

Rage of Israeli Women: Issue Is Graveside Rites

By FRANCIS X. CLINES

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MIGDAL HAEMEK, Israel, Feb. 4 — The rabbi smiled with a gentleness that hardly hinted at his power to outrage Israel's feminists.

Rabbi Yitzhak David Grossman said that he respected women as much as Moses did and that the current uproar was the product of a misunderstanding that followed the death of Hannah Chamu, a 105-year-old matriarch.

Her funeral produced unanticipated grief in this northern town near Nazareth when women complained that they were barred from the burial because townsmen believed that mystical holy writings attribute the town's recent misfortunes to the presence of women at gravesides.

"There have been disasters — 30 people died in the last month — and the people came to me very upset and asked for help," the rabbi said.

Moroccans and the Cabala

He noted this Moroccan Jewish town's devotion to the behavioral dictates of the Cabala, writings on mysticism dating to the 11th century that include cautions about mixing the sexes. "But we never banned the women," he said. "That is a lie."

Marcel Belaich, politely contradicting the town's rabbi, said, "That is a fact, not a lie."

Mrs. Belaich, a day-care supervisor here, described her shock at being among all the women — even female family relatives, she said — who were barred from Mrs. Chamu's graveside Jan. 27 while the men officiated.

"This never before happened here," she said. "There never was such discrimination between men and women."

Rabbi Grossman says the women were segregated at the family's request, but not barred from the graveside. But officials of Naamat, the women's wing of the Histadrut trade federation, have accused the rabbi of issuing the ban but then trying to retreat from the national controversy.

Hasidic Women Shun Graveside

Beyond this hamlet, a humble factory town set in a pastoral valley, customs at graveside can vary somewhat among Orthodox Jews. But Orthodox Jews separate men from women at funerals, as they do at religious services. Hasidim seldom permit women at graveside on the ground that the emotional strain may be too great.

The Jerusalem Post took measure of the conflict today in a long editorial warning that "the distinction between civil and religious authority is in accelerated erosion." The paper, saying the rabbi had in fact banned women from the graveside, said too many public figures have silently tolerated such suggestions of "magic"

in public life as the recent contention by leading rabbis that schoolchildren were killed in a train accident because of faulty mezuzas, the tiny doorpost containers of sacred writ.

"The Jewish religion is much more beautiful and humane than the way she is presented by those who claim to represent her," said Dr. Pinhas Peley, a specialist in Jewish philosophy and values at Ben-Gurion University.

He cited folklore, not such basic sacred sources as the Talmud, as the origin of false notions that disaster follows when the sexes are mixed at graveside. "Unfortunately the primitive religion is seeping into all layers, even the religious establishment and the rabbinate," he said.

Tova Lichtenstein, the new adviser on women's affairs in the Religious Affairs Ministry, said that the idea of banning women from cemetery services had no basis in Judaism's recognized sacred ordinances.

In contrast to what some see as the new wave of fundamentalist religious challenges, Ms. Lichtenstein is an advocate of greater consideration for the needs of women.

One aspect of the controversy that surprised some is that Rabbi Grossman has a reputation as an innovative religious man. He has a national reputation for championing the impoverished Moroccan Jews, who belong to the Sephardic tradition, rather than his own Ashkenazic tradition.

He is known as the "the disco rabbi" for his wanderings in search of troubled youngsters and as "the prison rabbi" for his felon rehabilitation program. He runs Migdal Or (Tower of Light), a secondary school and dormitory center for more than 2,000 young teen-agers, 180 of them girls.

A Rabbi for the Sephardim

He says his unusual ministry would fail if he did not honor his people's Sephardic traditions. Thus, he was respectful, he said, when townsmen came to him citing the unexplained deaths and the disaster warning about women at gravesides contained in the Zohar, or "book of splendor" in the Cabala.

He agreed to let each family decide its graveside policy.

"Why not?" the rabbi asked. "If people believe in something you have to strengthen that belief," he said.

In contrast, his critics, such as The Jerusalem Post, are warning Israelis that a rabbinate "cowed or hijacked by obscurantism or witchcraft could abduct the polity."

Beyond the controversy, the rabbi said he did not know the actual causes of the wave of natural deaths here lately. "I am flesh and blood," he said. "I don't keep God's accounts."