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Women's Whispers: Every hour a kiss

By VIVA HAMMER
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Two unforgettable events remain with me from my last visit to Israel: a kiss and a hug.

The kiss was perpetrated on Rehov Jabotinsky, an apartment forest in Jerusalem. A man in his 50s, with a well-risen belly and balding pate, waddled up the hill toward another man in his 30s. The second was a fair copy of the first, sans the yeasted belly. And as the older man came upon the younger, he held him firmly on both sides of the head and planted a long, fat kiss on his forehead. The younger man did not flinch as he accepted the tribute.

The hug erupted in the center of town on a Shabbat morning. A couple approached us: They were young and lovely, material from which the Song of Songs was composed. She was dark and slim. Her head was wrapped in a colored cloth and around her body white robes rippled. Her mate was two heads taller than she, fair-skinned and raven-haired, broad shoulders narrowing to a perfectly formed middle. And suddenly, with no provocation, she threw her arms around his waist and gave him a squeeze. What joy animated her as she held him! "What Greek god have I possessed," her face said. "What a man has been given to me!"

Her man, not pausing, told us a different tale. Shocked, embarrassed, confused, I wondered whether he reciprocated her adoration.

"Every hour a kiss," sings Chava Alberstein in a landmark composition, "every two hours a hug." It is a medical intervention she prescribes for all manner of disease: one that cannot be overdosed and that has no contraindications.

Jewish law thinks otherwise. I am forbidden close physical contact (*kiruv basar*) or touching with affection and lust (*hiba v'ta'ava*) with any man other than my father and grandfather, son and grandson, and periodically husband. These terms have been interpreted broadly by the rabbis to forbid all contact with the opposite sex except for professional necessity. Even hand shaking is controversial. Fanatic, you might think, but it certainly draws a line in the sand.

Twenty years ago, I became infatuated with a rabbinical student who had discarded the laws against touching. During those heady days, I visited my sister and she noticed a bruise on my arm. Responding to her questioning, I told her it must have been a souvenir from a date. "Get out now," my sister warned me. I did not heed her warning, and worse consequences than a black arm ensued. Any woman careful about the touching rules would have known that something was

awry if an observant man had so much as laid a finger on her. Outside the bounds of the law, touching becomes a treacherous negotiation between unequal parties.

A wiser woman now, I am nevertheless beset with touching challenges. During a recent business lunch, a member of management illustrates his points by rubbing my shoulder, putting his arm around my back, squeezing my hand. Modestly dressed and utterly professional, I am appalled by his caresses, but am at a loss as to what to do. If I make a fuss, I risk my job. If I do nothing, I am being violated and demeaned. I choose the latter, and leave the meeting sad and infuriated that even as a partner of the law firm, I have no recourse against harassment. What must it be like for the less successful among us?

Other touches are harder to object to. What am I to say when an older man, my American in loco parentis, slobbers all over my cheek? Or a beloved cousin swallows me in his hug? At the moment of contact, it would be a terrible offense to rebuff these loved ones. If I waited for a cooler moment to launch a discussion on the Jewish law of touching, they would examine me for signs of lunacy – and might just forget when next we met.

In an all-women's self-defense class I attended recently, the instructor asked permission before every contact she made with a student, and she insisted we do the same for each other. From her I learned that no touch between living things is neutral; every physical connection carries a message.

In my home, I follow Chava Alberstein's prescription: *kol sha'a neshika*, every hour a kiss, every two hours a hug. We are protected thereby from all manner of illness and bad temper, and it's absolutely free. But perhaps I am too cavalier: At home and in the street, in the office and supermarket, between the genders and within them too, a touch is a weighty missive. If we are wise, we will make sure the recipient is ready before we deliver it.

Viva Hammer is a Washington lawyer. vhammer@brandeis.edu