

The Pre-eminence of Holiness

Chapter 1

The advantages in this world and the next of being careful about matters concerning holiness and the harm done by disregarding them

Section one

1. Everyone wants to feel that he has a personal connection with Hashem. David Hamelech (Tehillim 42) said צמא נפשי לה' לקל חי מתי אבוא וארא פני אלקים 'My soul thirsts for Hashem, The Living G-d. When will I come and see Hashem's Presence?' To be close to Hashem is a tremendously important mitzva, and also the greatest pleasure that there is. However, in order to reach this exalted state, positive action alone is not sufficient; one also has to be wary of anything that might make you lose it.

2. Disregard for modesty and holiness is the worst hindrance to feeling close to Hashem. In פרשת כי תצא it says: כי ה' אלקיך מתהלך בקרב מחניך להצילך ולתת אויביך לפניך והיה: 'For Hashem your G-d walks within your camp in order to save you and give your enemies over to you. Your encampment should be holy and He shall not see a shameful thing amongst you and turn away from you.' The possuk teaches us that the strength of a Jew's bond with Hashem is determined by how careful he is about holiness and modesty. Vigilance in these matters will result in Hashem's exalted light and spiritual bounty shining forth and saturating his soul.

3. The Gemara - in more than one place - mentions that the lack of modesty we are cautioned about in this possuk refers even to aspects of modesty which might not seem very significant to some people, e.g. not paying attention to what you look at or think about. The Gemara says that it is not so; these matters are very important and prevent Hashem's exalted light from reaching a person.

4. We have mentioned that spiritual loss is incurred by a lack of modesty and holiness - a person will find himself further away from Hashem. From the same possuk we can infer that there is also physical harm involved - if בני ישראל Bnei Yisroel are not as careful as they ought to be, Hashem says that He will not look after them and they will lose their battles.

The Chofetz Chaim observes that even if the possuk speaks about the Bnei Yisroel going to war, at the same time it refers to everything else in the world as well. The success of what a person does is determined by how much Divine inspiration he receives; and that in turn is determined by how much attention he pays to matters of holiness and modesty.

The Chofetz Chaim writes that most of the troubles and misfortunes that happen in the world are because of insufficient holiness and modesty. When a person realizes how true these words of the Chofetz Chaim are, he will understand how important it is to be extremely careful about these matters. Even if it appears to be very difficult, he should nevertheless be aware that there is much more to gain by exercising caution in these matters than by neglecting them. Know too that the results of his actions affect not only himself personally but the whole of Klal Yisroel as well (as will be explained in chapter 6).

5. The obvious question is: Do we not see that there are good and righteous people who are extremely vigilant about these matters, yet some appear to be successful in life, and others to have difficult lives? Similarly, there are sinful

people who totally disregard anything to do with modesty or holiness and amongst them too we see that some seem to do well in life and some not.

The Chofetz Chaim's comment - that indifference to the interests of holiness and modesty is the root of a person's troubles in life - need not be a contradiction to what we see of the fortunes of men in the world.

The קהילות יעקב explains it. He says that when a person is born, his general role in life has already been fixed. For reasons connected the root-source of his soul and gilgulim etc. and which are not for us to delve into, each person is given a specific role to play in life. Some people seem to have been put into a better position in life, whilst others appear to be more unfortunate. Nevertheless, although his circumstances in general have been predetermined and are unchangeable, within the overall situation variations are possible. Those changes are influenced by his behavior, and to them the Chofetz Chaim is referring. It is those areas which are subject to modification, that will be determined, for better or worse, by a person's holiness and modesty.

6. Just as the punishment for being lax is so severe and far-reaching, so too is the reward. There is nothing in the world that links a person's soul to his Creator as effectively as being careful about matters concerning holiness and modesty. It earns him the wonderful proximity to Hashem's holy Presence, and affords him the best possible protection from his enemies and from misfortunes in life.

7. It goes without saying that in the world-to-come too, the reward for someone who cares about holiness and modesty - likewise the punishment for one who disregards these matters - will be extremely great.

Section Two

1. We can't imagine how much there is to gain by caution about anything to do with holiness; most particularly when learning Torah is concerned. It gives an automatic advantage to someone who wants to learn Torah successfully.

2. It is also an asset when it comes to remembering what you have learnt. There is an allusion to this idea in פרשת ציצית, where למען תזכרו ועשיתם את כל מצותי - 'in order that you should remember and do all My mitzvos,' follows on from ולא תתורו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם - 'do not turn aside to follow your hearts or your eyes,' From the juxtaposition of the two subjects our rabbis deduced that exercising control over your eyes and what they see, helps you remember the Torah you learn.

3. One should not infer from this that if someone feels that holiness is among his weaker points, he should not try to learn Torah. On the contrary, it is precisely through learning Torah diligently that he will, with time, become more attuned to holiness.

The Gemara says that learning Torah is the most powerful force for counteracting the evil inclination. The Gemara quotes Rabbi Yishmael: "If you meet 'the despicable one' (- the evil inclination) draw him into the House of Learning. If he is of iron, he will be crushed, as it says: הלא כה דברי כאש נאום ה' - 'Are My words not like fire? says Hashem, and like a hammer that crushes rock?' And if he is of stone, he will dissolve, as it says, הוי כל צמא לכו - 'All who are thirsty should go to the water.'"

4. If you follow this advice, you can be sure that you will come to feel that you can identify more easily with the idea of holiness. Moreover, you will also find

that because of the extra merit you have earned, the Torah you now learn is of a higher standard than it was before.

5. The same advice holds true with regard to being close to Hashem. If one doesn't succeed in always being concerned about holiness, he should not use it as an excuse to give up working on strengthening his contact with Hashem. Instead, he should make every effort to draw himself closer to Hashem, and in time the same efforts will help him become stronger in matters concerning holiness too

Chapter 2

The nature of the evil inclination, and people who think they have a stronger evil inclination than others

1. To hope to be victorious in the ongoing battle with the evil inclination, it would be wise to try and explain something of the essence of the Yetzer Hora.

Mankind's first sin was when Adam HaRishon ate from the Tree of Knowledge; from the Torah it would appear that the force driving him to sin – the snake – was external, and not within himself. Yet nowadays we feel that the Yetzer Hora is inside us.

In the Nefesh Hachaim it says that in fact the evil inclination is not an integral part of a person now either. It is an external spiritual force struggling with man. However, a result of the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge is that the concepts of good and bad are mixed up together ever since. Even though it feels to us as if the evil inclination is within us, it is in fact a delusion.

2. The fact that a person thinks that the Yetzer Hora is inside him and an essential part of him, is very harmful. If he would know that it is an external evil force, one which dislikes him and wants to hurt him, it would be much easier for him to counter-attack. It is far more difficult to do battle with a force that seems to be part of you, than with one which is obviously working against you.

3. It is the same as in all other kinds of battles: the most dangerous situation is when the enemy disguises himself and looks like one of your men, and you are not aware that have to be on your guard.

4. R. Chaim Volozhin (quoting the Arizal) explains why the forces of evil are so determined to make people sin. He says that every man has his share of spiritual plenty - שפע רוחני - set apart for him in heaven, and that shapes the success of what he does in this world and in the next.

However, he says that there are also forces of evil which are desirous of stealing whatever they can of that spiritual bounty. When they ה"ו cause a man to sin, they have successfully taken away some of his שפע רוחני.

The words שפע (plenty) and פשע (sin) are spelt with the same letters, although the order is different; the forces of evil trying to bring a man to sin, are in fact seeking to rearrange the שפע, so that it should pass to them instead of to the man for whom it was intended.

5. For the same reason our Sages say: כל הגדול מחברו יצרו גדול הימנו – a man who is greater than others, has a greater Yetzer Hora too. Since he has a generous share of the שפע רוחני, the forces of evil are more interested in stealing it. Just as the richer a person is the more likely it is that thieves will want to steal from him.

6. Therefore if a person sees that he has a greater Yetzer Hora than other people, there is no call for despair. Rather, he should realize that it means that Hashem has assigned to him a more elevated role in life, and to reach the lofty spiritual levels that can be his, he will have to withstand greater pressure.

This is true not only regarding different people with different situations in life, but also within the life-time of each individual. There will be times when he feels that he is faced with greater temptations than at others. This too is no reason for despair ה"ו. It means that he is in a phase of life with great potential for spiritual growth. He should realize that it is at such times that greater spiritual forces of holiness are available to him than otherwise. He is offered extra assistance to counterbalance the stronger forces of evil he has to deal with. With them he will

be able to overcome the Yetzer Hora and, with Hashem's help, go further than he would be capable of at other times.

A student once complained to the Steipler Gaon (the קהלות יעקב) that he gets distracted from learning more than any of his friends. He was answered that if it is indeed so, it just proves that he has greater potential and is capable of achieving more than the others.

A very important rule is to always try to avoid temptation. The Yetzer Hora is constantly seeking new ways to ensnare people. He presents them with difficult temptations and uses all his powers of persuasion to lure them to sin. A man has to know that the safest course of action is to avoid the conflict altogether. He should put himself in a position where he won't be even faced with temptation.

Every morning we pray ואל תביאנו... ולא לידי נסיון, that we should not be brought into head-on confrontation with the Yetzer Hora. The Gemara says that a Nazir should "take the circuitous route and not approach a vineyard." Eating grapes is one of the things which a Nazir is forbidden to do. Therefore he is cautioned that when traveling from one town to another and the most direct route would take him through a vineyard, he should prefer the longer way round which circumvents the vineyard, even though it greatly inconveniences him.

Although the Torah only forbids a Nazir to eat grapes; there is no mention of not being allowed to enter a vineyard. Nevertheless the Gemara says that he may not put himself into position where he is likely to be tempted, and therefore should not go into a vineyard either.

There are many other circumstances where a person is advised to erect protective barriers between himself and an actual prohibition. In Pirkei Avoth our Sages tell us עשו סג לתורה – make a 'fence' round the Torah. The Chazon Ish (in אמונה ובטחון) writes that it does not refer only to precautionary measures mentioned explicitly in the Gemara, like those for a Nazir: To 'make a fence round the Torah' is a general rule of conduct. From the example of the Nazir and the vineyard, we

should learn how important it is to avoid direct confrontation with the Yetzer Hora whenever at all feasible.

If, in spite of his precautions, a man finds that he is faced with temptation, he must, of course, use every means at his disposal to stand firm and not yield. Then, when he triumphs over the evil inclination, he has won a spiritual victory and he becomes a better and more refined person.

Chapter 3

How important it is to avoid even knowing about forbidden matters

1. There are people who mistakenly believe that, although they would not like to do anything which involves a lack of holiness or modesty, they do like to know what is going on in the world. Their interests include subjects and ideas which might be inappropriate or improper, and they think nothing wrong of it. Yet the truth is such an attitude is based on a misconception. In more than one place in the Gemara it says that it is forbidden to even think about things one may not do.
2. The Vilna Gaon speaks about the severity of the prohibition. In Kabbalistic terms he writes that, to a certain degree, every member of Klal Yisroel lives through all the events related in the Chumash. We all experience some measure of what happened to the ancestors of our people: - Adam HaRishon, the Patriarchs, Moshe Rabbeinu and the People of Israel. Obviously the Vilna Gaon does not mean that everyone will do all the sins mentioned in the Torah; what he wants to tell us is that everyone will have to deal with temptations in life which are in some way similar to those which our forefathers faced.
3. One conclusion we should draw from these words of the Vilna Gaon is that we ought to find out what was involved in the sin of the Tree of Knowledge; Adam's sin exemplifies the cardinal idea of sin as perceived by the Torah. We need to know how to safeguard ourselves from it, since during our lives we too will meet it in some form or other.
4. The Vilna Gaon, in his commentary to the Zohar on פרשת פקודי, writes that the essence of Adam's sin was that, through eating the fruit of the Tree of

Knowledge, he lowered himself in his thoughts in the direction that leads to evil. For that reason the punishment had to be so extreme that it altered the very nature of the world.

5. If we consider these two ideas discussed by the Vilna Gaon in conjunction with one another the inference is clear: The sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge - with which every Jew is tempted at some time in life - is the desire to let one's mind dwell on sinful subjects. People are inclined to believe that there can be nothing wrong with thinking, and something which is only in one's mind is permissible - just as Adam thought he was permitted to eat from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Yet it proved to be the primary cause of the downfall of mankind - and also the primary cause that can lead to the downfall of each man in his own life.

6. Therefore a person must be extremely careful not to let himself enquire, or even think about, sinful and evil subjects. How can a person control his thoughts? There is only one way; to strive to keep your mind constantly occupied with positive thoughts - Torah and learning and being close to Hashem. Only thus can you improve yourself and achieve spiritual greatness. Similarly, if anyone has been remiss in the past, he should make every effort to correct the fault. He must try to the very best of his ability to distance himself from the possibility of getting familiar with any of the negative aspects of what is going on in the world.

Chapter 4

Uncertainties about how to act in everyday life

1. Many people are confused when it comes to application of the above concepts to everyday life. They don't know how to decide whether or not a particular course of action is forbidden because of unsatisfactory standards of holiness and modesty. A common example involves participation in family celebrations: Relatives invite you, and assure you that the code of tzniuth there will be acceptable. You yourself are unsure whether it will indeed conform with all the demands of Halacha, and are unable to decide whether you may accept the invitation. A person comes across many situations in his daily life where he is unsure of how to act, whether similar to the above example or not.

2. Know that in such matters there are two types of sin. The first includes deeds which our Sages forbade because they contradict holiness – seeing or hearing anything that is clearly detrimental to being holy. The second forbidden category is forbidden thoughts. Included in that category is even an action which in itself the Halacha might permit, yet if you know that it will lead you to think about things you ought not to, for you it would be forbidden. Because even when a person sits in a closed room and merely thinks about forbidden matters he is doing wrong.

3. Only when you are convinced that a course of action will not lead you to any injurious thoughts, can you begin to consider the practical application of all the Halachic details of your circumstances. Even then, you should exercise extreme caution before listening to the voices of all manner of people; unfortunately there are many who try to allow things which are in fact severe transgressions. They

claim that they are quoting Halachic decisions, whilst the truth is that the Halacha explicitly forbids those matters which they would allow.

4. We mentioned earlier that even something which might be totally permissible as far as Halacha is concerned, may be forbidden for a particular individual if he knows it could bring him to think about forbidden matters.

Sometimes the Yetzer Hora tries to argue with you: 'If you were perfect anyway, and your thoughts were always pure and holy at other times, there might be some point in avoiding problematic places or circumstances. Since you are no paragon of virtue and frequently fall short in many areas, why pretend to be a Tzadik in this particular instance?'

Be on your guard and recognize the voice of the evil inclination trying to entice you to sin. Even if you may not always succeed in being as perfect as you would like to be, nevertheless each time and every detail about which you are careful is very significant to Hashem. You will be richly rewarded for every single success, however small, and you will be granted extra Heavenly assistance - סייעתא דשמייא - for all your spiritual goals in life.

5. Furthermore, there is an enormous difference between a person who tries his utmost to avoid sinning and, in spite of all his precautions, is still unsuccessful, and someone else who knowingly puts himself into a position where temptation is inevitable, e.g. by going to a place where merely being there is problematic.

Chapter 5

An awe-inspiring story about being careful of what one sees and the lesson to be learnt from it

1. The Yalkut Shimoni in פרשת ויהי tells a story about Rabbi Mathia ben Charash: He was sitting in the Beth Hamedrash learning Torah. His countenance shone like the sun and the features of his face were like the heavenly angels, for he had never in his life looked at a woman.

The Satan once passed by and could not tolerate it. He said: 'Is it possible that this man has never sinned?' He went to Hashem and asked Him: 'What is the nature of Rabbi Mathia ben Charash?' Hashem answered that he is a flawless Tzadik, whereupon the Satan asked permission to lure him to sin. Hashem replied that he would not succeed, yet the Satan insisted that he would still like to try. Hashem agreed, and gave the evil inclination permission to go to him in the guise of a beautiful woman.

The evil inclination went and stood before Rabbi Mathia. As soon as he saw him he turned his face to the other direction. The evil inclination went and stood to his left; he turned to the right. He came to him from every direction until the Tzadik said: 'I am afraid the Yetzer Hora is stronger than I am, and will make me sin.' What did the Tzadik do? He called his disciple and sent him to bring him fire and a nail. The disciple brought the nails and Rabbi Mathia stuck them into his eyes. When the Satan saw what Rabbi Mathia had done, he was so shocked that he fell over backwards.

Then Hashem called the angel Rafael and told him to go and heal Rabbi Mathia ben Charash. Rafael stood in front of Rabbi Mathia who asked who he was. He answered that he was the angel Rafael sent by Hashem to heal his eyes. Rabbi Mathia asked Rafael to leave him and let things remain as they are. Rafael went

back to Hashem and told Him what Rabbi Mathia had said. Hashem told Rafael: 'Go back and tell him that I will guarantee that the Yetzer Hora will have no power over him.' Rafael went without delay and cured Rabbi Mathia's eyes.

2. This story is related in the Medrash and the Yalkut Shimoni, quoted in a number of other seforim, and there are also references to it in many places in the words of our Sages.

3. We see how far one of our Sages was prepared to go to avoid seeing what he shouldn't. There must be a lesson for us to learn from this Medrash, and it is not י"ח to tell us that we are expected to put out our eyes in similar circumstances. Rabbi Mathia lived on such a lofty spiritual level that he understood that, for him, it was the correct thing to do. Yet there is still a great deal for us to learn from the general concept, even at our own level.

There are, for instance, people who frequent unsuitable shopping malls because of lower prices or similar considerations, totally ignoring the spiritual risks involved. Do they not realize that any monetary loss, or whatever they think they lose by buying elsewhere, is negligible compared to the tremendous spiritual cost of not caring about what their eyes see?

Similarly, it happens that people go to celebrations or family events where they know that the standard of tzniuth may well be problematic - maybe because they feel awkward refusing the invitation or maybe there are other reasons. If they would know what is truly involved, they would realize how mistaken they are. Would they weigh up the gains and losses of the eternal spiritual harm they would suffer if they go, and compare it with the temporary discomfort involved in declining the invitation, they would soon see that it is no comparison at all in terms of true gain and loss.

4. The Ben Aish HaI wrote (in פרשת ואתחנן) that a man has to be more careful with his eyes than with any other part of his body. Every limb or organ of a person has its counterpart in the spiritual make-up of his soul. Since the wonderful reward one earns in the world-to-come is ליהנות מזיו השכינה – to bask in the glory of Hashem's holy Presence, it follows that the quality of your Olam-HaBo depends on the well-being of your spiritual eyes. Damaged spiritual eyes are, therefore, the worst possible handicap, since they detract from your ability to receive or to enjoy your reward.

5. A person who is careful about what he sees will reach very great spiritual heights. Additionally, when he learns Torah, he will find that his success is beyond anything he could have hoped for in the normal way.

6. It is also a proven asset for remembering what you learn. About the psukim, ... למען תזכרו... עיניכם..... – ולא תתורו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם..... so that you should remember....', our Sages comment: 'If you do not let yourself follow where your heart and eyes want to lead you, you will remember what you learn.'

Chapter 6

Holiness and modesty and how all Klal Yisroel gains from each individual's efforts

Part 1

1. The Halachic details of what is permitted and what is forbidden in matters pertaining to holiness and modesty are adequately covered in the relevant compilations of Halacha and ethics. The importance of being conscientious about these matters and how great is the merit and reward, - and ה"ו the converse as well - has been discussed earlier. In this chapter we shall attempt to explore the idea that the community at large benefits from the efforts of each one of its members in these fields.

2. There is a possuk (in Tehilim) about קריעת ים סוף - the Splitting of the Sea. It says הים ראה וינוס - 'the sea saw and it fled.' The Medrash asks: What did the sea observe that caused it to flee? and answers that it saw 'the coffin of Yosef.'

Since the word וינס - to flee - is used both about the sea which fled, and Yosef who fled from the blandishments of his master's wife - וינס ויצא החוצה - 'he fled and ran out,' our Sages connect the two incidents. They say that the z'chus, the merit, that was Yosef's for withstanding temptation and not sinning, was the one in which the sea split. The Zohar takes the idea further and says that if Yosef would not have withstood the temptation, the whole of Klal Yisroel would have drowned in the Red Sea.

(As regards the questions this raises about the promise to Avraham Avinu; there are ways to resolve them but this is not the place for it.)

3. Yosef's tremendous z'chus was because he overcame the Yetzer Hora and did not sin. It was in matters of holiness and modesty such as we have been discussing here, that the evil inclination tried to bring him to sin.

Although greatly tempted - he was a young lad who had been stolen away from his parents home, in a distant land far from anyone he knew. Furthermore, our Sages say that Potiphar's wife threatened him that if he did not yield, she would have him jailed for the rest of his life. As indeed she almost did. He was imprisoned for 12 years - 12 years of suffering in an Egyptian prison. Yet even worse was knowing that under normal circumstances there was no way for him to ever escape from there.

As it appeared to him at the time, refusing to give in to her meant that he would spend the rest of his life incarcerated in a dungeon, alone until the end of his days, and without hope of meeting any of his family again.

Moreover, had he given in to her, there was no way anyone else would ever know about it. He would be able to continue his life as before - a chief steward in sole charge of the house of one of the king's ministers, successful in his position as he had been until then.

Nevertheless, his fear of Hashem prevailed over all else and he refused to sin. Our Sages tell us that a direct consequence of his refusal was that the sea split for Klal Yisroel and they were all saved.

4. As we know, a miracle was done for him later. Not only did he get out of prison, he became the viceroy of Egypt as well. Eventually he was reunited with his father and the rest of his family too. All because he did not sin. He was thrown into jail for not sinning - there he met Pharaoh's head butler and interpreted a dream for him - the butler was released from prison - he later mentioned Yosef to the king. Looking at it with hindsight we see that the whole chain of events leading up to Yosef's greatness began with his refusal to sin with Potiphar's wife.

At the time though, he could not possibly have known it. To anyone without prophetic vision it appeared that his fate would be exactly the opposite.

5. We see that in the merit of one individual who did not let himself be persuaded to sin, the whole of Klal Yisroel was saved. You might argue that the sin Yosef refrained from committing was a major transgression. But you should know that conducting oneself in a way that promotes holiness and modesty in relatively minor matters also has far-reaching effects. The whole of Klal Yisroel will reap the benefits of Hashem's bounty and blessing because of each individual's efforts. (The subject will be elaborated on later in Part 2.).

6. Our Sages show us how Yosef's z'chus was connected to the Splitting of the Sea - in fact they say it was the cause of it. It is logical to assume that such things happen in other circumstances and to other people too. Surely others who exerted themselves in order to be more holy were also indirectly - maybe one could even say directly - responsible for many of Klal Yisroel being saved from troubles and oppression.

7. See Part 3 where we shall discuss in detail the unique power that is inherent in anything to do with holiness and modesty, and which brings blessing and salvation for the whole of Klal Yisroel.

Part 2

1. We can also take a lesson from Kimchis, a woman who so meticulous about tzniuth that it affected the whole of Klal Yisroel. The Gemara (in יומא) tells us that Kimchis had seven sons and every one of them served as a Kohen Gadol. The Sages asked her what she had done to deserve such sons, and she answered that, "even the walls of my home never saw my hair uncovered." They answered that many other righteous women did the same, yet were not rewarded as she was. Yet there is some proof in the Gemara that the Sages did accept her explanation.

2. Furthermore, unlike the above Gemara in the Talmud Bavli, from the Talmud Yerushalmi - in more than one place - it appears that the Sages did accept Kimchis' opinion that it was for being so particular about tzniuth that she had such illustrious sons. They even quote a possuk which supports this view.

3. It is also possible that there is no discrepancy between the Talmud Bavli and the Talmud Yerushalmi. All agree that her exemplary tzniuth that was the principle source of her merit to have sons who were all Kohanim Gedolim. However the Sages of the Talmud Bavli did not think that this z'chus on its own was sufficient; they were of the opinion that it must have been in combination with other merit too, either her own or her ancestors. There is no disagreement over the fact it was for her attitude to tzniuth that she was so richly rewarded - whether or not other factors were considered as well - and maybe it would be right to accept this as the intended meaning of the words of the Talmud Bavli.

(The רב"ש in another context about בידם ולא עלתה בידם - many did so without the same results - says that undoubtedly for the good deeds of the kind mentioned one deserves that type of reward: the Gemara is only implying that other merit must have been involved too.)

Even if one says that there are two different opinions in the Gemara, the very fact that her words, and the whole exchange with the Sages, is recorded - and only rejected because of the argument that many others did so too - makes it quite clear that her words were seriously considered as plausible. In any case the opinion in the Talmud Yerushalmi is that the Sages did accept her words.

4. The idea that "the walls of her house never saw her hair" needs clarifying. It can not possibly mean that she did not uncover her hair in the presence of men, since that is something expressly forbidden by the Torah. All righteous women refrain from doing so, and for that alone she would not deserve more reward than others. It must mean that she never uncovered her hair even when no-one was present. Again, there must be many women who, as a general rule, are very particular about keeping their hair covered at all times. Nevertheless, to be able to say that it had never happened - at no time, and however difficult it might have been - shows an exceedingly scrupulous attitude towards matters of tzniuth, for which she well deserved extra credit and could claim that it might be her unique z'chus.

In fact the very text of the Gemara corroborates this interpretation of the words - "even the walls of the house" never saw her hair.

5. To be worthy of having a son who is a Kohen Gadol is a very great z'chus - and how much more so to have seven sons who were all Kohanim Gedolim. We can't even imagine it. The Kohen Gadol's position included the responsibility of obtaining forgiveness for Klal Yisroel on Yom Kippur. He was the only person in the world who was allowed - who was commanded - to go into the holiest place on earth on the most holy day of the year, and carry out the service there. He was the agent who served as the sole representative of Klal Yisroel to go and win forgiveness for them from Hashem.

Without going into detail here, we can be quite sure that, in the unique position he held as the Kohen Gadol of Klal Yisroel, he was active the rest of the year too as their benefactor.

Kimchis, for her modesty, deserved the wonderful z'chus of being the mother of seven such sons who were able to do more for Klal Yisroel than anyone else.

6. Even though only one particular aspect of her tzniuth is mentioned in the Gemara, it clearly reflects on the importance of the whole concept of holiness and modesty for men and women. (In fact the Talmud Yerushalmi does mention another aspect of tzniuth too, and from the possuk quoted there it can be understood that the subject is tzniuth in general.)

7. Kimchis' remarkable behavior earned merit for all Klal Yisroel. Everyone knew that she had seven sons who were Kohanim Gedolim, and our Sages say that it was because of her conscientiousness about matters of holiness and modesty.

From the fact that our Sages link the two subjects here, we can assume that the connection is always present. Throughout the generations, there have always been Jewish women who were most particular about tzniuth, and we can be sure that they too benefited the multitudes of Klal Yisroel in very many ways.

Part 3

We have tried to clarify (in Parts 1 and 2) that even a single individual's efforts to add holiness and modesty to his life can work wonders in terms of blessing and salvation for all Yisroel. We ought to find out why it is particularly for concerns of holiness and modesty that this effect is so noticeable. It has already been mentioned (in Chapter 4) that every mitzva a Jew does - or sin he refrains from doing - has a beneficial effect for all Yisroel, since each mitzva increases the spiritual bounty that comes down to this world from the upper worlds. Nevertheless, it would appear that what a single individual does in the fields of holiness and modesty, reflects more powerfully than other mitzvos on the whole of Klal Yisroel and we would like to discover why it should be so.

2. There are Kabbalistic reasons which explain it in several ways and it is difficult to go into detail about matters pertaining to Kabala. However, with Hashem's help, we shall examine the subject from one particular angle. Our words are based on a basic rule of Kabala which is mentioned in a number of places but the following is quoted primarily from the sefer (מאמר יחוד הגן) אדיר במרום of the Ramchal, since - in comparison with other Kabbalistic words - it is easier to understand.

(There is a letter written by a disciple of R. Chaim Volozhin - and the disciple was a great Torah scholar in his own right - in which he says that R. Chaim claimed that the Vilna Gaon himself testified to the Ramchal's greatness in Kabala, and said that the sefer אדיר במרום is full with awesome revelations from the Upper Worlds, with particular reference to the section of יחוד הגן, about which he says there is no end to how wondrous and awe-inspiring it is.)

3. It has already been explained that Hashem established the world in such a way that the mitzvos and good deeds we do in this world substantiate many lofty

spiritual worlds, which in turn are instrumental in bringing down spiritual and material bounty for Am Yisroel in the world.

This spiritual plenty, however, does have one drawback: One has to exercise supreme caution in order to ensure that it will bring all its good with it, and none will be seized by forces of spiritual impurity. The Ramchal says that it is indeed a serious impediment, and because of it only part of the spiritual bounty actually comes down to the world. A great deal of the שפע remains up in the spiritual realms. It is kept for Am Yisroel and they will receive it in the future, for there is no other way to safeguard it.

The Ramchal explains that if one does anything to protect the aforementioned spiritual bounty, it is a tremendous z'chus because through you the blessing will be able to come to Am Yisroel in this world. (- and we need not fear that what we receive here in any way detracts from what has been designated for us for the future. On the contrary, the extra שפע we get here and now surely helps us earn even more merit.)

4. We should now be interested to know if there is anything that we are capable of doing to protect the שפע, so that more of it can come down to Klal Yisroel.

Anyone who studies Kabbalistic writings will find a very clear answer. It is written quite clearly that the key lies in increasing awareness of holiness and modesty. Every man should be feel responsible for all the members of his household. He should make sure both that his sons are particular about those matters pertaining to their holiness and modesty, and that his daughters are equally careful about those with relevance for them. Each and every kind of precaution in these matters has the awesome potential of being able to safeguard Hashem's spiritual bounty.

It is not easy to clarify why the mitzva of tzniuth should have in it the strongest power for preserving the spiritual bounty; the issue is complex and lengthy.

Nevertheless we shall quote briefly on the subject and anyone well-versed in Kabala should be able to understand:

"The primary protection is dependent on safeguarding certain emanations of the highest spiritual emanations belonging to the force which is called the primeval serpent and all that is akin to it, and that surely is closely bound up specifically with the theme of tzniuth."

5. From this can be understood how every precautionary measure one practices in the fields of holiness and modesty, can benefit all Klal Yisroel. Klal Yisroel as a whole have a great deal of merit. They learn a lot of Torah. They do many mitzvos - of both kinds; mitzvos involving only a man and his Creator, and those concerning one's relationship with people too. Likewise prayers and all forms of Hashem's service are meticulously performed. All of which activate a tremendous amount of spiritual bounty which could bring endless blessing for Am Yisroel and save them from so many of their troubles in all spheres of life.

However, a certain amount of the bounty is prevented from coming down to the world and inundating Am Yisroel with goodness because of the above-mentioned antagonism of the forces of evil. It is set aside for the future, and through being careful about matters of holiness and modesty one activates forces which safeguard it. Thus the שפע, which has been prepared by Klal Yisroel doing Hashem's service in all its various forms, gets preserved and can come down to this world. It is not a complicated matter since the bounty does not have to be brought into existence; it is already there. All that is necessary is to find a way to bring it down to Klal Yisroel, and that is done by safeguarding it.

6. Merit for being careful in these matters is, therefore, communal merit, and was the kind needed in order for the sea to split at the ים סוף, and for the Kohen Gadol to do the service successfully. They were matters involving the whole of Klal Yisroel, and accordingly it needed the merit of the whole community.

Precautionary measures pertaining to matters of holiness and modesty, even when only individuals practice them, effectively provide the required merit. They have the automatic effect of conferring merit on all Yisroel, and as such have the power to bring Hashem's blessing and His bounty of spiritual and material goodness into this world for Klal Yisroel.

Part 4

1. Studying all we have written here will surely give you an added incentive to increase the holiness and modesty of your life-style, both because it is a very important mitzva, and because ה"ו disregarding these matters leads to serious transgressions. Additionally, every mitzva has its beneficial effect for all Klal Yisroel - and ה"ו the converse too - as explained in chapter 4. You will have now realized how much caution - and precautions - are necessary if you want to strengthen yourself in these fields.

2. There are a number of reasons why a person should strive to improve his approach to matters of holiness and modesty. Firstly, knowing the great potential these qualities have for bringing blessing and salvation to Yisroel should encourage anyone to do his utmost.

No less than that is the knowledge that your behavior affords Hashem great pleasure and gives Him נחת רוח; Hashem is most certainly pleased when you help other members of Klal Yisroel, both materially and spiritually.

There is also the aspect of a person's natural sympathy for his brothers of Klal Yisroel and wanting to help them, whether alleviating troubles that threaten the nation as a whole, or helping individuals with their personal sorrows and problems.

Furthermore, if you are responsible for bringing salvation and blessing to the community as a whole, you can be assured that your reward from Heaven will be immeasurably great.

3. Rashi explains (on a Gemara in עבודה זרה) that precautionary measures taken to avoid sin fall into two categories.

The first includes those which one employs when faced with the possibility of sinning, and does not ה"ו want the Yetzer Hora to gain the upper hand.

The other type involves using foresight to avoid being brought to a position or place where you might be tempted to sin. While this is true for all mitzvos, it is even more particularly so for matters concerning holiness and modesty. Practical experience shows that in these areas it is not enough for a person to strengthen his resolve to make himself pure and holy at all times. He has to be constantly on the alert, planning ahead and contriving strategies to avoid finding himself in any place or any situation that might compromise his efforts to achieve holiness and modesty.

Without going into much detail here, as a general rule it can be said that the recommended course of action is to spend as much time as possible in the Beth Medrash or Beth Knesset. Those are the places where one is most protected from negative influences. While he is in the house of Hashem he should, of course, occupy himself learning Torah. Torah is the most effective safeguard that exists.

4. If these are important considerations when a person has to make a decision about where to be at a particular hour, how much more do they have to be born in mind when he has to make major decisions concerning his whole future. Standards of holiness and modesty must surely be taken into account as a deciding factor. Likewise, inasmuch as it is in his hands to do so, he should try to arrange his everyday life so that as much of it as possible revolves around the hours he spends learning Torah in the Beth Medrash.

5. It can happen that a person wants to be particular about all matters of holiness, yet he finds there are certain places where he will be scoffed at for his attitude. There is no reason for him to be ashamed in the presence of the scoffers. To quote from the Shulchan Aruch (תהילת אור"ח): He should know that the truth is on his side. The highest and only truth is what is written in our holy Torah. The time will come when all those scoffers who mocked at him will realize that Torah observance is the correct way to live, and that he was in the right while they were

mistaken. When they understand that his conduct protected them and helped them considerably even though they did not even realize at the time, they will be extremely grateful to him. Then, they too will understand that, as we mentioned earlier, being careful about anything to do with holiness and modesty is a very effective way to help all Klal Yisroel.

6. It sometimes happens that a man lives in a neighborhood, or belongs to a certain crowd of people, where he is ridiculed for keeping the mitzvos of the Torah. The best solution for him would be to move to a different area or find a different circle of friends, in order to avoid finding himself in situations where he is likely to be tempted to sin. There are also other reasons why it is recommended.

However, there could also be reasons why the change is not advisable, and one can not generalize. Since there are many and varied issues to be weighed up whenever making major decisions, and each case is bound to be different, it is not really possible to make a general rule for everyone. Nevertheless it is obvious that the alternative of remaining where he is, doesn't even exist if he finds his attitude to matters of holiness and modesty deteriorating as a result of his environment.