

## The mitzvah and its “punishment”

**By Noa Raz**

**“He came closer and asked again, in a loud voice, ‘Is that from *tefillin*?’ I couldn’t ignore him anymore, so I answered, ‘Yes. What do you want from me?’ He forcefully gripped my left arm and started kicking me.” Noa Raz was attacked by an ultra-Orthodox man because of her religious beliefs.**

Every morning I get up and pray *shacharit*, with a *tallit* and *tefillin*, as God has commanded us. As a Masorti (Conservative) Jew, it is absolutely clear to me that these mitzvot – to pray, to put on a *tallit*, to lay *tefillin* – apply to every believing Jew, including Jewish women.

I am used to hearing offensive comments regarding my religious beliefs, from “Conservative? What’s that?” to “You’re not even Jews, you’re heretics.” Unfortunately, I am also used to reading news about the religious violence that is raging in the country. It starts with violence against the Women of the Wall, moves on through the growing number of public bus lines where men and women must sit separately, not to mention the ultra-Orthodox opposition to the emergency room construction at the Barzilai Hospital due to some suspect bones, and where will it end up? I am not so sure that I want to know.

But however much I may be used to and aware of all this, it did not help me this last Tuesday morning, when a Haredi man, with hateful eyes, decided to attack me because of my belief in God.

### **“Woman, abomination, desecration”**

It was 7.30 in the morning, quiet on the streets. I had stayed over at a friend’s in Beersheva. We got up. I donned my *tefillin*. We prayed. I took my *tefillin* off – very routine. We left the house and I made my way to the bus station. All I was thinking about was how I could squeeze in a few extra hours of sleep before work, but things didn’t quite pan out that way.

A few minutes after I got to the station, I noticed an older man, in Haredi garb, standing and staring at my arm. A few more seconds went by until he realized that his stare was not transmitting his message clearly enough. He leaned over towards me, pointed to the ruddy stripes on my arm, those that linger on the skin after taking off *tefillin*, and asked, “Tell me, is that from *tefillin*?” I ignored him, but he asked again: “Is that from *tefillin*?” Again, I ignored him, but he moved in on me, stood right in front of me, and again asked, in a loud voice: “Is that from *tefillin*?” I couldn’t ignore him anymore, so I looked at him and replied, “Yes. What do you want from me?”

To be truthful, I was sure that as soon as I would answer him, he would spit out some curse, turn around and leave. But I was mistaken, he had just started. He forcefully gripped my left arm and simply began kicking me. Of course, he didn’t forget to scream out a concoction of words such as “woman, abomination, desecration,” and more.

At first I just froze. I didn’t understand what was going on. But after a few moments I came to my senses. I struggled with him to free myself and ran for the bus that had now arrived. I felt completely alone. The place was not busy, but there were some people around. Some looked on with interest, others turned away. Only one woman shouted back at him, “Leave her alone, already.” I don’t want to think what might have happened had I not managed to get away.

## **The strong dominate, women are humiliated**

This is not a story about a man attacking someone at a bus station. It's not even a story about violence against women. It's a story about religious violence. It's a story about attacking a person due to his/her faith, due to his/her will to serve God in his/her own way, in private, according to his/her outlook, according to his/her understanding of the Holy Torah.

The problem does not only lie with that man, the attacker. It lies with those who educated him, with his leaders who shamelessly and violently talk out against any religious practice that is not Haredi. It lies with those who brought him up and nurtured him in an atmosphere in which it is permissible to say, without blinking an eyelid, that Conservative Jews are not religious, that someone from a different ethnic group is a cockroach (some Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox parents recently referred so to Sepharadi girls who they did not want their daughters to study with), that there is only one sector (extremely austere) that decides who is a Jew.

We live in a country where the strong dominate and where women are humiliated. As our society becomes more ultra-Orthodox, more extreme, these boundaries become clearer and more frightening. Pluralistic Judaism, in its various hues, works day and night to change situation, through egalitarian and inclusive synagogues, life-cycle events for all, including everybody.

In my view, these movements are saving the Jewish-democratic character of the State of Israel, and this is beyond their role in the international, public relations and educational arenas. But our country, the one that is supposed to defend us from madmen and false messiahs, as well as cultivate positive and progressive forces, this country is shooting us in the foot time and again.

We can protest against the Haredim every day, but they are not the only guilty ones. They are Haredi; this is how they believe and they have the right to believe this way. It is the State that is also guilty of violence, for authorizing their every rampage; and we just carry on and keep quiet. If we don't wake up to what is happening around us, we will very soon find ourselves living on the corner of Meah Shearim and Tehran.

On Tuesday evening I returned home after work. A Chabad van was parked at the corner of my street, surrounded by *hassidim*. I like the Chabad people, most of them are respectful of their fellow man. I have had the chance to have fruitful conversations with them, despite our fundamental disagreement. Fear paralyses, even me. Of course, the man who attacked me is not a representative sample, but to kick somebody just because she prays to God? From here to pulling out a knife, the way is very short. It makes me wonder who among us is the real Jew.

*The author is a member of the Masorti Movement. She has filed an official complaint with the police.*