

## Exposure of Women's Hair: Misrepresentation of the Igros Moshe's Position and the Standards of the Yeshivish Communities



In the present era, we have been blessed with a number of informative broadcasts covering a wide range of Torah topics.

In one such recent broadcast (entitled “Hilchos Tzniyus and Hair Covering—How Much?”), guest speakers were invited to discuss the halachos of tzniyus as they apply to women's hair (and other issues). However, it seems that speakers made a number of erroneous assertions, as will be elaborated upon below.

### Erroneous Assertions

In the broadcast, speakers contended that:

- ☞ The Igros Moshe zt'l is the Mara D'Asra of (at least) America (for all future generations), and his position regarding hair covering is thus the acceptable standard for American communities.
- ☞ The Igros Moshe (OC 4:112 and EH 1:58) is of the opinion that it is permitted for a woman to expose up to a tefach of her hair (and this is the opinion of the Mechaber in Shulchan Aruch).
- ☞ The (non-Chassidic) yeshivish communities have adopted this position of the Igros Moshe as their standard (with a few exceptions, such as in Bnei Brak).

It appears that these assertions constitute a misrepresentation of the position of the Igros Moshe and of the standards accepted by the yeshivish communities.

The largest and most representative (non-Chassidic) yeshivish community in America is that of Lakewood, and many of the other yeshivish communities in America and abroad have their roots in and identify with the Lakewood Beth Medrash Govoha (BMG) community, founded and inspired by Rav Aharon Kotler zt'l.

Does the Lakewood yeshivish community ascribe to and accept the asserted position of the Igros Moshe regarding exposure of women's hair?

Let us examine the sefer *Hi Tis'halel: A Practical Guide to Tznius*, written by the current senior Dayan

and Posek at Beth Medrash Govoha of Lakewood, Rav Yaakov E. Forchheimer shlit'a.

*Contrary to the contentions articulated by speakers in this broadcast, in the above sefer Rav Forchheimer clarifies as follows (see pp. 42ff in the 5769 [2009] revised and expanded edition):*

### According to Almost All Poskim, All the Hair on the Head Must Be Covered

- ☞ Rav Forchheimer writes that the *majority of poskim* rule that a woman is obligated to cover *all* the hair on the head. [This fact is documented in many compilations on the halachos of tzniyus; see for example the sefer *Kvuda Bas Melech* (chapter 1 footnotes 8-10); the sefer *Levusha Shel Torah* (chapter 24); the sefer *Oz V'Hadar Levusha: Modesty—An Adornment for Life* (chapter 5:C)<sup>1</sup>; and the sefer *Piskei Teshuvos* (OC 75:10)<sup>2</sup>]. Many are of the opinion that exposure of even one hair constitutes *giluy ervah* (see Rav Forchheimer, *ibid.*) and this is the position of the mainstream poskim considered authoritative by the yeshivish communities, such as the Chofetz Chayim in *Mishnah Berurah* (75:10) and in his sefer *Geder Olam* (chapter 2), who writes that even a minute amount of hair may not be exposed. The Igros Moshe is almost a *daas yachid* in proposing that

1. “According to almost all *Poskim*...and the *Gedolei HaPoskim* of our generation...a woman must cover all her hair...there is no heter for even a minor part of the hair to be uncovered over her forehead.”

2. ואפילו אינו רק מנעט מהשיער, הסכמת הפוסקים לאסור, כי בשיער לא נאמר שיעור 'טפח' (ס' פסקי תשובות או"ח סימן עה אות י').

the tefach standard applies to the exposure of women's hair and ascribing that position to the Mechaber in Shulchan Aruch (as attested in the sefarim just cited above<sup>3</sup>).

### Rav Aharon Kotler Ruled that not One Hair of a Married Woman May Be Exposed

☞ Rav Forchheimer writes that *Rav Aharon Kotler zt'l*, as well, was of the halachic opinion (and was very makpid) that *all of a woman's hair must be covered*. [Parenthetically, it is difficult to fathom why Rav Aharon's opinion was not mentioned at all by the guest speakers in the broadcast.] This psak of Rav Aharon Kotler that *not one hair* of a married woman may be exposed was reiterated by his son Rav Shneur Kotler zt'l in a public letter about tznius standards written shortly before his (Rav Shneur's) passing, in which Rav Shneur stated that all bnei yeshiva in both the *past, present and future* [who lead and populate most yeshivish communities] *are obligated to abide by his father's rulings and assure that their families do so as well*. [A facsimile of this letter has been published in numerous forums, including at the end of the sefer *A Living Mishnas Rav Aharon: The Legacy of Maran Rav Aharon Kotler*, by Rabbi Yitzchok Dershowitz, and in the sefer *Lvusha Shel Torah* (chapter 24:19).

### Who Is the Mara D'Asra of the Lakewood Yeshivish Community (and Its Associated Communities)?

☞ Rav Forchheimer further writes that since Rav Aharon Kotler (and not the Igros Moshe) is the *Mara D'Asra of Lakewood*, Rav Aharon Kotler's ruling is thus *binding upon the Lakewood community*. [As noted previously, Lakewood is the major and largest yeshivish community in America.] As cited earlier, his son Rav Shneur Kotler wrote that all former, current and future generations of Lakewood talmidim are obligated to abide by this ruling. [Exposure of women's hair is not the only case in which a leniency of the Igros Moshe was disputed by Rav Aharon Kotler and regarding which the yeshivish communities do not conduct themselves according to the Igros

Moshe. Examples are cited in the footnote<sup>4</sup>.]

### The Igros Moshe Never Permitted Exposure of a Tefach of Hair

☞ Rav Forchheimer further writes that the assumption that the Igros Moshe permitted exposing up to a tefach of hair is misleading and false. The Igros Moshe's leniency *only permits exposing two finger-widths of hair in the front of the head (which is about 1.77" or 4.5 cm. according to the Igros Moshe's definition of a*

4. Another high-profile example of a leniency of the Igros Moshe which was vehemently rejected by Rav Aharon Kotler and regarding which the yeshivish communities follow Rav Aharon Kotler (and not the Igros Moshe) is the **height of the mechitzah in shuls** (see for example Igros Moshe OC 1:39; OC 2:43; YD 2:109). How ardently Rav Aharon Kotler opposed the leniency of the Igros Moshe is evident from the following incident: "In the late fifties, while driving, the Rosh Yeshiva [R' Aharon Kotler zt'l] inadvertently pushed open the car door and fell out, resulting in a fracture of his arm. 'Chipesh Umotzo' – he searched and found and said afterwards that he believes he should have gone further to oppose the prevailing lenient practice (albeit authorized by a great Poseik) regarding the height of a Shul's Mechitza, and hence the punishment" (*A Living Mishnas Rav Aharon*, p. 440).

Another example is **Cholov Yisroel**. Here also, Rav Aharon Kotler was stringent and dismissed the well-known *heter* of the Igros Moshe (as is documented in the authoritative biography of Rav Aharon Kotler: *Aish HaTorah* by Rav Aharon Sorosky, acclaimed biographer of many gedolim, volume 2 page 287). It is often ignored that the Igros Moshe himself wrote that his leniency to consume milk under government (but not Jewish) supervision was intended only in situations which constitute "b'shas hadchak" and not for convenience or to prevent minimal monetary loss (see Igros Moshe YD 4:5). Nowadays, litvishe yeshivos fervently discourage their students from consuming dairy products which are not genuine Cholov Yisroel (but technically permitted according to the Igros Moshe). My Menahel and Rebbe in Yeshivas Ner Israel (Baltimore), Rav Yosef Tendler zt'l, related that when he moved to Baltimore with his young family, there was no Cholov Yisroel available in the area. Despite the hardships involved, Rav Aharon Kotler instructed him to use only full-fledged Cholov Yisroel (despite the fact that Rav Tendler originated from the Igros Moshe's community on the lower East Side of Manhattan), and for many years he imported Cholov Yisroel to Baltimore. Eventually Rav Tendler was the one who established full-fledged Cholov Yisroel in the Baltimore area.

Yet another example (which is much less known and thus less accepted) is the prohibition of shaving the beard with **electric shaving machines**, concerning which Rav Shmuel Halevi Vosner zt'l attested (Shevet HaLevi, Vol. 11, Yoreh Deah, Section 198): "With regard to shaving machines...it was agreed by *all the Geonim*...that there is no difference between [using] them and [using] a razor... The Gaon Rav Moshe Feinstein sought to make a distinction between today's [shaving machines] and a razor and advanced a theory [in justification of its use]... That theory is not correct and has not been accepted (אין נכונה ולא נתקבלה) *ainah nechonah v'lo niskablah*." Rav Shneur Kotler endorsed the sefer *Hadras Ponim Zokon*, and confirmed that its representation of his father's opinion about the prohibition of using shaving machines is accurate. Rav Aharon Kotler's position that shaving machines are considered the halachic equivalent of razors was also attested to by his major talmidim in letters published in the sefer *Hadras Ponim Zokon* (2:1), and, more recently, Rav Aharon's grandson, Rav Malkiel Kotler, along with all the Roshei Yeshiva of BMG, issued a letter which was posted on the BMG bulletin board stating that according to Rav Aharon Kotler, shaving machines should not be used.]

3. "העולה מכל הנ"ל דכמעט כל גדולי הפוסקים אסרו גילוי של פחות מטפח... והיחיד שמצאנו שהתיר דבר זה הוא הגאון בעל אגרות משה זצ"ל" (ס' לבושה של תורה, סימן כד:ז).

tefach), but more than that amount is definitely prohibited (as Rav Forchheimer explains in footnote 20 in the third edition of his sefer). See also Rav Pesach Eliyahu Falk (world-renowned posek from Gateshead, England) in his sefer *Oz v'Hadar Levusha: Modesty—An Adornment for Life* (section 5:C) and his sefer *Levusha Shel Torah* (chapter 24): “The Igros Moshe stipulates that the visible strip which is about two tefachim long (18 cm., as wide as the forehead) must be less than half a tefach wide (i.e., less than 4.5 cm. [1.77”] wide) because if it is half a tefach wide the area showing will be equivalent to a square tefach and this is definitely ossur.”<sup>5</sup>

### Many (if not Most) of Those Who Expose Hair Based on the Igros Moshe Are Acting in Opposition to Him

“Experience has shown that those who are lenient...willingly or accidentally expose more of their hair than the Igros Moshe allows even under the most pressing circumstances... The facts are that those who leave hair open invariably leave a strip that is 4.5 cm. [1.77”] wide or more and for this there is no justification, as explained. Even if during the first hour of the day the hair showing is less than 1.77 inches wide, it easily slips back with the passage of time and during much of the day more hair can be showing than is justifiable according to any opinion. It follows from all that has been explained that the trend to wear a snood [tichel] or beret which covers most but not all the hair, is a departure from halacha... To claim that there is an unqualified heter by one of the Gedolei Hador of our times to dress in this way is fallacious, as explained above” (Rav Pesach Eliyahu Falk in *Oz V'Hadar Levusha*, *ibid.*).

### The Heter of the Igros Moshe Was Never Intended for the General Public

5. “You ask my opinion regarding covering the hair. I was perplexed by the very question, as this is an explicit law in Shulchan Aruch and there is no room for any questions or doubt. I am particularly perplexed by the manner in which you present your question: You state that the kallah will wear a sheitel in a manner that all the hair will be covered except for ‘two finger-widths in front’ that will remain revealed. *I’m not sure who you are trying to fool.* One cannot fool G-d, and one cannot even fool everyone else—one can only fool oneself. What possible benefit can be derived from this? I am sure that with due diligence and through repeatedly discussing this issue with a kindly approach, you will be able to influence the kallah to conduct herself with regard to covering the hair in the appropriate manner” (*Igros Kodesh*, Vol. 9, p. 325).

☞ Rav Forchheimer writes that even this heter to expose up to 1.77” of hair in the front of the head (and not more) *was not meant by the Igros Moshe as a general ruling permitting women to go ahead l’chatchilah and uncover this amount of hair.* Rather, the teshuvah in Igros Moshe was intended *only for an individual who required it under exceptional circumstances (hora’as sha’ah).* Regarding the basic obligation to cover the hair, even the Igros Moshe is of the opinion that *the proper practice is to cover the hair completely, and this is how our daughters should be educated.* This clarification of the *Igros Moshe’s* psak has been confirmed by his son, Hagaon Rav Dovid Feinstein shlit’a, as attested to by the Mashgiach of Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, Rav Matisyahu Chaim Salomon shlit’a and by Rav Dovid Halperin shlit’a, Rov in London (in letters published in *Oz v’Hadar Levusha* and *Levusha Shel Torah*, *ibid.*). This understanding of the Igros Moshe was also presented by Hagaon Rav Nissim Karelitz shlit’a and Hagaon Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg zt”l in a public letter (which was reviewed and accepted by both Rav Dovid Feinstein shlit’a and Rav Avrohom Pam zt”l), as cited by Rav Forchheimer in the aforementioned sefer (*ibid.*).

Additionally, in the sefer *Oz v’Hadar Levusha: Modesty—An Adornment for Life*, Rav Pesach Eliyahu Falk shlit’a corroborates that “it is totally incorrect” to assume that the Igros Moshe allowed women to leave less than a tefach of hair uncovered. To dispel incorrect interpretations, Rav Falk published a statement from Rav Dovid Feinstein shlit’a that it is *a mitzvah to publicize* that his father never intended to give an all-out heter for the exposure of two finger-widths of hair, and the published teshuvah in Igros Moshe was a personal letter written for an exceptional case. “For women to freely leave some hair uncovered on the basis of this Teshuva [of the Igros Moshe] is a departure from the intention of its great author zt”l” (*Oz V’Hadar Levusha*, *ibid.*).

### The Igros Moshe May Have Retracted His Heter

Moreover, it is possible that the Igros Moshe retracted the basic premise that the aforementioned teshuvos were based on. In a teshuvah in Igros Moshe written after the teshuvos mentioned above (OC 4:15, dated 5732) it is implied that even less than a tefach of hair

must be covered, in line with the other “covered areas” of a woman’s body, of which even less than a tefach may not be exposed. See the sefer *Levusha Shel Torah* 24:12 where the analysis of these teshuvos is discussed at length.

### **Those Who Adopt the Leniencies of the Igros Moshe Often Do so Without Halachic Sanction**

Rav Yisroel Salanter zt”l wrote (in the introduction to the sefer *Ohr HaYom*) that one cannot accept the leniencies of even the greatest Gadol B’Yisroel unless one also accepts his stringencies (he wrote this even regarding a Gadol of the stature of the Vilna Gaon zt”l).<sup>6</sup>

Do those who rely on the leniencies of the Igros Moshe regarding the exposure of women’s hair also follow his stringencies? Examples include:

- ☞ Using a Shabbos clock (the Igros Moshe [OC 4:60] rules that one may not set a timer before Shabbos in order to cause a melachah to be performed on Shabbos).
- ☞ Listening to music (the Igros Moshe [OC 1:166; YD 1:173; YD 2:111 and 142] concludes that all instrument music is forbidden and that a ba'al nefesh should avoid listening to any form of singing).
- ☞ Carrying on Shabbos in communities in large metropolitan areas where eirubin have been established (the Igros Moshe disputes the validity of eirubin in neighborhoods such as Williamsburg [OC 1:138 and 140; YD 3:161], Manhattan [OC 1:139; OC 4:89; YD 3:161], Flatbush [OC 4:87-88; OC 5:28-29; YD 3:161], Borough Park [OC 5:28-29 and 89; YD 3:161] and Detroit [OC 5:29]).
- ☞ Wearing a *tallis katan* made out of a material other than wool (the Igros Moshe [O.C. 1:2; 2:1; 3:1; 3:52] advocates wearing a woolen *tallis katan*, and states that he himself did so even in the heat of summer. According to Igros Moshe, O.C. 2:1, wearing a talis koton made of synthetic fabric would present the following problems: 1) non-fulfillment of the mitzvah, 2) uttering a blessing in vain, 3) carrying on

6. The Igros Moshe *himself* advanced a similar concept in O.C. 2:60, where he posits that one may conduct oneself according to the Vilna Gaon in cases where he is a minority opinion -- only if one adheres to all the Vilna Gaon’s halachic rulings, both stringent and lenient.

Shabbos).

- ☞ Eating veal (the Igros Moshe [EH 4:92:2] rules that a ba'al nefesh should refrain from consuming veal).
- ☞ Shaking hands with a woman (Igros Moshe O.C. 1:113 and EH 4:32:9 state that shaking hands with a woman “is clearly forbidden;” “is certainly clearly forbidden.” See also EH 1:56 where the conclusion is that practically speaking it is difficult to rely on any leniency).
- ☞ Attending sports stadiums and theaters (Igros Moshe Y.D. 4:11:1 rules that going to sports stadiums and theaters is forbidden due to the prohibitions of Moshav Leitzim, Bitul Torah and promiscuity [but not due to Chukos Goyim]).

(There are additional examples as well.)

### **It Is Undisputed that the Entire Knee Must Be Covered**

Another assertion in this broadcast was that there is a doubt whether the knee itself may be exposed. However, please see Rav Forchheimer’s previously cited sefer where he writes that *it is undisputed that the entire knee must be covered*. Also, in the aforementioned public letter, Rav Shneur Kotler zt”l states that according to his father, Rav Aharon Kotler zt”l, dresses and skirts must cover the *entire knee*. Furthermore, he adds that the lower leg must be covered with stockings of an adequate consistency to allow onlookers to realize that stockings are being worn (and that these standards are incumbent upon the BMG Lakewood and associated yeshivish communities). Moreover, in total contradistinction to this proposition, the Igros Moshe (upon whose authority the aforementioned leniencies were predicated) rules:

“It is the obligation of a Bas Yisroel to wear clothing which do not allow even the most minimal part of her knee to show, chas v’chalilah, whether when walking or when sitting down. Even if she wears thick hosiery it is still forbidden, because it is an immense pritzus even when no flesh can be seen. How much more so if she is wearing sheer stockings through which the flesh can be seen, which are considered non-existent [from the perspective of halachah].” (*Igros Moshe*, EH 5:17)

For more details regarding this issue, please see sefer *Kvuda Bas Melech* (chapter 2 footnotes 26-28).