

Behind the Mehitza

Behind the Mehitza the women will pray,
When I sit there I feel there's a veil in the way,
And though everyone's singing and joy is the mood,
There's a lid on my heart and my voice is subdued.

Chorus:

Will you touch me dear brother
Will you call out my name
for the God that we speak to is the same, is the same.

There are nine men beside me; they're looking for ten
Though I'm here to be counted, they only see men,
"But my soul has no gender," I'm crying alone,
The men just give up and they're all going home.

Chorus

As a child what I learned was that God was a King,
To a man with a beard on a throne I would sing,
Now the vision has taken a feminine part,
Glorious queen of the universe, queen of my heart.

Chorus

Oh a good Jewish woman — a treasure is she,
Bringing light to her home and her whole family,
"You can chant from the holy books, certainly dear,
As long as you do it where no one can hear."

Chorus

Since women wear scarves tied with sexual hints,
While others stand naked with purest intent,
To cover my hair doesn't seem very smart,
When modesty's really a state of the heart.

Chorus

Commentary

In 1981 I spent some time on Moshav Modi'in outside of Jerusalem where the followers of Reb Schomo Carlbach lived. I was especially drawn to the women who lived there, and I spent time with a number of them who seemed to be struggling. It seemed to me that they were powerful women who had given up a lot of their power in order to conform to a lifestyle where woman's roles were primarily about cooking, childcare and taking care of the home. Each of the women confided in me how unfulfilling this was, but each of them blamed themselves, thinking, "there must be something wrong with me that I can't find contentment in this beautiful woman's life that God has given."

Behind the *Mechitza*, we watched the men pray, while trying to keep the children quiet. We weren't counted in the *Minyan* so there was a feeling that our presence didn't matter.

I love to sing, especially when I am singing to God with others. I had the painful experience of being shushed by the men, who instructed me not to sing too loud because there was a rule called *Kol Isha* that prohibited men from hearing women's voices, lest they be aroused.

The rules around modesty gave the message that it was the woman's responsibility to protect men from their own uncontrollable impulses.

The rules about *negia* (touching) were also very painful. Men weren't allowed to touch women, lest they become aroused or in case they might be 'unclean' (menstruating). This created a lot of shame for women, as men went out of their way to avoid inadvertent touching, as if we had 'cooties'. When I sing, "Will you touch me, dear brother, will you call out my name?" I am expressing the desire to be seen, heard and counted.

At the end of my visit at Moshav Modi'in, I shared this song with the whole community, and we all cried together. No one was defensive. Everyone was touched by the truth of this song.