

## Parashat Ki Tetze

### Whom Do We Benefit by Dressing Modestly?

#### Self-Expression Versus Modesty

When I first heard about the concept of *tzniut* (modesty), I didn't understand it at all.

I was a new, 19-year-old girl in the Yeshiva, coming from a more than open-minded Western background. For a nature-loving, flower-power girl who believed in full self-expression, without hiding any part of herself, connecting the word 'modesty' – a synonym for humility – even loosely to women's dress code seemed absolutely absurd. Many of my friends, whom I considered humble and modest, walked around naturally in their birthday suit on islands for likeminded naturalists. After several years of searching for the connection between modesty and covering up, I can easily relate to the struggle with *tzniut* that many women face today. Understanding the meaning of modesty, unrelated to dress code, is in itself a challenge- especially since self-expression has been on the top of the list of my values even as a one-year old, when I would sing for passersby from my father's shoulder. During a gradual process, while becoming a channel for Divine expression has surpassed the need for egocentric self-expression, I have nibbled at the concept of modesty, which is bit-by-bit becoming more palatable. Modesty entails being thankful for our G-d-given gifts rather than taking personal pride in projecting our talents and assets outwardly. More important than a preoccupation with expressing ourselves in words, song and art, is tuning into what others need to hear, see and learn from us. Rather than being motivated by the need to receive credit and recognition, a modest person operates in this world as a humble servant, desiring to use her talents for the benefit of others.

#### Modesty in Dress – A Service to Mankind

How can we apply the concept of modesty to our wardrobe? How do we dress as women who desire to use our assets to benefit others rather than gaining personal recognition? Whom would we benefit by wearing long sleeves and closed necklines? We need to understand that the beauty of our body is a G-d-given gift, granted to us for holy marital pleasure, rather than for receiving personal acknowledgement. Dressing publically in a way that accentuates our physicality, does not serve anyone, let alone ourselves. If we cannot benefit the public, by the choice of our clothing, then at the very least, we have a responsibility to avoid dressing in a way that does a disservice to others. Many women are unaware that men's desire for a female body is not always holy. Therefore, dressing modestly avoids being a detriment to the male population. Since, a woman's body may entice a man's *yetzer hara* (negative impulse); we benefit men, by concealing our physical figure.

#### Protecting the 'Weaker Sex' from Temptation

Many women take offence by the notion of dressing modestly for the sake of avoiding "putting a stumble block in front of the blind" (*Vayikra* 19:14). They claim that they are not responsible to keep men's appetite for women in check. Why should a woman suffer by wearing suffocating necklines in the heat of summer, just because a man cannot control his own animalistic tendency? I usually explain that just as it would be very inconsiderate to smoke in front of a person who is super sensitive to cigarette vapor, so is it inconsiderate to dress in a way that appeals to men's

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lower instincts. Hashem created the nature of men and women in such a way that they would want to get married and fulfill the first commandment: “be fruitful and multiply” by building families. A woman naturally longs for an emotional and intimate bond with her soulmate, who will elevate her to become a mother of children whom she yearns to nurture. However, the male nature craves independence above all. To tie himself to a family can be challenging for a man. Therefore, Hashem imbued man with a very strong physical desire for women so that he too will seek a suitable mate, and elevate his desire through the holy marriage union. Any caring person would want to protect the weak from temptation. Therefore, realizing the nature of man and the intensity of his desire should naturally make a woman want to dress in a way that protects him from being enticed.

### Do You Want to be a Face or a Behind?

The reason why many women are obstinate in this respect is that they have been force-fed *tzniut* down their throat since early childhood, in a way that makes them feel inferior, as if they do not have value as humans but are regarded merely as evil temptresses of men. In order to assert their own self-respect they reserve the right to dress as they please whether it bothers Rabbis and other men or not. Many women who dress seductively are motivated by an inferiority complex. A woman with low self-esteem intellectually, may compensate by asserting the power her body has over men. True self-confidence inspires an attitude of magnitude that affords dressing in a way that considers the limitations of others. Yet, dressing modestly is not only a way of showing consideration for others- it actually serves the woman herself by imbuing her with true self-respect. Realizing that the purpose of our body is to serve our soul – a spark of the Divine Indwelling Feminine Presence – naturally makes us want to dress in a way that causes others to view us as spiritual rather than physical beings. Covering our bodies with soft, flowing, loose wrappings highlights the light of our soul that shines through our facial features. Even though it is permitted for women to reveal their body in front of other women, out of self-respect, many women avoid doing so, as they want everyone to regard them as a face rather than as a behind.

### Does the Shechinah Reside in the Nudist Beaches?

The holier something is the more covering it requires. This is why the Torah scroll is covered by both velvet and silver, before being enclosed in its special cabinet. The holiness of womanhood – embodying the Shechinah – necessitates a high standard of covering. Upon marriage, a woman rises to even higher holiness, as a potential mother. Therefore, a married woman requires an even greater level of modesty that includes a covering for her head. Just as greater levels of holiness require higher levels of modesty- so does lack of modesty cause the holiness of the Shechinah to depart:

**ספר דברים פרק כג (טו) כִּי הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִתְהַלֵּךְ בְּקֶרֶב מַחֲנֶיךָ לְהַצִּילֲךָ וְלִתֵּת אֹיְבֶיךָ לְפָנֶיךָ וְהָיָה מַחֲנֶיךָ קְדוֹשׁ וְלֹא יֵרָאֶה בְּךָ עֲרוֹת דָּבָר וְשָׁב מֵאַחֲרֶיךָ:**

“Since Hashem your G-d walks in the midst of your camp to protect you and deliver your enemies to you. Therefore, let your camp be holy, let Him not find any nakedness among you and turn away from you” (*Devarim* 23:15).

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*Parashat Ki Tetze* teaches us that immodesty in dress and demeanor chases away the Shechinah. Therefore, the holiness of the camp of Israel, permeated with the Shechinah, precludes public nakedness and improper sexuality, which is also called nakedness. As kind and as humble people may be on the nudist beaches, the Divine presence surely does not reside there.

### The Burkini Outlaw

Today, it is not the nudists that cause the biggest stir in the news. Rather, a fully covered woman, who chooses to enjoy a swim at the beach is considered much more offensive by the authorities of the Western world. I can't believe that in the Free World of the 21st century women, whether Muslim or not, have been arrested for wearing a modest swimsuit at the beach, while various degrees of exhibitionists and other perverts are free to expose their sexual appetites publically. This lack of religious freedom seems even more backward than the attempt to enforce women to wear modest dress in certain neighborhoods. I guess the Burkini threatens the Western World's penchant for flaunting the flesh of full female forms freely. What it boils down to is that every woman is in charge of her own body. No one has the right to force a woman to either uncover or cover. However, I hope that every woman will choose how to dress wisely, showing consideration by thinking twice about the effect her uncovered body parts have on men, on the world and on her self-dignity.