

Parashat Acharei Mot

Pesach – Living by the Law of Covering our Nakedness

The Challenge of Recreational Swimming for the Religious Family

Here in Israel, summer begins right after Pesach with the opening of the public beaches. Swimming is a great, gentle, healthy sport that doesn't need to be shunned by the G-d fearing. Yet, in Denmark where I grew up, the women would go topless to the beach in order to soak in the scant summer sun. That may have changed today, due to fear of skin cancer. Still, I cannot take my son to any beach when we visit my parents in Denmark this summer. Mixed swimming is not an option for the Torah observant family. So, where can I go on vacation and swim together with my family? My husband and I used to go to isolated beaches without people, where I still wore my 'Princess Modest Swimwear,' just in case a man would pass by. However, after almost drowning in the undercurrent of the Mediterranean Sea, we discovered that at beaches where there are no people there is also no life-guard. The religious *Kinar beach* of the calm serene Sea of Galilee saved our day. There, we have a choice between separate swimming at the men or women's beach respectively and swimming together at the mixed modest beach where all the women are fully covered like me. In addition, the guesthouses in Israel that are geared toward the orthodox sector offer the pampering of a private swimming pool. I feel very fortunate to live five minutes from the separate pool of Alon Shevut that only has separate hours for men and women. Thank G-d for the Holy Land!

Sunrise Swimming Sisterhood

Every Monday morning I arise at times while it is still dark, and grab my swimming bag, heading for the 6-7 AM women's pool hour. It is such a powerful, liberating feeling to beat my tired, laziness through the strength of healthy routine. As the first mitzvah in the *Code of the Law* instructs us, "Be strong like a lion to wake up in the morning to serve the Creator" (*Shulchan Aruch* 1:1). At the pool, I join the silent, stout, sisterhood of swimmers, swimming against the stream of sluggishness. We place our bags on the yellow plastic benches, hang our jackets on the hooks and ignore the peeling ceiling and the dusty glare of the florescent lights, which hasn't been cleaned for Pesach. As a choreographed cluster, we calmly make our stride into the cool pool-water to swim our morning laps. Most of the women have the determination to repeat this routine every morning and they pay a monthly membership fee. This, I discovered when I missed my weekly Monday routine and had to make up on a Wednesday, while meeting mostly the same women. Over the years, I have come to know my fellow swimmers and grown fond of our tacit comradery. I accept that Chaya has tenure on the only hairdryer that works without turning on and off. I eagerly await the enjoyable healing scent of Shira's natural oils, which fortunately overpower the caustic smell of chlorine. She is a strong, avid swimmer with suntanned skin fitting tightly on her lean, muscular body. I exchange morning greetings and friendly smiles with Yael the physical therapist who helped me after my car accident 25 years ago. Miriam, who always brings a suitcase filled with clothes, various body-lotions and who-knows-what-else, involves all of us with her engaging friendly conversation. She may also join in with Daniella's happy, high-pitched singing in the shower. No wonder I always return invigorated not only from the swim but also from the positive energy generated by my female pool friends.

Avoiding Immodesty without Compromising our Health

With easy access to such enjoyable separate pool, mixed swimming holds no enticement for us early rising swimmers. I have only compassion for the poor insecure woman who gets her self-confidence from a handsome man noticing the skin of her flat stomach between the two parts of her bikini. This week's *parasha* discusses the prohibition of inappropriate sexual relationships. In this context, the Torah literally uses the expression, "do not uncover the nakedness" of the various women that a man is forbidden to marry (*Vayikra* 18:4-19). This expression alludes to the fact that uncovered nakedness is a main manifestation of sexuality, and we can therefore deduct that the covering of a woman's nakedness from the glares of inappropriate men through separate swimming is a mitzvah from the Torah. Certainly, a Jewish man may not go to a mixed beach where women are exposing their nakedness. The halacha goes as far as to prohibit a man from passing by a place where women are doing their washing because they used to stand in the water with their legs uncovered. If there is another way to pass (even through a detour) a man must not pass by women doing their washing. If there is no other way, he must close his eyes and look away (*Aruch HaShulchan* 21:1). However, Rav Moshe Feinstein does give one exception to this rule for a person who is in need of the healing at the sea. Such person is permitted to go to a mixed beach even if there are uncovered women, as long as he knows himself that it won't lead him to improper thoughts (*hirhurim*). This is on condition that there is no beach available with separate hours (*Igrot Moshe, Even HaEzer* 1:56). I recall going to the pool in my modest swim-dress when we lived in Memphis TN, where I was surprised to meet an elderly rebbetzin in her bathing suit. She told me that her rabbi had given her a *heter* (halachic permission) because she needed to swim for health reasons. The rules of the Torah are for us to live by to the highest degree rather than to be a detriment to our health. Thus, caring for our health is so important that it even at times overrides the important mitzvah of modesty.

No Need to Compromise Modesty to Enjoy Healthy Recreation

I'm proud to live in the Holy Land where we can follow Hashem's mandate to keep separate and holy rather than being enticed by the temptations of the immodest fashions and customs of the nations of the world including mixed swimming. Rashi explains that to be holy implies not only avoiding forbidden sexual relationships, but moreover to keep the extra fences that distances us from improper sexual energies: "Wherever you find a command to fence yourself against improper sexuality mentioned in the Torah you also find the mention of holiness" (Rashi, *Vayikra* 19:2). We see an example of this in the sequence of the end of this week's *parasha* that elaborates on the forbidden sexual relationships juxta positioned to next week's *parasha*, which opens with the command to be holy. To reach holiness we need to care more about keeping the Torah than following the culture and latest fashions of the world. As an introduction to the list of forbidden sexual relationships in this week's *parasha* we are directed to stir clear of the extraneous influence of exile so we can be free to keep the laws of Hashem:

ספר ויקרא פרק יח

(ג) כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבְּתֶם בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וְכַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְבִיא אֲתֶכֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּבְחֻקֹּתֵיהֶם לֹא תֵלְכוּ: (ד) אֵת מִשְׁפָּטֵי תַעֲשׂוּ וְאֵת חֻקֹּתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ לְלִבְתָּ בְּהֵם אֲנִי הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: (ה) וּשְׁמֹרְתֶם אֵת חֻקֹּתַי וְאֵת מִשְׁפָּטֵי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אִתְּם הָאָדָם וְחֵי בְּהֵם אֲנִי הָשֵׁם:

"You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I'm bringing you, nor shall you follow their statutes. Mine rules alone shall you observe, and walk faithfully in my laws: I am Hashem your G-d. You shall keep My laws and My rules, through which humanity will keep and live by them: I am Hashem" (*Vayikra* 18:3-5).

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

From the last words of this quote we learn that in spite of all the prohibitions of the Torah that seemingly restrict our lives, keeping all of these laws and rules actually brings us both holiness and true life as it states, וְחַיִּים בָּהֶם / *v'chai bahem* – and live by them. All of Hashem's laws in the Torah actually enhance our lives, even if it doesn't always feel that way on the surface for those of us who may be accustomed to the practices of the nations where we were exiled. Here in Israel we are fortunately to live enriched Torah observant lives without having to compromise neither our standard of modesty nor our standard of healthy and enjoyable exercise and recreation.