



The Ruling of the Chofetz Chaim at the Knessiah Gedolah

Hagaon Rav Avrohom Kalmanowitz *zt"l*, Rosh Yeshivas Mir-Brooklyn, was among the participants in the famed Knessiah Gedolah that took place in Elul 5683 (1923), in Vienna. Rav Kalmanowitz related the following story that he personally witnessed:

In the hall where the *asifah* took place, a special section was designated for the female participants. Since the women's section was located on the second floor, a substantial distance from the men, the organizers did not deem it necessary to place a physical *mechitzah* there.

When the *gabbaim* of the Gerrer Rebbe, the Imrei Emes *zt"l*, walked in and saw the arrangement, they said, "The Rebbe will not enter until there is a curtain placed by the women's section, as is appropriate!" This immediately sparked a lively debate amongst the participating *rabbanim*. Some agreed with the Imrei Emes and felt that a *mechitzah* was necessary, while others argued, reasoning that since the women were distanced enough from the men, a *mechitzah* was not necessary.

After extensive debate, the *rabbanim* decided to relay the question to the Chofetz Chaim *zt"l*, who was present, and follow his ruling. After hearing the arguments of both sides, the Chofetz Chaim declared:

"It is possible that according to the letter of the law, a *mechitzah* is not required in this particular situation. However, since there are *rabbanim* who are insisting upon one, we must listen to them and set one up."

The Chofetz Chaim elaborated on his ruling: "What is the worst thing that could happen to Klal Yisrael, *chas v'shalom*? That would be '*V'shav mei'acharecha*,' if Hashem were to turn away from us.

"When Hashem is with us, then the *pasuk* says, '*Ki Hashem Elokecha*

mis'haleich b'kerv machanecha lehatzilcha, He protects us from all ill; and
‘*Gam ki eileich b'gei tzalmaves lo ira ra 'ki ata imadi,*’ even as I walk the
valleys of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, as ‘You are with me.’ If, however,
the opposite occurs, *chas v'shalom*, then the *pasuk* says, ‘*Histarta panecha hayisi
niv'hal,*’ You hid Your face and I was alarmed...

“What leads to the situation of ‘*V'shav mei'acharecha*’? The *pasuk* tells us, ‘*V'lo
yireh becha ervas davar, v'shav mei'acharecha,*’ there shall not be amongst you
any impropriety, as He will turn away from you.

“Therefore,” the Chofetz Chaim concluded, “Any effort that you can make
regarding ‘*V'lo yireh becha ervas davar,*’ – i.e., any enhancement possible in the
realm of holiness and *tznius* – is worthwhile, if only to prevent ‘*v'shav
mei'acharecha,*’ *chas v'shalom*. We are so dependent upon Heavenly mercy and
require Hashem’s protection; therefore, we must be stringent!”

(Be'er Emunah; Yisrael Kedoshim)