

Pleased to Meet You Shaking Hands with the Opposite Gender

“The courteous and competent real-estate agent I’d just hired to rent my house shocked and offended me when, after we signed our contract, he refused to shake my hand, saying that as an Orthodox Jew he did not touch women. As a feminist, I oppose sex discrimination of all sorts. However, I also support freedom of religious expression. How do I balance these conflicting values? Should I tear up our contract? J.L., New York”

This question was addressed to Randy Cohen, New York Times Magazine’s “The Ethicist.” His response made it clear that he found the Orthodox real estate agent’s refusal to shake his female client’s hand “an offensive action.” He wrote, “Though the agent dealt you only a petty slight, without ill intent, you’re entitled to work with someone who will treat you with the dignity and respect he shows his male clients.” He felt that the real estate agent’s behavior was an affront to the client. “I believe you should tear up your contract,” he wrote.

Defining the Prohibition

Why did this real estate agent refuse to shake his client’s hand? Is any and all contact with a member of the opposite sex forbidden by the Torah?

This question is the subject of considerable debate, based largely on differences of opinion in understanding various *pesukim* in the Torah, among them the *passuk*, “Any man should not come close (*lo sikrevu*) to any of his close relatives to uncover their nakedness, I am Hashem” (*Vayikra* 18:6). The Hebrew wording of this verse (*lo sikrevu*) is in plural, teaching us that the prohibition applies to men and women alike: both are forbidden to have physical contact with a member of the opposite gender outside of marriage (Rashi).¹

Another critical *passuk* is, “You shall not come close to a woman in her time of unclean separation to uncover her nakedness” (*Vayikra* 18:19). We learn from here that the prohibition applies equally to a married woman who is ritually impure (a *niddah*) as well as to a single woman who is a *niddah* (*Rema, Yoreh Deah* 183:1, citing the *Rivash* and *Beis Yosef*; see *Responsa Mishneh Halachos*, vol. V, 126, *Shaar Alef*).²

The *Gemara* brings two opinions concerning the extent of the prohibition. According to the first opinion, *all* forms of physical contact are forbidden *d’Oriesa* (by Torah ordained commandment). According to Rabbi Pedas, the Torah ordained prohibition extends only to actual intimate relations. Other forms of physical contact are forbidden not *d’Oriesa*, but *d’rabbanan* (by rabbinic decree) (*Shabbos* 13a).

¹ The prohibition against contact with a member of the opposite gender, and with it, the question of whether it is permitted to shake hands, applies to both men and women alike. For convenience, we will use the phrase “shaking hands with a woman” unless otherwise required.

² A woman is a *niddah* from the time she begins to menstruate (typically at age eleven or twelve) until she immerses in a proper *mikveh* in preparation for marriage. She subsequently becomes a *niddah* each time she menstruates, until she immerses in a *mikveh* after waiting the required time period. By rabbinic decree, non-Jewish women also have the status of *niddah* starting from the age of three (*Avodah Zarah* 36b; *Rambam, Hilchos Metamei Mishkav U’Moshav* 2:10).

Rulings of the *Rishonim*

The Rambam (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon) and the Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman), two of the most prominent *Rishonim* (early halachic authorities), disagree as to which types of physical contact are forbidden by the Torah, and which by rabbinic decree. The Rambam rules more strictly: any contact with a woman which is affectionate or passionate, is a Torah-ordained prohibition. He writes that the Torah forbids us to “come close” to forbidden intimate relations; in other words, not only are intimate relations forbidden by the Torah, we also should not do anything which might bring us close to intimate relations (*Hilchos Issurei Biah* 21:1). As we shall see, the Rambam’s qualification that the prohibited physical contact must be affectionate or passionate, often called *derech chibbah*, has important halachic ramifications in a variety of contexts.

The Ramban disagrees with the Rambam’s ruling. Citing many proofs from *Tanach*, *Gemara* and *Midrash*, he rules that only actual intimate relations are forbidden *d’Oriesa*, while other forms of physical contact are forbidden not *d’Oriesa*, but *d’rabbanan* (*Sefer HaMitzvos, Lo Saaseh* 353).

Rabbeinu Yonah, another very prominent *Rishon*, also rules strictly, in fact even more strictly than the Rambam: “Any sort of physical contact [between a man and a woman] is forbidden, such as touching the hand of a married woman.” He writes that the Torah forbids us to “come close to uncover nakedness,” because contact leads to forbidden relations. He explains that *Chazal* equate the prohibition of touching the opposite gender to the *halachos* of a *nazir*.³ A primary obligation of a *nazir* is to refrain from wine. Nonetheless, the Torah applies the *nazir*’s vow to a number of related products, including even grape pits or water in which grapes were soaked (*Bamidbar* 6:1-4), as an essential safeguard to prevent him from drinking wine. By the same rationale, the way to ensure that a man does not have intimate relations with a woman who is not his wife is by forbidding all forms of contact, even merely touching her hand (*Shmos Rabbah* 16:2).

Rabbeinu Yonah does not differentiate between touching which is *derech chibbah* and that which is not – he rules that any physical contact is forbidden *d’Oriesa*, based on the Torah’s prohibition against “coming close to uncover nakedness” (*Shaarei Teshuvah* 3:80).

Jonathan Rosenbloom responded to the issues raised by the Ethicist and his questioner. In his response, he explained why Orthodox Jews refuse to have any physical contact with members of the opposite gender: “True, shaking hands is a pretty innocuous form of contact, and for that reason some Orthodox religious authorities permit it in the business context. But the same claim of innocuousness is made for kissing and hugging in many circles. Rather than stepping onto a slippery slope and leaving the matter to subjective determinations about the erotic content of any particular act, many Orthodox Jews choose to simply avoid any physical contact.”

Innocent or Affectionate: Touching which is *Derech Chibbah*

³ The voluntary status of *nazir* involves three restrictions, typically taken on for a specified time by means of a vow: abstention from wine and grape products; refraining from cutting one’s hair; and avoiding contact with a corpse (see *Bamidbar* 6:1-21).

The core issue in clarifying whether or not it is permitted to shake hands with the opposite gender in a business context hinges on the question of whether all touching is forbidden, or only touching which is affectionate or passionate, referred to as *derech chibbah*.

There is some difference of opinion among the *Rishonim* regarding this question. The majority rule in keeping with the Rambam – only touching which is *derech chibbah* is a Torah ordained prohibition. There are, however, some *Rishonim*, among them Rabbeinu Yonah, who rule that regardless of whether it is or is not *derech chibbah*, any touching is prohibited *d'Oriosa*.

In 1970, Rav Ovadia Yosef, shlita, was presented with the Israel Prize by then-Prime Minister Golda Meir. Mrs. Meir extended her hand, but the Rav did not respond. His refusal did not go unnoticed, eliciting comments about his lack of politeness. The Rav said, "The Torah is more important than politeness."

The *Beis Yosef*⁴ and the *Shach*⁵ disagree in their understanding of the Rambam's ruling.

The *Beis Yosef*'s Stricter Ruling

The *Beis Yosef* rules that even if there is no element of affection involved in physical contact, it is still forbidden (*Yoreh Deah* 195). He quotes a responsum of the *Terumas HaDeshen*, citing "a great Torah scholar" who discusses the case of a woman whose husband was a physician. She was ill, and she happened to be a *niddah* at the time. Was her husband permitted to take her pulse, touching her while she was ritually impure? The *Terumas HaDeshen* rules that this would be forbidden, even if there is no other doctor available (*Responsa* 252).

The *Beis Yosef* cites the Rambam's opinion that touching a woman is forbidden *d'rabbanan* but not *d'Oriosa*. In the Rambam's *Responsa*, he rules that it would be forbidden by rabbinic decree for a husband to take his wife's pulse while she is a *niddah*, even if the physical contact is not affectionate, but intended only for medical purposes (*Responsa* 127). The *Beis Yosef* also cites the Rambam's opinion that any form of touching is forbidden *d'Oriosa* (*Sefer HaMitzvos, Lo Saaseh* 353; *Hilchos Issurei Biah* 21:1). According to this ruling, touching for serious medical need might also be forbidden, even if it is in no way affectionate (see *Beis Shmuel* on *Even HaEzer* 20:1).

The *Shach*'s Lenient Ruling

In his commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*, the *Shach* rules in two places that physical contact which is not *derech chibbah* is *not* forbidden.

In his first *pesak*, the *Shach* writes that even according to the Rambam, who rules that physical contact is forbidden *d'Oriosa*, touching which is *not* affectionate or passionate is not forbidden. The *Shach*'s ruling is in opposition to the stricter *pesak* of the *Beis Yosef*, who forbade even touching which is not *derech chibbah* (*Shach, Yoreh Deah* 157:10).

⁴ An exhaustive commentary on the *Tur* written by Rav Yosef Karo (1488-1575); the precursor of his definitive *Shulchan Aruch*.

⁵ A super-commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch* written by Rav Shabse ben Meir HaKohen (1621-1662), a leading halachic authority.

The *Shach* cites the *Beis Yosef's* interpretation of the Rambam's ruling: physical contact with a woman is a Torah ordained prohibition, possibly even if there may be an element of danger to life involved (as in the case of providing medical treatment). However, the *Shach* disagrees with the *Beis Yosef's* understanding of the Rambam, pointing out that the Rambam's ruling hinges on the condition of whether or not the physical contact is *derech chibbah*. The *Shach* rules that touching which is not *derech chibbah* is permitted, in keeping with the Rambam.

In his second *pesak* as well, the *Shach* permits touching which is not *derech chibbah*. He goes on to say that it is common practice for Jewish doctors to take a woman's pulse and treat female patients, even if there is a non-Jewish doctor available to provide treatment. He writes that this practice is clearly permitted (*Shach, Yoreh Deah* 195:20).

The *Noda B'Yehudah*⁶ disagreed with the *Beis Yosef*. In the late 1700's, he wrote that accepted practice is in keeping with the ruling of the *Shach* (*Responsa Noda B'Yehudah, Tanina, Yoreh Deah* 122).

More recently, Rav Moshe Feinstein ruled in accordance with the *Shach* as well: physical contact which is not *derech chibbah* is permitted. He wrote that according to the Rambam, it is forbidden to come close to anything which will lead to relations. However, physical contact which is not passionate or affectionate is not considered "coming close to uncover nakedness," because it will not lead to forbidden relations. As such, *Chazal* saw no reason at all to forbid it, not even as a rabbinic decree (*Igros Moshe, Even HaEzer*, vol. II, 14).

Physical Contact which is Not *Derech Chibbah* is Forbidden *D'Rabbanan*

As we have seen, the *Shach* explains that according to the Rambam, physical contact which is *derech chibbah* is a Torah ordained prohibition, while physical contact which is not *derech chibbah* is permitted. However, a minority view, held by a few *achronim*, maintains that even according to the Rambam, physical contact which is not *derech chibbah* is forbidden by rabbinic decree.

The *Ezer MiKodesh* writes that it is possible that even according to the Rambam, physical contact is forbidden even if it is not *derech chibbah*, at least by rabbinic decree. This is because of the likelihood that contact which starts out as "not *derech chibbah*" can easily turn into desire. When that happens, the physical contact escalates into a Torah ordained prohibition. In order to guard against violating this prohibition, *all* physical contact is forbidden, because there is only a fine line between touch which is not motivated by desire, and that which is (*Ezer MiKodesh on Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer* 20:1).

Otzar HaPoskim cites a similar *pesak* from the *Sedei Chemed*. The *Sedei Chemed* writes in two places that according to all halachic authorities, when there is no actual need for physical contact, as with a doctor treating a patient, any sort of touching or physical contact – even if it is innocent in nature – is certainly forbidden *d'rabbanan* (*Otzar HaPoskim* 20:3, *Os Alef*, p. 13b).

Shaking Hands

Strict Halachic Opinions

⁶ The responsa of Rav Yechezkel Landau (1713-1793), rabbi and *rosh yeshivah* of Prague; an important *Acharon* often known by the name of this major work.

How do these halachic rulings, strict and lenient, apply to the question of shaking hands with members of the opposite gender? This is an issue which constantly arises in business meetings, and in fact, in just about any dealings with the secular community.

Barry and I had done business together by phone and email for a number of years, but we had never met in person. Barry had no previous exposure to Orthodox Jews and Jewish observance. When he came to Israel for his son's bar mitzvah, we met when he visited us in our home. Ever the gentleman, he shook my hand, and then held out his hand to my wife and children – including my three daughters.

Those *poskim* who forbid shaking hands with a woman list a number of reasons for the prohibition.

Rabbeinu Yonah: Non-affectionate touching is also forbidden *d'Oriosa*

We mentioned Rabbeinu Yonah's ruling: *all* physical contact, including so much as touching a married woman's hand, is forbidden *d'Oriosa*, because "coming close" leads to "uncovering nakedness" (forbidden intimate relations; *Vayikra* 18:6). By refraining from actions which skirt the border of sin, we maintain a safe distance from the sin itself (*Shaarei Teshuvah* 3:80).

Based on Rabbeinu Yonah's ruling, Rav Binyamin Zilber writes that shaking hands with a woman violates the Torah's prohibition of "do not come close" (*Mekor Halachah*, vol. II, p. 23).

***Sedei Chemed*: Touch which is not *derech chibbah* is forbidden by rabbinic decree**

As we said, the *Sedei Chemed*, cited in *Otzar HaPoskim*, writes that even simply touching a woman is forbidden by rabbinic decree, barring a need such as medical treatment (*Otzar HaPoskim* 20:3, *Os Alef*, p. 13b). Based on this *pesak*, shaking hands with someone of the opposite gender would be forbidden *d'rabbanan* – it is unlikely that a handshake in just about any context would be considered a "need" akin to medical purposes.

Rav Moshe Feinstein: The likelihood of transitioning to *derech chibbah*

We find another reason to forbid shaking hands with a woman in three responsa by Rav Moshe Feinstein, who rules strictly on this question.

Rav Moshe writes that shaking hands with a woman "is clearly forbidden." This is certainly true of a married woman, Rav Moshe says, and even of a single woman, because a single woman is a *niddah* (*Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim*, vol. I, 113).

In another responsum, he writes that physical contact which is not accompanied by desire is not forbidden, as the *Shach* rules (*Yoreh Deah* 157:10). Nonetheless, Rav Moshe continues, it is difficult to be lenient based on this ruling – can one really be absolutely certain that there is no element of attraction involved when shaking a woman's hand? The questioner mentioned that he had seen that even observant Jews are lenient about shaking hands with women. Rav Moshe writes that perhaps they reasoned that there was no element of desire involved in the contact, and that it was therefore permitted. He concludes that practically speaking, however, it is difficult to rely on this leniency (*Igros Moshe, Even HaEzer*, vol. I, 56).

In a third responsum, Rav Moshe writes that shaking hands with a woman in greeting “is certainly clearly forbidden.” Citing his first responsum, he writes that we must be concerned with the possibility of taking pleasure in the physical contact. He also cites his second responsum: while one should judge those who do shake hands with women favorably, as they may be assuming that there is no element of attraction involved, “it is difficult to rely on this” (*Igros Moshe, Even HaEzer*, vol. IV, 32, *Os Tes*).

As we see, the *Igros Moshe* rules in accordance with the *Shach* – physical contact which is not *derech chibbah* is permitted. However, Rav Moshe writes, in any case it is still forbidden to shake hands with a woman, because one cannot be certain that the contact is free of any tinge of attraction or desire.

***Az Nidberu*: Regardless of intent, the form of the act is forbidden**

Rav Binyamin Zilber, a contemporary halachic authority, rules in Responsa *Az Nidberu* that it is forbidden to shake hands with a woman, regardless of whether there is any feeling of attraction. His opinion is based on the precise wording of the Rambam. The Rambam wrote that physical contact “*derech taavah v’chibas biah*,” literally “*in the manner of desire or physical attraction*” is forbidden; in other words, the Rambam did not say that only touching which is *motivated by* desire is prohibited. He focused on the *way* such desire is expressed. Based on this understanding of the Rambam, physical contact which has the *form* of affectionate touching, even without the feeling behind it, is also forbidden. The issue is not merely a matter of intent, but also of the form the action takes.

As proof, Rav Zilber writes that the Torah prohibits physical contact which leads to intimate relations. The act of intimate relations is always forbidden with any woman other than one’s wife, regardless of whatever thoughts there may or may not be behind it (*Responsa Az Nidberu*, vol. II, 73).

Social Pressures

The Ben Ish Chai, the great nineteenth century *posek* of Babylonian Jewry, wrote that it was customary among Europeans for a guest to greet his host or hostess by holding his or her hand in a firm grip, as an indication of friendship and goodwill – an excellent description of a handshake! He writes that a G-d-fearing Jew should certainly refrain from this practice, because it involves holding and touching the hand *derech chibbah*; the very reason for the firm grip is to demonstrate great affection.

He cites *Sefer Chassidim*, who writes that “a Jewish man should not shake hands with a non-Jewish woman, nor a non-Jewish woman with a Jewish man. A Jewish woman should not [shake hands] with a non-Jewish man, nor a non-Jewish man with a Jewish woman, even if the hand is wrapped in a garment [for example, a glove], as a preventive measure [literally “a fence”] against forbidden relations” (*Sefer Chassidim* 1090). Clearly, the Ben Ish Chai writes, *Sefer Chassidim* refers to shaking hands in greeting, as was customary in his time in European cities.

He explains why the *Sefer Chassidim* specifically focused on a Jew shaking hands with a non-Jew, but did not mention a Jewish man and woman shaking hands with each other. The *Sefer Chassidim* teaches us that even if it is the non-Jew who extends his or her hand, as is their custom, and the **Jewish** man or woman will be embarrassed because the non-Jews around him will laugh at him if he does not reciprocate, it is still forbidden to return the handshake. Accordingly, he writes that it is certainly

prohibited when it comes to a Jewish man and woman shaking hands with one another (*Od Yosef Chai, Shoftim 22*).

Rav Mordechai Eliyahu, former Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, was introduced to no less a personage than the Queen of England. The Queen graciously extended her hand to the rabbi, and despite the slew of cameras filming the scene, he did not shake it. Later that evening, he received a letter of apology from the Queen's protocol expert. Apparently, it is on official record that the Queen should not shake hands with a rabbi!

More recently, the Queen dubbed Rabbi Aryeh Sofrin a "Member of the Empire," in recognition of his eighteen years' work as the head of a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center serving members of all faiths. Much to Rabbi Sofrin's relief, when bestowing the award, the Queen departed from her usual custom and did not shake his hand.

Shaking Hands to Spare Embarrassment

Rav Menashe Klein, author of *Mishneh Halachos*, responded to the following question. If a woman extends her hand in greeting, is it permitted to respond by shaking hands, even though it involves touching her hand? The questioner mentions that he had heard that Rav Moshe Feinstein ruled that it is absolutely prohibited, but nonetheless, he had seen very observant people who were lenient about shaking a woman's hand in order to avoid embarrassing her. He had also heard that there are some *roshei yeshivah* who permit it.

The *Mishneh Halachos* responded that in his opinion, it is forbidden to even suggest that a *rosh yeshivah* would permit shaking hands with a woman to spare her embarrassment; it would be unthinkable to permit an act related to such a serious prohibition because a woman has extended her hand – even if she has only done so because she is unaware of the prohibition. He also is not convinced that there is in fact an element of embarrassment involved in not reciprocating the handshake.

Rav Klein pointed out that there were those who allowed themselves to be lenient in this regard because they lived in countries such as Germany and France, where promiscuity was rampant and it was common practice for people to shake hands with anyone, man or woman. They relied on the *Shach's* opinion (*Yoreh Deah 157:1*). The *Shach* ruled that the Rambam only forbade physical contact which was *derech chibbah*, unlike the *Beis Yosef* (*Yoreh Deah 195*). However, he writes, it is not proper to rely on this leniency, which, as Rav Moshe Feinstein ruled, is very weak (*Igros Moshe, Even HaEzer 56*).

The *Mishneh Halachos* lists three reasons to forbid shaking hands with a woman.

First, many *poskim* disagree with the lenient ruling of the *Shach*, and concur with the *Beis Yosef*, who rules that even physical contact which is not *derech chibbah* is forbidden. Among them are the *Beis Shmuel* (*Even HaEzer 20:2*) and the *Beis Yaakov* (para. 80), who disagree with the *Shach*.

Second, it is possible that even the *Shach* would also forbid shaking hands. The *Shach's* lenient ruling relates only to someone like a physician who is involved in his work, and for whom the physical contact is part of his duties. Surely this leniency would not apply to shaking hands in greeting; even if a handshake is not actually *derech chibbah*, it is close enough.

Third, even if the handshake did not begin as *derech chibbah*, at times the contact itself arouses desire, and it turns into *derech chibbah*; as such it may be a Torah ordained prohibition (*Mishneh Halachos*, vol. VI, 123).

As we said, *Sefer Chassidim* writes that it is forbidden for men and women to shake hands. He also specifies that a *non-Jew* should not shake hands with a Jew of the opposite gender. Practically speaking, it is unlikely that a non-Jew would consult a work of Jewish law for guidance on Jewish etiquette! It is more likely that this was an additional warning for Jews: even in the uncomfortable circumstance that the non-Jew is the first to extend his or her hand – and even if the **non-Jew** will be embarrassed by the Jew not reciprocating the handshake – it is still forbidden.

Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, the Steipler Gaon,⁷ was asked if it is permitted to shake hands with a woman (*Kreina D'igresa*, Part 1, 162). He responded that without doubt, it is absolutely forbidden, as is any physical closeness with a member of the opposite gender. He cites what is related in the name of the *Chazon Ish*: shaking hands with a woman is in the realm of *yehareg v'al yaavor*,⁸ the same as any other actions related to forbidden intimate relations. There is no difference between a married woman and a single woman; a single woman is also forbidden because she is a *niddah*. Under any circumstances, even if she is not a *niddah*, the Torah's commandment, "And you will guard yourself against every evil thing" (*Devarim* 23:10), applies, for no one can claim that he is immune to improper thoughts.

The Steipler's questioner had raised another point – refusing to shake a woman's hand once she extended it would embarrass her publicly. The Steipler did not consider this sufficient reason for leniency. He wrote, "G-d forbid to say such a thing. The fact that one party will be embarrassed by [the other party] refraining from sin is no grounds to permit it." He cites *Chazal's* ruling concerning *shatnez*:⁹ if a Jew becomes aware that a garment he is wearing contains *shatnez*, he must remove it immediately, even if he is out in public (*Berachos* 19b).

The Steipler also points out that it is impossible for a young man to touch a woman without being physically affected, or without having some pleasure from the contact (*ibid.* 163).

Sefer Beis Yechezkel (33) cites Rav Serayah Devilitzky, who testified that the *Chazon Ish* told him that shaking hands with a woman is *yehareg v'al yaavor*, even if the man has no pleasure from the handshake. If he does derive pleasure, "Even if he has Torah and good deeds in hand, he will not be spared from the judgment of *gehinom*" (*Maseches Kallah*).

Lenient Opinions

⁷ Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky (1899-1985), a brother-in-law of the *Chazon Ish* and the father of Rav Chaim Kanievsky, *shlita*, was known and revered as "the Steipler," after the name of his hometown of Horonsteipel in the Ukraine. A student and eventually a *rosh yeshivah* of the Novardok *yeshivos* in Europe, he settled in Bnei Brak in 1934, where he served as a *rosh yeshivah*, and became one of the *gedolim* of recent generations. His is the author of *Shaarei Tevunah*, *Birkas Peretz*, *Chayei Olam*, and *Kehillos Yaakov*, a commentary on most of *Shas*.

⁸ A transgression which one should allow himself to be killed rather than transgress.

⁹ A mixture of wool and linen in a single garment, forbidden by the Torah; see *Devarim* 22:11.

Any lenient opinion concerning shaking hands with a member of the opposite gender can only be based on the *Shach*'s ruling that physical contact which is not *derech chibbah* is permitted.

Rav Shlomo Carlebach (1845–1919), a prominent rabbi in Lubeck, Germany, ruled leniently on the question of shaking hands with women in his introduction to an article included in *Kovetz L'Dovid Tzvi* (p. 218).¹⁰ Although he does not mention it explicitly, his lenient opinion is clearly based on the ruling of the *Shach*.

Rav Carlebach mentions that the problem involved in shaking a woman's hand is that it may lead to improper thoughts. In his early years, he writes, he had refrained from shaking hands with women, but was unable to maintain this stricter practice. Most women were not familiar with the prohibition, and would innocently extend their hand to men in greeting. He writes that there could be nothing more humiliating than refusing to reciprocate; respect for the dignity of others is an overriding consideration. The Talmud teaches that "respect for the dignity of others is so great that it overrides a negative commandment in the Torah" (*Berachos* 19b).

Rav Chaim Berlin's opinion on this question is similar to that of Rav Carlebach.¹¹ A former student asked Rav Berlin if it was permitted to shake hands with a woman. In answer, Rav Berlin cited the *Gemara*'s teaching that it is forbidden to hand money to a woman, *in order to look at her* (*Berachos* 61a). If, however, one's intentions are pure and innocent, as he is sure is the case with his student, and he is not motivated by a desire to look at her, it would be permitted to hand money to a woman.

He goes on to say that if there is a way to avoid shaking hands, it is certainly preferable. However, if there is no way around it – for example, the woman has already extended her hand – and he has no improper thoughts in mind, he need not be strict in this regard. Rav Berlin points out that "[the Torah's] ways are ways of pleasantness" (*Mishle* 3:17). *Chazal* tell us that our conduct should make the Name of Heaven beloved (*Yoma* 86a); we should not cause others to say that religious Jews are *meshugaim* (outlandish) and ill-mannered (*Responsa Nishmas Chaim* 135:6).

However, the proof from the *Gemara*'s ruling regarding handing money to a woman, the basis of Rav Berlin's lenient *pesak*, does raise a question. *Chazal* spoke of handing money to a woman, which does not involve actually touching her hand. In this instance, where there is no physical contact, if one's intentions are innocent, it is not forbidden. However, shaking hands *does* involve touching and holding a woman's hand, so the parallel is questionable.

From the writings of Rav Shlomo Carlebach and Rav Chaim Berlin, it is clear that it would only be permitted to reciprocate a handshake initiated by a member of the opposite gender if one is certain that he can keep his thoughts clean and pure. If one suspects that he may have improper thoughts, it is absolutely prohibited to reciprocate, even if refraining would embarrass the initiator of the handshake.

In addition, it appears that although they rule leniently, they do not rely exclusively on the *Shach* – they call for one or more additional factors to support their lenient positions. They mention the following extenuating circumstances:

¹⁰ *Kovetz L'Dovid Tzvi* is an anthology of articles by different *rabbanim*, published in 1914 in honor of the seventieth birthday of Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffman.

¹¹ Rav Chaim Berlin (1832-1912), eldest son of Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the famed *rosh yeshivah* of Volozhin, was a distinguished *rav* in Russia, and in his later years, in Jerusalem.

First, the situation is such that refusing to shake a woman's extended hand would humiliate her.

Second, one's intentions are entirely *l'shem Shamayim* (for the sake of Heaven), for example, to prevent a *chillul Hashem* (desecration of Hashem's Name).

Third, the refusal to shake hands would cause onlookers to view observant Jews as boorish and ill-mannered.

It must be stressed that even according to the lenient opinions, there are grounds for leniency *only* when the *Shach's* ruling applies, meaning that the contact is not *derech chibbah*, and *only* when the other party has initiated the handshake.

Polite Options

As we see, many important *poskim* rule strictly on the question of shaking hands with women. Even Rav Chaim Berlin, who does rule leniently, writes that if possible, it is better to avoid it.

A woman has extended her hand and expects us to shake it. What can we do? Several people have passed on suggestions which they have found helpful. I personally attempt the first, although not always with success. While these techniques may not be ideal and may not always work, they can often be a way out of a problematic situation.

- *Keep your hands full – if you are holding files, a briefcase, or the like, a smile and a nod in lieu of a handshake may be more readily accepted. It is easier to employ this method from a reasonable distance – it works best when you are more than an arm's-length away!*
- *Have a business card strategically in hand, and place it in the other party's extended hand instead of shaking it.*
- *When truly desperate, pretend to have a cold or allergy attack, and cough or sneeze into your own hand. This is an effective deterrent, but it probably cannot be used too often with the same person.*
- *Or else... simply be honest and explain upfront that due to religious considerations, you do not shake hands with anyone of the opposite gender.*

Unfortunately, when dealing with other people, nothing can ever be foolproof. I am friendly with a rabbi and rebbetzin in Los Angeles who market a line of kosher candy and spices. Their business requires frequent meetings with representatives of different retail stores. Because most of the representatives they meet are male, the rebbetzin makes sure to be the one carrying the samples, so that her hands are otherwise occupied. When that fails, she openly says that she does not shake hands with men for religious reasons. For years there was never a problem, until they met with an especially friendly store representative. She declined the outstretched hand, and apologized as she always did. "No problem," said the store rep, "I understand." Instead of shaking her hand, he enveloped her in a bear hug!

The question of shaking hands with the opposite gender is an almost daily issue in the secular workforce. Most *poskim* rule strictly, as we see from their responsa; they prohibit shaking hands, even if the other party initiates the handshake.

Nonetheless, a number of prominent *poskim* in the United States, among them Rabbi Herschel Schachter and Rabbi Mordechai Willig, do permit shaking an extended hand. Rabbi Willig advises responding with what he calls a “dead fish” handshake, rather than with a firm grip.

I discussed the issue with Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz, an American *rav* and *posek* who is currently a senior lecturer in Yeshiva Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem. He believes that most rabbis in the United States are lenient, and permit returning a handshake in a professional context where the initiator of the handshake is likely to feel embarrassment or humiliation. Accordingly, many people in the workforce will reciprocate when a member of the opposite gender extends their hand. However, it is important to remember that this leniency is based entirely on the ruling of the *Shach*: only physical contact – handshaking included – which is not *derech chibbah* is permitted. Any lenient *pesak* assumes that our minds are free of any improper thoughts as we return a handshake. If this is not the case, there is no *heter* at all for a man and woman to shake hands.