

Modesty

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In the world we live in, there seems little room for modesty. Where absolutely every nook and cranny of the human body is easily available on the Internet and teens see more pornography than people of my age saw in the whole of their lives, any attempt to cover up is regarded as prudery or religious extremism.

In theory modesty is knowing that there is a place for everything, but not everywhere is that place. Judaism has always regarded sex as a positive, healthy Divine gift to be enjoyed and respected with an appropriate partner. It is true you can find in the Talmud the opinion that one should never reveal too much. But you will also find the principle that between a man and his wife everything is permitted so long as it is freely granted and completely consensual.

But in public the tradition is to be modest. Orthodox men not only cover their heads, but also wear clothes that cover up and are not body fittingly suggestive. Women either cover their heads or keep their hair modest. They also wear clothing that is not overly suggestive or tight-crotched or cleavage-revealing. Of course there are anomalies and contradictions, such as wig-wearing women in spandex and minis and Charedi men going to strip clubs. But we are not dealing with outliers.

Nudity has its place and the human body after all is God's work! But I have always preferred the sense of modesty that respects bodies. I always noticed immodest dress. But what was revealed in my youth is nothing to what one sees on the streets of cities in summer nowadays. Not to mention what one sees at the cinema, even in movies rated as suitable for children.

The more I hear criticism of Orthodox extremes, the more I appreciate the foresight and genius of its founders to create a system that would end up demanding we shut off our phones and computers at least one day a week, insisting on families eating meals together, thinking about what it is we are eating, and expecting us to dress modestly.

There are many areas in Judaism where women suffer various degrees of disadvantage and prejudice. Most of it (not all, by any means) comes from adopting values from other cultures we have been living under. But one area where we have equality is in the area of modesty. There are some religions and cultures that expect women to cover up, sometimes everything except for eye slits, but allow the men to wear whatever they want. Or those that blame women, even kill them, when they are raped and oppressed, but exonerate or even praise the male perpetrators, and let them get away with it. If you are genuine and religious, as opposed to primitive and superstitious, you will insist on standards that apply across the board. I applaud modesty and agree with traditions that expect standards of dress from women, although I cannot understand, nor do I think it honest, that so many of them do not expect

similar modest standards from their men.

We now live in a world of making statements, revealing everything about ourselves online. Everything is out in the open. Social media now exercises so much influence that it can topple or reinforce regimes, dictators, and self-promoters. But it also caters to hypocrisy. Covering one's head used to be an act of genuine piety. Now it is a public statement to flaunt. Whether it is a hijab or a kipa, it says nothing about religious standards but everything about your political agenda.

In my western European youth, outward displays of religiosity were frowned upon. We did not push for religious agendas. We were Orthodox in private or in synagogue. If we went to college or worked in the city, we did not cover our heads. The default position in Jewry was to assimilate, to try to escape the Judaism that made us different (if we had any knowledge of real Judaism altogether, which in most cases we did not). But that all began to change, and I think its healthier even if it is a misuse.

Overt displays of piety were always the preserve of a few. But as a general symbol of identity, it started in the West with immigration and the idea that there was nothing wrong with looking or being different. Not only, but you no longer needed to adapt or learn a new language. And outward symbols also became a way of fighting back against more open societies. Not to preserve, but to offend. You should stay the way you were without making any concessions to the host society. For Jews, the Six-Day war was liberating. We no longer needed to apologize. We could feel secure.

I recall at interfaith meetings 50 years ago where no one suggested taking a break for Mincha. I remember telling cautious Muslim participants then not to follow the example of Jewish immigration in the nineteenth century that thought it best to hide one's identity and be a Jew at home but an Englishman in the street. Now, of course, the pendulum has swung the other way. Many western cultures have all but lost interest in preserving their religious identities, and what identity one sees is either apologetic or fascist. Many of those who object to religious modesty on the grounds that it constricts females, approve of excessive looseness of dress that overemphasizes physicality and that also constricts females by objectifying them. A hijab is just the other side of the coin to the thong.

Moral relativism allows or turns a blind eye to a great deal, whether it is permissive or barbaric. Nations have lost their identities, and as a result all that is left is individual choice, which it is why modesty is so important. Because modesty is one of the few values most religions share. It is the usually (not always, I agree) the test of how committed one is.

Where it has become a political statement, I dislike it. It is too often hypocritical, destructive, and socially divisive. It encourages people to think they are holier than others. But as a genuine statement of respect, value, and self-control, I believe it to be as important today as ever before.