

Nourishment for the Neshama

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Sunday, June 03, 2007

Basic Laws of Modesty

One important way of conducting ourselves in a manner that is G-d conscious, that makes us aware at every moment of our holy neshamas, is the manner in which we dress. Below are the basic laws and, on the sidebar, there are links to sites where these types of clothes can be found. Hatzlacha rabba u'merubah.

Modesty in Dress-The Principal Law

What areas must women and girls cover to dress modestly?

All women and girls, married or unmarried, must cover all parts of their main body (torso) plus parts of their arms and legs when in public or in the presence of individuals outside their immediate family. Under no circumstances may even a small part of these areas be uncovered in the presence of men or boys. These areas naturally provoke attention and must therefore be covered by decree of halacha (Jewish law). Their status as ervah (areas that must be covered) has been established by Chazal (our sages) and is not dependant on the local or prevailing custom. Accordingly, even if most Jewish women would chas v'shalom (G-d forbid) not cover these areas properly, the halacha (law) would still remain the same.

Modesty- An Adornment for Life, Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk (page: 267)

The Tefach Measurement:

Are there any allowances to keep any of the aforementioned parts uncovered?

Many people who have heard the term, Tefach b'isha ervah, have mistakenly concluded from it that it is permissible to leave less than a tefach (a measurement of 4" x 4"-10cm x 10cm) of a forbidden area uncovered. This is a serious mistake since the halacha (law) requires complete covering of forbidden areas. The tefach measurement was given only in connection with the husband and very close family saying a bracha (blessing) when his wife is not fully covered, but there is no heter (allowance by law) whatsoever to leave a small amount uncovered in the presence of a stranger, and there is no difference between a tefach and less than a tefach.

Modesty- An Adornment for Life, Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk (pages: 268, 293)

Covering Hair-Crown of the Jewish Woman

What is the basic law of covering the hair and its measurements?

A: Covering Hair in Public:

It is an obligation min haTorah (from the Torah) for a married woman to have her hair covered whenever she is in a public area or appears amongst a large number of people. Chazal (our sages) labeled hair of a married woman "ervah" (area that must be covered) and it is therefore ossur (prohibited) mid'Rabanan (from the sages) to say a bracha (blessing) when looking at such hair, be it another woman's hair which he may not see, or his own wife's which he may see.

It is an obligation mid'Rabanan (from our sages) for a married woman to cover her hair when she is not in the public eye but she could be seen by men who are not part of her intimate family, e.g. when she goes out to the porch or yard. The issur (prohibition) applies even if she can only be seen by one individual, such as when she opens the door to a stranger.

Hair which is difficult to contain in a regular well-fitted hair covering is halachically (according to law) exempt from this obligation. This refers to hair which grows on the temples next to the ear or on an exceptionally low hairline that extends below what a net or tiechel (scarf) would normally contain.

Although there is no obligation to cover such hair, nevertheless, if local shomrei mitzvos (observant Jews) are stringent and cover them, the halacha (law) obliges women who live in this locality to behave likewise. In fact, many have adopted the custom to be stringent because Kabbalistically much stress is put on covering all hair of the head without exception. If a woman is just temporarily in a place that is stringent, she is obliged to cover this hair in accordance with the local minhag (custom), even though it is halachically (by law) permitted for her to show this hair at home where people are used to it.

There is no heter (leniency) for a lock of hair that comes from the upper head area to descend and protrude from the tiechel (scarf), snood etc. at the temples or even below them since such hair can easily be contained. There is no heter (leniency) for even a minor part of the hair to be uncovered over the forehead. Such hair must therefore be covered in line with all other hair.

B: Covering Hair in Privacy:

The Poskim (Rabbi's that rule the law) write that even the lenient opinion (that maintains that she is not halachically (by law) duty-bound to cover her hair in privacy) agrees that it is an extremely praiseworthy act of tznius (modesty) for a woman to cover her hair whenever possible (even in bed). This is evident from the story of Kimchis. This outstanding woman merited having seven sons who all became Kohanim Gedolim (High Priests). When asked what notable deed she did to merit having such children she answered, "The ceiling beams of my house never saw the hair of my head". This means that even when she wished to comb her hair she would avoid exposing the hair properly. For example, she combed the hair under a shawl that lay loosely over her head.

This was an outstanding act of tznius (modesty) and it is certainly not expected of the average woman. However, the basic idea of reducing the exposure of hair to the absolute minimum is certainly to be learned from Kimchis, and her ways should be emulated as far as possible. As a result of this particular form of tznius (modesty), a woman could merit to have children who are great Talmidei Chachamim (Torah Scholars).

What other benefits can be gained by covering the hair?

Kabbalah: Great Damage is done by Exposing Hair:

All opinions (of Rabbis) agree that Kabbalistically a woman harms herself, her husband and children by partially exposing some of her hair. Moreover, those that leave some hair uncovered usually do so in order to look more attractive and from the Zohar (Kabbalistic writing) it is evident that when hair is uncovered to attract attention, the harm and damage done is even greater. The Zohar (a Kabbalistic writing) says the following:

Rabbi Chizkia said, 'Cursed is the man who allows his wife to expose hairs of her head beyond their covering. Covering the hair is one of the acts of modesty that should be performed even in the home (i.e. not just in public). The woman who allows some of her hair to be uncovered in order to exhibit it causes poverty to descend on her home, her children not to reach the prominence they could have achieved, and an impure spirit to dwell in her home. What precipitates such misfortunes? The hair that she exposed within her house! If the effect of an indoor exposure is such, imagine what damage is caused by exposing hair outdoors... A woman should, therefore ensure that not even a single hair is uncovered even when she is indoors, and all the more so when she goes outdoors.'

If women would realize the harm they inflict upon themselves by being lenient, they would surely return to the traditional Jewish way of covering all their hair. It is tragic that such an important Chazal (teaching of our sages) as this Zohar (a Kabbalistic writing) is not more widely known.

Modesty- An Adornment for Life, Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk (pages: 228-240)

The Neckline

How do I measure the area called 'the neckline'?

A woman must cover the whole of her main body (the torso). She must, therefore cover whatever is halachically (according to law) not considered to be part of the neck.

At the front, the neck ends just above the collar-bones; the collar bones form the frontal uppermost part of the torso. As the collar-bones are part of the main body, they must be properly covered, in line with all other parts of the main body. At the center of this frontal area, the neck extends slightly downwards between the collar-bones in a small v-shaped dip. This is due to the fact that the collar bones do not join one another, but rather leave a soft fleshy area between them. This area is an extended part of the neck and need not be covered (as this part may be exposed, great care must be taken to assure the coverage of the collar bones).

At the sides the neck gives way and becomes shoulder when it curves outward, or is at least more horizontal than vertical. Since this area is shoulder, it is an integral part of the main body and must be completely covered (check out the necklace method below).

At the back- At the rear, the neck ends and the upper back starts from a point that is level with the highest point of the shoulders. This is above the second projecting bone of the spine which can be seen very well on a young child when he bends his head forward. When a necklace lies at its lowest natural point across the back of the neck, it will hang from what is still considered neck. Below this point the upper back starts, which must be covered as explained. A necklace can also be used to help determine the boundaries of the neck to the right and left.

Modesty- An Adornment for Life, Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk (pages: 269-270)

The Arms

What parts of the arms must a woman cover?

Upper sections of the arms must be completely covered. The elbow has the same halachos (law requirements) as the upper section of the arm and must be completely covered. In fact, the elbow is a "ball and socket" area, the "ball" being the rounded end of the bone of the upper arm, and the "socket" the top end of one of the lower bones of the arm (the radius). Hence the upper limb of the arm occupies a substantial part of the elbow. Since the upper section of the arm must be covered and it extends into the elbow, it is understood that the complete elbow must be covered.

Modesty- An Adornment for Life, Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk (pages: 291,293)

According to law, must a woman cover her forearms?

Most Poskim (Rabbis that rule the law) maintain that the halacha (law) does not require women to cover their arms below the elbow. Although there is no halachic (law) obligation to cover the forearms, nevertheless, this part of the arms offer an opportunity for a woman or girl to exercise her own instinctive feeling for refinement, where halacha (law) has not demanded of her. To cover the complete arm is a hidur- a considerable enhancement of the mitzvah (commandment) of tznius (modesty). In some Chareidi (Observant Jewish) circles it has become customary that women and girls cover most of the lower section of the forearms- and some go even further and cover the whole lower section of the arm (except where the bracelet or watch is worn). If one is in such a place, one must do likewise (only in that place), because the individual woman is halachically (by law) required to keep the standard set by women of that time and place. If covering most or all of the forearm has not become the local minhag (custom), an individual may do so herself. She has, however, no right to insist that other women and girls do so.

All opinions agree that women need not cover their hands or fingers in public.

Modesty- An Adornment for Life, Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk (pages: 296,298)

The Legs

Upper Section of the Legs:

What is the law requirement of covering the legs?

Skirts must cover the knees completely. The upper section of the legs must be covered when in public by decree of halacha (law), due to their proximity to the main body. Therefore, even if most women would wear short sleeves or short skirts, it would still remain strictly against the halacha (law) to do so.

A woman or girl must cover the upper sections of the legs including the knees. This is because the knee is not an independent bone (apart from the slim knee cap). Instead, it contains the rounded lower end of the upper section of the leg- the femur. This upper bone extends through to the lowest point of the knee to the extent that when a person who is sitting puts his hands onto his knees he is touching the rounded lower end of the femur bone. The lower leg (the tibia) which is slightly indented to comfortably support the rounded end of the upper section is situated just below the knee. Since the upper section of the leg must be completely covered as has been explained, and the upper sections of the legs extend down the complete knee, it is obvious that the knee must be completely covered.

A woman must ensure that her knees remain fully covered at all times, even when she is sitting, stretching, ascending stairs, (walking), and so on. The skirt length must therefore ensure that her knees will not be uncovered even for a moment.

Modesty- An Adornment for Life, Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk (pages: 300,302)

May a woman wear a tight fitting skirt if they properly cover the upper legs and knees?

Even though the upper sections of the arms and legs are both ervah (areas that must be covered) by decree of halacha (law), there is an important difference between them. The upper arms must be covered but there is no halachic (law) obligation to disguise and mask their shape by covering them with a shawl etc. The upper sections of the legs, however, are governed by a far more stringent halacha (law). They must be covered in such a way that the limbs are totally disguised and the shape of the thigh and upper sections of the legs cannot be seen. This implies that the thigh must be dressed in a loose fitting garment and is therefore hidden and goes unnoticed.

Modesty- An Adornment for Life, Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk (pages: 308,309)

Lower Section of the Legs:

What is the law requirement of the lower section of the legs?

The lower section of the legs must be fully covered with hosiery (tights or stockings) which masks the legs and covers them well. There are two independent reasons why the lower sections of the legs must be covered in this manner:

- **Firstly, Chazal (our sages) state that Shok b'isha ervah- "the leg of a woman is ervah (area that must be covered)". According to many Poskim (Rabbis that rule the law), Chazal (our sages) are referring to the lower sections of the legs.**
- **Secondly, it is a fully-accepted Orthodox practice that the lower sections of the legs are covered whenever a woman or girl is in public to lessen their visibility and render them indistinct. The legs are therefore limbs which are generally covered and obscured and as such it is an obligation on everyone not to deviate from this practice.**

Modesty- An Adornment for Life, Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk (page: 329)