

## Nourishment for the Neshama

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### Reflections on Tznius, Boundaries and the World Today

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In Rabbi Falk's book *Modesty, An Adornment for Life* (p. 211-212) he discusses the halachos of a man saying a bracha, krias shema or any other davar shebikdusha in front of an inadequately-clad female.

Firstly, Chazal, the Rambam and the compiler of Shulchan Aruch did not arrange a section on the halachos of Tznius concerning female clothing. Their approach was quite different. Within the halachos of krias shema they wrote a section which deals with a man who wishes to say krias shema when there is an inadequately-clad female present in the room at the time. In the context of these halachos, almost all halachic points concerning what needs to be covered and which clothes are or are not suitable for a Bas Yisroel are recorded...there is a very powerful message, even for women, in the issur for men to say krias shema and brachos in front of an inadequately-clad female. From these halachos, women and girls can see for themselves the far-reaching effect that even minimal carelessness in dress has on men who catch sight of them. ...we are dealing here with factors that are of critical significance to the purity and chastity of the Jewish people. When a bracha is said by a man facing a woman with semi-uncovered arms, the bracha is imperfect and according to some is even invalid and classified a bracha levatala...If a woman sits at the breakfast table with her hair or a tefach of her hair uncovered, or if just half the upper sections of her arms are uncovered, and her husband sits facing her, all brachos he recites while in that position are imperfect and according to some are rendered brachos levatala. This is so even if he is not actually looking at her while saying the bracha.

While many may wish to dismiss his statements or quote other sources that are more lenient, the purpose of this essay is to ask..."what if" and suggest "if so then" regarding boundaries.

I learned from Rebbetzin Heller's shiur on the Maharal's Netzach HaShalom about boundaries and how understanding our boundaries leads us to respecting the boundaries of others which, in turn, leads us to accepting the picture of shalaim that HaKadosh Baruch Hu has created through His Will. When boundaries are crossed, the general reaction of a person is a sense of loss or pain, leading to anger, despair, or a whole range of fearful and angry responses. And, from Rebbetzin Heller's shiur on the Maharal's Netzach Koach HaYetzer, I learned that the yetzer hara feeds off our sense of lack and steers us in the wrong direction. We follow the yetzer hara's temptations trying to regain something when instead, we are instructed to remember that we never lack anything that is good for us, that Hashem only sends good, and that this is the preserving route to take when we experience pain or loss. In sum, our boundaries get crossed, and our choices are to pursue after erroneous goals that we believe might reset our boundaries and make us whole but which drain our higher selves and lead us

most often into averahs and lowly conduct OR to see that our boundary is crossed and that the suffering is a cleansing to lead us back to our identity in devekus, closeness to Hashem, this being the only path that will, in fact, give us a sense of fulfillment.

Now how is this relevant to tznius? What Rabbi Falk's description of the halachos of tznius is telling us seems to be that whether or not we believe it or feel it, Torah tells us that a man's boundary is crossed when women are inadequately dressed. With all due respect to all the objections that are coming to mind (mine and yours), let us take a moment to reflect. What if it is true? After all, it is the Torah, and the Torah is emes. And it encompasses more than we can understand. Given that we are not able to have more than fleeting moments (if that) of contact with our neshamas, how can we be certain that our neshamas' boundaries (or the boundaries of a man's neshama) are in fact NOT being crossed? For example, what shifts our thinking during prayer from kavana to the mundane? Is not it likely and possible that even the slightest distraction leads us there? Why wouldn't that hold true for a man as well when faced with an inadequately dressed woman or girl? Obviously it is. And since there is no way to really block it out, let us assume that what Chazal is telling us, that his boundary is being crossed and his tefillos are being compromised with more lowly feelings and urges, is true.

We can debate all the halachos and interpretations, but that is not my point. Let us accept for a moment on faith that this is true because I would like to make a more far-reaching point.

Our boundaries get crossed every day. In a world where anything goes, how does one protect one's boundaries? How today can anyone stop anyone? We are experiencing this through threats of terror, the war in Iraq and many horrifying crimes. Israel is physically building a wall to protect its boundaries.

Hmmm.

Are you understanding where I am going?

We know that mankind has a tremendous impact on the way Hashem runs the world. What we do matters in sending upward to the indeterminate forces influences on the world. What would happen if we, Jewish women, ALL decided to follow the halachos as described in Rabbi Falk's book? We would be protecting our boundaries and the boundaries of our men, protecting the sanctity of our people. If we are careful in the way we dress, recognizing the impact we can have on another person, is it not likely that we will be more respectful of others, and also that others will be more respectful of us? And further, if we protect and set our boundaries properly, perhaps the boundaries for our people will receive help from above as well.

This is my thought. If we dress properly, and this leads to mutual respect between us, which creates also positive indeterminate forces, then it becomes easier to protect our boundaries as a people in two ways. Firstly, our relationships with our fellow man will be more respectful naturally and secondly, we might acquire more spiritual merit upon which the Shechina will protect Israel and save us from those who wish our destruction.

We learn from the laws of tznius a truth about boundaries. They matter. Even if we don't understand how the boundary is crossed, it is crossed. And impurity in a spiritual

realm matters. Let us keep holy the things that are holy.

#### ADDENDUM

On reflection, I only wish to add the following.

If we accept upon ourselves to dress tznius lishma, because Torah tells us that this is necessary for the purity of our people, what we are really, in essence doing is saying, okay! I am more than meets the eye. I have a holy neshama with a boundary that I can't measure because it is in two worlds. Likewise those I meet have this same "condition," a holy neshama in two worlds whose boundary that I can't measure is crossed unless I dress appropriately. In essence, when we now look at another person, we are not only seeing their physical form, but we have, in our own minds, acknowledged their holy essence. Our decision to dress in the manner we do is a constant reminder. The outcome? Respect for each person, and a return to understanding mankind as having the capacity to grow in holiness.

When we make considerations and allowances in a realm that is so vague to us, we change this.

Would it not be reasonable to set our boundaries in such a way as to bring respect into every contact? Would we need weaponry if each person perceived the other in such a way?





