



# Modesty through THE LENS OF CHASSIDUS

by Keren Gordon

## BEAUTY

According to *halacha*, before Yom-Tov a man should buy his wife clothing or jewelry to make her happy. Additionally, there used to be a custom that after getting engaged there would be about a year until the actual marriage during which time the woman would have beautiful clothing and jewelry made for her. From here we see that a woman's need to feel beautiful is not just a personal desire; it is rooted in Torah.

Unfortunately, the culture surrounding us has distorted our perception of beauty. Instead of uplifting and complementing our

personality, it attempts to highlight our basest elements.

The<sup>1</sup> Rebbe quotes the statement of Chazal בנות ישראל מנוולתן שהעניות אלא הן נאות (“Jewish daughters are beautiful but poverty makes them ugly.”) and says אלא עני – Poverty can also refer to the lack of knowledge. What knowledge are we lacking? (1) who we are, and (2) what true beauty is.

Before Hashem gave us the Torah and before He even took us out of Mitzrayim, Hashem told us who we are and what is our relationship with Him. Hashem warned Paroh: אמר ה' בכרי בני ישראל “So said Hashem, ‘My firstborn son is Israel.’”<sup>2</sup> Hashem tells us many times, לבית תאמר ה' “So shall you say to the House of **Jacob** and tell the Children of Israel”;<sup>3</sup> “And [out of all the nations,] you shall be to Me a treasure”;<sup>4</sup> והייתם לי קדושים “And you shall be holy to Me”;<sup>5</sup> קדוש וגוי כהנים ממלכת לי התיו ואתם “You shall be for me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.” ...

This point is emphasized over and over again before the giving of the Torah to show that the mitzvos are not simply restrictive rules. When we know who we are and feel like *bnei* and *bnos Melech* — all of the other pieces just fall into place naturally. *Aidlichkeit* and *tznius* are *middos* that go far beyond the *halachos* of “do’s” and “don’t’s”; they are a sensitivity and a knowledge of who we are.

Our *neshamos* descended from their lofty place under the *kisei hakavod* into this lowly and dark world full of concealment, trials, and tribulations. We’re on a mission: to elevate this world and to make a dwelling place for Hashem. Where do we start? Within our own *daled amos*, specifically our own bodies.

## THE KELIPAH OF FASHION

Through a story about the Alter Rebbe, the Rebbe demonstrates that fashion is actually a *kelipah*, a negative force that comes to tempt a person to go against Hashem’s Will:

There is a story that my father-in-law, the Rebbe, told (and it was later printed) about the Alter Rebbe, the *Baal HaTanya*, who called

<sup>1</sup> Sichos Kodesh 5730, p.120 onwards.

<sup>2</sup> Shemos 4:22.

<sup>3</sup> Shemos 19:3.

<sup>4</sup> Shemos 19:5.

<sup>5</sup> Vayikra 20:26.



in his grandson (a son of the Mittlerer Rebbe) for a conversation immediately after his wedding. (In those times, it was customary to make weddings at a young age, shortly after the *chosson's bar mitzvah*.) He had new clothes that he had received in honor of his wedding, including a fur winter jacket that was made partially of leather. This was considered a very nice garment in those times, and it was expensive as well. [The Alter Rebbe] told his grandson that if he would rip the main part which made the garment beautiful, then he promised him **במהיציאתי עמי אתי** (he would be with him in *Olam Haba*).

The grandson asked him if he needed to do this sincerely, or whether it would be sufficient to do so only because his grandfather, the Alter Rebbe, had commanded him. It seems that the young man had not yet reached the spiritual level of tearing the jacket based on his own wish to do so, and therefore the jacket remained as it was, intact.

Afterwards, at the end of his life, the grandson settled for a few years in Haditch, where the *Ohel* of the Alter Rebbe was located, in order to atone for the fact that initially he hadn't had the strength within him to rip the garment.

When my-father-in-law told this story, he added an explanation for why the ripping of the garment was so important that the Alter Rebbe had promised that his grandson would be with him in *Olam Haba*, which is one of the greatest promises and gifts that a Rebbe can give.

The explanation is that in the region where the Alter Rebbe lived, it was becoming customary for *Yidden* to adorn themselves with garments in the custom of the nations of the world. When the Alter Rebbe saw that this was a new *kelipah* of a *taivah* (lust)—and this lust was now standing at its very peak—he decided that it needed to be broken and nullified at its beginning, before it would increase and spread.

The breaking of a *taivah* has to be done by those who have

a connection to the *taivah*. This is most applicable to those of a young age, especially right after marriage when there is a desire to **זיך אויספיינען**, outfit oneself with fine clothing... and according to Torah there is a place for matters such as jewelry and the like.

Since this was a matter of breaking a *taivah* when it was at its strength... the Alter Rebbe was willing to promise his grandson a place with him in *Olam Haba*!

From this we understand that when there is a powerful pull toward a matter that is not according to Torah, breaking away from it can have a powerful impact on the matter for years to come.<sup>6</sup>

So powerful was this *kelipah* that, HaRav Chodakov, the Rebbe's secretary and head of Lubavitch Educational Institutions, said, "In every generation there is an *avoda zara* specific to that generation which requires a special effort in order to overcome and nullify it. In this generation there is a plague, *rachamana litzlan*, of the lack of *tznius*. This needs to be overcome, especially in the areas that entice the *yetzer*. Sometimes it happens that a person transgresses and then repeats the transgression, and **כהיתר לו נעשה**, it seems as though it is permissible.<sup>7</sup> However, the prohibition remains, and then one needs to strengthen oneself even more [to overcome this sin]."<sup>8</sup>

The Sfas Emes explains our modern day challenge from the Torah. The possuk says: **וישקהו [לקראת יעקב] ויחבקו, ויפול על צווארו** [לקראתו], "And Eisav ran towards him [Yaakov], and hugged him, and fell on his neck and kissed him."<sup>9</sup> The Torah tells us that when Eisav approached Yaakov Avinu, he kissed him. According to a Midrash, Yaakov's neck turned into marble, so Eisav couldn't bite him as he had planned and was forced to kiss him instead. Since Eisav hates Yaakov, why would

<sup>6</sup> Hisvaaduyos 5715, vol. 1, pp. 244-245.

<sup>7</sup> Yoma 86:2.

<sup>8</sup> HaChinuch VeHamechanech, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Bereishis 33:4.

he kiss him when he couldn't bite him? There are other ways he could have harmed Yaakov besides biting him; why did he kiss him instead?

The Sfas Emes explains: *מנשק כשעשו!* "When Eisav kisses, Yaakov receives a bite!" Eisav hates Yaakov. When he can bite him, he does so. When he can't, he bites him with a "kiss". These kisses surround us. They are the *nisyonos* on the threshold of *Moshiach*. In our generation, this dark *kelipah* takes on a form which is pleasant to our senses, but let us not be mistaken: The billboards, music, and tolerant culture that surrounds us and tells us that it's perfectly fine to be just like the *goyim*, that it's beautiful, pleasurable, and desirable, are nothing more than the "kiss" of Eisav. In truth, it is unpleasant both materially and spiritually and, more importantly, it is *heipech haTorah*.

The Rebbe explains that fashion is dictated by a *goy* in Paris, and this *goy* in Paris does not determine fashions by taking into consideration the dignity of a *bas Yisroel*. The *goy* in Paris wants to make money, which he does by enticing the yetzer and drawing attention to different parts of the body. Each season a different body part is given prime focus. Once we become habituated to that, in order to keep things exciting, our attention is moved to another body part. That is why we see short skirts come into fashion, then it's back to long, then short tops, then shirts that reveal the shoulders, the back, and so forth. We are part of a culture which has a motto of "if you have it, flaunt it!" This has become so widespread that it has even come to affect our psyches. Should I be ashamed of myself? Do I have something to hide? Why should I not share the most private aspects of my life with the world? If I have a nice body, why do I need to hide it?

## BOUNDARIES

*Yiddishkeit* is all about boundaries. These boundaries are there to protect us and bring order and harmony. Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Jacobson explains that for fire and water to simultaneously exist, they must be kept separate. Put them together, and either the fire will be extinguished or the water will evaporate. Unfortunately boundary breaking can be observed in all domains of contemporary life. We see it between men and women, parents and children, teachers and students, private and public... and what we are left with is chaos. When the boundaries start shifting, society is left with broken homes, gender confusion, delinquent children, no respect for authority, and people chasing after the wrong things and living unfulfilling lives *chas vshalom*.

When we maintain the division between private and public, only then is there the possibility of true intimacy, real connection in the private realm. No, we are not ashamed of our bodies. It is not that we need to hide in shame. We cover ourselves out of a feeling of dignity. We are like the holy Torah scroll which, to preserve its precious dignity it has layers of coverings and is not up for display at all times. It is taken out only during certain occasions, then carefully adorned and put away, under a cover, in an ark, under another cover. The most precious diamond in the diamond store is not the one in the display case; it is hidden away in a safe, in a box, in a pouch and is brought out only for very special customers to see.

We are *kadosh*. We carry around with us a piece of Hashem; we are a *chelek Eloka mima'al mamosh...* and when we cover ourselves in a dignified way, we allow our *neshama* to shine and radiate its beautiful light into this world. People may not be able to put their finger on what exactly it is, but there is a magnetic purity that draws out the *kedusha* in the other person. On the other hand,

when the body is out for display, it screams so loudly that it is very difficult to see past it. Instead of drawing forth a person's *nefesh Elokis* and higher faculties, the person's base instincts are what are drawn to the fore.

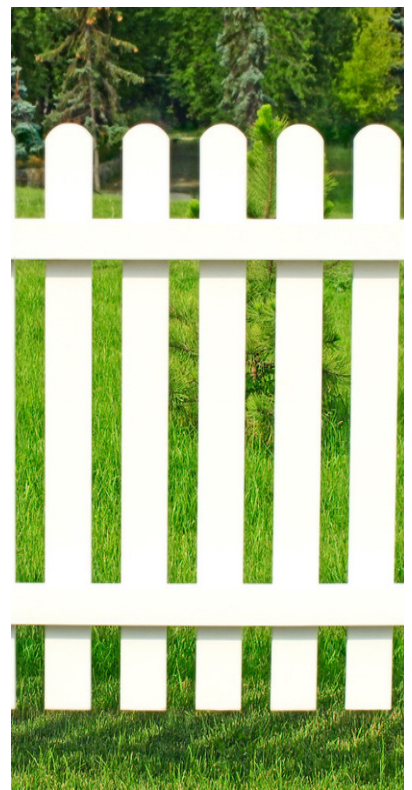
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*Yiddishkeit* values the trait of humility, perhaps above all else. The antithesis of this is *yeshus*.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman Gafni relates:

Before traveling to the Rebbe for Tishrei ל"תש (1969), my wife asked me to discuss with the Rebbe a *tznius* gathering that had taken place in Bnei Brak. The gathering was headed by the Rov, HaRav Yaakov Landau, and my wife had been one of the organizers. I had many things to discuss with the Rebbe, but I added a few words about it at the end of my note.

I was surprised when the Rebbe replied in short to all of the other issues I had mentioned,





and began speaking about this subject at length. The Rebbe was very agitated: “Now the style has become to wear clothing that reaches the ground. That’s the brainstorm of some crazy *goy* in Paris! Should *Yiddishe* women be taking cues from some *goy* in Paris?! Is that how it ought to be?!”

“Today’s immoral people have contrived to make tight clothing the fashion. It accentuates the body and arouses men’s desires. Long and tight clothing is the idea of these immoral people.”

The Rebbe continued with specific directives:

“The knees must be covered while sitting, and this isn’t always the case when women sit. Women’s clothing must therefore extend at least 10 centimeters beneath the knees to ensure that they remain covered. I’m not deciding the length; that’s the *Rabbonim*’s job. I’m simply stating the minimum. And may whoever adds beyond that be blessed.

“This isn’t to say that women shouldn’t dress well, but the clothing must be appropriate.

Those designing the clothing are trying to make it inappropriate in the first place. The correct approach is to create nice, respectable clothing, but not too long or too tight.”

The Rebbe praised HaRav Landau for arranging the gatherings, but said that my wife should privately discuss *tznius* with other women, since this is more effective. The Rebbe concluded that this is a critical issue, since *tznius* is the wall protecting *Klal Yisroel*. More must be done, and the more the better.<sup>10</sup>

### CLOTHES MAKE THE PERSON

The garments a person wears are not only indicative of what is going on inside the person, but also has a powerful affect on them emotionally and even spiritually.

Yaakov Avinu is described as impersonating the *middah of emes*. He was not just an honest person, he was the spiritual epitome of truth. When it came

time for Yitzchak to bless his children, Rivka wanted to ensure that it would be Yaakov and not Eisav who received the *brachos*. The Chasam Sofer explains that the reason that Rivka had Yaakov dress in Eisav’s garments is that only in this way would it be possible for Yaakov, the embodiment of the *middah of emes*, to be able to deceive his father. Rivka knew that it would otherwise not be possible to have untrue words come out of Yaakov’s mouth. When wearing the garments of Eisav, even the *middah of emes* could come to deceive his father. This story demonstrates the giant impact of garments. When a Yid dresses like a Yid, it makes the person feel like a Yid and act like a Yid.

This can be demonstrated on an emotional level as well. When soldiers train in the army, they train in uniform. Wearing the uniform of a soldier makes them feel and act the part.

When a person gets dressed up in their most elegant clothes, they feel different than when in pajamas or comfortable clothes for lounging around the house. The clothes we wear affect how we feel and, in turn, how we act.

The Zohar warns that the *yetzer harah* begins its influence on a person by targeting his clothing, as with Yosef HaTzaddik, who was grabbed by his garment. One must strengthen himself to escape, exactly as Yosef did.<sup>11</sup>

A woman’s *tznius* protects a woman from her *yetzer hara* in a similar way that Torah learning impacts a man.<sup>12</sup> The woman’s *tznius* firmly attaches her to *kedusha* and *emes*, which gives her a greater ability to recognize the *yetzer hara* and push it away.

The *chossid* Reb Peretz Chein once traveled to the Tzemach Tzedek together with another *chossid*. This other *chossid* had had the *zechus* of seeing the Alter

<sup>11</sup> (ב"ע צ"ק' ע' א"ח דהר)

<sup>12</sup> (Gaon Chassid MiVilna, chapter 15 note 21, Oz Vehadar Levusha p. 38)

<sup>10</sup> The Rebbe on Modesty p. 114, 157.

Rebbe, yet was now dressed in a more modern fashion. The Tzemach Tzedek did not recognize him and asked Reb Peretz who he was. After being told, the Tzemach Tzedek said in wonder, "Is that so? Had I known that clothing could have such an effect on a person, I would have had *mesirus nefesh* for it!"<sup>13</sup>

Now this story requires a bit of explanation. When we see a woman wearing a different *sheitel*, it is possible that we will no longer recognize her, but that is because we are seeing her externally. When a Rebbe looks at a person, he doesn't view him or her the way an ordinary person does. He can see straight through the person to their *neschama*. The fact that this person was no longer recognizable to the Tzemach Tzedek indicates how a person's garments can entirely transform him spiritually, for the good or *chas veshalom* the opposite.

Yidden have always been particular that the right side of their garments go over the left. The Rebbe mentioned this a number of times, and explained that this is done so that *kedusha* and *chessed* — which are associated with the right side — should be the prevailing influences in one's life.<sup>14</sup>

The *Kohen Gadol* can only bring forgiveness to the *Yidden* once he puts on the *Bigdei Kehuna*. The Tzemach Tzedek explains in a *ma'amar* that this proves that the clothing of the *Kohen Gadol* is even more powerful than the *Kohen Gadol* himself! As the *Kohen Gadol* is the holiest person in *Klal Yisrael*, the impact of his clothing is significant indeed!

*Tznius* is connected with the dwelling of the *Shechina*. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* asks that we make ourselves into a place for Him to dwell, to prepare an abode for Hashem in this world. By dressing and conducting ourselves in a *tzniusdike* manner, we invite the *Schechina* into our lives; we

draw the *Shechina* into our homes, our communities, and the world.

### TZNIUS BRINGS THE SHECHINA INTO THE HOME

It is appropriate to spend some time on the *psukim* in which the G-dly *brachos* are recounted as a reward for מצותי ואת תלכו בחוקותי תשמרו ("walk in my statutes and keep my *mitzvos*"). The central point of the *brachos* is: בתוככם והייתי בהתהלכתי... בתוככם משכני ונתתי לעם לי תהיו ואתם לאלוקים לכם ("And I will place My dwelling in your midst... I will walk among you and be your G-d, and you will be My people"). Even though the *bracha* is connected with keeping Torah and *mitzvos* in general, the special importance of *kedusha*, *tahara*, and *tznius* is emphasized. This is because they are the foundations of the *mishkan* of Hashem and the dwelling of the *Shechinah* among

the Jewish people in general, and among each *Yid*—man or woman—in particular. This matter is also emphasized in another place in the Torah: בך יראה ולא קדוש מחניך והיה: כן יראה ולא קדוש מחניך ושב דבר ערות your camp shall be holy, so that He should not see anything unseemly among you and would turn away from you.")

Our Sages explain in a clear way that *tznius* and *kedusha* need to be kept in all matters, in speech and, especially, in garments and behaviour. It has been mentioned on previous occasions that *N'shei* and *Bnos Yisroel* set the tone in certain matters of Jewish conduct, as is seen clearly, especially in the area of *tznius*. There is a famous statement of our Sages, of blessed memory, that the greatest *nachas* from children, both spiritually and materially, is connected with the conduct of the mother in *tznius*.<sup>16</sup>

By dressing and conducting ourselves in a *tzniusdike* manner, we invite the *Schechina* into our lives, drawing the the *Shechina* into our homes, our communities, and the world.

<sup>13</sup> (ע ידעו למען 273)

<sup>14</sup> (יעוד מ'תשד אמור פ"ש, ג'תשכ תמוז ב"י)

<sup>15</sup> (כניטו דברים)

<sup>16</sup> Likkutei Sichos, vol.7, p. 360-361

## PROTECTION FOR KLAL YISRAEL

In an address to a Kinus of N'shei U'bnos Chabad, the Rebbe assured us: "And it should be "You will live safely in your land" (plus every Jew, wherever he finds himself) in a manner of "You will sleep without fear"; there will be no need for a watchman because the Al-mighty watches, about whom it is said, "The Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps."

To merit this protection, we need to observe *tznius* (modest dress), as the verse states, "Since G-d, your G-d, accompanies your camp (because) He does not see any immorality in you." **When the Al-mighty sees that in the Jewish nation, wherever they may be, there is no lack of *tznius*, then He comes between them and you to "save you and to place your enemies before you."** The Jewish nation has nothing to fear because the Al-mighty saves them, and with His own energy destroys their enemies. "I will grant peace in the land; the enemies will become those who make peace and will beg for peace with the Jews..."<sup>17</sup>

## BRINGING THE GEULAH

We know that *Moshiach* is a descendent of Rus. There are very few details we are told about Rus. One of those details is her extraordinary level of *tznius*. We learn that she bent over in a *tzniusdik* way, and this is what made her find favor in the eyes of Boaz, the leader of his generation. For this reason, she merited to have the redeemer of Israel come from her.

We learn that the *nashim tzidkaniyos* of Mitzrayim merited redemption because of three things they did not change: 1) their way of dress, 2) their names, and 3) their language. All of these three things are very external. They also are the first three things immigrants change when they move to a new place in order to fit in to the new

<sup>17</sup> Likutei Sichos, vol. 8 p. 226-227, talk to Kinus N'shei U'bnos Chabad, Iyar 28 5730 [1970]

The 50th gate of tumah is the goyishe way of dress and had the Yidden of Mitzrayim fallen into it, they would not have been able to be redeemed.

culture. These three things are the way in which we want to project ourselves to the world, and so, while many people often say "It's just *chitzoniyus*; what's the big deal", we see that it is very *noge'ia* to our *pnimius*. Our self-identity and self-expression are at stake. This is why it is so important that we strongly identify with our *neshamos*, *kedusha*, and *Yiddishkeit*. When the world looks at us, these are the things we want them to see, not that we are so good at following the directives of the *goy* in Paris!

At a gathering of N'shei U'bnos Chabad, the Rebbe posed a perplexing question. The Medrash states that Bnei Yisroel "did not change any aspect of their dress." Why is this statement declared in the negative form? All other reasons for the redemption of the Yidden are stated in the positive, such as "In the merit of the righteous women were they redeemed." Why does the *posuk* not say "In the merit of their *Tznius* they were redeemed"? The Rebbe explains that the syntax of this

verse indicates that Bnei Yisroel were not redeemed because they observed the basic laws of *Tznius*. Rather, they were redeemed because even when the Egyptian culture that surrounded them wore technically *tzniusdike* clothing, the Yiddishe women did not assume the Egyptian dress. Even when the modern clothing covered what is required to be covered, the women continued to wear Yiddishe clothes.<sup>18</sup>

Reb Hillel Paritcher once explained regarding the extraordinary *mesirus nefesh* he had for Yiddishe dress, that it had come from a handwritten note of the *tzaddik* Reb Pinchas Koritzer which he had in his possession. In the note was written: The 50th gate of *tumah* is the *goyishe* way of dress (*makif d'binah d'klipah*), and had the Yidden of Mitzrayim fallen into it, they would not have been able to be redeemed. Similarly, in the time before *Moshiach*, there will also be an attempt to make

<sup>18</sup> Merkaz Anash

*Yidden* change their way of dress, and unfortunately, it will succeed. **Only in the merit and zechus of individuals who will have *mesiras nefesh* not to change their dress, will the *Yidden* be able to go to the *Geulah!*** Reb Hillel himself wrote that for the above-mentioned reason, every *Yid* should be different in dress from the *goyim*, so that *kedusha* should rest upon him.<sup>19</sup>

Rabbi Aharon Dovid Gancz once explained beautifully in a lecture that we look at the people in *Tanach* as just figures. We are shocked that the *Yidden* could sin again and again after everything Hashem does for them, all of the *nissim*, etc. We don't view the *Yidden* of *Tanach* as real people with real struggles. When we see the big picture, it seems absurd to us. In the same way, very soon *Moshiach* will be here, and we will look back at our lives and the petty day-to-day trials, and we will not be able to understand how a few inches, or what the *goy* in Paris dictates, could be more convincing than what is laid out for us in *Shulchan Aruch*. Really, it comes down to a choice. Do we choose Hashem, or *ch"v* the *goy* in Paris? It is that simple. We just need to keep reminding ourselves of that.

## GETTING PRACTICAL

We would never pasken for ourselves when we have a mix-up in the kitchen or when a problem arises on Shabbos, we would ask a *sha'aloh*. We should have the same inclination when it comes to *tznius*. A code of conduct has been laid down in the *Shulchan Aruch* and in the *Sifrei Haposkim* and instead of paskening for ourselves and our children about how long a skirt should be, or how far a collar may be open, *sha'alos* must be asked in these matters just as in all other areas of everyday life.

The innate feelings of *tznius* do not exist for us anymore... at least to the degree it did for women in past

generations. We need to turn to the *seforim* and *rabbainim* to check. Is this *tzniusdik*? Is this permissible? Should I be okay with this? When what is written in the *seforim* feels a bit too much, a bit extreme, we can question ourselves. What is more likely: Might I be desensitized, or is it that what all of the women in our history, as well as the *rabbanim* and holy *tzadikim*, decided was a little too much? Look around at our world. Every day new boundaries are being broken. The music is shocking, the pictures... Our world has gone to an extreme level of immodesty.

How do we gain these sensitivities back when everywhere we look we are confronted with the opposite of *tznius*? I think that we have to accept the fact that when it comes to *tznius*, we cannot trust ourselves to be good judges. We learn that the wife of Onn ben Peles let down her hair at the entrance of her tent so that Korach's congregation would not come to get her husband. They, with all their shortcomings, saw her hair and ran off, embarrassed. Today, who bats an eyelash for such things? We may intellectually realize that such things are against Torah, but everywhere we look there are married women with uncovered hair, women who wear their hair down and more.

When the alarm bells start going off in our heads as we

read through the *seforim* and it seems too high of a level to live with... don't write it off. It is very important that we tell ourselves "I'm not holding there right now. It's a beautiful *madreiga*. *B'ezras Hashem* one day." We need to get into the habit of approaching things that are on a higher level than we are holding, with such a perspective. Our children are constantly soaking up our attitudes. If we want them to grow to be on a higher level than we are, and not run in the other direction, it is imperative that our children see us embracing this approach. Otherwise, what message do they get? If instead they hear, "that's beautiful, I'm not ready yet, hopefully one day", we have left the door open for what we learn to sit on our hearts and slowly come to affect us. If we never open up the *seforim* though, there is no way we can ever gain back the sensitivities.

For us to be able to continue to stand strong before these incredible challenges to *tznius* and the battle on our sensitivities, we need to fortify ourselves with continuous learning about the beauty of *tznius* and the *halachos* of *tznius*. In time, with some learning and *Siyata Dishmaya* we will be able to see beauty again according to the lens of Torah and truly feel that nothing is more beautiful, dignified and honorable as *tznius*.

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<sup>19</sup> Migdal Oz, p. 236