

## *Parashat Tetzaveh*

### Do We Need to Wear Black Polyester Skirts for Modesty?

#### Struggling with Modesty and 'Keeping Up with the Kohenses'

Since this this week's parasha discusses the garments of the Kohanim for glory and for beauty, I thought to share with you some Torah regarding dress-code for women in the Torah. A while back, I received the following question via email:

Shalom Rebbetzin,

I have a question that I haven't found the answer to and I hope you can help me out. I'm not sure what to answer people here in Tzfat, who say or imply, that to wear clothing that isn't exactly like the style of *frum* from birth people in B'nei Berak, is dishonoring the Torah. They claim I must wear straight polyester suit thingies in drab colors and button up or wear a turtleneck, etc. My husband is *sefardi* and says as long as I'm keeping by the *Shulchan Aruch*, they're just talking nonsense. However, I'm the one facing the constant comments. For example, I might wear a cotton skirt down to the ankle, and they say according to Beis Yaakov schools, etc., that it is too casual and modern and dishonors Torah. If I wear a scarf (exactly) like the one in your picture here, it is too dangly, too casual, too alternative. If I don't wear collared shirts and pleated skirts four inches above the ankle, I am just too rebellious. I feel that, truthfully, I was once frolicking on the beach in a red bikini, so Hashem knows that for me, this black cotton skirt with its peasant-looking ruffles is really QUITE an improvement! Those 'Beis Ya'acov' rules are made for people who never lived that sort of life. Regardless of honoring Torah, they'd just simply never wear a ruffled skirt and a Bat Ayin brand peasant blouse because that isn't part of their background. For people like me, these are quite honorable. Did Sarah *Imeinu* wear polyester suits? A big, hot, polyester Chassidic scarf? Do you have any words of wisdom? A comeback I can try? I went thru a phase where I tried to follow those guidelines, but I ended up doing it only out of fear of what people would say and found myself constantly imagining another woman thinking and criticizing, "Oooh, she's wearing 3/4 length sleeves! Or, her scarf is purple, not grey, black or brown, not good." I feel I can do without honor, which I shouldn't chase, but on the other hand, they should judge favorably. Thanks so much for your wisdom!

kindly,  
Esther

#### The Importance of both Physical and Spiritual Aspects of *Tzniut* (Modesty)

Dear Esther,

Thank you for your very important question. Your question shows true sincerity and desire to follow Hashem's will. I believe you expressed a frustration with certain customs of *tzniut* (modesty) that many Jewish women share, especially in the *Ba'al Teshuva* (returnees to Judaism) world. Therefore, I'm happy to address it in length.

## Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

Developing proper *tzniut* is definitely one of the most important qualities for a Jewish woman to achieve spiritual perfection. Literarily *tzniut* means hidden. We do not want to flaunt our assets whether physical or spiritual, to the world. In this way, we emulate G-d Whose power is hidden in the world. *Tzniut* entails so much more than the 'frum dress-code.' In our zeal to keep every extra stringency in modest attire, it is important not to neglect the spiritual aspects of modesty, such as humility in thought and speech. While developing proper *tzniut*, we need to distinguish between what is required by Halacha and extra *chumroth* (stringencies), which certain Jewish communities have adopted.

### Dress Code in Halacha

According to *Halacha*, based on the Chafetz Chaim's *Mishnah Berurah*, which is widely accepted by all Ashkenazi Torah observant Jews, the Laws of Modesty include the following: The neckline must be high enough to cover the bone at the base of the neck (collarbone); sleeves must cover the elbow; the skirt must cover the knees. The obligation to wear socks depends on the *minhag* (custom) of the place (*Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chayim 75*). The only color that is prohibited for a woman to wear is the color red like the rooster's comb (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 20a, Ha'Aruch, Karbal*). Clothes should not be tight and cling to the body. I, have, therefore, adopted the custom of not wearing T-shirts even with the correct sleeve-length and neckline without wearing something else on top. We should avoid loud patterns on clothing and especially patterns or pleats that emphasize the hidden body parts. If you are Sephardic, you need to keep the *halachot* according to the Sephardic *poskim* who I believe are similar except regarding the *Sheitel* (wig), which is not permissible according to many Sephardi halachic authorities (Maran Ovadia Yosef, *Shut, Yabia Omer, Even HaEzer 5*).

### Difference in Determining Skirt and Sleeve-length

Based on different interpretations of the Hebrew words *Shok* (thigh) and *Zero'a* (arm), there are different opinions regarding the required length of the sleeves and the dress/skirt. While the Chazon Ish holds that sleeves must be to the wrists and skirts to the ankles (Chazon Ish, *Orach Chaim 16:8*), the Chafetz Chayim permits sleeves that cover only the elbow and skirts that cover the knees (also when sitting down). If you keep these rules, you are surely covered according to the *halachot* of modesty in dress code. In addition, now that you are married, you do not need to be stricter than your husband, especially since he makes a very good point to keep basic *halachot* according to the *Shulchan Aruch*.

### Not Letting Fashion Dictate Our Choice of Clothes

Certain communities have added extra stringencies that have no source in Halacha. This includes style and colors in women's clothing, length of earrings and even the 'prohibition' of wearing a back-pack! The argument used is that whatever is in style in the world is forbidden, as we don't want to take on the ways of the world. For this reason, many communities forbid any garment made of jeans material. It seems to me that since we don't want the style of the world to dictate our choices in clothing, we need to choose that which is modest and practical without being concerned about whether it is in style or not. Specifically avoiding that which is in style is actually giving power to fashion in reverse, by letting fashion dictate our choice of what

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not to wear. Therefore, I see no reason not to wear, for example, a modest skirt made from jeans material, as long as it's not totally washed out and looks too casual for a daughter of the King.

### Is any Skirt Length Too Long?

Regarding length of skirts, I don't believe there is a halachic authority prohibiting skirts that are too long. However, since modesty entails not drawing attention to oneself, I agree that skirts that are so long that they sweep the streets could be considered immodest, yet this is still preferable to wearing skirts above the knees. I have often seen young, stylish, *frum* ladies from certain communities who keep their skirts exactly to the knees, not realizing that when they sit down, their knees are actually showing. This is clearly against Halacha even if the knees are covered by pantyhose that is not sheer nylon.

### Choice of Colors in Clothing

As I mentioned above, only the color red is specifically mentioned in Halacha as forbidden to wear if that is the main color of the garment (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim, 178*). There is no prohibition against wearing purple, turquoise, green or even orange. Black used to be the color of mourning and not a color to wear on a day-to-day basis, although it is considered to be a humble and modest color (*Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 3, Laws of getting dressed*). This explains why certain Jewish communities adhere to this color in spite of it being the most fashionable color in the world. Although there is no specific prohibition, I would personally stay away from wearing hot pink from top to toe, as it would attract too much attention. Nevertheless, I enjoy expressing my *Neshamah* through the spectrum of colors rather than only gray, navy and drab brown. I was once in B'nei Berak and heard directly from the secretary of Rabbi Karelitz the nephew of the Chazon Ish, that the Rabbi does not require women to wear only those drab colors, and therefore, the women in Rabbi Karelitz's *Chareidi* community wear colorful garments.

### Do Not Judge

While it is a virtue to be strict on oneself and take on extra stringencies – (*Hamachmir tavo alav bracha*), one is not permitted to require of others to take on extra *Chumrot*- not even one's immediate family! You are making a very good point about not allowing ourselves to get caught in the small mindedness of judging others, and measuring their sleeve-length. It's a terribly negative mindset that is totally against several Torah commandments including "Judge your fellow with the benefit of the doubt" (*Vayikra 19:15*), and "Love your fellow Jew like yourself" (*Ibid. 18*). Sadly, in their zeal to keep extra stringencies, many G-d fearing Jews transgress actual Torah law. Only Hashem is the true judge and our job is to serve Him to the best of our ability with *simchah* (joy) and not out of fear of what other people may say. I bless you to feel comfortable keeping the laws of modesty according to Halacha, without taking on extra stringencies that you are not comfortable with. Even though it's hard not to fall into the pressure of "what will the neighbors say," doing the will of your husband and Hashem is the highest way of honoring the Torah.

## Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

Dearest Rebbetzin,

I'm so glad that you took time and thought in answering my question. Your reply was well worth the wait). Your words touched me. Please feel free to use whatever parts you can, anonymously or not. I hope that others read it and gain *chizuk* from it - including those who make me feel bad for wearing a green scarf or a deep purple skirt, or mascara.

You make such a good point about transgressing a Torah commandment. I must remember, as well, that I can't read their minds; maybe they don't mean things the way they sound, etc. and I should give them the benefit of the doubt and forgive.

Consider yourself hugged!

All my warmest best,

Esther