

The Jewish Laws on Touching and Looking at Women

A Responsa Based on Talmudic and Halachic Sources

The question of whether a man may touch or look at a woman who is not his wife or close relative is one of the more debated topics in Jewish law. On one hand, the Talmud and later halachic authorities issue statements that seem to prohibit all forms of contact and even looking at women in certain circumstances. On the other hand, we find instances where great rabbis engaged in acts that, at first glance, contradict those prohibitions. How do we reconcile these texts?

Ula and the Concept of Personal Boundaries

The Gemara in **Avodah Zarah 17a** presents a seeming contradiction regarding Ula:

"When Ula came from the house of Rav, he would kiss his sisters on their hands (or, some say, on their chests). However, Ula himself also said: 'Casual closeness is forbidden, as they say to a Nazir: Go around, go around, but do not approach the vineyard.'"

This passage is perplexing. How could Ula rule that any casual closeness is forbidden and then himself engage in an act of closeness? The answer lies in the principle of personal awareness and self-restraint. Ula understood that general rules exist to prevent situations where individuals might stumble. However, he also recognized that different people have different levels of susceptibility. For Ula, kissing his sister was not problematic because it did not arouse any inappropriate feelings in him.

Rabbi Gidel and Looking at Women in the Mikvah

The Gemara in **Berachot 20a** tells another puzzling story:

"Rabbi Gidel used to stand by the entrance of the mikvah and instruct the women: 'Immerse this way, immerse that way.' The Rabbis asked him: 'Are you not afraid of the evil inclination?' He replied: 'To me, they are like white geese (i.e., I do not experience any improper thoughts).'"

This passage underscores the same concept—halacha does not impose a universal rule that prohibits all forms of looking. Instead, the principle is subjective: Rabbi Gidel was aware of himself and knew that he could perform this role without inappropriate thoughts. However, for most men, standing at the entrance of a mikvah would be an inappropriate situation.

Dancing with the Bride – A Puzzling Custom

There are several instances in the Talmud (Ketubot 17a, for example) where great sages participated in wedding celebrations in ways that appear problematic by today's standards. One famous story tells of a revered rabbi dancing with the bride on his shoulders. The Gemara does not censor these stories but instead presents them as part of the broader discussion about personal boundaries. For the rabbi in question, this was not an issue—his level of purity was such that he did not view the act in a way that would lead to improper thoughts.

Later Rabbinic Sources on Touching and Looking

The **Benei Banim (Vol. IV, Essays 2, available on Sefaria)** provides a comprehensive discussion of these topics, drawing from various Talmudic and halachic sources. Some key points include:

- **Rambam (Hilchot Issurei Biah 21:1)** states that affectionate physical contact between a man and a woman who are not married is forbidden, as it is a potential gateway to sin. However, he acknowledges that prohibitions depend on intent.
- **Shulchan Aruch (Even HaEzer 21:1)** rules stringently, while later authorities like **Rav Moshe Feinstein** discuss the nuances of social norms and the subjective nature of temptation.
- **Rav Tuvia Goldstein**, ruled that in Western culture, a handshake is generally not a problem since it is not inherently an affectionate gesture. (He told me this personally)

Conclusion: The Individual Responsibility to Set Boundaries

From these sources, it is clear that there is **no absolute prohibition** on touching or looking at women. Rather, each individual must assess their own level of susceptibility and act accordingly. Some may need to avoid all physical contact, while others can engage in certain social norms without concern.

This perspective aligns with the Talmudic examples: Ula, Rabbi Gidel, and the wedding dancers all acted based on their personal awareness. The Torah does not issue blanket bans but instead demands personal responsibility. In a modern context, this means:

- **Shaking hands** in a professional setting is usually permissible.
- **Casual social hugs or kisses on the cheek** may be acceptable for those who do not experience improper thoughts.
- **Looking at women in everyday situations** is generally not an issue, but one must be mindful of situations that could lead to inappropriate arousal.

Thus, Jewish law does not dictate absolute restrictions but rather imposes a duty on each individual to avoid scenarios that could lead to inappropriate thoughts or behaviors. Each man must know himself and act accordingly.