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## Modesty and the Modern Jewish Woman

By Sylvia Barack Fishman

What is modesty? The Hebrew word *tsanua* can mean modest, humble, simple, austere or small. The Hebrew word *tzniut* has the additional connotation of chastity and morality. The intersection between these two meanings illuminates the very different ways the concept of modesty has been gendered in Orthodox communities today. Each of these concepts of modesty potentially has genuine value as a corrective to the excesses of contemporary American society. Today, the half-naked bodies of half-starved girls and women are widely used as marketing tools. Partially as a result, an epidemic of anorexia afflicts middle class Jewish females. Similarly, Americans are obsessed with buying and displaying material goods, to such an extent that many families convert bedrooms into closets the better to store their stuff. Young people raised without firm guidelines and societal norms indulge in ever more extreme masochistic piercings, in a vain cry for the reestablishment of boundaries. Not least, the sexual freedoms embraced by women three decades ago have largely proven to enhance the sexual exploitation of women, rather than their pleasure.

Responding to the pathology of this world without *tzniut*, journalist Wendy Shalit recently published a book, *A Return to Modesty*; she urges a movement against the grain of American society, reestablishing a respect for modest clothing, premarital abstinence, and marital monogamy. In Orthodox rhetoric today we certainly see a new emphasis on modesty. But modesty for whom, and why? The new modest-makers do not address the broader societal issues of widespread materialism, arrogance, and immorality. Instead, they focus narrowly on micro-managing women's wardrobes and silencing women's voices. And yet, powerful biblical passages instruct men on the critical importance of male modesty.

The prophet Micah declares men should do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. (Micah, 6:8) The concept of *hatzneah lechet* is not focused primarily on women. Some segments of the Orthodox community take a short cut in resealing the boundaries that separate Orthodox from non-Orthodox (and non-Jewish) life. Women are asked to become more and more punctilious in laws of *kol isha* and *tzniut* and to avoid leadership roles, because the rigorous enforcement of these laws gives the entire society the illusion that they have successfully resisted the incursions of modernity. Constricting women's lives becomes a symbolic exorcism of modernity. Insistence on limiting women's lives has probably been influenced by several interrelated factors:

(1) The feminist movement has created an emphasis on women unprecedented in religious thought. Women are subjected to greater attention and scrutiny than ever before.

(2) The grassroots prevalence of feminist agendas in American Jewish life has created its own backlash.

Within the Orthodox world, feminist has become a code word for modern, and an emphasis on women has often taken the form of reinforcing traditional women's behaviors. The reactionary segments of the Orthodox community are fond of accusing those to their left of entering onto a slippery slope, which will undermine Torah true Judaism. However, just the opposite is true. The right wing has climbed onto a slippery slope in which restrictions upon the lives of women become more and more extreme.

The current extreme emphasis on female modesty is a distortion of traditional Jewish values. Moreover it is part of an unwholesome tendency which also includes rigid separation of men and women, silencing women, and disenfranchising women even in areas in which clear halakhic precedents exist for expanding women's roles: a constellation of demands profoundly inappropriate for the world in which the vast majority of Orthodox Jews live. The right wing is sliding down a slippery slope toward the unconscionable psychic crippling of their and our own daughters. Let us reclaim the true prophetic meaning of *hatzneah lechet*, as men and women who treat each other with justice and mercy, and require more modesty of ourselves than of others.