

Shaking Hands and Shaking the Boat*

Can I shake a woman's hand?

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Question

With the sharp increase of women in the workforce in recent years, interacting with the opposite gender in the workplace has become more challenging. Even the most basic gesture of goodwill – a simple handshake – is a complicated halachic matter. Should a man extend his hand when greeting a female business associate? What if she takes the initiative and extends her hand first? Should one be concerned about causing embarrassment and ill will?

These and many other related questions will hinge on the way this gesture is understood in authoritative halachic teachings. What degree of personal touch or intimate intention might be present when shaking the hand of a woman? Most importantly, are these gestures characterized by the Torah as neutral acts of goodwill or are they viewed as a gateway for further physical contact that can lead to intimacy? What guidelines does the Torah provide for avoiding physical contact with the opposite gender?

Response

Physical Contact with a Woman

Biblical or Rabbinic

When relaying the prohibition against engaging in forbidden relationships (*arayos*), the Torah states, “No person shall approach any of his close relatives, to **uncover** [their] **nakedness**.”¹ Similarly, with regard to a woman who is in a state of ritual impurity (*Nida*), the Torah further states, “Do not come close to a woman who is ritually unclean.”²

(1) ויקרא (יח, 1): “איש איש אֵל כָּל שָׂאֵר בְּשָׂרוֹ, לֹא תִקְרְבוּ לְגִלּוֹת עֲרֹוּהָ, אֲנִי ה'”.

(2) ויקרא (יח, יט): “וְאֵל אִשָּׁה בְּגִדְתָּ טְמֵאָתָהּ לֹא תִקְרַב לְגִלּוֹת עֲרֹוּתָהּ”.

