



Body Image: What are We Ashamed of?

Parashat B'reishit, Genesis 1:1-6:8 | By Mark Greenspan

“Public Appearance and Behavior” by Gordon Tucker (pp. 373) in *The Observant Life*

Modesty as a Jewish Value

If there is a single aspect of traditional Judaism that both defines and divides right-wing Orthodox Jews from their neighbors, it is *tz'nit*, modesty: long sleeves, below the knee or ankle length dresses, and head coverings for women; men in black with broad rimmed fedoras. Living in the contemporary world, these practices may seem both impractical and anachronistic to us. We argue that we are comfortable with our bodies and should not be ashamed of them. What's more, we feel that clothing should not serve to separate us from our neighbors.

But there is another side to modesty as well. We are sometimes offended by the lack of common sense and modesty that people show when they attend religious services dressed inappropriately. We look at a person in a short skirt or a tight outfit and say to ourselves: “what was that person thinking?”

Should the clothing we wear accent our sexuality? Does Judaism have something to say about how we dress and present our bodies? Is there a sensible approach to modesty somewhere between clothing that completely hides our bodies and clothing that is both comfortable and appropriate to the setting? Should the styles of clothing we wear be defined by context and society or are there objective criteria for defining modesty?

The two of them were naked (arum), the man and his wife, yet they felt no shame (v'lo yitboshashu). Now the serpent was the shrewdest (arum) of all the wild beasts that the Lord God had made... Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked, and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.

- Genesis 2:25-3:7

The Torah Connection

Gordon Tucker suggests that the story of the Garden of Eden is an etiological tale explaining the human need to cover our nakedness. At the opening of the story, Adam and Eve are oblivious to their nakedness, neither embarrassed for themselves or for one another. Commenting on the word *v'lo yitboshashu* (they felt no shame), Professor Nahum Sarna writes:

The Hebrew expresses mutuality. So long as the harmony with God remained undisturbed, the pristine innocence and dignity of sexuality was not despoiled.

- The JPS Torah Commentary

Interestingly, sexuality already exists in the Garden of Eden. God has commanded the first human beings “to be fruitful and multiply.” They are referred to in this passage as “the man and his wife.” Nudity and sexuality are not connected here. The first human beings are innocent and are not embarrassed at all by one another's nakedness. There is a natural harmony between animals, humanity and the garden.

The Bible is not the first work to address the question of nakedness and innocence. In the Gilgamesh Epic, the Babylonian creation myth, we learn about Enkidu, the primordial man, is formed from clay and saliva from the goddess of creation. At first, Enkidu runs naked with the animals and is part of the natural world. It

is only after being seduced by a Temple prostitute (sent by Gilgamesh) that Enkidu becomes civilized and begins wearing clothing. Note the difference between these two myths: in the Babylonian myth, sexuality becomes a means of humanizing humanity; clothing is the result of this process. In the Hebrew myth, sexuality precedes shame. Clothing only becomes necessary when the first humans disobey God and suddenly find that their eyes are opened to their own shame. Wearing clothing, then, is not just about sexuality but part of the process of maturation, just as it is for children. At some point, we become aware of our nakedness and that is what makes us human.

Nudity and sexuality are not connected in the Biblical tale. I would argue that being modest isn't necessarily about being prudish or uncomfortable with our bodies. The sin of the first human beings is that they disobeyed God, not that they become sexually aroused by their nakedness. Shaina Handelman suggests that modesty is not a matter of embarrassment or contempt for the human body but also a deep respect for privacy:

Kedusha is one of the most important aspects of tz'niut; "privacy," "modesty" are not expressions of contempt for the body, the physical, but on the contrary, expressions of their kedusha (holiness). A Torah scroll, for example, is covered, because of its high degree of kedusha. A woman's body – as well as a man's – is covered, because it is kadosh. The most intimate physical relation between man and woman is reserved, private, not for public display, and not for anytime, anywhere, with anyone – because it is kadosh, special, apart. As Zalman Posner points out, tz'niut "is not a question of a bit of cloth, it is a life-mode, perhaps the bedrock of Judaism." It has not to do with just hemlines or head coverings, but with thought, speech, sexual relations – our sense of who and what we basically are, a sense that our personhood is kadosh, inviolate. The body is not a piece of property, an object to be disposed of casually; it, too, is an integral part of the sanctity of personhood, the kedusha of the Jew.

- "The Paradoxes of Privacy," *Sh'ma*, November 1978

For Handelman and others, *tz'niut* has more to do with the concept that we are created in the image of God. Just as we cover the Torah scroll in between *aliyot* and do not leave it exposed to the world, our bodies are meant to be treated with privacy and respect and are only shared with those with whom we share the most intimate relationship. Of course, there is another approach to *tz'niut* that has everything to do with sexuality. Tucker quotes the following passage from the Talmud regarding modesty in the presence of someone who is reciting the *Sh'ma*:

Rabbi Isaac said: A handbreadth [exposed] in a woman constitutes 'nakedness.' In what way? Shall I say, if one gazes at it? But has not Rabbi Sheshet taught: Why did Scripture enumerate the ornaments worn outside the clothes with those worn inside? To tell you that if one gazes at the little finger of a woman, it is as if he gazed at her secret place! No, it means, in one's own wife, and when he recites the Shema. Rabbi Hisda said: A woman's leg constitutes "nakedness"... Samuel said: A woman's voice constitutes "nakedness," ...Rabbi Sheshet said: The exposure of a woman's hair constitutes "nakedness"...

- BT, *B'rakhot* 24a

Halakhah L'ma-aseh

1. *Circumstances and contexts surely differ from one society to another. In a society in which it is customary for men and women to wear short pants to ball games, swim suits at the beach, to uncover their hair in public, and in which decent women of unchallengeable moral bearing expose their arms and wear dresses or blouses with lower than necessary necklines and skirts that end at or above the knees, doing so cannot be reasonably understood to be sexually provocative or demeaning to the wearer.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 376
2. *Thoughtful reflection on the sanctity of the synagogue, then, should lead directly to higher standards of modesty in that place. Moreover, sloppiness should be judged unseemly in the synagogue along with nearly all inscriptions on clothing.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 377-8
3. *Thus, the wearing of a kippah...elsewhere is a custom, not a law. On the other hand, the practice is so well entrenched as to be virtually definitive of both Orthodox and Conservative synagogues. For that reason, it can be considered a rule of Jewish practice...all this applies to men. As for women...the practice is much more mixed. Married women who do not cover their hair in public, may or may not choose to cover their heads in synagogue. Those who do, however, usually do so out of a sense of piety in a sacred space, or else out of a desire to promote equality of practice with men.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 379
4. *A Jew should be expected to avoid obscene language called nibbul peh in the sources as much as possible, because it befouls the God-given gift of speech and increases vulgarity in the world. As in the case with matters of tz'niut in general, mature and insightful consideration must be brought to bear to locate the dividing line between vivid and vulgar, between forceful and foul.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 387

Questions to Ponder

1. Notice that in the story of the Garden of Eden, both the first human beings and the serpent are *arum*. This word has two different meanings: the serpent is shrewd and the humans are innocent. What is the connection between these two expressions? In what ways are the serpent and the human beings similar to and different from one another?
2. What is the connection between guilt and shame in this story? How do Adam and his wife change once they eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil?
3. Is *tz'niut* a matter of common sense and social expectation or should there be objective criteria defining what is considered modesty in dress and behavior? Who should decide what these standards should be?
4. Gordon Tucker is not specific about defining standards of *tz'niut*. What would a contemporary standard of modesty look like?
5. In what areas of life are we expected to respect the individual's privacy? Why?
6. It is customary, when reading from a Torah scroll, to cover the scroll in-between *aliyot* with a special piece of material or with the Torah cover. Why do we do this? What connection might there be between this practice and the idea of *tz'niut* with regard to the human body?
7. Nudity and coarse language are common in contemporary films and even on television. Does exposure to such behavior and practices influence the way in which we act? Should Judaism encourage self-censorship?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan