



*Parshat Matot-Maasei*  
**July 22, 2017 — 28 Tammuz 5777**  
**More than a Pretty Picture**  
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On June 14<sup>th</sup>, college student Hannah Pewee was roasting in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She decided to escape the hot weather. She put on a Finding Dory tank top, jean shorts, and a comfortable pair of nude flats and headed to the mall with her sister. But shortly after their arrival, a security guard approached her and told her she needed to leave the mall. Why? As Hannah wrote on Facebook, "Apparently some anonymous person reported me to MALL SECURITY for inappropriate dress and I was kicked out...Never mind that within a one-foot radius there were plenty of girls dressed just like me, since it's NINETY degrees outside." Her post generated thousands of likes and hundreds of comments. The mall later apologized, saying simply, "We dropped the ball on this one."

June 24<sup>th</sup>, in Knoxville, Tennessee, Tori Jenkins went for a swim with her fiancée in their apartment's pool. Three minutes after their arrival, Tori was approached by the pool's management. They told Tori that she needed to either put on additional clothing or leave the pool premises. Never mind that she and her fiancée pay to keep up the pool. And never mind that Tori was wearing a modest pink one-piece bathing suit. Pool management then took it a step further. They took a picture of Tori and used that picture to show her all the areas of her suit they deemed inappropriate. They also told her that her attire would inappropriately excite the teenage boys in the area. Tori left the pool crying. Her fiancée posted pictures of Tori in her completely appropriate bathing suit to Facebook. His post generated hundreds of supportive reactions and comments.

Sadly, Hannah and Tori's experiences are not uncommon. Every year, around prom season, we read stories of young women who are expelled from their proms because of the cut of their dress or the amount of cleavage showing. Every year there are stories about girls who are asked to leave school because their skirts are too short or their pants too tight. This year, Sophia Abuabara from San Antonio, Texas was nearly prevented from taking her AP exams because her school principle felt her dress was too short. Summer, an honor student from North Carolina, was threatened with arrest and suspended when she arrived to school with her shoulders exposed. As an added form of punishment, her school wouldn't allow her to walk across the stage for graduation.

Don't think for a moment that this phenomenon is limited to women living in Michigan, Tennessee, Texas, or North Carolina. Sadly, young women across the country have grown accustomed to dealing with regular intense and inappropriate criticism of their attire.

This type of censorship and critique was one of the reasons I left the music world. I can remember one year, we travelled to a vocal competition at a different college. It was a competition for which I had been practicing for months. But, after my audition, after singing my heart out, I received a comment sheet which was nearly blank. There were no comments about my musicality, performance, intonation, pronunciation, or stage presence. Instead, written in all capital letters across the top of the page was, "wrong color blouse—too tight." I sang my heart out on that stage and all the judge saw was my shirt.

This kind of thing happens here too. During the school year, adults would ask me if I could talk with the girls in our community about appropriate bat mitzvah attire. When I told them that we only talk with the girls about what they are learning and who they are, the adults began trying to explain to me how important it is for us to teach girls about modesty.

Just last week at Kiddush, someone came up to me and said, “Aliza, I have something I need to say to you and I hope you won’t be upset, but I’ve been talking with people, and there are some concerns about the length of your skirts.”

We live in a world where it has somehow become acceptable for people to criticize and critique women’s bodies and attire. We live in a world where one in four girls would rather win America’s Next Top Model than win the Nobel Peace Prize<sup>1</sup>. We live in a world where it seems somehow normal to read about which gown Mrs. Trump chose to wear to the state dinner or to talk about how horrible a woman looked on the debate stage. We have become inured to the objectification of women.

But just because this has become the norm; just because young women everywhere have developed strategies for walking through the cat calls, and responding to criticisms about the lengths of their skirts and the skin on their shoulders, does not mean that it is ok for us to stand by and allow this to continue.

Every time we send a high school student home on a test day because of her outfit, we are communicating that her body has more power than her mind ever will. Every time we tell a young woman that her outfit will inappropriately excite men in her vicinity, we are communicating that she is responsible for other people’s actions and reactions. Every time we talk about only the clothes women are wearing or about how they look we are communicating that a woman’s value is tied up in her appearance.

It is time for us to change the status quo.

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<sup>1</sup> Check out Lisa Bloom’s book *Think: Straight Talk for Women to Stay Smart in a Dumbed-Down World*

It is time for us to say that women's ideas are worth more than the number of square inches of skin they have covered. It's time for us to say that women are only responsible for their actions and their ideas, that when women are the victims of sexual harassment it is never their fault. It is time for us to say that women have much more to give the world than a pretty picture.

In our parsha this week, we read about the daughters of Zelophechad. Their world didn't see them, didn't accord them the respect that they deserved, didn't allow for them to inherit their father's wealth. But these women spoke out in front of the whole community. They articulated the injustice that they were about to suffer. And because of their brave testimony, because of the way they spoke the truth, the laws were changed and these women were able to inherit.

We are the daughters of Zelophechad. It is time for us to speak out. It is time for us to make sure that our daughters inherit a better world than we did.

Here are four things that we can do to change the status quo.

1. The first thing that we can do relates to the way that we see ourselves. When you wake up in the morning and look at yourself in the mirror, what is your internal monologue? Does it go something like, "Ugh, look at those under eye circles" or "oh, another wrinkle"? Our first piece of spiritual homework is to look at ourselves in the mirror every day and choose to look beyond our physical appearance. Take time every day to look yourself in the eye and think about your strongest qualities, the ways that you are kind and generous in the world, the work that you do to make a difference on a planet. You have to put your oxygen mask on before helping others.

2. The second thing that we can do relates to our children. When you see a little girl playing in the halls, resist the temptation to tell her how cute she looks or what a pretty dress she is wearing. Instead, ask her about what she is reading. Notice how brave she is or how kindly she treats the other children. Show her that what she does matters more than what she looks like.
3. The third thing we can do relates to our friends. When you see someone you know, resist the urge to say, “you look great” or “wow, what a nice blouse.” Instead, talk about who they are, what you admire about them, and share how much you’ve missed them. If you find yourself reverting to appearance commentary, check in with your own heart. Are you uncomfortable in this moment? Are you trying to fill the space? Even saying, “Gee, I feel awkward—it’s been so long” is better than clothing discussions.
4. Finally, the fourth thing we can do relates to the world around us. When a young woman is suspended from school or kicked out of a public space, write to her and assure her that she is supported by people in the world who care for her. When you see hear someone shaming a young woman for what she is wearing, say something. And do not ever be afraid to speak up for yourself.

Though the daughters of Tzlophechad are long gone, we are their legacy. It is time for us to take a stand.