



Maintaining Separation:

We will now address the question of how much of a distance one needs to maintain when men and women get together at a family Chanukah party.

It is clear that not all cases are alike and not all families are fully comparable. Some families are very large, while some are very small. Some family gatherings are only attended by one or two generations of relatives, while others are attended by several generations, including many people who are related through marriage.

When it comes to smaller families, in many cases there is no “obligation” to have a *mechitzah*. It is enough for the men and women to keep

themselves sufficiently separated and avoid mingling with each other. However, there are cases where a *mechitzah* is necessary, especially if the family is larger and consists of numerous branches of relatives from several generations who all are gathering together in one place.

The *halachos* of how much separation is needed will also be dependent on the type of party that is being arranged, and what the mood and atmosphere will be like, all of which greatly depends on the nature of the family.

Since the practical *halachah* can vary greatly depending on the specific nature of the gathering, one should consult a *Rav* in every instance. The halachah is clear - men and women should remain separate from each other and should not intermingle. Guidance is necessary to apply it practically in each situation.

A More Detailed Explanation:

It is important to understand that, according to *halachah* (see *Shulchan Aruch EH* 21:7; *Chut Shani EH* 1 and 16; *Shiurei Halachah-Rav Felder* 11:3), relatives — **with the exception** of very close relatives (such as a father-mother, grandfather-grandmother, brother-sister and, according to some *poskim* and in certain aspects, also biological aunt-nephew) — are considered the same as strangers. This includes brothers and sisters-in-law, and certainly includes cousins through marriage and further distant relatives.

Therefore, when a large family gets together it is exactly the same as if a gathering of strangers of both genders is taking place. Just as *mechitzos* are used at a sheva brochos or any event where there is more than just immediate family, even if most of the attendees are somehow related, the same applies at such a gathering, especially if the mood is lighthearted.

It is also obvious and clear that the rules of guarding one's eyes and keeping one's thoughts pure apply to interactions with relatives through marriage and to more distant family members. As with any other women, one must do whatever is necessary to avoid the danger of transgressing these prohibitions. As the ***Sefer Hachassidim*** ⁽³⁹³⁾ writes: "If a mitzvah leads to an *aveirah*, it is better not to do the mitzvah. An example of this is the mitzvah to bring joy to a groom and bride. If one knows that there will be immodestly dressed people at the wedding, or that he will not be able to avoid thinking improper thoughts, or that he will inevitably gaze at the women there, he should not go."

Some people think to themselves, "We didn't do this until now. I never saw my parents do this. If it was good enough for them then it's good enough for me. Why should I institute such a change?"

To counter this thought process, it is important to explain several points:

1. It is possible that the reason these standards were not abided by in the past was simply due to a lack of knowledge. We find that many early *sefarim* already discussed this type of lack of awareness (such as those cited in the Introduction), and they say that

ignorance of the *halachos* often leads people to believe that forbidden actions are permitted.

2. Very often, families grow gradually. Over time, the family grows but no one realizes that the new reality of the situation necessitates an equal change to their standards. There is no official point in time when a family's status changes from "small" to "big," and it is hard to pinpoint the exact time to institute a change to the required boundaries to reflect the new "facts on the ground". Therefore, the family members continue to interact the same way they have always done, without creating any boundaries, and never put a stop to it.
3. We also must keep in mind that previous generations faced much less danger and challenges than our generation does. This is especially true in the matters of *tznius* and the corresponding need to protect oneself from falling prey to impropriety in this area. Our generation must, therefore, adjust previous practices and set necessary boundaries to deal with contemporary challenges. We must ensure that we do not come to transgress the laws of seeing forbidden sights, having improper thoughts, engaging in improper behavior, etc. (See *Sefer Hachinuch*, mitzvah 188)

The need for this is amplified by the testimony of our *Rabbanim* about the many incidents of severe downfalls that they are dealing with as a result of those who were not properly vigilant when amongst family members.

Rav Bentzion Snyders *shlita*, Rav of Basel, Switzerland, relates (in his book

V'Ha'ish Moshe – The Torah of Hagaon Hatzaddik Rav Moshe Soloveitchik zt"l of Zurich, Switzerland, p. 208)

that he once asked Rav Moshe Soloveitchik zt"l what he should answer to people who ask why it is necessary to be so stringent today and to do things that their great-grandparents never did in their times, such as putting up a tall *mechitzah* between the men and women by every gathering and *simchah*.

Rav Moshe answered that we find in the Gemara (*Bava Basra 91b*) that the *Amora* R' Yochanan described a stark difference between the generation of his youth and the generation he lived in later in his life. He said that certain conduct between men and women in the past did not lead to any sin but, when he got older, he saw that this conduct was creating problems. The same is true in our times. There were certain things that people did not have to be so stringent about in the past because people in general were more formal, and these things did not cause them to fall prey to sin. Today, however, our spiritual fortitude is much weaker, and we need stronger boundaries to avoid falling to transgression.

We will continue with the answer tomorrow.
