

Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Acharei Mot

How Can We Not Appreciate Belonging to a People Imbued with Laws of Morality?

Why Would I be Thankful for Having Grown Up with Immodesty?

I am grateful that I grew up in a sexually permissive and perverted society. Denmark has traditionally been characterized as progressive and liberal in terms of attitudes regarding sexuality. Denmark boasts a liberal stance on public nudity, rooted in its longstanding tradition of promoting individual freedom. Unlike many countries where public nudity might be confined strictly to designated areas, in Denmark, it's generally legal to be nude on most public beaches. This means no one needs to find a specific 'nudist' or 'naturist' beach to sunbathe or swim without clothing. In addition, certain areas are specially designated for naturists, to provide a sense of community for those looking to engage with fellow naturists. You may wonder why, in the world, I would be happy, let alone grateful, for my exposure to such blatant immodesty. You did read right, I AM thankful for having experienced such decadence, which has heightened my awareness of the importance of modesty. Maharal teaches that a matter develops through its opposite. Therefore, at the beginning of our nationhood, Hashem brought us to live specifically within the two most perverse nations: Egypt and Canaan. In contrast to the degree of their sexual depravity, the Israelites would turn out all the more refined and chaste. (*Gevurat Hashem* Chapter 4). So, I'm thankful for having experienced such darkness that aroused within me the greatest desire for light. While I used to believe the naturists' claim to be free to be themselves without inhibitions, when I embraced the Torah lifestyle it became clear that being a naturist and allowing oneself to follow nature's call without inhibitions is no different from acting the way of the natural animals. Hashem imbued humans with the ability to overcome our natural instincts including various sexual urges, as *Pirkei Avot* 4:1 teaches, Who is mighty? He who subdues his [natural] inclination, as it states, "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that rules his spirit than he that captures a city" (*Mishlei* 16:32).

Why am I Proud to no Longer be a Danish Citizen?

At the end of *Parashat Acharei Mot* Hashem warns the Israelites to distance themselves from the immoral practices of Egypt and Canaan:

סַפֵּר וִיקְרָא פֶּרֶק יַחַד פְּסוּקֵי

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: (ג) כְּמַעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבַּתְּם בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וְכַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְבִיא אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּבְחַקְתִּיהֶם לֹא תִלְכּוּ: (ד) אֵת מִשְׁפָּטֵי תַעֲשׂוּ וְאֵת חֻקֹּתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ לְלַכֵּת בָּהֶם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

"Speak to the people of Israel, and say to them, I am Hashem your G-d. Do not behave like the people of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, and do not do, like the deeds of the land of Canaan. You shall fulfill My laws and observe My statutes, to follow them. I am Hashem, your G-d" (*Vayikra* 18:2-4).

This verse informs us that the deeds of the Egyptians and the Canaanites were more corrupt than those of all other nations and that the Egyptians residing in that region where the Israelites had dwelt, were the most corrupt of all. The same verse also informs us that those Canaanite peoples that the Israelites conquered, were more corrupt than any other people (Rashi, *Vayikra* 18:3) based on *Torat Kohanim* 18:138).

Why does our paragraph state twice, "I am Hashem your G-d?" The Midrash explains: "I am G-d – twice

- I am the one who punished the generation of the flood, Sodom and Egypt. I will in the future punish those who act like them" (*Vayikra Rabbah* 23:9). According to *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 26:5, "The generation of the flood were not eradicated from this world until they had established marriage contracts between two men and between man and beast." The commentary of Mararzo explains, "They erred in their defective minds and thought that since they were created with powerful lusts, they were obliged to follow their desires in whatever direction it would take them... Thus, they established marriage contracts between two men, and their judges legitimized them." The fact that Denmark was the first country in the world to legally recognize same-sex partnerships is commonly referred to as indicative of its 'progressive' and 'liberal' attitudes regarding sexuality. Surveys also show that the approval of homosexuality has increased significantly in the last three decades. Yet, according to the teachings of our Sages, this kind of progressivity and liberality is no other than the immorality that brought about the destruction of the world during the Flood. So, even if I must wait in longer lines at airport security when I visit my mom and sister, I'm proud that I'm no longer a Danish citizen.

Reversing Immorality Through Modesty

"Separate yourselves from sexual immorality and sin, for wherever we find a barrier against sexual immorality, we find holiness (Rashi, *Vayikra* 19:1). Pardes Yosef instructs us, "If you don't know how to behave, look at the practices of Egypt and Canaan and do the opposite." Having been rebellious from early childhood, I'm in the good company of Miriam the Prophetess, whose name derives from the word מִרְיָה/meri 'rebellion.' Today there is no lack of decadent countries - from where many of us originate - whose practices we can reverse. I'm grateful that I have learned from my country of origin to be a staunch advocate of modesty, through kabbalistic lenses. I teach my students that we cover our bodies to reveal the light of our souls. The more holiness, the more covering is required (Rav Eliyahu Kitov, *Ish U'Beito*). Just as in the Synagogue the most sacred Torah scrolls are not only concealed within a wooden ark but moreover enveloped in a beautiful velvet embroidered cover, so does the holiness of the Jewish woman require her to cover most of her body. Sexuality specifically between husband and wife (as opposed to two husbands or two wives) is likewise sacred. In the Holy of Holies of the Temple, where only the Kohen Gadol could enter once a year, the two *Keruvim* - cherubs, male and female - embraced and engaged in intimacy manifesting the holiness of marital relations that reflect Israel's relationship with Hashem. Likewise, the Holy of Holies is referred to as *Cheder Hamitot* or 'bedroom chamber' (Rashi, II *Melachim* 11:2). This highlights the metaphoric relationship between Gd and His people as that of bride and groom by referring to the Holy of Holies as the master bedroom!

The Light of Israel Emerges from the Darkest Darkness

Surprisingly, the nation of Canaan became the most corrupt specifically because they dwelled in the Land of Israel. The reason for that seems to be that the *Sitra Achra* (side of impurity) desires to cleave to kedusha to nurse from it. Therefore, the *Sitra Acha* attaches itself specifically to the place where Israel dwells. Since it is unable to attach itself to Israel at all, due to our holiness, it cleaves to the nations amid whom Israel dwells. These nations learn a few mitzvot and good deeds from Israel through which they require a tinge of holiness. Then the *Sitra Achra* dwells upon these nations, and through this they become the most corrupt in the world (*Pardes Yosef, Vayikra* 18:3). This explains why Israel dwells amid the vilest nations in the world like a lamb among wolves. From Bat Ayin we can hear their many prayers through the broadcastings of their minarets. This testifies to how they

have a few mitzvot learned from Israel such as praying to Allah the uppermost only G-d. Through this, they attract the forces of impurity that entice these nations to become the most evil of all – the real obstacle to peace. The eyes of Mosab Hassan Yousef, the son of Hamas founder Sheikh Hassan Yousef, were opened to the darkness in which he was raised, and of all people, he began working for the Mossad and saved thousands of Jewish lives. Through the October 7th atrocities, our national Jewish Neshama has been revived, as Maharal taught us, “A matter arises through its opposite.” This principle is reflected by the beautiful emunah-filled final words of Israel’s assumedly secular Eurovision entry, “We don’t need big words, only tefilot, even if it’s hard to see, You always leave me a small light!”

**Gratitude Focus for the Week of *Parashat Acharei Mot* –
Some Tips for How to Strengthen Gratitude for Modesty**

Modesty is moderating exposing and expressing your endowments. Modesty is humble and empathic rather than flashing and flaunting. Unfortunately, we live in a world of exhibitionism where showing off has become a necessary part and parcel of most people’s daily lives. Yet, thankfulness is manifested in the state of self-transcendence. It is an awareness that inspires us to pursue our daily life experiences with expressions of contentment, modesty, appreciation, and joyfulness.

- **Accept Hardships as Opportunities for Growth** – I truly believe that someone who wants to find the truth will find it. By Hashem’s providence, every hardship we must undergo is placed before us for a reason. They helped me realize that I needed to change, and I am thankful for the time and opportunity to learn to strengthen my modesty.
- **Keep Learning Torah** – The world (now more than ever) is telling us to wear short shorts and rock the swimsuit. The body positivity movement has completely taken the fashion industry by storm and is telling us that showing skin equals confidence and beauty. But truly, Torah-modesty standards tell us the opposite! Through Torah study we learn to be humbly adorned, and that our beauty will shine through our actions. It doesn’t mean we can’t feel good in our own skin, but I’m thankful that I don’t need to show everything off to feel so!
- **Ask for Help from an Accountability Partner** – Whether this is a spouse, a parent, or a good friend, having someone you trust check your outfit before you leave the house is wise. If they say what you don’t want to hear, let it be a lesson learned, and be grateful for their truth rather than holding a grudge against them for telling you what you asked them.
- **Set Modesty Boundaries** – This takes some training and sometimes re-programming of the brain. If a garment is snug on top or falls short, leave it out. Ask yourself whether you would feel it was appropriate if an attractive woman wore this in front of your husband. Be thankful for the ability to take responsibility to do your part in not causing others to stumble.
- **Turn Inward in Prayer** – Through crying out to Hashem in heartfelt prayer, you can learn to turn inward and discover the hidden light in the world and in your soul.