THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT: Yihud, protecting conjugal fidelity

Yesterday we wrote about the seventh commandment: “You shall not commit adultery” and we explained how the Mitsva of Taharat haMishpaha helps to maintain and strengthen the attraction between husband and wife.

Today we will begin to see another aspect of the Jewish attitude towards sexuality. There are Jewish laws and codes of conduct that have as one of their fundamental objectives to safeguard marital fidelity. One of these important rules is called “Yihud”, or seclusion.

We read in the book of Shemuel II, chapter 13, about a young man named Amnon, son of King David. Amnon was obsessed with Tamar, also the daughter of David, but from a different mother. Amnon pretended to be ill, he locked himself in his room and asked his father David to ask Tamar to prepare for him something to eat. When Tamar arrived, Amnon demanded everyone to leave his room and asked Tamar to feed him. When Tamar arrived, Amnon, abused her. This affected King David, who felt partly responsible for not having avoided this tragedy. Together with his Court of Justice (□□□□ □□□□ □□□ □□□□) he established, or according to most opinions, “extended” this law of Yihud (□□□□□ □□ □□□□, let us clarify that the Jewish Courts of Justice have the right to establish new regulations, as any the Supreme Court in the modern world countries).

The law of Yihud states that a Jewish man should not be alone in a locked room with a woman other than his wife (or his mother, or daughter, etc.).

This rule belongs to the category of gedarim or siyaguim, that is, fences or Halakhic barriers, to prevent the risk of “falling” into a greater prohibition.

A “siyag” is what forest ranger establishes, erecting a fence a few steps before the cliff so that those who visit the forest do not get too close to the cliff, and by distraction or because of the attractiveness of the landscape, they come

to close and fall.
There are many examples of this type of behavioral fences in modern society. A person who suffers from alcohol addiction and wants to be rehabilitated is advised not to frequent bars or parties where people drink or go out with friends who drink alcohol. All these additional restrictions and “fences” are necessary for those who want to recover from their addiction, to protect themselves from themselves, and from a temptation that can become irresistible. It is much easier to resist entering a bar than to resist drinking alcohol, once you have a drink in your hand.
The Rabbis of the Talmud expressed that the sexual instinct is so powerful that one should not rely only on his common sense and decency (□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□ □□□). But there must be additional norms, fences, in order to avoid facing a potentially destructive scenario. And while loyalty is fundamentally a matter of values and mores, if a man strictly respects the laws of Yihud, the possibility of committing adultery, especially without premeditation, would drastically diminish. Yihud’s law states that a man and a woman should avoid seclusion or remain alone in a room or office that is locked or inaccessible. However, the presence of other people in that scene, or even the fact that the room or office where they are, is accessible from the outside, significantly avoids or diminishes the possibility of any kind of temptation, harassment or sexual abuse.
The concept of Yihud is today, I believe, better known and more accepted than ever in the non-Jewish society as well.
At US airports, if someone passing security checks carries something unusual underneath his or her clothes, he will have to be escorted to a closed office, where he will be ordered to take off his clothes. And all that time, from the moment one enters until he leaves, he will be always accompanied not by one, but by “two” officers of his or her same gender. This simple rule reduces to the minimum the possibility that something inappropriate might happen. It is as if the concept of Yihud, far from out of fashion, is increasingly better understood and applied to avoid potentially improper situations.
I remember a few years ago I participated in a conference of rabbis organized by the Orthodox Union (OU), and in one of the

lectures, a prestigious lawyer recommended to the rabbis that whenever we see a community member for counseling, etc. we should let the door of our office semi-open, or at least unlocked, as a general code of behavior. He told us that in the United States, there is a great awareness on this subject. And that many Jewish and non-Jewish professionals, doctors, dentists, psychologists have established similar rules in their offices, avoiding being alone with a patient or client in a closed room, to prevent potential inappropriate situations, cases or allegations of sexual abuse.
An American rabbi had an audience with the previous Pope, Benedict. It was at a time when the Boston Church had being sued for hundreds of allegations of sexual abuse, pedophilia, and so on. This rabbi suggested to the Pope that the church adopt the Jewish law of Yihud, and establish it as a Church's policy: that no minister or priest can meet or be left alone with a student, a girl or a child, in a locked office. And that this simple rule would minimize the problems that had caused so much damage to hundreds or thousands of children.I do not know what happened in the end, and if the Pope followed or did not follow this advice, but I could appreciate, once again, the infinite wisdom of our Tora and our Sages that thousands of years ago established laws that today, the rest of the world, accepts, values and imitate.
(*To be continued…*)