

# OBLIGATION OR PRIVILEGE?: PART III

*by Rebbetzin Tsiporah (Heller) Gottlieb*

## Student Comments and Questions

This week's class features student responses to "Women in Judaism: Obligation or Privilege", which appeared in two installments over the past several weeks. This class encourages your reactions to the material and has already received many insights into the controversial topic of women in Judaism. Please join the dialogue by sending your questions and comments to [lkohn@torah.org](mailto:lkohn@torah.org). All mail is answered by Mrs. Leah Kohn, Director of the Jewish Renaissance Center and moderator of the class.

### Student Response #1

Being a baal teshuva (newly observant) family, my daughter at first had a lot of problems dealing with the extent of modesty expected of a Jewish woman. "Why should I have to swelter outside because a man can't control his hormones?" was her basic response. "If a man is the one who can't stay in check, he should be the one to blindfold himself rather than inconveniencing someone else." I told her, "We are not doing this because men have a 'problem.' We are basically doing this for our own well being. When you become friends with a boy, or even when you start dating, you're not going to want him to want to be around you because of your nice legs or slim waist." When you have any type of relationship, you want to be appreciated for your mind, sense of humor and intelligence. You are doing this for your own advantage. Once my daughter understood there are benefits for herself it became a lot easier. She started taking pride in the way she dressed because she didn't need male approval of her body in order to feel confident.

*Jaimie*

### Student Response #2

I feel that focusing on a Jewish woman's responsibility not to dress in a way which might lead a man to transgress is almost as bad as the example you give from the secular world of using scantily-clad women to sell cars. It's tantamount to saying that a woman has 'invited' rape, for example. I'm sorry if this sounds disrespectful, and I really do want to learn more about my religious heritage, but I find this particular attitude very distressing. I wondered if there is anything I can read which might reconcile me to this?

*Josefa*

Dear Josefa: The Jewish perspective on the issues you raise is that both men and women are responsible for mutual respect. If a woman is improperly dressed, she is responsible for transgressing her obligation to modesty. If a man conducts himself improperly towards a woman, regardless of whether she is modestly dressed, he is held accountable for his actions. I must emphasize that, if a woman is immodestly dressed and is violated, she is not held responsible for the violation of her body, only for the violation of tzniut (modesty).

*Leah Kohn*

P.S. For further reading, please see: Outside/Inside: A Fresh Look at Tzniut, by Gila Manolson

### Response #3

To Whom It May Concern, I am an Orthodox teenage girl, and when I was younger, I was led to believe women were second class in Judaism. Then, I was taught things from a different perspective, and I was given the impression that women are better than men. However, I soon realized that this was very wrong and a very immature and ignorant approach. I basically felt that these people were saying, "Well, of course women are just better", but when you'd ask, "Well what makes them better?", there would be no response. I also always learned that women didn't need positive, time-bound commandments because they were always keeping home. This didn't sit too well with me either. Finally, I realized, with the help of some excellent teachers and friends, that women aren't second class, and they also aren't better than men-they're just different. Not being able to put on tzitzit and tefillin doesn't bother me, the same way it shouldn't bother a man that he doesn't have a mitzvah to go to the mikvah once a month after he marries. So whenever people in class attack a teacher with comments like, "Why don't women have to daven three times a day?", I always sit and smile because these things don't bother me anymore-I understand them.

With regards to modesty, I also had many difficulty understanding why women have many obligations, while men have virtually none. When I started to talk to more males, and some females, I realized just how weak men can be when it comes to women. I no longer see it as "my body must be hidden out of shame", but rather that my body should be hidden because there are men out there who can't handle seeing a woman without thinking of her first as an object and then as a person. I now appreciate these laws much more than before. I would like to thank you for your beautiful, easy-to-understand classes about the woman's place in Judaism. I really enjoy receiving it, and seeing how you don't feel the need to put down one gender to show the importance of the other. May you inspire other women as you have inspired me.

Thank you,

*Elana*

Once again, your responses to this and any other "Women in Judaism" classes are welcome. Material may be reprinted here and on the bulletin board of the Jewish Renaissance Center website, <http://www.JewishRenaissance.org/>.

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