

Rav Yitzchak Yaacov Fuchs

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# HALICHOS BAS YISRAEL

*A Woman's Guide to  
Jewish Observance*

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the English edition of  
הליכות בת ישראל

prepared by  
RAV MOSHE DOMBEY  
in collaboration with the author

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*From the Hebrew edition,  
Chapters 1–13*

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## Covering the Body

2. The *Mishnah* in Tractate *Kethuboth*,<sup>2</sup> in discussing *tzniuth*, observes that it was a custom of Jewish women not to weave in the marketplace, thereby identifying this as a restriction derived from *Dath Yehudith*. The *Gemara*<sup>3</sup> explains that this prohibition arose because the motions of weaving inevitably cause a woman to expose her upper arms in public, and this immodesty is a violation of *Dath Moshe*. Here, the secondary *Dath Yehudith* restriction is a “fence” around a more serious infraction against the Torah, *Dath Moshe*. This Talmudic discussion is the direct and indirect source of many of the laws of modest dress.

3. It is a serious transgression for a woman to dress immodestly.<sup>4</sup> By ignoring the laws of modest dress, a woman not only violates the Torah herself, but causes

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2. *Kethuboth* 7:3.

3. *Kethuboth* 72b.

4. *Iggeroth Moshe, Yoreh De'ah*, Vol. 1, No. 81; *Y'chaveh Da'ath*, Vol. 3, No. 67.

There are numerous prohibitions against wearing immodest clothing. *Iggeroth Moshe* states that one who wears immodest clothing is said to be “walking in the way of the gentile,” which involves a violation of the Torah injunction, “You shall not walk in their ways” (*VaYikra* 18:3).

*Y'chaveh Da'ath* adds that a woman who dresses immodestly violates the biblical prohibition, “You shall not set up a stumbling block in front of a blind person” (*VaYikra* 19:14), since by ignoring the laws of *tzniuth*, a woman causes men to violate the law forbidding them to view the parts of a woman’s body that should be covered. The author continues that immodest dress violates the prohibition, “And you shall guard yourself from any evil thing” (*Devarim* 23:10), and that immodesty causes the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) to depart from Israel, as it is written, “He shall not see any eroticism in your midst, for then He will turn away from you” (*Devarim* 23:15).

others who see her to transgress. Jewish Law not only prohibits a woman from dressing immodestly, but also forbids men to look at someone who is so dressed.<sup>5</sup>

### Parts of the Body Which Must be Covered

4. Jewish Law requires that the following parts of a married or unmarried woman's body be covered in public:

- a) The neck (below and including the collarbone<sup>6</sup>)
- b) The arms (the upper arms,<sup>7</sup> including the elbow<sup>8</sup>)

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5. *Shulchan Arukh, Evven HaEzer* 21:1; *Mishnah Berurah* 75:7; *Iggeroth Moshe, Orach Chayim*, No. 40, and *Evven HaEzer*, No. 56. This prohibition applies even where no sexual desire is involved.

6. The *Mishnah Berurah* 75:2, clearly states that the area above the collarbone may be exposed. Also see *Kuntres Malbushey Nashim*, p. 12.

7. *Mishnah Berurah* 75:2 and 75:7; *Chaye Adam* 7:2; *Kaf HaChayim* 75:2 and 75:3.

The *Gemara, Kethuboth* 72b, explains that the *Mishnah* confirms the *Dath Yehudith* prohibition against a woman weaving in the marketplace because she will invariably expose her *z'roah* (arm) in public. The *Mishnah, Ohaloth* 1:5, defines *z'roah* as the bone extending from the shoulder to the elbow.

The *Chazon Ish, Orach Chayim* 16:8, raises the possibility that the lower arm may also be considered *z'roah*. He concludes that it is possible that the entire arm should be covered to the wrist. The *Ben Ish Chai, Shanah Rishonah, Parshath Bo* 11, and the *Kaf HaChayim* 75:2 cite the *Zohar*, which states that only the hands should be exposed, but most later authorities accept the view of the *Mishnah Berurah* that only the upper arm and elbow need be covered. Also see *Yabiah Omer*, Vol. 6, *Orach Chayim* 14:3.

It should be noted that in a community where the accepted practice of observant Jewish women is to dress in a more stringent manner, a visitor should adopt the prevailing custom so as not to appear conspicuous.

8. The elbows are covered because, if they were not, the upper arms would often be exposed as the woman raised her arms. See *Kuntres*

c) The legs (the thighs, including the knees<sup>9</sup>)

A woman is required to wear a dress or skirt which is long enough to cover her knees whether she is standing or sitting,<sup>10</sup> and this is necessary even if she wears non-transparent stockings.<sup>11</sup> Some authorities maintain that the dress must be ankle-length, but this is not the generally-accepted practice. It is, however, the general practice of women in many Jewish communities to wear stockings.<sup>12</sup>

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*Malbushey Nashim*, p. 8-9, which explains that the prohibition against exposing the upper arms applies even if it is done occasionally or unintentionally.

9. *Mishnah Berurah* 75:2, quoting Tractate *Berakhoth* 24a: "The exposed *shoke* (thigh) of a woman constitutes *ervah* (an erotic stimulus)."
10. *Kuntres Malbushey Nashim*, p. 10, suggests that, in order to ensure that the thigh will always be covered, a dress should reach approximately ten centimeters (four inches) below the knee.
11. HaGaon Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and HaGaon Rav Yosef Sholom Eliashiv write in the journal *Bam'silah* (5730, p. 97): "The *shoke* must be covered when the woman is sitting or standing. Under no circumstances should one rely on stockings as a covering." In *Kuntres Malbushey Nashim*, p. 11, HaRav Binyamin Zilber writes that covering the knee with non-transparent stockings might satisfy the *Dath Moshe* requirement of covering the *shoke*, but the traditionally-accepted practice of Jewish women, *Dath Yehudith*, mandates that the dress itself cover the knees.
12. *Shulchan Arukh HaRav* 75:1; *Orukh HaShulchan* 75:3; *Chaye Adam* 14:2; *Ben Ish Chai*, *Shanah Rishonah*, *Parshath Bo* 11-12; *Kaf HaChayim* 75:2.

The two opinions cited in the text on the required length of a woman's dress are based on different definitions of *shoke*. The *Mishnah Berurah* 75:2 states that the area below the knee is not *shoke*, consequently, the obligation to cover this area is not *Dath Moshe*, but depends on the accepted practice of observant Jewish women in a particular community. The *Chaye Adam*, however, maintains that only the feet are excluded from *Dath Moshe* and that the calf is part of the *shoke*. This view reflects the definition of

5. Some women mistakenly believe that they may expose up to a *tefach* (four inches) of parts of the body which require covering. This is not correct; they must be completely covered.<sup>13</sup>

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*shoke* in the *Mishnah, Ohaloth* 1:8. *Shevet HaLevi, Orach Chayim*, Vol. 1, No. 1, brings additional support from a Responsa of Rabbi Akiva Eiger. HaRav Yehoshua Neuwirth, writing in the journal *Sh'matin*, No. 11, says that this opinion is the same as the *Bach, Shulchan Arukh HaRav* and the *Orukh HaShulchan*. The *Chazon Ish, Orach Chayim* 16:8, also finds it difficult to agree with the *Mishnah Berurah*. HaGaon Rav Binyamin Zilber, in *Kuntres Malbushey Nashim*, p. 10, writes that after corresponding with the *Chazon Ish*, he, too, is unable to agree with the *Mishnah Berurah* on this question. Clearly, many opinions require a woman's dress to be ankle-length.

In spite of the weight of so many contrary views, most Jewish communities today have adopted the more lenient definition of the *Mishnah Berurah*. It is, however, a widely accepted practice to wear non-transparent stockings, and a woman is obligated to do so in a community which follows this practice.

*Minchath Yitzchak*, Vol. 6, No. 10, rules that a woman should wear stockings at home because strangers or visitors may come at any time. Nevertheless, HaGaon Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurbach writes, "According to the letter of the Law, a woman is not required to wear stockings in her husband's presence, yet she is still required to wear a dress that accords with the minimum standards of modesty." According to *Shevet HaLevi*, Vol. 5, No. 77, a woman who wears an ankle-length dress need not wear stockings.

HaGaon Rav Yosef Sholom Eliashiv rules that in communities where it is the accepted practice for women to wear stockings, a man is forbidden to recite *Shema*, blessings or study Torah in the presence of his wife if she is not wearing them. This is based on the principle that a man may not recite prayers or study Torah in the presence of any woman, including his wife, if any normally-covered part of her body is exposed. This principle is discussed at length in paragraphs 6-11.

13. *Iggeroth Moshe, Evven HaEzer*, No. 58, based on the *Remah, Orach Chayim* 75:1. This ruling concerns areas of flesh, not the hair. For a discussion of the amount of hair that a married woman may leave

## Prayer and Torah Study

6. A man may recite *devarim shebikdushah* (words pertaining to holiness) — prayers, *Shema*, words of Torah and blessings — in the presence of a woman only if she is modestly dressed. He is forbidden to do so in the presence of a woman, even his wife, if any normally-covered part of her body is exposed.<sup>14</sup> This prohibition applies even if the man is not looking at her.<sup>15</sup> Areas of the body covered by transparent clothing are considered exposed.<sup>16</sup>

7. In communities where observant Jewish women do not cover their calves and forearms, a man may recite

exposed, see Chapter 5, paragraph 9.

The mistake is based on a misunderstanding of the *Beith Yosef's* view in *Orach Chayim* 75:1, permitting a *man* to recite prayers and blessings in the presence of a woman if less than a *tefach* is exposed. But the *Beith Yosef* does not mean to imply that such exposure is permissible for the *woman*. Also see *Chazon Ish, Orach Chayim* 16:7; *Lev HaIvri*, p. 65; *Mishnah Berurah* 75:7.

14. *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim* 75:1 and *Mishnah Berurah; Minchath Yitzchak*, Vol. 2, No. 84; *Sh'arim Metzuyanim BeHalakha* 5:9; *Yabiah Omer*, Vol. 6, *Orach Chaim*, No. 12.

Following this rule, a man should not recite *devarim shebikdushah* while facing his wife when she is nursing a baby unless she covers herself. See *Chaye Adam* 4:7.

*Salmath Chayim*, Vol. 4, No. 4, states that these rules also apply when a man wishes to write words of Torah in the woman's presence.

15. The *Mishnah Berurah*, 75:1, 75:7 and 75:29-30, points out that if the man turns his entire body away and faces the opposite direction, he may recite *devarim shebikdushah* even though the woman is in the same room. When there is no alternative, the *Mishnah Berurah* even permits him to close his eyes and recite *devarim shebikdushah* without turning away. The *Chazon Ish, Orach Chayim* 16:7-8, concurs with this decision. Also see *Y'chaveh Da'ath*, Vol. 4, No. 6.
16. *Magen Avraham* 75:1, based on Tractate *Berakhoth* 25a.