

Estie Florans

insideout

BEAUTY REDEFINED

Creating lasting change is a challenge, especially when it comes to business. Peninim's innovative learning group format gives women the tools to grow throughout their lives.

I was intrigued.

Can words like “beauty, depth, dignity, self-esteem” really be synonymous with tznius... or is this just a gimmick, an interesting way of captivating an audience for the 45-minute speech awaiting us?

I listened. And yes, I was captivated. I was about to find out what true beauty really is.



“Something isn’t working...”

A group of *mechanchos* from Montreal, disturbed that the many inspiring tznius programs they had initiated in the past were not having a lasting impact, decided to search for a solution. They analyzed the problem and the psychology behind it, and emerged with an idea.

Their idea blossomed into a worldwide organization that is still growing and metamorphosing; its roots firmly planted in the ground, its buds continuing to emerge. For it hasn’t only effected amazing growth in its hometown of Montreal, but has spread outside Canada to... Far Rockaway, the Five Towns, Monsey, Toronto, Lakewood, Passaic, Flatbush, Los Angeles... and is continuing to travel across the Atlantic Ocean to Gateshead and Zurich.

Peninim, founded and developed by Mrs. Goldie Lindner and three other Montreal educators, is a system of learning groups, where friends and neighbors gather to study the laws and *hashkofos* of tznius, helping and encouraging each other to meet their individual challenges in a non-threatening environment.

“But why is this necessary?” I ask Mrs. Tziporah Wasserman*, one of the organization’s founders. “You’ve worked

on many tznius events in the past and we’ve all gone to inspiring lectures before. There are numerous telephone programs and Torah tapes on the subject, as well. So why,” I reiterate, “is Peninim necessary? Can’t we just study the *halachos* on our own or go to one of the many tznius events to get a dose of inspiration?”

“That’s just it,” she explains. “Despite the tremendous effort and time that went into the events, we didn’t feel that they were necessarily having a lasting effect. Through our involvement in teaching high school girls, adult education, and the events we’ve organized, we’ve listened and heard the array of comments, difficulties, challenges, and successes. We’ve questioned, studied, and analyzed what’s

lacking, what works, and what doesn’t. And the bottom line is that in the past, *bnos Yisrael* received the messages of tznius, in both *halachah* and *hashkafah*, from their homes by osmosis. Today, however, these messages are being misconstrued because of the society we live in and the peer pressure that goes along with it.

“So we go to an inspiring evening about tznius and come home on an emotional high, sometimes even taking on a *kabbalah*. But this comes from a place of emotion and the change may not last, because it’s generally external. Then, those outside influences and peer pressure once again become obstacles, along with our inner resistance to being told what to do. We realized that we need to separate tznius from the externals, and

Mrs. Bonnie Mansour is a popular speaker and teacher who pioneered tznius support groups in the Syrian community 11 years ago. Today, Mrs. Mansour runs several Peninim groups and is also the author of a guide to tznius, which is a compilation of excerpts from various *sefarim*. Mrs. Mansour says: “I’ve been asked why I decided to form a support group and not a series of lectures about tzniut.” She answers with another question. “Is there anyone who feels she’s reached perfection in tzniut and ‘made it’?”

When she was approached by some women in the community who wanted to grow in tznius, she suggested that instead of classes, they should learn together. The result? In a non-threatening environment, they were able to express their concerns and fears and ask their questions, giving each other *chizuk*. They shared ideas about where to shop, how to alter an outfit to make it appropriate, and how to handle awkward situations and friends who have not yet reached their level.

Mrs. Mansour feels that studying together in a supportive atmosphere is the only way to go... the only way it can last. She says that although she has lectured to large audiences, even the most inspiring, fiery speech is not going to take you to that moment in the store’s dressing room when you need to decide if the outfit is appropriate. “Only learning on a steady basis, constantly involved with the subject, leaves us with the tools to make the right choices in the fitting room,” Mrs. Mansour says emphatically.

bring it inside us and make it internal. And how do we do that?" She pauses. "By learning the *halachah* and *hashkafah* of *tznius* on a steady, constant basis. This way, it gradually becomes internalized. It isn't coming from an outside source and isn't being reflected merely on the surface.

"By doing it together with our peers," she continues, "the social pressure is diverted into something positive and supportive, with no one but the Torah and its *halachos* telling us what to do.

"Since we're studying the material, integrating information at our own pace and level, eventually, without realizing, it becomes part of us. It's a painless process that transforms us internally. We don't necessarily feel that transformation; there isn't this sudden makeover, or struggle, because it's gradual and coming from a recognition and appreciation of who I really am and a proper understanding of what *tznius* truly stands for."

The following story, in the protagonist's own words, illustrates this point:

It was before Pesach and I was at the seamstress, having my skirt altered. The seamstress, knowing me for many years, began pinning my skirt.

"A little longer," I suddenly found myself saying.

"You're sure?" the surprised seamstress asked me.

"Yes... um," I peered into the mirror, "still... a little longer."

When the door closed behind me, I was puzzled. I'd been part of Peninim for a while, but I was surprised at what had just happened to me. "I, Sarah Schwartz, just asked for my skirt to be longer?" I marveled that it hadn't been a struggle... I didn't even need to stop and think and ask Hashem for help. I just did it, because it came naturally. I didn't think — it was just... me!*

*"Why is it," I ask Mrs. Wasserman, "that people sometimes feel intimidated by the word *tznius*?"*

Her response is immediate. "Because for a long time it was perceived as

something restricting and negative, when really it's so liberating and full of beauty."

She explains, "If we don't allow women to exercise the creativity and beauty that is innately theirs — and the Torah does describe the beauty of the *Imahos*," she emphasizes, "an outer beauty that reflected a deeper, internal one — then they'll end up expressing that need for beauty subconsciously and often inappropriately.

"Beauty can be expressed either with color or style. In recent years, we became an all-black society, resulting in form-fitting styles. When the beauty of color is

good, instead of the other way around.

"*Tznius* is misunderstood," she explains. "Most people think that *tznius* is only a list of rules about clothing. At Peninim, we try to develop a new understanding of *tznius* as a concept that touches so much more than dress. It defines our essence and shapes our self-image. That's why, when properly understood, *tznius* is so empowering for a woman.

"Through the many Peninim groups and schools' *tznius* classes, we're hearing the concerns, misinterpretations, and questions of the individuals and we're

I was asked to share my Peninim experience.

After the initial introductory Flatbush Peninim meeting at Mrs. Adina Schron's home, I came away impressed and enthusiastic. My neighbors are busy, modestly clad grandmothers, who don't seem to have a challenge with *tznius*: *shul* Rebbetzins, *mechanchos*, etc. Nevertheless, I called them and tried sharing some of what I had heard. And *baruch Hashem* they came.

We've been meeting now for several months and our group has found that by being part of a Peninim support group, we're discovering and discussing areas of modesty that might have nothing to do with knees, elbows, and collarbones, or even clothing — and growing from that. Another gain is that we're appreciating our new spiritual connection to each other, realizing that although we have almost lost touch with each other despite our close physical proximity, by meeting once every two weeks we're forming a necessary and everlasting camaraderie.

Kedushah, *zechuyos*, friendships, and growth... one group, one step, twice a month... eternity.

taken away, we end up expressing it improperly, through the beauty of the feminine body.

"In the past, when you entered a clothing store, the garment itself appeared beautiful, due to its design and color. Naturally, when it was put on, it looked even nicer. The garment was used to beautify the wearer. Now, when the saleswoman shows you the garment, she tells you not to judge the outfit by the way it looks on the hanger, but to try it on. The wearer makes the outfit look

trying to address them with the halachically and hashkafically correct answers. That's why Peninim is now in the process of creating our own *sefer*. The book delves into various concepts to help us process the material, aiming for an outcome of higher *tznius* aspirations.

"For example, there's a beautiful chapter on privacy, and another on educating young children about *tznius*. We're not telling anybody what to do, saying 'wear this, don't wear that.' We're relaying the facts with detailed

explanations, incorporating background information, and including the *mekoros* for each *halachah*.

"The guidance we received from *daas Torah* was to explain the *halachos* well, giving each person the time to process the information, with an approach that she can relate to and identify with... in order to help her absorb and be *mekabel* the *halachos*. And in the program, so much is focused on perspective."

"Perspective?" I question. "Many of us wonder what's right and what's wrong. Sometimes we're not sure what the actual *halachah* is, what's a *chumrah*, and what might be a personal sensitivity to a *tznius* issue. It can leave people so confused that we don't know what's important anymore."

"That's just it," she explains. "When you understand *halachah* thoroughly, with the Torah's emphasis on different areas, the sensitivity to what we choose to wear becomes so much clearer and more understandable."

"Because this understanding is so important, *tznius* should be incorporated into the high school curriculum as a proper subject," she states emphatically. "Although teachers explain various conflicts pertaining to whatever styles are 'in' during those four years... what happens later on? Styles are constantly evolving. Did they arm the girls with the tools to make proper decisions about future styles and the support to fight what society represents? It's all about education. You want the girls to understand what the *halachah* is so that later they will do what's right."

Branching Out

Mrs. Hadassah Zelman, a resident of Far Rockaway and popular *kallah* teacher, has been teaching *tznius* in the Far Rockaway and Five Towns communities for many years and recently has brought Peninim to her neighborhood.

"How did you get involved with teaching *tznius*?" I ask her. "And why did you bring Peninim to your area?"

"A number of years ago, Rabbi Dovid

Weinberger, the Rav of Congregation Shaaray Tefilla, the shul where I work, went to HaGaon Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, *shlita*, to discuss *tznius* and its significance in being *mechazek* the *kehillah*," Mrs. Zelman relates. "Rabbi Weinberger, together with Rabbi Naftoli Jaeger, *shlita*, Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivah Sh'or YOSHUV, arranged a *kinus hisorerus* with Harav Matisyahu Salomon, *shlita*, the *mashgiach* of Bais Medrash Govoha of Lakewood, as the guest speaker.

"As a follow-up, Rabbi Weinberger arranged men's and women's workshops in each neighborhood. Additionally, he gave a series of *shiurim* on the *halachah* and *hashkafah* of *tznius*, leaving me extremely inspired," Mrs. Zelman explains. "I wanted to share this and started giving *shiurim* on this topic in Far Rockaway and the Five Towns. It was around this time that I attended a Bnos Melochim video presentation and heard Mrs. Chani Feldbrand describe a program that she started in Lakewood, Ateres, which teaches *tznius* to young girls in an enjoyable way. This, too, influenced me to share the beauty of *tznius* with other

adults.

"So, I had been teaching for years," Mrs. Zelman continues. "Then, over a year ago, we were marrying off one of our sons to a girl from Montreal. On the day of the *chasunah*, as I spoke with the young lady applying my make-up, she mentioned that she had just returned from a *shiur*.

"A *shiur*?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. 'A *tznius* learning group called Peninim.'

"I perked up; I had been giving classes on that subject and was interested in hearing more!

"Well, with tremendous *siyatta diShamaya* and help from Rabbi Weinberger and others, we presently have over 20 groups, *ka*"h, even though Peninim came to Far Rockaway only a few months ago. And it's still growing!" she says.

"Sometimes people react to something we're discussing in the group with a 'Come on... really?' but it is a gradual, deep process. One of these women, let's call her Judy,* who originally thought I was being extreme, called me

What Happens at a Peninim Meeting?

Mrs. Shani Mendlowitz, one of Peninim's founders and directors and *mechaneches* at Bais Yaakov Seminary of Montreal, explains:

Biweekly, a group of 8-15 women get together for approximately one hour.

The cozy, non-judgmental atmosphere, filled with camaraderie and good will, sets the tone for comfortable discussion and *chizuk* addressing today's *tznius* challenges.

The session opens with a 1- to 3-minute inspiring message on an audio CD. It continues with the reading designated for that particular session. The text is a *sefer* which includes *halachos*, *hashkafos* and practical advice that was written especially for the Peninim program.

The session then continues with a workshop discussion, where true-to-life situations are spotlighted, expanding the focus from dress to daily activities and interactions. The non-threatening, friendly setting and workshop format encourage animated discussion among members. The session closes with an inspiring written message.

Peninim participants leave with an uplifted, enjoyable feeling as they look forward to returning for more in two weeks' time.

To bring this program to your community, email peninim@thejnet.com or call 514-270-7840 or 514-274-7258.

one week later to tell me that what we had discussed had been on her mind all week, and that now she understood, because, as she said, 'I have a new awareness.'

"You're incredibly busy," I comment to this hardworking wife, mother, teacher, *kallah* instructor, and shul bookkeeper. "How do you have time for Peninim?"

"When something's important, people make the time for it," is Mrs. Zelman's quick and cheerful reply. "And you know how women can sometimes shmooze indefinitely... Here we come together and shmooze with an important focus."

And then with a passion I find contagious, Mrs. Zelman adds, "In fact, Judy, that same woman who had at first thought things were a bit extreme, already began her own Peninim group in addition to being a member of mine."

It Happened in Flatbush

Mrs. Devoiry Horowitz, a Flatbush wife and mother known for the Sunday *Chovos Halevavos shiur* given by Rebbetzin Vital Kalmanovitz in her home, was one of the primary proponents who brought Peninim to our neighborhood.

After thanking her for that, I ask her the question I'd been wondering about ever since she first introduced Peninim to me. "How did you hear about Peninim and what prompted you to get it going here?"

"I'm raising my family on the same block I was raised," she says. "I see the challenge of *tznius* becoming more difficult. When I tried articulating this to someone, she wholeheartedly agreed that there is a problem, yet was clueless that she herself was part of the problem. It was then that I realized that people need to be educated.

"Although *tznius* wasn't on my agenda, the inner shapes the outer." Mrs. Horowitz shares some personal background with me. "After I got married, I took a home-study course and became a decorator. The tragedy of September 11th made a big impact on me, and that's when I started the *shiur* on *Chovos*

Halevavos with Rebbetzin Kalmanovitz, which has continued for over 10 years. This *shiur* has affected me greatly. As you become more spiritual, you need to grow in all areas. So it wasn't a conscious decision to get involved with Peninim, but I found myself yearning to grow.

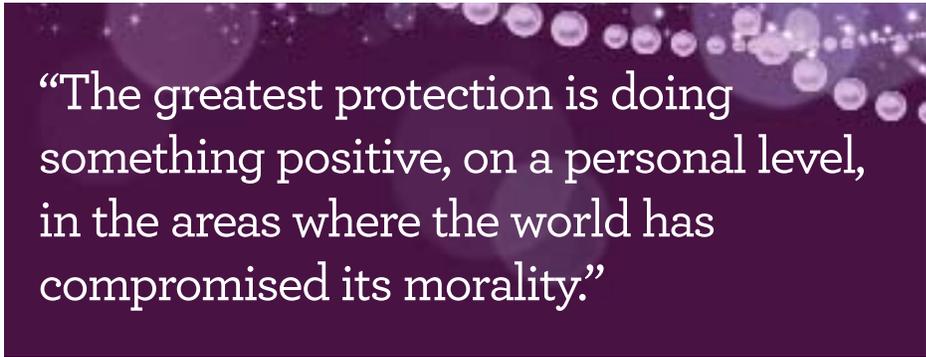
"When my daughter became engaged, I wanted to give something back by showing *hakaras hatov* to the *Eibershter* and arranged a *shiur* where a Rav spoke passionately about *tznius*. I was moved, but knew that nothing concrete had been established, despite the inspiration. After the *chasunah*, I called Rebbetzin Chana Rochel Twersky, principal of Bnos Yaakov Elementary School of Lakewood, who had written a *tznius* curriculum, and expressed my inner drive to do something concrete to effect change in *tznius*.

"She told me about Peninim and how quickly it grew in Lakewood, and gave me the telephone number of one of the women instrumental in coordinating it there. She reiterated those same feelings

communities are comprised of one large *kehillah*, but Flatbush includes many diversified *kehillos*. Peninim is spreading quickly, with people from all different circles embracing it, even though everyone thought it couldn't happen here. Today, two weeks after the Flatbush Inaugural Event, the membership has doubled," she says. "Just as the Torah is for everyone, Peninim is for everyone — it's part of the Torah. The only question is which group will work for you. So," she suggests, "make your own group, with your own friends.

"People are worried about their children and the influence that the world is having on their *hashkafos*. Although there are no guarantees, the greatest protection that I'm aware of is doing something positive, on a personal level, in the areas where the world has compromised its morality, and being *mezakeh* the *rabbim*, as well," Mrs. Horowitz advises.

When I met Mrs. Chaya Rochel Rokeach at one of the Flatbush Peninim



"The greatest protection is doing something positive, on a personal level, in the areas where the world has compromised its morality."

about what Peninim's goal is... to raise awareness through education in a gradual, internal, and comfortable manner.

"As a decorator, it was always important to me to look good. I didn't lose that innate desire, and through Peninim, that feeling is channeled in the right direction..." she says, emphasizing that it isn't a contradiction. "You cannot be an *oved Hashem*, a *mevakeshes*, without growing in *tznius*."

She explain, "Many other

planning meetings, I was impressed by her enthusiasm and realized that this is exactly what she's doing, being *mezakeh* the *rabbim*. She is a wife and mother in Flatbush who runs a home-based business, has been a "*mashpia*" in Oorah's Girl Zone for two summers, and has recently become involved with Peninim.

"How did it begin?" I ask.

She passionately relates: "The women of the shul were deeply affected when two local *yeshivah bachurim* from the *yeshivah* in Waterbury were killed in a

terrible accident, R”l. They wanted to do something inspiring to turn their feelings into a positive force that would make a difference. When a person is affected by a tragedy, it awakens their *neshamah*,” she explains. That’s why her friend, Mrs. Esther Rochel Bistrisky, asked Mrs. Rokeach to facilitate a Peninim group in her home.

“Like many of us, I’ve studied *shemiras halashon*, *hilchos Shabbos*, and *hashkafah* throughout the years and knew that *tznius* is important, but learning it? I’m not a rebbetzin or teacher,” she says, “but when Esther Rochel called me, I knew this was something I should pursue and didn’t want to leave this topic on the back burner any longer.

“It could be that at the beginning, people may have raised their eyebrows,” she admits. “But the women in our groups are an amazing bunch of fun, well-liked women. Now, so many people want to join us. But sorry,” she grins, “we’re full. We’ll be happy, though, to coach you on starting your own.”

I ask her why she thinks Peninim is so successful.

Her response is swift. “It’s not about making a *kabbalah*, committing to a sudden, permanent change. It’s a commitment to keep coming. The changes will happen because of what’s going on inside each one of us. No,” she reiterates, “it’s not about changing your wardrobe overnight.”

Mrs. Rokeach speaks of the importance of connecting to Hashem. “Although we went to Bais Yaakov and seminaries,” she says, “I believe that the struggles we have with *tznius* manifest a disconnection from Hashem. Before we start our group, we take a moment to talk about the wonders of Hashem. When you make Hashem real, it opens you up to learning more about *Yiddishkeit*, and the internalizing comes easier.”

She speaks of her friend, Miriam*, who is a *giyores*. Miriam plowed through it all, taking courses on different religions, persisting through many years of schooling, struggles, searching, and

finally coming to the conclusion that the Torah is *emes*.

But... she wasn’t ready to accept *tznius*. She thought she’d do it halfway and found herself torn and crying out to Hashem about how difficult following *tznius* was for her. She didn’t realize how much of her externals were tied into her self-esteem, how much she relied on what others thought of her.

When Miriam fully accepted that truly believing in Hashem and loving Him requires following His commandments,

“It’s not about making a kabbalah. The changes will happen because of what’s going on inside each of us.”

including *hilchos tznius*, she found that as she improved in *tznius*, she began knowing herself better and she came to appreciate that a true sense of self-worth comes from within and not from the outside.

Mrs. Rokeach goes on, “The Torah is *emes*, Hashem is *emes*... The internals start affecting the externals.

“Until Peninim was introduced to us, we would never have thought of forming a group to learn about *tznius*,” she shares, “and now it’s our highlight, twice a month. We currently have two different groups; one includes women in their 20s, and the other group’s members are in their 30s.

“I would like readers to know that change is gradual and not always immediately seen externally in a woman’s mode of dress. You might meet someone on the street who you would be surprised to know is participating in a *tznius* group and on the path to true greatness, and whose externalities will soon meet up with her internal growth.”

Shimrit Adar, a member of Mrs. Rokeach’s group, says, “This group means a lot to me. I literally look forward

to it. The small group is great because I’m not afraid of people judging me. It’s a form of therapy, almost. We all help each other through different struggles. Peninim has made me more aware as a wife, Jew, and *bas Yisrael*. In high school, there are rules, but once you’re an adult there’s no teacher or principal enforcing the rules. So you need to take that extra step in order to be more aware. Attending these meetings raises that awareness, making you into a better person. When I leave the group I leave on a high... excited to live

life and to take what I learned and incorporate it.”

Mrs. Rokeach adds, “I heard from Rabbi Jonathan Rietti that Hashem created the world in six days, even though He could have done it in an instant, because He wanted to teach us that life is a process and that you need to respect the process. So if you don’t feel it (the growth) right away, eventually, you will. You’ve got to respect the process and keep on learning. It will be life-altering.”



I now understood. *Beauty, depth, dignity, self-esteem...*

Tznius?

Yes, I felt myself nodding. *Tznius!* 

Estie Florans, a writer of fiction and nonfiction, is the author of *Conquer the Darkness*, *Set Me Free*, and the newly released *Lift Me Higher*, a true-to-life, contemporary novel for women and girls of all ages.

*Name has been changed.