

I

One of the defining characteristics of the Jewish religious personality is *tzeniut* which may approximately be translated as modesty. Normally, the concept of *tzeniut* is discussed in rather technical terms: how low or how high a hemline, the length of sleeves, the form of dress, the number of square millimeters of skin that may be exposed, and so on. Indeed, these are important issues, but they are *aspects* or *details* of *tzeniut*, not its heart. It would be a pity to limit our understanding of *tzeniut* to that which can be measured by a ruler, while ignoring its conceptual matrix. What should concern us is the world view of Judaism that informs the concept and the practice of *tzeniut*, an exceedingly important Jewish principle and value which touches the fundamentals of our faith. In seeking the broader implications of *tzeniut* and its universal context, we must explore three dimensions of *tzeniut*.

The first of these is the principle of *kedushah*, holiness. The Torah says, "You shall be holy." The Sages of the Talmud comment: *hevu perushim min ha-arayot*, you shall separate yourselves from immorality. The commandment thus concerns immorality in its strictly sexual significance. The more one transcends his corporeal nature, expressed in illicit sensuality, the more one is able to achieve personal sanctity or *kedushah*.

How does *tzeniut* relate to *kedushah*? I heard an explanation from my illustrious teacher and mentor, Rabbi Joseph. B. Soloveitchik, *zekher tzaddik li'verakhah*. The "Rav," as he was known, offers this trenchant insight: *kedushah* thrives in *he'elem*, in hiddenness, in obscurity, not *be'giluy*, openness. (Indeed, the Torah's euphemism for illicit sexual intercourse is *giluy arayot*, the exposure or baring to public view of nakedness.) Hiddenness is what links the two concepts of modesty and holiness.

The holiest place in the world for Judaism is the *kodesh ha-kodashim*, the Holy of Holies in the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Temple in Jerusalem. The holiest person during the service in the Temple was the *Kohen Ha-Gadol*, the High Priest. And the holiest day of the year is *Yom Kippur*. No one may enter the inner sanctum of the Holy of Holies, except the *Kohen Ha-gadol*, on *Yom Kippur*. Here we have a converging of three forms of *kedushah*: the *kedushah* of place, the *kedushah* of time, and the *kedushah* of personality--in one place, only once a year, by one person. If *kedushah* is so important, we might have expected masses of Jews crowding the Temple with a great deal of fanfare, marching to

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This essay is dedicated to my friend Haham Dr. Solomon Gaon, a man of true modesty who walked humbly with the Lord his God.



the *Kodesh Ha-kodoshim* to participate in this phenomenal concentration of holiness. Yet that is not the case at all -- because *kedushah* does not prosper in the presence of masses. It does not thrive under the gaze of the many, in openness, in revelation, in exposure. Rather, it is the opposite of exposure -- hiddenness -- which is the natural environment of *kedushah*. Holiness grows in the unobtrusive recesses of the soul, not on the stage of one's public persona.

Another example of the Halakha's preference for hiddenness as a prerequisite for holiness is the *Sefer Torah*. The Torah is read on Monday, Thursday, and twice on Shabbat. It is forbidden to touch the inside of the parchment of the Torah scroll, the side on which the writing appears, which is why we use a metal or wooden pointer. Indeed, if one does touch it, his hands are considered "defiled" -- *tamei yadayim* -- and he therefore must wash his hands. The *Sefer Torah* confers impurity upon the hands because otherwise one might become over-familiar with *kedushah*; if that happens, one detracts from the *sefer Torah's* sanctity. When there is too much exposure, holiness is diminished. Indeed, when the Talmud speaks about not touching the parchment of the *Sefer Torah*, the language it uses is: *ke'she'hu arum* -- "when it is naked." At such time, it is, as it were, exposed, naked -- or: lacking in *tzeniut*.

The Greeks, the Rav says, saw the human body primarily in aesthetic terms. They were obsessed with beauty. But their notion is that beauty does not thrive in hiddenness. Beautiful objects require that they be displayed. Hence, if you accept the body primarily in aesthetic terms, an object of beauty, it demands exposure. This indeed was one of the major elements that occasioned the great collision between Athens and Jerusalem: the Greeks introduced gymnasia into Israel, where sports were engaged in the nude because the body was an object of beauty. But Judaism does not look upon the body primarily in aesthetic terms. That is what, to a large extent, caused the Hasmonean revolution which we celebrate on Hanukkah.

That is not to say that there is no aesthetic in Judaism. When, for instance, the Talmud says that *benot Yisrael yafot hen*, that Jewish women are beautiful, the Talmud was not engaging simply in an off-hand comment. But clearly, in the priority of values *kedushah* takes precedence over esthetics. The main approach of Judaism toward the human body was not as an aesthetic object but as a religious value -- something sacred. But that which is sacred requires covering, distance, the opposite of exposure. Hence, Judaism legislated the laws of *tzeniut*, and demanded covering up, because if indeed the body is sacred and sanctity is more important than beauty, then beauty has to take second place. The laws of *tzeniut* therefore position Judaism as opposite the Hellenistic tradition.



A few examples may be offered to support the Rav's thesis. In the beginning of *Shemot*, God calls to Moses out of the burning bush and says, "Moshe, Moshe." Moses replies, "Hineni." God continues: "Remove your shoes because the ground you are standing on is hallowed ground." And here God reveals Himself for the first time to the world's greatest prophet: "I am the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." How does Moses react? With *tzeniut*! *Va-yaster Mosheh panav ki yarei me'habit el ha-Elokim*--Moses covers his face because he is afraid to look at God. This fear is not lest God punish or devour him, nor is it the fear of the unknown. It is, more accurately, awe: Moses is overawed. In the presence of *kedushah* the proper response is to close one's eyes and to cover one's face. If *tzeniut* reflects the correct orientation of the human personality to the presence of *kedushah*, then the body, which encloses the human personality, requires similarly that it be covered up.

Another example: The sixth chapter of Isaiah, often referred to as the vision of the "seraphic songs," records the first divine revelation to this great prophet. Isaiah envisions the *seraphim*, or fiery angels, as they surround the very throne of the Holy One. As they do so, they call out to each other: *kadosh kadosh kadosh*, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts." It is most interesting to note how the prophet describes these angels: Each angel has six wings. With two wings the angel covers his face, with two others the angel covers his feet, and with the remaining two he flies. Note: *only two of the six are functional*--the wings for flying! Four of the six represent *tzeniut*, covering up! Why do they cover up? Because *kadosh kadosh kadosh*; in the presence of *kedushah* there must be covering up. Exposure is abhorrent--even of angels, beings which have no *yetzer hara*, to whom sexuality is utterly irrelevant. In the presence of *kedushah*, there must always be concealment.

*Tzeniut* is an indication that a human being possesses a *neshamah*, a soul, and the soul is an aspect of *kedushah*. *Tzeniut* is therefore an acknowledgement that the human personality, which includes the human body, partakes of *kedushah*. It is not just a fortuitous biological accident devoid of any transcendent meaning or higher moral obligation. Man may be an animal, but man is also an angel because he has the *tzellelem Elokim*, the divine spark; he possesses *kedushah*.

## II

The second dimension of *tzeniut* is connected with the experience of *kavod*, usually translated as "glory," "majesty," "honor," or "respect." But "dignity" is a better translation. The word "dignity" itself derives from a Latin root which means value,



worthiness. A human being must have a sense of self-respect, an awareness of his own self worth. The source of this human dignity is *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu*, with regard to Whom we say *kevod Elokim haster davar* (Proverbs 25:2), the dignity of God lies in hiddenness. Dignity, like *kedushah*, thrives in *haster davar*, in obscurity, in concealment rather than exposure. This holds true for man as well: his concealment is both cause and effect of *kavod*. One who possesses *kavod*, a sense of dignity, will deal with it in a manner compatible with *tzeniut*. Modesty will characterize his conduct and personality as a reflection of that inner sense of worth.

Confronted by a person who is always bragging, always talking about his own achievements, boasting of his attractiveness or intelligence or talent or wealth, we know intuitively that such a person despises himself. He compensates for his poor self-image by proclaiming how great and superior he is, subtly seeking the approbation of others. A person who has self-respect has no need to wear his virtues like a badge and broadcast them to the world. One who lacks this sense of *kavod*, of inner dignity and worth, will expose himself, as if to say, "Look at me. Am I not beautiful? Am I not smart?. Do you not like me?" The lack of *kavod* leads to exhibitionism, the opposite of *tzeniut*, whereas a sense of *kavod* will normally result in the practice of modesty or *tzeniut*.

As mentioned earlier, propriety of dress is an aspect of *tzeniut*, but that does not by any imply mean that *tzeniut* requires a kind of concerted attempt to look unkempt or unstylish. *Tzeniut* is not the antonym of attractiveness and pleasantness of appearance; it is the opposite of overexposure which, in turn, is a sign of the lack of *kavod*, of self-dignity.

*Tzeniut* implies *kavod* both with regard to oneself and to others. In its broader sense, the concept of *tzeniut* as *haster davar*, as concealment or hiddenness, bears upon interpersonal relationships. A relevant and significant example is *tzedakah*. The highest expression of this mitzvah occurs when the donor and the recipient do not know each other or of each other. Here, *tzeniut* ensures that *kavod* is extended not only to one's self but, primarily, to the other, in concern for the dignity of another sentient and sensitive human being. To give someone a handout directly is a good thing, but it is not the ideal way for he is aware of his status as a mendicant. The far nobler way is that of genuine modesty, where in addition to supporting somebody financially in a time of his need, you also support his personality by respecting his *kavod*.



## III

Finally, I propose a third concept, privacy, for which no word exists in classical Hebrew. (The absence of a name does not imply the non-existence of the concept. One can entertain an idea or a value or a precept without consciousness of it as a separate entity and, hence, without a name.) Privacy is a very important concept not only in secular law generally, but also in Halakha where it was very well developed much earlier than in the Western world. (See the chapter on "Privacy in Law and Theology," in my *Faith and Doubt*.) It is part of Judaism's *ethics of communication*.

In a sense, we might say that the ethics of communication which Judaism prescribes, directly or indirectly, is based upon *imitatio Dei*, the imitation of God or, in the Biblical-halakhic vocabulary, "You shall walk in His ways."

In order to define the boundaries of the ethics of communication, we must consider how God communicates with humans, so that we might learn more of how humans ought to communicate with each other. God both reveals and conceals; He communicates, but not everything, not always.

At Mt. Sinai, there took place *giluy Shechinah*, the revelation of His presence and of His teaching, i.e., Torah. God communicated with Moses and with the emerging nation of Israel gathered about the mountain. It was a communication of self-revelation.

In turn, man communicates with God by "revealing" himself to His Creator. Such is the understanding of prayer by the Tanya and Rav Kook, among others.

Hence, in imitation of the Creator, man too must reveal himself to his fellow men as a means of communication. But there is a limitation that is very important: God reveals Himself, but He also conceals Himself. There is a divine sense of privacy which affirms the boundaries of His personality. There are limits beyond which no human may trespass and into which the human intellect may not freely probe. Thus, King Solomon in his Proverbs teaches us, as was mentioned earlier, *kevod Elokim haster davar*, the honor or dignity of God is in concealing matters. And the Talmud (*Hagigah* 13a) quotes Ben Sira who warns us, "in what is wondrous to you do not probe; in what is hidden from you do not explore; understand deeply what was permitted to you, but you have no business attending to the hidden things." There is enough unknown in matters available for man's search and research; there are areas, however, that are "off limits" to him. The essence of the Creator is forever concealed from man, and no



matter how we will try we shall never penetrate the inner sanctum of God's essence. He wishes to protect His privacy, as it were.

Similarly, *tzeniut* means respect for the inviolability of the personal privacy of the individual, whether oneself or another, which is another way of saying that *tzeniut* is a respect for the integrity of one's ego, of one's essential self.

Man, in the understanding of Judaism is fundamentally inscrutable; as much as you know about him, you never know *everything* about him. Were you really to know everything about him, that would mean that he lacks a core of self and is nothing but a collection of reactions and molecules and organs but not yet a human being. One's humanity, in some sense, is contingent upon his inscrutability, his mystery, his privacy. Man, according to Torah, possesses not only *natura*, not only his natural self that can be weighed and measured, but also *personae*. The word originally meant a mask, because it symbolizes that aspect of man that is concealed from public view. Beyond that mask is a living, very real human being. This mysterious, vital center of personality transcends the collection of our natural physiological and psychological properties. Not only *is* man a mystery, but *he should be* a mystery. One is obliged to develop a proper sense of self, whereby one is happy with that self even though no one else knows about it, confirms it, or validates it. This does not mean that one ought to be catatonic; a state where one does not communicate with another human being is pathological. In a healthy human being, revelation and communication are balanced in that vital core that remains free and undetermined--the center of personality that has clearly defined boundaries of selfhood. It is this privacy which we confirm when we speak of *tzeniut*. The other aspects of *tzeniut* are but derivative expressions of this core.

The concept of privacy in Halakha is evident in the beginning of the Talmud's tractate *Bava Batra*. The Gemara discusses the question of *hezek re'iyah*, a tort or damage that consists of invading someone's privacy by looking into his property. This visual intrusion into his private domain is regarded as a *hezek* or tort, and is actionable in a halakhic court of law. To take the Gemara's example, assume two partners bought a parcel of land and later decided to divide it. The halakha is that if one partner wants to build a fence to maintain his privacy, even if the other does not, the fence must be built and each pays 50% of the cost. Why? Because of privacy is a right; *hezek re'iyah* is a genuine right.

Now, the partner who does not want the fence must still pay 50% not because he also derives the benefit of privacy, but for quite the opposite reason. The Gemara explains by posing the following case: The partners purchase and then wish to divide a piece of



property that is on a slope or diagonal, with one taking the bottom half of the property and the other the top half of the property. They now want to build a fence. But in this case, only one party has to pay the entire amount--and that is the owner of the upper level property. Why? Because the law of *hezek re'iyah* is such that one must pay not to gain protection from the visual intrusion of the other party, but rather to prevent oneself from invading *another's* privacy by spying on him! Therefore, if the two lots are level, each partner has to pay half the expense of the fence to prevent each from spying on the other. But if one is on the upper level and can look into the other's property, especially his roof where the partner who holds the land below assumes he is safe from inquisitive eyes, but the latter can not see the former, the latter does not have to pay at all. Hence, the halakha requires of one to respect the privacy of his fellow man and--to pay for it. This is the law, and is so codified by the Rambam and the *Shulhan Arukh*.

*Tzeniut* is much more than a *mitzvah* or commandment embodied in the very texture of the Halakha. . Consider this: A great deal of halakha is ethical in nature. *Tzedakah*, the prohibition of gossip, the commandment to bury a corpse if there is no one else to do it, visiting the sick, and so many other laws, both positive and negative, are therefore treated in both the halakhic and Musar (ethical) literature. Are these ethical halakhot only to be considered as *mitzvot* --or something more than that?

The ethical *mitzvot* are more than disembodied commands, because they issue from the principle of *Imitatio Dei*, the imitation of God. The *Mekhilta* comments on the verse *zeh E-li ve'anvehu*, "this is my God and I shall glorify Him," that the word *ve'anvehu* is composed of the two words *Ani ve'Hu*, "He and I," that is, God and me. The Rabbis teach that as He is, so I must be: just as He acts morally, so must I. As God is merciful so must I be merciful. So it is with regard to all the "ethical *mitzvot*"--God not only *commands* these acts as a matter of law, but *He Himself performs* them! With the "regular" *mitzvot*, for instance when God commands us to eat the *korban Pesach*, He Himself does not, of course, eat the Passover lamb. But when God commands us to be kind, gentle, compassionate, considerate, loving, generous--it is because He acts in that manner, and we must not only *obey* Him but also *imitate* Him. His actions become the norms. This is what the Rabbis meant when they said that "the Torah begins with *hesed* and ends with *hesed*." In the beginning of the Torah we read that Adam and Eve were naked. As an act of loving kindness, God prepared clothing for them. Thus, we humans must imitate Him, and we too must provide clothing for the unclothed, the poor. The Torah concludes with the death of Moshe Rabbenu. God performed the act of burying Moshe, and because God did it, we do it. The highest realm that humans can reach is the imitation of God's ethical personality.



If we say that *tzeniut* is in imitation of God's ways, that means that God too practices *tzeniut*. But how is it possible to say of God that He is modest? If we take *tzeniut* in the conventional context, that it implies clothing that covers certain parts of the body, etc., it is an absurd irrelevancy. However, we can speak of God as having a sense of privacy.

In the philosophic and Kabbalistic traditions, one aspect of God is His knowability, His accessibility to our intellectual curiosity, His readiness to allow us to seek Him out, His relatedness to us. To know God is, after all, a great mitzvah. In Isaiah's famous vision of the Messianic era, the culmination of the redemption will be *u-male'ah ha-aretz deiah et Hashem*, that the earth will be filled with knowledge of Hashem as the waters cover the sea.

But at the same time that God is knowable by man, both Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah teach that in His essence God is absolutely unknowable. He is infinitely remote from man's inquisitive mind, totally impervious to man's unquenchable desire to know. That is why, in the Kabbalah, the essence of God is called the *Ein-Sof*, the Infinite. However, R. Hayyim of Volozhin says that the real, inner meaning of the term *Ein-Sof* or endless refers to our search for understanding of Him: that there is no end to our efforts to know His essence; we must fail. It is His nature to remain mysterious, infinitely remote. This vast inscrutability of God is the inner boundary of His privacy. He resists man's desire to know Him, and limits his longing theological curiosity. This is the concept of the privacy of God.

Of course, Judaism wants us to understand. It wants us to understand nature, all knowledge of the world and of man. It wants us to know Torah and to know God. To know Him is one of the loftiest ambitions and most heroic achievements of *Homo religiosus*, religious man.

But both philosophers and mystics have taught that only certain aspects of God are accessible to man's intellect. Thus, what God does can be pondered; His "actional attributes" are such that we may attempt to describe and understand them, and we are bidden to imitate them. But when it comes to the divine Essence, to what He is, His inner self, we can only know what He is not--His "negative attributes." We are strictly limited in our ability to apprehend Divinity: encouraged to know what we may, discouraged from the futile task of going beyond our ken. Just as man, if he were totally knowable, would be less than human, so God, if He were totally knowable, would be less than divine. God is, as it were, a very private Individual. Just as He reveals Himself, He conceals Himself.



The prophet Micah spoke words which remain one of the great formulations of man's duty on earth: "It has been told to you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you, but to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with the Lord your God." The last of these three items, "to walk humbly" or modestly, is, in the Hebrew, *hatzneia lekhet*. *Hatzneia* is from the same root as *tzeniut*. To live a life of *tzeniut* is a matter of imitating God--"to walk humbly with the Lord your God." As He is merciful, I must be merciful; as He is gracious, I must be gracious; and therefore, as He practices *tzeniut*, privacy, so must I practice *tzeniut* and I must be modest and establish my own privacy and refrain from encroaching upon the privacy of my fellow humans. We must imitate the Almighty and learn from Him how to relate to others and to ourselves.

Man cannot flourish in a meaningful way without revelation. Just as God reveals Himself, so man cannot flourish without self-revelation or communication. And he must supplement that with its opposite: *tzeniut* or privacy, keeping the center of his personality mysterious and unknown, unexposed, unbreached.

#### IV

*Tzeniut* in its larger sense reflects the faith in the human potential for sanctity, *kedushah*. It reflects a respect for one's self and for others--for their *kavod*, their dignity. It is also a halakhic and ethical expression of the inalienable and inviolable privacy of man, based upon imitation of God. *Tzeniut* is also, therefore, a statement about God: that He is *kadosh kadosh kadosh*, He is holy, and that *melo kol ha-aretz kevodo*, the entire world is filled with His *kavod*, His majesty or dignity. Finally, *tzeniut* is a characteristic of God: He is private and, therefore, the acme of religious and moral development takes place when, in our own lives--in every prosaic aspect of dress, of speech, of mannerism--we reflect the highest and ultimate demand of the Holy One as it came to us through the prophet Micah--*ve'hatzneia lekhet im Hashem Elokekha*, to walk with *tzeniut*--with and in imitation of the Lord our God.