The Mehitsa and Yirat Shamayim

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The primary source for the requirements of a *mehitsa* is a Mishna in *Middot*, the tractate that deals with matters relating to the Temple parts, structure, and measurements. *Middot* literally means "specifications." The fifth Mishna in the second chapter of *Middot* tells us that the women's chamber in the Temple, the *ezrat nashim*, was quite large: 135 cubits in length and 135 cubits in breadth. The Mishna goes on to say that the chamber had originally been bare, but then a balcony was added so that women could look out on the proceedings from above while the men were below. The purpose of the balcony was to prevent the mixing of the sexes.

In the context of the Mishna's discussion of *Simhat Bet haShoeiva*—the great evening rejoicing that began on the second night of the Sukkoth festival—Rabbi Elazar elaborates on the decision to make what was a major structural change to the Temple, and one that could have been the source of controversy (*Sukkah* 51b). The Temple's measurements had been divinely ordained, and the original "spec's" did not provide for a balcony. How then could its incorporation be justified?

The Talmud tells us that initially the women's chamber had been inside that of the men's area, but there was too much frivolity taking place. It was therefore decided to place the men in the interior chamber, and the women in the exterior area. Unfortunately, the frivolity continued.

So the structural alteration was made, women were placed in the balcony, and the frivolity ceased. Nevertheless, how could the change have been sanctioned? As was their wont, the rabbis found a scriptural source. *Zekhariah* 12:12 speaks of the mourning in Jerusalem, mourning that is interpreted to be for the death of the Messiah son of Joseph (who precedes the Davidic Messiah). Zekhariah states that in each family the men and women would mourn separately. And so, the Rabbis concluded, if the prophet decreed that men and women mourn separately at a time when there would be no *yetzer hara* /evil inclination—which will not exist in the days of the Messiah—certainly while the evil inclination continued to thrive, men and women should be separated in the Temple precincts.

The Rambam, in his great work, the *Yad haHazakah*, provides an additional sense of context in the eighth chapter of the laws of *Lulav* (halakha 12). He states that "on the festival of Sukkoth there was a

surfeit of joy, as it is written, 'you shall be joyous before God your Lord seven days.'" He then points out that on *Erev Sukkoth* a balcony was erected to prevent the mixing of the sexes, and then they began to rejoice.

It was therefore in the very special context of extreme rejoicing—and we know that in such circumstances many people can lose their self-control-- that the *mehitsa* was called for. In other words, even as people rejoiced, dignity had to be maintained.

Why? Because the passage tells us *u'smahtem* ***lifnei hashem Eloheikhem***. This was no ordinary party. This was a rejoicing **before God**. And before Hashem, *yirat shamayim*, fear of Heaven, is paramount, and extreme behavior of any kind is discouraged.

A *mehitsa* is not meant to wall off women. It is not a sign that men and women cannot mix, any more than discouraging drinking in a *Bet Midrash* is a sign that people cannot drink. It is, however, a reminder that there are places where the sexes can mix, outside the *Bet Midrash*, in a Synagogue lobby for example, and other places where such mixing is inappropriate.

But a *mehitsa* is still more than that. We learn in *Tehillim*, Psalms, "*ivdu et Hashem beyirah, vegilu b're'ada,*" "serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling" (2:11). That was what was behind the Temple balcony. The *mehitsa* is in fact the embodiment of the concept *veYareita meElohekha*, "and you shall fear your Lord."

The Torah uses the phrase *veYareita meElohekha* in five passages, all in Leviticus. In every case the phrase relates to man's behavior toward his fellow man, and warns man not to dissemble or dissimulate, because God is watching, and one must fear God.

Perhaps the most widely known example is that of "*lo tekalel heireish v'lifnei iver lo titein mikhshol,*" "do not curse the deaf and do not place a stumbling block before a blind man" (Lev. 19:14), the latter part of the verse meaning that one should not trick the guileless or the innocent. But the other verses involve the same principle: do not pretend not to see an older man standing or to ignore the presence of an elder ("*mipenei seivah takum"*); do not charge any form of interest, including that which is not clearly identified ("*al tikah me'ito neshekh v'tarbit"*); do not hurt one's sensibilities and pretend not to realize what has been done ("*lo tonu ish et amito"*); do not overwork a slave and pretend your action was inadvertent ("*al tirdeh bo b'farekh"*).

When my parents, *zikhronam livrakha*, would praise someone, they would call him a *yerei shamayim*, one who fears Heaven. Not "frum," not one who buys the biggest etrog, lights the most elaborate hannukiya, has the fanciest seder plate—but one who fears God. A *yerei shamayim* is one who is sincere, and respectful of time, of place, and of people.

The *mehitsa* does not separate the sexes, it separates the synagogue from other places. It tells us that our everyday business stops at the synagogue's entrance. The *mehitsa* has become an outward sign of Orthodoxy. But it connotes far more. For a *mehitsa* does not merely regulate those behaviors that we term *bein adam laMakom*. Instead, and on the contrary, the *mehitsa* signifies the essence of *yirat shamayim*, the fear of Heaven, and reminds us whenever we see it that the fear of Heaven can only be realized when man is meticulous *bein adam leHaveiro*, and comports himself properly and ethically with his fellow man.