

Modesty

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Democracy is the best form of government we have because it tries to resolve issues through respectful debate and dialogue, not through violence or coercion. Which of course applies equally to the Left and to the Right.

I have watched more television this past year than I should have and I have been struck by the incessant diet of sex, violence, horror, and crime, only occasionally interspersed with serious drama and brilliant documentaries.

I am no prude. But I really think it has now become gratuitous and offensive. There has always been sexual exploitation, abuse, prostitution, and pornography. But at various times in human history, it has been driven underground or out of sight. Now, it is everywhere. Once it was something to be kept private, hidden, or restricted. Limits that were once imposed on what could be shown in public have slowly withered away or been diluted. Hardly a movie or TV series nowadays is without scenes of explicit sexual intercourse.

In the 1950s when TV really began to expand its reach, many orthodox rabbis at the time publicly expressed their horror at this new medium and tried to ban it. My father wrote a letter to the press arguing that any medium can be distorted and misused, but that one ought to engage with its challenges, be selective, and learn how to evaluate good informative and creative programs from the dross. It would be naive not to think that by hiding from it one could protect one's children from its negative aspects. I do not think he was wrong. But like us all, he had no idea the extent to which the dross would become so mainstream, so pervasive, so corrosive of human values.

Rabbinic bans and anathemas have done little to curb it. Censorship has never worked. Banning always makes something more attractive. As the Bible says, "stolen water tastes sweet and food eaten in secret tastes better." I often saw young very orthodox children denied Television at home seeking out less strict relatives, standing watching public screens, and finding all kinds of stratagems to see what their parents had forbidden.

Never before have so many people had such immediate access to information. The complete library of Jewish texts is online for all with the skills to see. All without having to spend years memorizing, revising, and disciplining

ourselves. But it comes at a cost. We become completely reliant on our screens and less on our minds. Thank goodness for Orthodox law that insists we turn off our screens at least one day a week. But even so, we are constantly being tempted and seduced. All bodily functions have important, useful, and beneficial functions. And every one of them can be abused and misused. What gives pleasure can also lead to nausea. Sex is wonderful, in private. But now it is everywhere. It surrounds us in the environment, in public dress, on billboards and advertising, in theatres and entertainment, and now on our personal screens.

What should we do? Of course, we should teach and give our children the tools to deal with the challenge. It has always been there ever since Pagan times. Judaism has always advocated enjoyment and pleasure. But with constraints designed to enhance pleasure, not to deny it. One of the tools of constraint has been modesty. What does modesty mean? Can it be taught or legislated?

One of the most important tools in Judaism has been the idea that we should be holy, in the sense of trying to be better human beings. Holiness, **Kedusha**, means that one does nothing one would not want others to see. And this is linked to the ideal of modesty. But modesty is something that for all its importance is hardly regulated at all in law. It is meta-legal in the sense of propriety and restraint. Or as the Talmud says, never say or do anything that makes you look over your shoulder to make sure no one is watching you. But it is almost impossible to find a universal standard in practice.

The word we use for modesty in Hebrew is **TSaNUah**. When the prophet Micah says that God requires of us three things, he says we do justice, be kind, and walk before God in humility (**HaTSNeah**). The root of the word means to protect or to cover. Behavior that should not be flaunted but kept under control. Actually, it also means cold, and Icy. But I don't think that this means we should all be frigid.

Moses is described as the most modest of men. Humility and modesty go hand in hand. Wise people are described both in the Bible and Talmud as being TSaNUah. And yet the Torah lays down no specific rules about how to define modesty. Even if later on certain standards were specified. Nowadays it is left up to the person and convention. Societies decide what is modest and what is not. Just consider the different standards between Chasidic groups. Sadly, our civil societies have almost completely removed any sense of modesty. Quite the contrary, we are constantly being exhorted to break down fences. And flaunting it, exhibitionism is now a badge of success and honor.

Most human beings are insecure, particularly teenagers. The pressure is to be part of the crowd, to conform. Selfies, of nudity or exhibitionism, are regarded as badges of honor and success. Our children are being shamed into being immoral and provocative. They are made to feel defective if they do not join in. People who dress in a sexually provocative way want to be noticed, less as humans but more as objects. Exhibitionism may gain the attention of others, but not gain the respect and love a person needs.

Modesty is intended to help us avoid misbehavior in one way or another. By stressing modest dress and behavior, the word in Hebrew is **TSeNiut**, it is emphasizing the value of human relations that includes sex, but not in public. One can be elegant and attractive without having to reveal half of one's body or more. If you doubt it, go to a Charedi wedding to see elegance, beauty, and modesty all in one person.

When the Talmud says the honor of a woman lies inside, it is not negating outward beauty. But insisting that beauty is enhanced by modesty. Rather than degraded by revealing all to the public glare. Modesty leaves room for fantasy, imagination, and above all respect.

Even in our public political life now we see that there is no respect for difference, as we have witnessed. A society without respect and modesty is like a person without respect or modesty. An open latrine. Healthy sexuality may be healthy, and necessary, but we do not need to show what we are doing in public. And all this applies to men just as much as it does to women. Charedi men dress that way for a reason, even if as we know it does not always work. We live in a pagan world. We must not allow it to drag us down to its level. Modesty requires us to be different.