

What is modesty?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Summer time. Swimming time. Bikini time?

“In olden days, a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking; now, Heaven knows, anything goes,” wrote Cole Porter over seventy years ago. And if it was bad then, it is worse now. Nowadays on home television, let alone computer, one can see all there is to see. It is hardly surprising that that all religions are trying to draw lines.

Modesty is regarded as a supreme religious quality. But what is modesty? How do we define it? The Torah does not even mention modesty directly. There is no specific law of modesty in the Torah. You can pick up hints, like Rebecca covering her face when she sees her husband-to-be. The procedure relating to a suspected adulteress indicates that correct dress included covering one's body and keeping one's hair neat and tidy. But such dress code as there is in the Bible is entirely concerned with the male priests.

The Song of Songs, allegory or not, tells us a lot about contemporary fashions. Isaiah and his colleagues had a lot to say about the provocative and scandalous dress and behavior of the Israelite women of their day. (Both Jewish kingdoms three thousand years ago were heavily influenced by pagan practices and pagan queens. Think of Jezebel and her daughter Athalia.) But the term “tzniut” (modesty) does not appear, and the one obvious example, “walk modestly/humbly with your God” (Micha), is about general human behavior.

By Talmudic times, things were very different. Roman excesses and the assimilation of the Judean aristocracy led to a serious cultural division between the modest traditionalists and the looser modernists, not unlike nowadays.

The Talmud makes a great deal out of modesty, for men and women, and talks about not revealing too much flesh. Loose behavior and loose dress are regarded as grounds for divorce, but once again there is no specific list of what the limits are beyond a vague instruction to cover “the head and most of the body”. There were different standards as between the classes and environments. The Talmudic references to modest dress are almost all in reference to working women. And we know that some sects were much more particular than others. Still it was much, much later, in medieval times, that some decided to start measuring and defining hemlines and sleeve lengths.

I believe the absence of specifics in earlier texts is intentional, because it is not simply a matter of being covered as opposed to uncovered. It is more to do with attitude. Modesty is about mental attitude (translating into actions, of course), not measuring flesh. Kosher dress is no guarantee of kosher behavior.

Modesty, in my opinion, is a positive quality, not a negative one that leads people to cover up out of embarrassment. Covering up because the Law says so, or because one is ashamed of oneself, might have some positive aspects, but it can so easily become purely negative and destructive to self-worth. Similarly, the quality of humility that stops one flaunting one's merits, be they physical or intellectual, is a positive quality that sees value in not boasting or showing off, which is usually the characteristic of the insecure.

The opposite of "tzniut" is "azut", meaning arrogance both in behavior and dress. The women or the men who bare it all and flounce around revealing everything are arrogantly inviting anyone and everyone to have a look. They do not care. But not caring is often arrogance. Some societies prefer to keep things covered up. Though it always amazed me how dowagers in strapless ball gowns seemed perfectly happy to reveal folds of unsightly flesh. Modest dress certainly has advantages if only by leaving something to the imagination which is usually far more enticing than the reality.

Nowadays, airbrushed photos, constant plastic surgery, and cosmetic disguise all create artificiality and intolerable pressures to be impossibly perfect and impossibly ageless. The result is that the real inner beauty of personality, mind, and emotion gets lost in illusion. No wonder some give up the battle and decide to cover up from head to toe. Sadly, even in the most Orthodox of communities, outward beauty, like easy money, seems in the ascendant. That is why I believe the desire to create an alternative value system has not entirely succeeded.

Go to an Orthodox wedding. Sheitels, dresses, makeup, and cosmetic surgery all create a Hollywood fairytale atmosphere that shrieks ostentation, externality and therefore arrogance. Surely this contradicts Torah values of modesty. For, again I stress, modesty is not just about how you cover up but about how you act, bear yourself, the impression you give. You can be modestly dressed and immodest, or you can be less modestly dressed but still act with dignity, restraint, and self-control. In the end, this inner modesty is the one that counts, the one that the rabbis of the Talmud declare distinguished Rachel from the other wives of Jacob.

Jewish law is neither ascetic nor unrealistic. There are different opinions in the Talmud as to how free one may be in the intimacy of one's home but the demand to cover is not a matter of shame but respect. Beauty is appreciated and the Talmud says that beautiful people and objects broaden a person's mind. If there is a blessing to be made over a beautiful woman, someone must have been looking and someone must have been revealing enough for others to see! Jewish law advocates a balance. A beautiful person is not expected to hide it, nor an intelligent person to seem dumb, but neither should she or he flaunt it. Disapproval came from other traditions. Laws insist that partners try to look good for each other, and even approve of wearing makeup even when in mourning. But this is still regarded as secondary to inner beauty, not essential.

Within Orthodoxy, there are different standards of modesty. Between different communities and countries of origin there are varying standards. There are inconsistencies. Anyone who has been to any of the Mediterranean resorts has

seen women in sheitels revealing more than they should or young boys in peyot running in and out of naked sunbathers. It is a bit like kosher meat. So long as there is a stamp on it, no one seems to care about anything else, and as a result very often it is not as kosher as it claims to be.

The Talmud says that the rabbis of Babylon wore fancy clothes because, as they were not so learned as the rabbis of Jerusalem, they relied on outward signs for their status and respect. We are all Babylonians nowadays.