MUSIC TO MY EARS: A SCIENTIFIC ELUCIDATION OF KOL ISHA

Deborah Farber

The interpretation of the prohibition of hearing a female’s voice has evolved within Judaism throughout the years. Perhaps a fresh look at this prohibition is warranted considering recent advances in modern neuroscience.

A woman’s voice, according to the rabbis, can be attractive or sensuous, and therefore laws must be in place to describe when a man can listen to a woman’s voice. The halachic prohibition that the rabbis instituted for “kol b’isha erva” (a woman’s voice is nakedness) originates primarily from two Talmudic sources.

The first source is from a discussion in the Talmud in masechet Brachot. Several rabbis in this passage discuss the concept of erva (nakedness). Rabbi Yitzchak teaches that a woman’s hair is erva, and Rav Sheschel teaches that a woman’s legs are considered erva (Brachot 24a). Shmuel also expresses his opinion on the issue of erva, stating that a woman’s voice is erva (Brachot 24a), and citing as proof, “For your voice is sweet and your appearance attractive” (Song of Songs 2:14). The second source of “kol b’isha erva” is found in masechet Kiddushin. In this gemara, Rav Nachman asks Rabbi Yehuda to send his regards to Yalta, Rabbi Yehuda’s wife. Rabbi Yehuda responds, citing Shmuel, that a woman’s voice is erva, and therefore it is inappropriate to send greetings to Rabbi Yehuda’s wife (Kiddushin 70a).

These passages pose several inconsistencies about the nature of a woman’s voice. The prohibition of kol isha came to be interpreted in different ways by various leading rabbis. According to the interpretation of most German rishonim, including Rabbi Eliezer ben Yoel Halevi, the sources in masechet Brachot and masechet Kiddushin indicate that a man is prohibited from hearing a woman’s singing voice while reciting kriat shema. This ruling was made in order to avoid distraction while partaking in religious activities that require one’s full attention. Later rabbis began to interpret this prohibition to include other activities, in addition to kriat shema. However, Rabbi Yosef Karo, author of the Shulchan Aruch, merely advises that men should avoid hearing a woman’s singing voice while reciting kriat shema. Rabbi Moshe Iserless, citing Rabbi Yosef Karo, shifts the advisory nature of Karo’s statement to the status of law [1]. Rabbi Eliezer ben Shmuel of Metz extends this prohibition to include any davar shelikdusha, from which Rabbi Mordechai ben Hillel extrapolates its application to the study of Torah [2].

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Rabbi Saul Berman, Judaic Studies professor at Stern College for Women, points out a major issue with the rabbinic interpretations of kol isha. All of the rabbis mentioned above only consider the gemara in Brachot, which prohibits hearing a woman’s singing voice. However, they ignore the prohibition of hearing a woman’s speaking voice, as stated in the gemara in Kiddushin that relates the story of Rabbi Yehuda. In Rabbi Berman’s article, “Kol Isha,” he regards the interpretation of the Rabad of Posquieres to be significant because the Rabad deals with the inconsistency between these two Talmudic sources. The Rabad deems the restriction applicable to the woman’s speaking voice as well, and not just her singing voice, as does the Meiri [3]. Alfasi and the Rambam, also cited in Berman’s article, conclude that the prohibition applies to a woman’s singing voice as well as her speaking voice, as the prohibition against listening to the woman’s speaking voice seeks to prevent illicit social relationships between a man and a forbidden woman [2, 4]. These sources seem to indicate that hearing a woman’s speaking voice is included within the prohibition of kol isha.

A widely accepted opinion regarding kol isha is that of Rabbi Gumbiner, commonly known as the Magen Avraham. He stated that the singing voice of a married woman is always forbidden, while her speaking voice is permitted [5]. This is the generally accepted approach among many Orthodox communities. However, there is much room for debate, given the plethora of halachic opinions as well as the ambiguous nature of the Talmud’s statements on the topic of kol isha.
A recent study performed at the University of Sheffield, under the guidance of psychiatrist Michael Hunter, could change the way we perceive the prohibition of *kol isha*. Along with Hunter, Professor Peter Woodruff’s group in the Department of Psychiatry and the Division of Genomic Medicine helped shed light on the true nature of a woman’s voice, and its consequent classification as *erva*. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), researchers monitored the brain activity of 12 men while they listened to voice recordings. The subjects received 96 stimuli, consisting of male and female voices that were either gender-apparent (unaltered in pitch) or gender-ambiguous (pitch-scaled). The researchers found that the male brain processed voice stimuli differently depending on the gender of the voice stimulus. Male and female voices each activated different areas of the brain in male listeners [6].

The researchers found that perception of a male voice results in activity in the mesio-parietal precuneus of the brain, an area involved in episodic memory and imagination of sounds. Precuneus activation in the male brain during perception of a male voice was consistent with the idea that males compare the male voice stimuli with the internal paradigm of their own voice. In contrast, female voice stimuli activated human voice-selective regions of the right anterior superior temporal gyrus (STG), which is close to the superior temporal sulcus (STS). This finding is consistent with the idea that brain processes that attempt to attribute human qualities to voices are more involved in the perception of female voices than male voices. One explanation for activation of the STG by female voices is that female voices involve a greater employment of emotional prosody (affect and melody) than do male voices, the identification of which involves the STG. It is suggested that female voices are acoustically more complex than male voices, as female voices result in greater activation of the auditory cortex. Studies have demonstrated that computer technology has greater difficulty in recognizing and synthesizing female voices [6].

Regarding the study, Hunter explains, "Voices allow the brain to determine various factors about a person’s appearance, including their sex, size and age. It is much more complex than most people think and is an extremely important tool for determining someone’s identity without having to see them" [7]. The findings from Hunter’s experiment allow us to re-conceptualize our modern thoughts on *kol isha*. Given that a woman’s speaking voice triggers a different part of the male brain than does a male voice, it is plausible that a woman’s speaking voice, similarly to her singing voice, holds the potential to trigger sensual thoughts in male listeners. In the halachic realm, the Meiri further supports this claim by equating a woman’s singing voice with her speaking voice [3]. Therefore, Hunter’s experiment supports the claim that the prohibition of *kol isha* applies to both a woman’s singing voice and her speaking voice.

Today, in Western culture, the prohibition of *kol isha* is seldom applied to a woman’s speaking voice. While I am in no way offering a halachic psak, by taking Hunter’s findings into account, we are able to recognize the reasoning behind those less prevalent opinions which also apply the prohibition of *kol isha* to a woman’s speaking voice. Even though this opinion may not be treated as halacha lema’aseh, Hunter’s experiment gives us the ability to appreciate the basis of this approach, ultimately teaching us that “eilu v’eilu divrei Elokim Chayim” (Eruvin 13b).

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REFERENCES

[1] *Shulchan Aruch*, Orach Chayim, 75:3
[3] *Chidushei HaRashba*, Brachot 25