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Joyce Azria: Fashion Icon and Orthodox Jew

By Dr. Yvette Alt Miller

The Energetic Designer's Journey
From Chanel to Shabbat.



Joyce and her husband Ilan

Fashion icon and Orthodox Jew are two descriptions that are not often used together. Yet those are the terms that best describe Joyce Azria who was the creative director for BCBG, the fashion powerhouse that recently announced it is shutting its doors after 28 years of providing red carpet style at affordable prices.

One of the most sought-after designers in America today, Joyce isn't retiring. She is starting her own fashion line, Avec Les Filles ("With the Girls"), a fashion line aimed at younger women, providing Joyce's trademark fashion-forward look with classic pieces and affordable price-points.

Aish.com recently caught up with the irrepressible and energetic designer who shared her thoughts about being a fashion icon and observant Jew.

The daughter of famed designer Max Azria, who founded the BCBG and other high-fashion clothing lines, Joyce grew up in a fast-paced, glamorous world, dividing her time between Paris, where she was born, and Los Angeles, where she grew up and still calls home. "Everything we did was fashionable," Joyce recalls. The family vacationed in the most fashionable resorts, enjoyed summers on yachts. "And everything was very material."

Joyce remembers growing up in Los Angeles. "I saw a lot of people who were lost, focused only on the latest trend and adopting the newest fad." Even though she was living in that milieu, Joyce notes there was something different about her family. Joyce's father was born into a large Jewish family in Tunisia and moved to Paris as a child, eventually studying fashion there. "My dad is a Sephardi Jew," Joyce explains, "and always raised us with a lot of spirituality and excitement towards *Hashem* (God)."

One way he conveyed that spirituality was through Shabbat. Although he travelled constantly for work, Max Azria always made it home in time to say Kiddush on Shabbat. That sent a powerful message to Azria's seven children. "We were very grounded in our beliefs," Joyce says.

That spiritual element helped the Azrias maintain perspective even in the center of the high-fashion worlds of Paris and LA. "Our family had a funny take on how unimportant it all was." Travelling to developing countries where some of their clothing lines' garments were made also helped shape Joyce's view of the world and of fashion's place in it.

Joyce entered the family business at age 18, learning the clothing industry and designing. From the outside, her life looked impossibly glamorous; she travelled the world, rubbed shoulders with celebrities, but the reality was far different. Building up the family's fashion brands was intense, grueling work, and many of the famous people Joyce got to know didn't seem fulfilled or happy up close. "Those people are real people, they have a lot of trials and difficulties."

Her work was thriving but after a few years in the fashion industry something seemed missing. Joyce began delving more intensely into Judaism, reading articles online and taking classes at Los Angeles' Aish Hatorah and Chabad centers. She first turned to Aish.com because she was looking for recipes. Growing up Sephardi, Joyce didn't know how to prepare her Ashkenazi husband Ilan Trojanowski's favorite dishes. "We each have different ways to enter into new worlds of ideas. Food is one language," Joyce explains, "that motivated me to learn more about Judaism."

Joyce started taking classes at her local Chabad center. Learning about the weekly Torah portion started to change the way Joyce looked at her life and the world around her. "I could always relate it to something that was going on with my life," she notes.

Joyce started learning the weekly Torah portion with her young son. "I was intrigued and taken by the stories. They seemed very modern, even though they are timeless. No matter how modern my life felt, every Shabbos I felt like there was a relevant lesson for me."

Learning about Judaism felt like falling in love. Soon, Joyce, who was divorced, was sharing that love with her new husband, whom her rabbi introduced her to. After she and Ilan married, they made the decision to adopt an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle, moving to an Orthodox neighborhood where they live with their five children.

Joyce believes that becoming an observant Jew has helped her grow not only in her personal life, but professionally as well. "Having a strong moral center helps you be a better businesswoman, a better partner, a better wife, a better person."

Though she jokes that she moved "from Chanel to Shabbat", Joyce notes that since becoming Orthodox people think she has become even more stylish, calling her more modest style "classic".

Designing for young women, Joyce is keenly aware of the pressures that girls and young women face to conform to the latest styles. "A lot of girls buy into fashion trends and they push their level of comfort which creates insecurity," Joyce notes.

"The number one thing you should look at when selecting clothes is how comfortable they make you feel. Are they revealing too much? Making you feel insecure? Confidence is central in fashion and confidence really means being comfortable in yourself. It's about finding the authentic 'you.' If you don't stand for something, you stand for nothing. And if you stand for nothing, people can't stand you," she quips.

Confidence also comes from whom we surround ourselves with, Joyce notes. When we make sure we are surrounded with positive people and mentors, it

can help us discover who we really are, and feel confident in projecting that. Instead of trying to fit in, spend time discovering who are, what we really think and stand for. “The whole point of fashion is to reveal who you really are,” Joyce explains.

Joyce sees that respect for her has increased since she became more religious. She notes that she is seen as a more trustworthy and honorable person. Wearing modest clothes has also changed the way people relate to her. Joyce has noticed that in conversation people look more at her eyes and seem to pay more attention to what she says. “They can get to know you on a much deeper level.”

As a female entrepreneur, Joyce appreciates the more professional way people now relate to her. “Women are royalty, and when you dress that way, you became royalty. People are beautiful when they are true to who they are.”

Joyce is incredibly busy, working to launch her new fashion line online and in hundreds of Macy’s stores across the country. Amid her intense schedule, Shabbat is her anchor in time, just as it was growing up when her whole family would gather together each week to hear Kiddush.

With her irresistible laugh, Joyce recalls an intense business meeting when she was still with BCBG that took place late on a Friday afternoon. “We were going through a really big business decision that had to be made within 24 hours, and it was just before Shabbat.” As the meeting concluded, one of her coworkers told Joyce that he’d call her soon and let her know how the decision turned out. “He said I’m going to call you, and get you on the line and let you know,” Joyce recalls, “and I said ‘Sorry, the world just stops for me on Shabbos.’”

Her colleague was incredulous, asking Joyce wouldn’t she be curious?

“Not really,” Joyce replied. “On Shabbat, I leave behind the business world and focuses on my family and my relationship with G-d,” she told the colleague. “I am fortunate that I’m not a slave to my work.”

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Story #1011

Levels of Truth

From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles

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One of the main disciples of **Rabbi Menachem-Mendel of Kotzk** was **Rabbi Ze'ev-Wolf from Strikov**, a great and holy Jew in his own right. When the famed Kotzker Rebbe passed away, many of his followers chose R. Wolf as their new Rebbe, traveling great distances to be near him and under his influence.

One particular chasid chose not to join R. Wolf. He explained that the Kotzker was a man of truth to an extreme, and no one else could ever approach the high standard of truth that he championed. (Once, as a young child, the Kotzker came home drenched. His mother asked him if it was raining outside. He answered, "When I was outside, it was raining".)

"Since I," the chasid said, "am committed to attaining the dedication to 'absolute truth' that I learned from the Kotzker, I am not interested in traveling to a person not up to his standard of truth."

Time passed and the man became seriously ill. Even though it was unpleasant for him to seek help from a Rebbe whom he told to his face that he did not accept him, after being bedridden for over a week, he decided it was nevertheless necessary to send his son to R' Wolf to request a blessing for healing.

The Strikover responded to the son's petition that if his father wants to be healed he must come himself. The son responded that it was not possible because of the illness. The Rebbe answered back, "Then let him be carried here in his bed." And that is what happened.

When the chasid was brought into the Rebbe's room, R. Wolf explained:

"We have an interesting insight concerning a person afflicted with a leprous-looking skin disease called *tzara'at* (see Levit. ch.13). Our tradition (*Talmud Bavli, Erchin*) teaches that the cause of this disease is spiritual-due to the person speaking *lashon hara*, evil speech. 'Evil' but not 'false' [if false, it would be in a different category of forbidden speech-'*rechilus*-slander' -YT.].

"*Lashon Hara* is saying something true about another person but in a way that the person is perceived in a negative light. He was punished because he said something true but in an inappropriate way.

"So how does *metzora* (the person afflicted with *tzara'at*) get healed? He has to be brought - even against his will -- to Aharon the Kohen (see Lev. 14:2), whose divine service was to increase peace and harmony within the Jewish people, and between them and G-d. Occasionally, this involved telling a lie. (If Sam and Joe were having an argument, Aharon would first go to Sam and say, "You know, Joe really wants to make up." Then he would go to Joe and say, "You know, Sam really wants to make up." Thus he would bring peace between them with a lie.)

"The healing for a person who is being punished from Heaven because he said something true in a manner or situation that could cause divisiveness because of the truth is to humble himself before a *Kohen*, who was entitled to compromise the truth when necessary in order to bring harmony, even though in general our holy Torah strongly forbids falsehood (Ex. 23:7)."

The chasid understood what Rabbi Wolf was saying: if he wished to be cured, he needed to humble himself to the *tzadik*-holy man, to apologize for his inappropriate speech and on some level accept R. Wolf as his Rebbe. He did so immediately and was healed.

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*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from a section of a weekly Torah essay by Rabbi Shaul Y. Leiter, executive director of Ascent-of-Safed, mailed in Spring 2015.

*Biographical notes:* **Rabbi Menachem-Mendel of Kotzk** [5547 - 22 Shevat 5619 (1787 - Jan. 1859 C.E.)], although born into a non-chasidic family; early became a disciple of R. Yaakov Yitzchok [the "Seer"] of Lublin, R. Yaakov Yitzchok [the "Yid HaKadosh"] of Pshischah, and ultimately of R. Simcha Bunim of Pshischah, Superficially stern, he practiced and preached a zealous and unrelenting search for truth, whose prime enemy is self-centeredness. His oft-quoted aphorisms are characteristically pungent and unsugared. Stressed earnest Torah study. Spent the last two decades of his life in isolation. After his passing, the majority of his followers recognized his disciple R. Yitzchak Meir of Ger as their rebbe. [from Uri Kaploun in "A Treasury of Chassidic Tales"]

**Rabbi Ze'ev-Wolf of Strikov.** [5566 - 11 Elul 5651 (1806 - Sept. 1891)], the oldest son of Rabbi Avraham Landau of Chekhanov, was considered one of the wisest and most learned of Menachem Mendel of Kotsk's disciples, Upon the death of the Kotsker in 1859, many of the chasidim accepted R. Ze'ev Wolf as their Rebbe, although he himself became a follower of the Chidushei HaRim of Ger. In 1878, upon the death of his father, R. Wolf succeeded him as Rebbe in Chekhanov. His discourses on the Torah and festivals were published in *Zer Zahav-Keter Torah* (1901). A collection of his correspondence, discourses and poems (in Hebrew) was published in 1926.

*Connection: Weekly reading-the double portion of Tazria-Metzora"*

*Reprinted from last week's Parshat Tazria-Metzora email of KabbalaOnline.org, a project of Ascent of Safed. [www.ascentofsafed.com](http://www.ascentofsafed.com) [ascent@ascentsofsafed.com](mailto:ascent@ascentsofsafed.com)*

## **L'Maaseh**

# **The Chofetz Chaim Explains the Danger of Mistaking the Wrong Person as Being Your Friend**



**The Chofetz Chaim**

The Chofetz Chaim once explained that while listening to words of Lashon Hara may be enjoyable, nevertheless, one must try with all his might to not listen to it. This can be compared, taught the Chofetz Chaim, to a charlatan who put on elegant clothing and walked out to the center of town.

There was a visitor in the city that day, who was there for the first time and did not know anyone. He wandered around, gazing at the crowded streets filled with people and at the stores selling their wares.

Suddenly, the charlatan approached him and said, "Shalom, to you, my good Jew, I can see that you are a visitor here. Is there anything I can help you with? This is your lucky day, for it just so happens that I have some time on my hands and I am willing to show you around the city."

The visitor was overjoyed and grateful for the man's kindness, and immediately trusted him based on the fine clothing he was wearing. The charlatan led the visitor through the city streets, and gave him an extensive tour. When they had finished, he told the visitor, "Since you are my guest for the day, I would like to invite you to my favorite restaurant for a lavish meal, one fitting for such an esteemed guest as yourself. It will be my treat!"

They entered an expensive restaurant and the man told the visitor to order any delicacy he desired, both food and drink, which the guest happily did. As their meal came to a close, the charlatan excused himself, and said he was going to take care of the bill, and as soon as he was out of the eyesight of the guest, he quietly walked out of the restaurant and ran away.

Soon, the manager of the restaurant presented the bill for the meal to the guest, but he argued that his friend had went to pay it a short while ago. They explained to him that they did not know who that man was as they had never seen him before, and he had left the restaurant already.

The guest's claims and protests were of no use, as the manager pointed out that the visitor had ordered everything himself, and he was forced to cover the enormous expense of the meal. He suddenly realized that this imposter was not a friend at all, but a bitter enemy!

The Chofetz Chaim says it is the same when it comes to Lashon Hara. While it may be enjoyable to hear the tales and stories at the time, and he may even be grateful to his friend for allowing him to hear the "precious" secrets, when the time arrives for him to stand in judgment before the Heavenly Court, he will be forced to pay the bill for the Aveiros he partook in, and his "friend" will be nowhere to be found! Only then will he discover just how costly that conversation was, and how the person he thought was his friend was never his friend at all!

*Reprinted from the Parshas Tazria-Mesora 5777 email of Torah U'Tefilah: A Collection of Inspiring Insights collected by Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg.*

# A Time for Mundane Talk

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipshutz

Rav Yisroel Hager of Vizhnitz regularly sits with a *gabbai* to go through the pile of *simcha* invitations that arrive at his home. The *rebbe* recently paused after reading an invitation to the wedding of a girl whose mother passed away not long before.



The Vizhnitzer Rebbe, shlita

He asked the *gabbai* to mark the date and let him know when the wedding would take place. As the wedding day approached, the *mechutonim* went to the *rebbe* for the traditional *brocha*. When they left, the *rebbe* asked the *gabbai* to let him know when the wedding ended. He wanted to be informed of when the families would leave the hall, regardless of the time.

On the appointed day, in the wee hours of the morning, the *gabbai* gingerly knocked on the door and informed the *rebbe* that the *mitzvah tantz* had concluded and the families were on their way home.

Accompanied by the *gabbai*, the *rebbe* left his home and walked through the quiet streets, as he headed to the apartment of the *kallah's* father. The *rebbe* knocked on the door, which was opened by the stunned *chossid*.

The *rebbe* asked if he might come in for a cup of tea. The *rebbe* sat down and began speaking to the man about the wedding. How had it worked out? Did all

the guests come? Was the food good? How was the band? Did things go according to schedule?

The *chossid* found his voice, answering the *rebbe*'s questions and discussing each part of the wedding in great detail. The *rebbe* listened closely, asking more questions, before offering his fondest wishes and returning home.

As they left, the *gabbai* asked the *rebbe* why he had gone to visit the *baal simcha* and taken such intense interest in the wedding. The *rebbe* explained, "Loneliness is never easy, but at a time like that, it is especially profound. Here he is, a proud new *mechutan*, having just married off his daughter. The *chasunah* was no doubt filled with joy, but a big part of that joy is being able to come home after the event and talk about it, sharing the *simcha*, reminiscing about who came and who didn't, and speaking about the things that worked out well and what was most meaningful. But this *mechutan* lost his wife and he has no one to discuss it with. He came home to an empty house. Alone. I can't erase his loneliness, but this was an opportunity to be there at a moment when he really needed company."

A person of *tzurah*, *arvus* and *ruach memalela* feels the soul of another. Reb Moshe Prager described a small *shul* on Tel Aviv's Rechov Allenby, not far from the roaring waves of the Mediterranean. Every evening, between *Mincha* and *Maariv*, a learned member would deliver a *Gemara shiur* to Holocaust survivors.

One evening, as the *shiur* began, a distinguished-looking visitor with glowing eyes entered the non-descript *shul*. The Ponovezher Rov slipped onto a worn bench and looked into the *Gemara* with the person next to him, as they followed the *shiur*.

After *Maariv*, the men gathered around the famed orator. He turned to them and simply said, "It was so enjoyable to sit with you. How nice it is to be with other Jews. It was so heartening to hear the song of the *Gemara* together with you." And with that, he left a broad smile on his face.

The Rov had heard that there was a group of survivors in Tel Aviv, and he traveled there to check on their needs and see if they required *chizuk*. As great as he was, he enjoyed their company and returned home thankful that he met them and that they were acclimating well to their new surroundings.

Great people perceive the joy in being around people. They value being part of a whole. They seek people whom they can help. For we are all one.

*Excerpted from the April 28, 2017 edition of the Yated Ne'eman.*

# Connect the Dots

By Rabbi David Ashear

The Gemara says: The reward for Mitzvot is not paid in this world. Hence, a Tzadik will not necessarily enjoy a life of bliss here. The rewards are stored up for עולם הבא-The Next World which has the capacity to compensate properly. Nevertheless, performing Mitzvot does produce "side benefits" in this world, as well. Very often, Hashem will show us how He sees and appreciates all our efforts. Sometimes, decades later, He allows us to witness His Hashgacha in using those deeds to benefit us.

I read a story which was taken from the book "Small Miracles II." It was a summer afternoon, and a handful of rabbinical students at a renowned Yeshiva stepped outside during their lunch break. They were speaking about the complexities of a Gemara that they had just learned, and as they were absorbed in discussion, one of the young men noticed a hearse driving up the road.



He said, "Look how sad-one lone hearse, unaccompanied by a procession of mourners." Everybody felt bad. How could someone go to the grave completely alone? Where were the family members? Where were the neighbors and friends? They decided to follow the hearse to the cemetery and participate in the burial. But first they went back into the Yeshiva and told everyone to come join in this great Mitzva. Soon, the hearse was escorted by a long and impressive line of hundreds of students.

When it reached the grave, a rabbi emerged from the hearse and said, "This is very fitting. How did you all know about her death? No one even knew she

existed anymore. She lived the life of a hermit for the last fifty years." The young men looked at him strangely, puzzled by his assumption. One man said, "Excuse me Rabbi. We don't know who the deceased is. We just came because we felt bad that here was no one to escort the hearse."

Upon hearing that, the rabbi began to cry. "My dear friends, your presence here today is clearly from Heaven. Seventy years ago, a wealthy Jewish business man donated an expensive property to build your Yeshiva. He continued to support it throughout his lifetime. As he got older, the Yeshiva wanted to do something to recognize his outstanding philanthropy, but he was very humble and didn't want any recognition.

"He had only one daughter, and he asked that if his daughter should ever need help that the Yeshiva should be there for her. The rabbis told him, "We will always be there for your daughter." After he passed away, his daughter veered off the path of religion and disconnected herself from the Jewish community. She was in and out of psychiatric institutions all her life.

"The rabbis tried to keep contact with her and lend their support, but she refused to have a connection with anybody. That group of rabbis eventually passed away, and that daughter led her life alone away from society. But my friends, it is her funeral to which you have coincidentally come to today! The funeral of the daughter of the benefactor who built your Yeshiva. By your presence here today, you have fulfilled your rabbis' pledge and your benefactors' request."

Later, the students found out that the hearse was not planning on driving down their small obscure street. The driver made a wrong turn and drove down their street by accident. This was Hashem, 70 years later, remembering the deed of the philanthropist and insuring that at least his daughter would have an honorable funeral.

Hashem sees and remembers all our deeds. We can't always connect the dots and see the benefits of our deeds, but we do know that the real reward will be very clear and very big-in the World to Come.

*Reprinted from the April 27, 2017 email of Daily Emunah.*

# The Sin of Giving Too Much Tzedakah



**Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, zt"l, the Beis HaLevi**

The Beis HaLevi (Rav **Yosef Dov Soloveitchik**, zt'l) noticed two gravestones in the beis hachaim of Brisk that aroused his curiosity. One headstone had the words, "Her hand was spread out for the poor" on it, and the headstone next to it read "and she gave her hand to the pauper."

The Beis HaLevi assumed there was a story behind these headstones and their unusual inscriptions, so he checked the chevrah kadishah's ledger, and this is what he discovered:

There were two very wealthy people in Brisk who would help the poor with an open hand. But their businesses plummeted, and suddenly they were struggling financially.

The beis din wanted to discover the sin that these two men committed, which resulted in a change of their destiny, but they couldn't find anything that warranted such a loss.

Their only explanation was that they were guilty of giving too much tzedakah (charity). The beis din told them, "Chazal say, 'If a person wants to be very generous with his money, he still shouldn't give away more than a fifth,' but you give more than a fifth! Accept on yourselves not to give more than a fifth of your earnings to tzedakah, and be'ezras Hashem, your wealth will return."

The two men accepted the beis din's ruling — but it was very hard for them. When a poor, struggling person came to them, their hearts would break, and they felt so bad that they couldn't give more.

They found a solution. They said, "Beis din only forbade us from giving away too much money. They never said we can't give away assets." So they began distributing to the poor their assets and their home items. Eventually, those were also gone.

One day, two poor people came to their door asking for charity. All they had left was one gold spoon. What should they do? Two paupers were in need, and there was only one gold spoon left? They broke the spoon in half, and gave the äöë, the round side, to one of them, and the äéé, the handle, to the other.

When the people in the city saw how desperate they were to give tzedakah, they prayed for them, and they became wealthy again. When they were niftar their graves were inscribed with the passuk, the round end of the spoon, was given to the poor, the handle, was given to the pauper.

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