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Is Modesty Still Relevant in the Twenty-First Century?

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Modesty is hardly a popular concept among liberal-minded Jews, nor within the Western world in general. The reasons for this are multiple. Historically, modesty has been disproportionately applied to women, often as a means of controlling female behavior and sexuality. It is often associated with patriarchy, control, and the suppression of individual freedoms. Modesty is frequently perceived to be a negation of individuality, body positivity, and self-expression.

The situation could not be more different among Orthodox communities, where modesty is strongly—sometimes even obsessively—emphasized. In many religious circles, *tzniut* (the Hebrew word for modesty) is understood as a pivotal religious duty, a form of feminine achievement, and a path toward self-fulfillment. However, all of this is historically unprecedented, and my own research examines how a vague socioreligious norm ascended to the top of the pyramid of Orthodox Jewish observance.

Yet must progressive Jews entirely forsake the idea of *tzniut*? I think not. The concept, as derived from traditional Jewish sources, still offers valuable lessons for the modern, egalitarian, and inclusive society in which we live. Below, I suggest three such insights where a broader vision of Jewish modesty informs how human beings interact with the Divine. On one foot: it requires spatial, mental, and self-preparation.

One of the conceptual cornerstones of Jewish thought about modest conduct is found in this week's parashah: "Since your God ה' moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you, let your camp be holy; let [God] not find anything unseemly among you and turn away from you" (Deut. 23:15).

This verse links the Divine presence within human society to the concept of holiness, which is contingent upon the absence of any "indecency." Yet the key Hebrew term *ervah* has been interpreted in various ways by the Sages of the Talmud.

A first approach is found in early rabbinic sources (the Mishnah and the Tosefta, both compiled around 200 CE), which prohibit reciting the *shema* or any blessing when in the presence of *ervah*. Here we encounter the concept as referring to an objective, anatomical reality: nakedness, understood as actual genitalia (male or female).

This paradigm where nakedness and holiness are incompatible has antecedents in the Bible, where priests were prohibited from publicly displaying their sexual organs. Instead, they were enjoined to wear linen breeches to cover their nudity when "*they approach the altar to officiate in the sanctuary*" (Exod. 28:42–43), namely when performing a holy activity.

In this ancient paradigm, the interaction between the divine and the human necessitates the purification of *space*. There is a geography of the Sacred at play here, governed by its own principles: individuals can elevate themselves toward the Divine only within a suitable place that is free from reminders of the animalistic aspects of their nature.

A few centuries later, the amoraim (scholars of the period from about 200 to 500 CE) introduced an alternative vision of *ervah*, radically reinterpreting the term as referring metaphorically to sexual arousal. Reflecting a broader Talmudic tendency to subjectify concepts that were objective in earlier texts, these later sages redefined nakedness as a psychological notion encompassing all parts of the female body that a male might find sexually arousing.

In this second approach, the rabbis focus on the *mind* of the male reciter, who is forbidden to utter a prayer when his senses are assailed by a source of sexual stimulation. This represents a second level of preparedness, this time mental/internal rather than spatial/external, to the encounter between the Divine and the human.

Rabbinic literature, as we know, was written by men and for men, and it reflects a heterosexual male perspective. Its vision of subjective *ervah* likely crystallizes a profound male anxiety over the wildness of sexual desire. Still, one thirteenth-century rabbinic scholar, Elazar of Worms, posited that both men and women are equally susceptible to heterosexual stimuli and applied the same norms regardless of gender.

The third (and, so far, last) transformation of the concept of *ervah* emerged in the mid-twentieth century, when the entire complex of subjects associated with *tzniut* became understood by some authors to represent an expression of human dignity.

Dignity: the concept is actually modern and secular. According to Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, the contemporary notion of dignity must be distinguished from the premodern value of honor. "Honor" is possessed by only the elite; for instance, one is honored with the *Légion d'honneur* in France. If everyone is distinguished, it is no longer an honor.

"Dignity," however, is used in a universalist, egalitarian sense. In this spirit, the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) asserts the "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family." The idea here is that this dignity is shared by everyone.

Another critical point is that the universality of dignity was intensified, toward the end of the eighteenth century, by the development of an understanding of identity that emphasized authenticity. "Authenticity" implies connecting with something that is not God (per the Torah) or the Good (Plato) but rather our own selves that lie deep within (Rousseau, Herder).

Within this recent framework, modesty dress codes, including the idea of *ervah*, ought to be understood as expressions of self-respect and as acknowledgments of an authentic, universal, and rigorously inalienable human dignity.

Is all this apologetic? Perhaps. Nevertheless, what is often more significant is not the accuracy or beauty of a rabbinic interpretation, but rather its intuition: the three dimensions of connection (spatial, mental, and identity) with the Divine that Jewish tradition has particularly examined through the lens of the concept of modesty.

In contemporary times, these three dimensions may manifest in various ways: by seeking a tranquil space within a bustling urban setting; by temporarily disengaging from social media and its myriad distractions; by attuning oneself to the messages of one's own body; and so forth. Yet this reflection began, in the Jewish tradition, when an antique biblical verse prescribed to remove all "indecencies" to encounter God.

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