

He was determined to remove what he described as the pollution that was contaminating the holy city. The protracted protests became a struggle for the character and nature of the city. The secular public also initiated protests against religious coercion. The Mapai party, for example, urged its members to go to Meah She’arim to support the club and ensure it remained open.⁴⁸

Against the background of this war of principles, it is interesting to consider the real motives behind the affair as revealed in the Blau archive.

⁴⁴ Unsigned, “Fervent Ceremonies against the Beach were Given in Synagogues in Tiberias,” *Heruth*, January 27, 1962, 4 (in Hebrew).

⁴⁵ Amram Blau, “To Our Distinguished Friend, etc. etc., R. Yaakov Pinchas Gewirt, May He Live Days That Are Pleasant and Long,” 9 Adar 5722 – 1962, Modesty File, unnumbered.

⁴⁶ Unsigned, “The Discussion on the ‘Club Affair’ was Transferred to the Interior Committee,” *Hatzofeh* December 15, 1954, 1 (in Hebrew); Unsigned, “Sabbath Demonstrations Continued the Entire Sabbath,” *Heruth*, November 27, 1954, 4 (in Hebrew).

⁴⁷ Amram Blau, “Remember, Lord, What We Had,” Modesty File, unnumbered.

⁴⁸ Unsigned, “The Club in Dispute in Jerusalem – Institution under State Supervision,” *Davar*, November 25, 1954, 8 (in Hebrew).

It emerges that a large girls' school was situated alongside the club. The school was attended by some 700 girls and was suffered from severe overcrowding. Due to the proximity to the club and the unacceptable standards of modesty from the Haredi perspective, the educators refused to allow the girls to use the school courtyard. Neturei Karta was asked to demonstrate in order to close the club and enable the use of the building by the school. Blau's letter to the Satmar Rebbe in New York, Yoel Teitelbaum, describing the campaign reveals that the owner of the property was asking 7000 Israeli pounds for its sale. After more than a year of demonstrations, the owner agreed to sell the property for 2,000 Israeli pounds. Blau contacted influential rabbis in the United States, such as the leaders of the Satmar and Stropkov Hasidic courts, in an effort to raise the required sum. The property was eventually purchased by Yechiel Benedict, a philanthropist.⁴⁹ Thus the demonstrations served purposes not necessarily confined to lofty concerns of modesty and purity. Practical considerations such as shortage of space in Meah She'arim also underpinned the protests as the Haredi community sought to expand its presence beyond the confines of the enclave.

From as early as the 1940s, consumer boycotts were widely used in order to "correct" businesses that acted in a manner contrary to the desires of Neturei Karta. The Haredi public learnt to use this tool, and due to its monolithic character it has been able to use, it continues to employ it effectively to the present day.

The appeal to Diaspora philanthropists illustrates another recurring pattern in Neturei Karta's actions. The movement itself and several of its followers and functionaries were sponsored by the Jewish Diaspora, as was the old Yishuv. Conflict resolution techniques thus included the purchase of properties at points of friction in order to resolve the campaign successfully. This pattern was seen in the case of the beach in Tiberias and the "Club Affair" in Jerusalem.

THE LIMITS OF ZEALOTRY: THE BURNING OF THE EROS SEX SHOP IN TEL AVIV

In 1972, a shop called Eros opened in Tel Aviv selling pornography and sex-related items. Unsurprisingly the development aroused the wrath of

⁴⁹ Amram Blau, "To the Glory of Our Heads, Our Teacher Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, May He Live Days That Are Pleasant and Long," undated, Modesty File, Doc. 70. See also Amram Blau, "To Our Distinguished Friend, Our Teacher Rabbi Yechiel Benedict, May He Live Days That Are Pleasant and Long," 8 Sivan 5716 – 1956, *ibid.*, Doc. 67.

the Haredi zealots. Two young Haredim who torched the shop were prosecuted and sentenced to eighteen and twelve months in jail.⁵⁰

The arson attack became the subject of lively debate within Haredi circles. On the one hand, the religious public certainly considered a campaign against pornography a legitimate goal. On the other hand, the action taken by the two young men went beyond the normal confines of protests, such as demonstrations and propaganda. The arson attack constituted an offense against the laws of the state, endangered the well-being of individuals, and was a clear instance of individuals taking the law into their own hands. Rabbis and religious circles raised all these arguments as they distanced themselves from the attack.

By contrast, Blau justified the arsonists' approach and claimed that it was consistent with the Halakhah. He explained his position by reference to the Biblical story of Pinchas, the son of Elazar the priest, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7. The Biblical story supports spontaneous acts of violence in order to sanctify God's name.

Taking this precedent as his point of departure, Blau emphasized that he did not condone violence or underground actions. However, it could not be claimed that the two men acted in a manner that was contrary to the Halakhah. He acknowledged that the Torah does not permit individuals to do "that which is right in their own eyes," but added that a clear and detailed Halakhic solution can always be found to such problems. Blau asked why Pinchas had not obeyed Moses' instruction, choosing instead to act on his own. Answering his own question, he declared frankly: "Because when there is desecration of God's name, one does not pay respect to the rabbi." Thus in such an extreme state of debauchery and abomination there is no need to wait for instructions from the rabbis; action must be taken even without an explicit order.

Blau then embarked on a discussion of the principle of "accepting the yoke of Torah and the commandments." He argued that the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai and the acceptance of the Torah by the Jewish people made them "partners in an unlimited business" – that is, a binding partnership. Accordingly, each partner must prevent and protest any action liable to destroy the business. Every Jew is responsible for every other Jew, and accordingly what one Jew destroys will affect everyone. Blau claims that the Biblical story of Pinchas gives individual the right to take the law into his own hands, since Pinchas did not wait for official

⁵⁰ Unsigned, "Two Yeshivah Students were Convicted of Torching Eros," *Ma'ariv*, August 5, 1972, 5 (in Hebrew).

permission to act in violence. Accordingly, this is the Halakhic approach. It is interesting to note that in this interpretation, Blau does not distinguish himself from the seculars, and sees them all as being parts of the same organ, unlike his previous statements.

Blau further emphasizes that the Jewish people is not a democracy, since it accepted the Torah, which is not democratic. He characterizes democracy as “each one doing what is right in his own eyes,” whereas the Torah determines the proper course for the Jewish people. There can be no deviation from this course and penalties are prescribed for any violation. The Jewish people accepted the Torah as a collective and all are committed to it, he argued. Accordingly, anyone who acts in the name of the Torah is not to be considered wicked or criminal. The two men did not torch the shop out of wickedness or out of a desire to commit a crime such as a bank robbery. They acted on the basis of their religious sentiment of respect for the Torah, and the public supported their action. Accordingly, their faithful devotion to the Torah clears them of any offense.⁵¹

Blau’s defense argument echoes the French judicial category of *crime passionnel* committed under the influence of sudden or extreme passion. Killing an adulterer or adulteress upon the sudden discovery of adultery is characterized as a crime committed in the heat of passion, and as such entailed a reduced penalty or even acquittal.⁵²

Blau’s response reflects the dialectics of Neturei Karta zealotry. He himself would not send men to commit such an act, since he advocates a passive and nonviolent struggle. After the act has been committed, however, it can only be justified, and those who committed it must be defended against their many opponents within the Haredi public. Although the intention was that the modesty campaigns would take the form of nonviolent protest, the danger is always present that a protester who considers himself a zealot may engage in serious physical violence. This approach carries the potential for a descent into violence, although most cases did not reach this extreme.⁵³

⁵¹ Modesty File, Doc. 60.

⁵² Ruth Harris, “Hysteria and Feminine Crimes of Passion in the Fin-de-Siècle,” *History Workshop* 25 (1988), 31–63; Robert Ferrari, “The ‘Crime Passionnel’ in French Courts,” *California Law Review* 6.5 (1918), 331–41.

⁵³ During the Gay Pride march in Jerusalem in 2005, one of the participants was stabbed by a young Haredi, Yishai Shlissel, who was later sentenced to twelve years in prison and fined NIS 280,000. This incident is further proof of the potential for zealous protest to descend into violence.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the subject of the modesty campaigns led by Rabbi Amram Blau as the leader of the Neturei Karta movement, with the support of the Court of Justice of HaEdah HaHaredit.

In many cases the modesty campaigns were used to bolster Neturei Karta's leadership position among the Haredi public in Jerusalem at the expense of Agudat Yisrael, a movement that was a partner of the Zionist state. It is worth noting that during the modesty campaign Neturei Karta published fierce and strongly worded statements against Agudat Yisrael for operating in the Knesset and the Municipality of Jerusalem.⁵⁴

With the benefit of hindsight, the defensive modesty campaign can be judged a great success. The rules imposed on women's clothing in the 1940s are still enforced today, with minor variations. Conversely the offensive modesty campaign may be judged a failure. Neturei Karta was unable to prevent the secular development of Jerusalem. Even from 2003 through 2008, when Jerusalem had a Haredi mayor, Uri Lupoliansky, this did not prevent the opening of places of entertainment on the Sabbath, let alone mixed swimming or dancing. Eventually, Neturei Karta virtually abandoned its offensive modesty campaign. However, the demonstrations raised the self-esteem of the Haredi public and created an aura of heroism around the campaigners for modesty.

The rise of religious fundamentalist movements can be explained as a reaction to secularity; their actions are intended to regain political powers after years of feeling attacked by secular society and state.⁵⁵ One of the main characteristics of this response is creating an enclave, a safe haven where the particular lifestyle can be maintained without outside interference. Joining the enclave is voluntary; therefore religious adherence is strictly enforced.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Neturei Karta even imposed a *pulsa di-nura* curse on Meir Yitzhak Levin, the political leader of Agudat Yisrael, who agreed to serve as the Minister of Welfare in the first government of Israel (1948 – 1952). The *pulsa di-nura* (literally, in Aramaic, “lashes of fire”) is a curse calling for a person to meet with an unnatural death. See: Amram Blau, “A Warning Advice to a Hostile Enemy of Israel,” Blau Archive, Box 3, File 1, No. 6.

⁵⁵ For an historical account of fundamentalism as a global phenomenon see Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2001.

⁵⁶ Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, *Strong Religion*, pp. 23–89.

In a controversial article published in 1983, "Extremism as a Religious Norm," the Israeli political scientist Charles Liebman argued that extremism embodies the adage "the more the better." This is true, firstly, in the expansion of religious law to include the public as well as the private realm, and in the imposition of ever-greater restrictions and hardship on implementing the law. The second dimension in which this adage is applied is that of isolationism, while the third is the rejection of cultural norms that are indigenous to the religious traditions. Liebman argued that the rise of extremism in the Jewish world is due to the breakdown of the Jewish community and the breaking of the institutions that were able to restrain the radicals. In addition, the search for a harsher interpretation of the law consistent with the desire to assure one's self and others that one is indeed living accordance with what is commanded to do.⁵⁷

Adding to Liebman's argument, Gil S. Epstein and Ira N. Gang developed a mathematical model that explains the rise of extremism in a fundamentalist movement. They claim that the laws and regulations in a fundamentalist movement are becoming harder to follow, and followers may find themselves unsure of exactly what rules they are supposed to observe. It is the followers' ignorance and their desire to do what is right according to their religion that drives the increasing level of observance, which they assume increases the probability of meeting religious law. The severest position results in the greatest certainty that God's will is being performed.

Religious leaders apply fundamentalism by using religion to control behavior, thereby securing benefits from their followers or adherents. The leaders are assumed to possess more knowledge regarding the laws and rules that should be obeyed than their followers. Leadership rivalry leads to a race to the top in observance level, not to the bottom. The desire to hold on to members radicalizes clergy.⁵⁸

These theories can inform our understanding of the success of Blau's modesty campaigns. The establishment of the Haredi enclave in Jerusalem was intended to block secular influence. Blau and his movement competed for power, thereby adopting increasingly extreme modesty demands. The expansion of the modesty rules was possible due to the community's

⁵⁷ Charles Liebman, "Extremism as a Religious Norm," *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 22(1) (1983), 75–86.

⁵⁸ Gil S. Epstein and Ira N. Gang, "Understanding the Development of Fundamentalism," *Public Choice* 132(3/4) (2007), 257–71.

inherent insecurity and its assumption that “the more the better.” Women constituted a weak link in the structure of this society, as had always been the case historically. Neturei Karta adopted an extreme position regarding modesty rules and other authorities were unable to challenge these without weakening their own leadership position. In such conditions, there was no incentive for Blau and Neturei Karta to halt or moderate the modesty campaigns.