

Relationships in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Noach: Preserving the Divine Image How Does Modesty Preserve the Dignity of Parents and Mentors?

Why Do I Make an Effort to Keep My Body Covered in Front of My Students?

I participate weekly in our Meditative Movement classes at Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin. These classes offer a precious opportunity to step away from words and connect with Hashem through movement, breathing, and awareness of our bodies. Although we are only women exercising together in the yurt, and I leave the students free to wear shorts, tank tops, or whatever is comfortable for them, I make a conscious effort to keep my own body covered in their presence. On Tuesdays, I choose a long tunic, skirt, and leggings so that I can move freely while remaining modestly dressed. When we reach the balancing exercises and my skirt gets in the way, I quietly remove it, knowing that my tunic and leggings still provide substantial coverage.

Beyond general modesty and cultivating the awareness that we are always walking before the King of Kings, I am mindful of the special relationship between a Torah teacher and her students. Closeness and warmth are essential to teaching, yet so are the boundaries that preserve respect. Our Sages teach that a son should not bathe together with his father while unclothed, and that a student should not bathe with his Torah teacher unless the teacher needs his assistance (*Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 51a*). Although our movement class is a different situation, these teachings deepen my sensitivity to how I present myself before my students.

In many Jewish communities, men immerse in a mikvah every Friday as a minhag (custom) in honor of Shabbat. I remember my sons taking care to wait until their father returned from the mikvah before going themselves. This quiet consideration expressed their respect for him without diminishing the warmth of their relationship.

The fifth commandment, "Honor your father and mother..." (*Shemot 20:12*), calls us to look beyond our parents' physical presence and recognize the Divine image within them. A parent or teacher is human, with a body, vulnerabilities, and imperfections. Honor and respect involve focusing on a person's Divine image, which shines through the face and expresses their inner kedusha. Seeing the naked body of a parent or teacher can shift our attention from that spiritual presence to their physical being, diminishing the reverence with which we regard them. Therefore, when I keep my body covered before my students, I seek to preserve their awareness of the Divine image within me and carry myself with the dignity appropriate to the Torah I hope to impart.

Why is it Important to Take the First Step to Protect Our Family's Dignity?

The Torah gives us a model for how to respond when a parent or mentor becomes exposed. In *Parashat Noach*, Cham's response to his father's nakedness contrasts with Shem and Yefet's careful covering of him. When a parent or someone we respect behaves in an embarrassing way, we may feel disappointed, uncomfortable, or unsure how to respond. We can draw further attention to the incident by discussing it with others, or we can quietly help the person regain their dignity. Shem and Yefet did more than refrain from mocking their father. They responded to his exposed state with practical care, covering him with a garment.

בראשית פרק ט פסוק כג ויקח שם ויפת את השמלה וישמו על-שכם שניהם וילכו אחרנית ויכסו את ערות אביהם ופניהם אחרנית וערות אביהם לא ראו:

"Shem and Yefet took the garment, placed it on both their shoulders, and walked backward to cover their father's nakedness. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness" (*Bereishit 9:23*).

Why does the Torah mention Shem before Yefet, even though Yefet was older as the Torah emphasizes “the brother of Yefet the elder” (*Bereishit* 10:21)? Shem showed greater diligence in fulfilling the mitzvah and therefore received the greater blessing (*Bechor Shor, Bereishit* 9:23). Rashi notices a further indication of Shem’s initiative in the word נָטַח/ *vayikach* – “he took.” The Torah uses the singular rather than נָטְחוּ/ *vayikchu* – ‘they took’ to teach that Shem exerted himself more in the mitzvah (Rashi, *Bereishit* 9:23). Shem did not wait for his older brother to take responsibility. His father needed help, and he took the first step.

Although Shem took the initiative, both brothers shared equally in covering their father (*Pesikta Zutarta, Bereishit* 9:23). Each brother placed part of the garment on his own shoulder (Ibn Ezra, *Bereishit* 9:23). This teaches us that our first step can inspire others to help. Instead of drawing someone into a conversation about a family member’s embarrassing behavior, we can invite them to join us in offering practical support.

How Can We Help Without Focusing on Another Person’s Shame?

Shem and Yefet’s care in covering their father finds an echo in the halachic teachings about preserving respect for parents and Torah teachers. Following Rambam, *Shulchan Aruch* rules that a student should not enter a bathhouse with his Torah teacher unless the teacher needs his assistance (Rambam, *Hilchot Issurei Biah* 21:16; *Shulchan Aruch*, Yoreh De’ah 242:16). Rema clarifies that the restrictions concerning one’s teacher and father apply when nakedness is exposed; when the private parts are covered, entering together is permitted.

Why does the Torah repeat that Shem and Yefet’s faces were turned backward? Having already told us that they walked backward, would we not understand that they avoided seeing their father’s nakedness? Rashi explains that even when they came close and needed to turn their bodies to cover him, they kept their faces turned away (Rashi, *Bereishit* 9:23). Their concern for his dignity continued through the act of helping. They did not use their good deed as permission to look.

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno adds a tender insight: even while covering their father, when turning toward him might have seemed necessary, they avoided looking so that they would not add to their own sorrow (Sforno, *Bereishit* 9:23). Shem and Yefet attended to his need without unnecessarily taking in a distressing sight. This suggests a delicate balance in human relationships. We need enough understanding to offer appropriate help, but we do not always need to know every painful or embarrassing detail. When a parent, spouse, or friend is struggling, concern can easily become curiosity. Shem and Yefet teach us to ask: What do I need to know to help, and what can I leave respectfully unseen?

Rabbi Moshe Alshich deepens this teaching by asking why the brothers walked backward rather than simply approaching with their eyes closed. He explains that their faces bore the holiness of the Divine image. They did not want even their faces turned toward their father’s nakedness, despite having their eyes shut (Alshich, *Bereishit* 9:23). Their approach reflected an awareness of the holiness within themselves. We, too, can bring that awareness into moments when another person’s vulnerability is placed before us.

Their restraint protected both their father’s dignity and the holiness of their own encounter with him. Applied to our relationships, perhaps this means that respect involves more than withholding a hurtful comment. It also shapes the way we regard others. We can acknowledge a weakness without allowing it to become the defining image we carry of that person.

What Does Another Person’s Weakness Reveal About Our Own?

The words “they did not see their father’s nakedness” can also teach us about how we perceive another person’s shortcomings. Cham responded to his father’s vulnerability with disgrace rather than care. Shem and Yefet, by contrast, took steps to protect his dignity without dwelling on his shame.

They recognized what needed their attention without making his failing the focus of their gaze.

The Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching that another person can serve as our mirror invites us to examine our response when we notice a fault. Although this does not necessarily mean that we have committed the same act, we may have a trace of that transgression, or something corresponding to it, within ourselves. For example, witnessing idolatry may call our attention to our own anger, which our Sages compare to idolatry (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 105b*). We are shown the failing from Heaven so that we will examine ourselves and do teshuvah (*Ba'al Shem Tov al HaTorah, Bereishit* §129, citing *Rav Yeivi, Tehillim 22*).

Yet we must distinguish between seeing a flaw that calls for self-examination and recognizing a need that calls us to help the other person. If our attention centers on judging the person, the encounter calls us to look inward. If our attention centers on what we can do to help, the encounter becomes an opportunity to act. Shem and Yefet understood that their father needed covering; they did not dwell on his disgrace (*Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 10, pp. 24–29, as presented in "To See or Not To See").

This gives us a practical question to carry into our relationships: Why am I continuing to think about this person's weakness? Perhaps there is something within myself that needs attention. Perhaps there is something I can do for them. We need not pretend that the difficulty does not exist. Like Shem and Yefet, we can recognize what needs to be covered and repaired while refusing to make another person's failing the focus of our gaze.

Can One Act of Respect Become a Legacy for Generations?

The garment that Shem and Yefet carried became more than a covering for one vulnerable father. An act performed quietly within a family can have consequences far beyond what we can imagine. Hashem does not withhold the reward of any creature, even across many generations (*Pesikta Zutarta, Bereishit 9:23*). Because Shem exerted himself in this mitzvah, his descendants merited the tallit of tzitzit. Yefet's descendants merited burial, another form of dignified covering (Rashi, *Bereishit 9:23*). The *Kli Yakar* asks why tzitzit is also a reward for Avraham's refusal to accept even "a thread or a shoe strap" (*Babylonian Talmud, Chullin 89a*), when Shem had already earned this reward for his descendants. He explains that Shem's act earned the garment, while Avraham's act earned the thread. Before a person can attach tzitzit, Hashem must first provide the garment to which they can be attached (*Kli Yakar, Bereishit 9:23*).

There is something beautiful in this connection: the garment used to protect a father's dignity becomes the dignified garment of tzitzit through which his descendants serve Hashem. Covering Noach's nakedness is also related to the power of tzitzit to guard against forbidden sexual behavior. The covering and its reward both express restraint and the preservation of proper boundaries (*Kli Yakar, Bereishit 9:23*). We can also understand this as a lesson about the atmosphere we create in our homes. When children see us respond to another person's embarrassing moment with discretion and practical kindness, they learn how to treat vulnerability. When we resist repeating a humiliating story, offer help discreetly, or preserve respect for a parent despite a painful failing, we pass on a way of relating. We may never know how far that example will travel, but we can choose to leave a legacy of kindness and respect. Whether in a movement class, a family affair, or a moment of another person's vulnerability, the care we take to honor the Divine image can become a quiet lesson in dignity for generations to come.

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