PARTICIPATION COMMUNITY EDUCATION LEADERSHIP FAMILY

JOFA Journal

FALL 2009–TISHREI 5770 • VOLUME VIII, ISSUE 2 WWW.JOFA.ORG

From Our President

B'tzelem Elokim

By Carol Kaufman Newman

When I sit at a JOFA Board meeting I am always struck anew by the diversity of women who sit around the table. All Orthodox Jewish women but practicing in different ways. There are those who wear pants and those who don't. There are some who cover their heads and some who do not. There are those who want to storm a building in order to be heard and make change and those who want change to happen more slowly. They are all wonderful women—a microcosm of our greater JOFA constituency. And yet we are united. What unites us is that we all take our religion seriously and work together on common goals.

We were all created in God's image. To be beautiful. Making ourselves beautiful is a form of *hiddur mitzvah*. Whatever our individual positions, we all worry about how we relate to our children, particularly our daughters and granddaughters. We want them to have a healthy relationship to their bodies and their appearance without obsessing over them.

I am one of four children. My mother loved to see us dressed beautifully and took such pride in us. She used to tell people that we were her four masterpieces. If we dressed in a way she didn't approve of, she would tell us it was like painting a blotch over a Rembrandt. She gave us a wonderful sense of self.

I grew up at a time when Orthodoxy was less defined by dress and appearance. Our Jewish day school allowed cheerleaders (I was one) who wore short skirts to basketball games. I went to an Orthodox camp that had "mixed" swimming every day—and *shiurim*.

Today the Orthodox Jewish world is different. I would be less than honest if I did not confess that all this covering up gives me pause. Last summer when I took my granddaughter shopping for camp she told me how wide the sleeve on her tee shirt had to be. I was surprised that a child was so conscious of how her body was being perceived, and what parts needed to be covered.

I know some of you will find my words controversial because in today's society we are expected to conform to stricter observances. I am trying to be less judgmental about the emphasis on covering up. And in turn, I would like for others not to define me by the length of my skirt and sleeves.

This journal contains a range of pieces exploring the relationship we as Orthodox women have to clothing, appearance and our physical selves, and looks at some of the views on these issues that are to be found in our sources. I hope that these honest and sincere pieces expressing different views will spark serious conversations and help us better understand each other's perspectives.

This issue of the JOFA JOURNAL is made possible through the generous support of Dr. Giti and Jack Bendheim, and Lili Goldberg.

Dress, Gender and Jewish Law

By Devorah Zlochower

It is commonplace that dress is a cultural artifact. Our assumptions about men and women, what roles they play in society, indeed our very notions of masculinity and femininity are products of the cultures in which we live and are often encoded in our dress. This is not only a modern notion, but appears early in our tradition in the discussion of *kli gever* and *simlat ishah*, the prohibition forbidding men to wear women's clothing and women to wear men's clothing.

The Torah states in the 22nd chapter of the book of *Devarim:*

לא יהיה כלי גבר על אשה ולא
ילבש גבר שמלת אשה כי
תועבת ה' אלקיך כל עשה אלה.

> A woman shall not put on man's apparel, nor shall a man wear women's clothing, for it is an abomination to the Lord your God all who do these things (Deuteronomy 22:5).

This verse has been applied variously to modes of dress, behaviors, and grooming practices. An examination of halakhic sources reveals a great deal about how the Sages and our halakhic decisors through the ages have understood and applied this prohibition.

Let's begin by examining this verse, which is composed of two parts. The first part informs us of the prohibition that falls on men and women. The second half of the verse seems to be a kind of rationale for the prohibition, but the connection between the first and second parts of the verse is not so clear. Does the second part delimit and modify the first part? Are all acts of cross-

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What's **Inside?**

From the **Editor**

JOFA Journal

Volume VIII, Issue 2
Fall 2009–Tishrei 5770

The Journal is published by JOFA, a non-profit organization. Annual membership—$36. All correspondence should be mailed to: JOFA, 520 8th Avenue, Fourth Floor, NY, NY 10018. We can be reached by phone at (212) 679-8500 or by email at: jofa@jofa.org

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dressing *to'eivah*, an abomination, or only some of them; if only some, then what criteria distinguish them from the others? Or perhaps the second part of the verse expands the first part, with *to'eivah* prohibiting not simply acts of dress but other behaviors as well.

Sifre, a *midrash halakha* to the book of *Devarim*, presents two alternative answers to these questions:

> What is the verse teaching us, that woman must not dress in white garments and man must not dress in colored garments? Rather, the verse states "abomination" i.e., that which leads to abomination. This is the rule: Woman shall not dress in the manner in which man dresses and go among men and man shall not adorn himself with women's jewelry and go among women. Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov states, "From which Biblical verse do we know that woman shall not bear arms and go out to war? 'A woman shall not put on men's apparel.' From which Biblical verse do we learn that man may not adorn himself with women's jewelry? 'Nor shall a man wear woman's clothing'" (*Sifre* Deuteronomy *Piska* 226).

The first statement in *Sifre* begins by dismissing the possibility that simply breaking the social conventions differentiating men's and women's apparel is prohibited. Presumably, men's and women's clothes at the time were quite similar, differing only in color; that alone does not constitute the Torah's prohibition. Consequently, this view looks to the end of the verse to explicate the prohibition stated in the first part. Which types of apparel are forbidden? Clothing that leads to *to'eivah*, dressing in a manner that leads to illicit behaviors. What behaviors are prohibited? One must not attempt to pass as members of the other sex; mixing of the sexes, specifically when no one else recognizes that it has occurred, is forbidden. This suggests that women dressing in male garments and men in female garments without such intents would not be prohibited acts.

The second statement in *Sifre* has a different focus. R. Eliezer ben Yaakov points to quintessentially male and female roles and functions of the time. Men went out and waged war, and women beautified themselves with cosmetics and jewelry. These notions of masculinity and femininity appear often in rabbinic literature.[1] R. Eliezer ben Yaakov makes no reference to the second part of the verse; he adopts a more expansive view of the prohibition. His statement addresses proscribed feminine and masculine roles.

As we proceed through the halakhic sources, we will see the positions articulated in *Sifre* again and again. This leads us to question: What is prohibited – behavior or dress? Under what circumstances is certain dress prohibited, and what is the relevance of the wearer's motivation and intent?

When we look to the Talmud, the focus again shifts from dress per se to behavior. The Talmud raises the question whether men may shave or pluck body hair and concludes that this act is prohibited.[2] In fact, our citation from *Sifre* is cited as proof that the behavior is forbidden. Nevertheless, despite a fairly clear conclusion in the Talmud, *Tosafot* qualify the statement by adding the element of intent. They argue that the prohibition refers to shaving done for cosmetic reasons; in other words, a feminine act. Shaving done for comfort is not forbidden.[3] They broadened the conversation from clothing to behaviors that are seen as gendered; at the same time they limited the prohibition by focusing on the intent and motivation of the action.

This focus on context is emphasized most keenly in the following responsum of Rav Sherira and Rav Hai Gaon regarding a practice in Babylon in which men shaved body hair, seemingly in contradiction to the talmudic passage discussed earlier:

> It has been the practice of all the rabbis in the two yeshivot [of Babylon] for the past few hundred years to remove underarm and pubic hair and no one has restrained themselves from this practice.... This is what we observe; what constitutes men's and women's apparel changes through time and by geographic location. There are also differences among particular garments. Here, for example, men do not wear colored linen and cotton garments but they do wear very colorful wool and silk garments. Therefore, it would be permitted to wear such garments according to the fashion of the times and place. And if it were a time or place where such garments were not regularly worn, then they would be forbidden. Similarly, if there is one fashion in women's and men's apparel here and a different fashion in other areas, the fashion would dictate what is forbidden and permitted. For the matter of what constitutes men's clothing and women's clothing is not pre-defined; it is determined by

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Veil, linen, metal thread embroidery, guipure lace, Turkey, early 20th century
Collection of Yeshiva University Museum

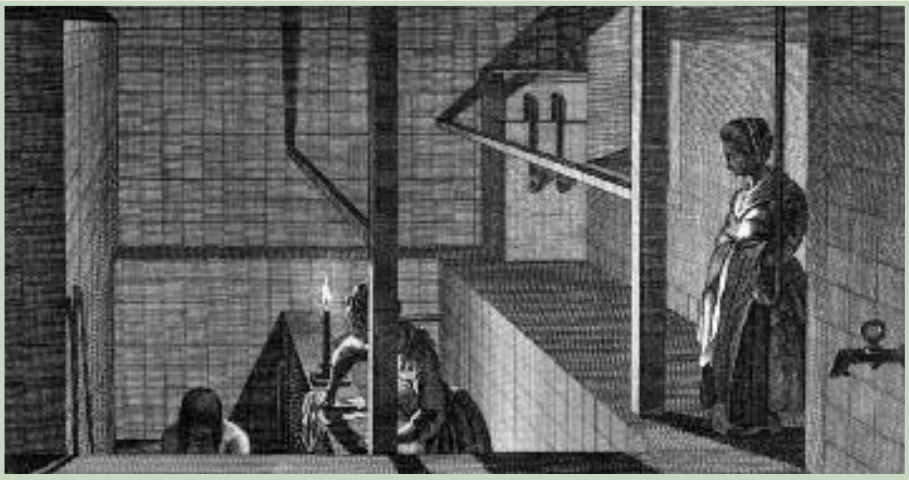
Exposing *Tzniut:* Reflections Toward a Redefinition of Modesty

By Naomi Marmon Grumet

A number of years ago, I had occasion to travel to Japan with a few friends. It was a wonderful opportunity and gave us a chance to experience firsthand a strikingly different culture from our own, as we encountered the combination of ultra-high modernity and Old World heritage for which the Japanese are famous. One of the highlights of that trip was visiting a Japanese hot spring. It was both relaxing and rejuvenating – a much-needed respite from the hectic pace of the trip. Amidst the cherry blossoms that filled the landscape of the idyllic spa set at the foot of Mt Fuji, I had the opportunity to reflect on my own upbringing and cultural conceptions. As I sat in the spa, surrounded by naked Japanese women of all ages, the thoughts that most prominently surfaced were on the meaning of *tzniut*. These graceful women, who appeared to be so at ease with themselves and so comfortable with their bodies, seemed (in almost a paradoxical way) to epitomize the concept of *tzniut*. They neither gazed at each other nor hid their blemishes; each respectfully nodded as another woman passed by, acknowledging her presence (or essence) but respecting the atmosphere that allowed each to commune privately in the context of this public setting.

The Japanese women's grace and ease contrasted sharply with that of one of my travel companions, Bracha.[1] Though adopting a more "modern" orientation in her own lifestyle, Bracha had attended Bais Yaakov throughout her school years. She studied special education in college after learning for a year in Israel and has worked in both the yeshiva and public school systems. I remember that she often commented about the restrictiveness of the dress code she was forced to follow when teaching in a yeshiva school (long sleeves and long skirts with hair tied back). Although Bracha said that she felt confined by these regulations, it was interesting to watch her in the context of the hot spring. Bracha stood in a corner to change. She waited until the shower stalls were almost empty before she cleaned herself in preparation for going into the spring – a requirement for entry into the hot springs that was strikingly reminiscent of our *mikveh* preparations. She bent down, attempting to shield most of her body from the sight of others, and promptly wrapped herself in a robe when finished. In contrast to the Japanese women, who held up a small towel to cover their private areas or else walked naked, Bracha remained wrapped tightly in her robe until half her body was in the water. In fact, so conspicuous was the contrast between her entry and that of all the other women that the eyes of almost everyone turned to watch as she removed her partially soaked robe. Watching this scene I asked myself, what is it in the education of Japanese women that leaves them so reserved in public but so comfortable in this context? What are the messages that our education and (religious) cultural milieu impart about our bodies? And what attitude and relationship should we take toward our bodies?

I often revisited my thoughts from the Japanese hot spring during the course of my doctoral fieldwork, in which I interviewed American and Israeli Modern Orthodox women and men about their practice of *niddah* and its experiential impact on their marital lives and identity. Of course, topics related to *tzniut* and body image often arose in this context; the rules of *niddah* intimately affect our bodies, and almost all facets of the *mikveh* ritual revolve around it. It is these *mitzvot* (particularly the *mikveh*) that most directly require that we examine and uncover ourselves, then bare ourselves to another, and enter into a relationship (first with God and then our husbands) free of external trappings or physical barriers. In discussing a *mitzvah* that requires that we fully uncover ourselves, I was able to discern messages implicitly transmitted by those injunctions that require that we cover ourselves. These interviews also provided insight into how ideas of *tzniut* shape women's personal body image and the way women feel about themselves, and the impact these feelings can have on the marital relationship and on sexual satisfaction and enjoyment.[2]



An Eighteenth Century Dutch Mikveh
From William Hurd, *Oude en tegenwoordige staat en geschiedenis van alle godsdiensten*, Amsterdam, 1781
Courtesy of The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary

For some women, negative body and self-images seemed to be reinforced by the *mikveh* experience itself. "I feel so exposed when I'm in the *mikveh*," Shifra commented. "I have a bad image of my body, so having to inspect it, and then having another woman do so, makes me feel fat and accentuates the discomfort." Shuli, a woman in her thirties and the mother of four, spoke openly about the anxiety she has about her body and how that affects her experience of *mikveh* and her intimate relationship with her husband:

> I hate going to the *mikveh*. I don't know what it is. Some people see *mikveh* as such a beautiful thing and you're cleansing your soul and blah, blah, blah. And to me, you're getting naked

in front of this woman, who has to watch you dunk your head under. It's just uncomfortable.… I hate my body. I really want to lose weight, but I can't. So I hate my body and I'm not okay with it. And then, it's an issue because if I really hate my body, how can somebody else love it if I think it's disgusting?

Although not all the interviewees spoke in such extreme terms, many expressed tension and awkwardness at being naked in front of another woman. More than that, a significant number stated that they felt uncomfortable revealing their bodies because doing so conflicted with the messages of *tzniut* with which they were raised. Naava, a postmenopausal interviewee, had felt this conflict for years: "I'm sort of a very shy, modest kind of person.… There are some women who walk around with no clothes on and it doesn't worry them at all.… [At the *mikveh*] they just walk around openly without any *bushah* (embarrassment). I don't know how!" For Naava, as for others, resolving the tension between the perceived messages of *tzniut* and the requirements of immersion is an ongoing struggle.

My findings revealed multiple negative messages in the way that the concept of *tzniut* is currently portrayed, which seem to have debilitating repercussions for many women. These repercussions included feeling ill at ease with one's own body, being embarrassed that others should see it, feeling afraid to engage in bodily pleasures, and being unable to enjoy doing so. Though not all interviewees articulated these negative expressions, the themes recurred enough to warrant notice. They pointed to the fact that whereas messages about the need to cover and conceal one's body are explicitly (and perhaps neutrally) delivered by the *tzniut* requirements, negative overtones were conveyed implicitly through the education and culture that teach about and delimit them. Gila, a lawyer by profession and mother of three, addressed these issues. Gila had attended an all-girls' religious high school in the New York area. She said:

> I had such a bad image of my body, and negative associations with what my body could do [to men]. Those messages had been drilled in by the endless repetition in [my high school] of the need to wear sleeves and long skirts all the time; to never use my body in a way that would allure men, of a million and one things that were not "*tzniusdik*."… It took a long time until I felt comfortable enough with myself to feel anything positive about having a physical relationship. In fact, when Meir (my husband) and I were dating seriously I went for therapy because I knew that I could never have sex, let alone enjoy it, if I didn't.... I think that my decision not to cover my hair and to wear pants was part of taking back my body, gaining comfort with myself, and the need of my feminist side to free myself of the *tznius* shackles.

Zara, a new mother and graduate of the Israeli religious Zionist school system, made mention of similar issues. Her comments show the extent to which the negative messages associated with *tzniut* pervade elements of the religious Zionist community and where their sometimes extreme consequences lead. Here are Zara's words (in translation from the original Hebrew):

> The message came across loud and clear that a (religious) girl is supposed to be *tzenuah* (modest) and *tehorah (*pure). The obvious corollary was that she should be afraid [of sex]. If you want to be a good, religious girl, then you have to be afraid of it.… It was immodest not be afraid.… I think that there was something in the education that told us that if we were not afraid that there was something wrong. It wasn't formal, but it was definitely there.… And it wasn't necessarily only from the teachers; the dynamic amongst the girls [in my high school] said that "good girls" were afraid.

In addition to the educational setting instilling a fear of physical intimacy, Zara suggested that her social circles conceived of the laws of modesty as a complete negation of women as sexual beings. Sadly, a number of the interviewees expanded upon how this perception created great difficulty for them in their marital and sexual lives. This difficulty was particularly apparent when they described the transition into marriage, a time when cultural expectations shift from encouraging a girl to be chaste and uninterested in sexuality to becoming an active marital partner who is alluring and available for her husband – a shift that some found to be extremely jarring. So deeply engrained were the psychological effects of these messages that a few interviewees, even years into their marriage, still suffered each month as they transitioned back to sexual permissibility at the end of a *niddah* cycle.

These findings lead me to suggest that we seriously need to re-examine the messages of *tzniut* as currently taught and rethink the methods by which this subject matter is transmitted. We must challenge ourselves to find a way to teach modesty while instilling a healthy body image and sense of self. And we must ask ourselves, is there a way to teach modesty as part of a greater context of "הצנע לכת עם אלוקיך – walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8) without an excessive focus on clothing?

The Japanese women whom I encountered, and maybe even all of Japanese society, have successfully cultivated a culture of humility and modesty – perhaps sometimes even in excessive amounts. Despite that, I saw no evidence that this culture led to a negative self-image or discomfort with their bodies. I hope that we will rise to the challenge of teaching a healthy humility and modesty that will ennoble rather than crush the sense of self in our young women.

Naomi Marmon Grumet *received her PhD in Sociology from Bar-Ilan University. She is currently spearheading an initiative to create a women's center in Jerusalem complete with educational, medical, sexual and halakhic resources and a "*mikveh *spa" at its heart.*

[1] All names cited are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of those mentioned.

[2] This research was conducted with an Ashkenazi population. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the same issues apply to Sephardi women today (at least in Israel) because of the joint educational system. For example, fewer *kallot* agree to share with family and friends the traditionally communal pre-wedding *mikveh* celebrations, preferring to keep the *mikveh* a private, individual ceremony.

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customs and practices. In Talmudic times men did not customarily shave their pubic and underarm hair and they thought of one who did so as feminine; instead they grew their body hair until it ceased growing of its own accord. Thus, it was forbidden for them. And even nowadays those who live in Arabia have such a practice as they see a man who removes pubic and underarm hair as weak and womanlike. Consequently, Jewish men who live in those areas are forbidden to remove their body hair (cited in *Teshuvot HaRashba* 5:121).

This is a radical statement! We are being told that masculine or feminine garb and behavior are defined in relation to the fashions and cultural practices of the general society in which one lives. We are therefore to understand the statement in the Talmud in a historical context. In talmudic times, in some areas, it was considered feminine to shave body hair, but in our time and place, say Rav Sherira and Rav Hai, this is not the case. We cannot rule summarily on the halakha without reference to the broader culture in which we live and its fashions and practices.

"Dress carries heavy symbolic value"

In contemporary times, the discussion of masculine and feminine clothing (*beged ish* and *simlat ishah*) has often focused on whether pants for women constitute *beged ish*. If one applies the criteria of Rav Sherira and Rav Hai Gaon, because women in the larger society wear pants and these pants are constructed specifically for women, there would be no prohibition of *beged ish*.

In contrast to the Geonim, Dayan Yitzhak Yaakov Weiss, in his responsum on women wearing pants, articulates a very different ideal. A prominent halakhist, Dayan Weiss was a Hungarian rabbi who survived the Shoah by escaping his homeland. He served as a dayan in Manchester, England, for many years before moving to Jerusalem and heading the Edah Haredit. This responsum was written in 1958 in Manchester.[4]

The questioner poses a leading question: Are pants for women forbidden because they are similar to men's pants or because, originally, pants were only worn by men? Dayan Weiss begins his response with a strong statement of condemnation:

> הנה אין דין זה צריך בושש דהוי איסור גמור, דחוץ מזה דבגדי שחץ כאלו, נעשים מתחילתם לעבירה, והם בגדי זימה, ומביאים לידי תועבה, ואף אם לא יהי' בכלל כלי גבר, המה בכלל תועבת ד' כל עושה אלה... עוד באמת המה בכלל כלי גבר ממש, דעדיין שם מכנסים עליהם, והגם שהם משונים קצת, מ"מ שמם עליהם, וכמ"ש בזה בפשיטות.
>
> This question needs no consideration; certainly it is completely forbidden. Aside from the fact that these clothes of abomination are made for the purpose of transgression, and they are clothes of licentiousness and bring to *to'eivah*, were they not forbidden because of *kli gever* they would still be forbidden because of "for it is an abomination to the Lord your God all who do these things." Additionally, they are *kli gever* for they are still called pants, and even though they are slightly different [from men's pants], they are called by the same name.

Referring to the second part of the verse in *Devarim* 22:5, Dayan Weiss asserted that women's pants are forbidden both because they indeed constitute men's garments as they are still called pants; additionally, were they not considered men's garments, they would still be forbidden as a *to'eivah*. Later on in the responsum, Dayan Weiss added that pants must not be worn even by small girls, even while indoors and even while skiing.[5]

The force of Dayan Weiss's condemnation of women's pants is obvious from the polemical language of the responsum. It highlights the discomfort that many felt as pants for women were just beginning to be worn commonly. The issues go beyond a narrower question of whether women's pants are *beged ish* to their cultural and social significance as roles for women began changing and expanding, and stricter notions of gender distinction were beginning to break down. Whereas Rav Sherira and Rav Hai Gaon seemed to view dress approvingly as a reflection of the culture in which we live, Dayan Weiss perhaps championed a separation from the general culture as he reacted to the early stirrings of what would become the sexual revolution.

Dress carries heavy symbolic value. It reflects our assumptions about gender and our notions about what roles men and women play in our society. It articulates our positions toward the cultures in which we live. It is thus inevitable that the halakhic literature on the prohibition of *kli gever* and *simlat ishah* provides such a rich panorama of views.

Devorah Zlochower *is on the Talmud faculty of SAR High School in Riverdale, New York. She was Rosh Beit Midrash, and Talmud and Halakha instructor at Drisha Institute for ten years. She serves on the board of JOFA and is co-editor of* Ta Shma, *JOFA's halakhic source series on women and* mitzvot.

[1] See for example איש דרכו לכבש ואין אשה דרכה לכבש (BT *Yevamot* 65b) and אין אשה אלא ליופי (BT *Ketubot* 59b).

[2] BT *Nazir* 58b-59a.

[3] *Tosafot* to BT *Nazir* 59a s.v. *gevul yesh lo*.

[4] *Minhat Yitzhak* 2:108.

[5] The skiing discussion is particularly interesting as it relates to the ruling of the 17th-century halakhist, the Shakh, that one can wear clothing of the other sex to protect from poor weather. Ski pants would then seem to fall within the permitted. However, Dayan Weiss distinguishes between activities such as skiing that are voluntary and braving the elements, which is not.

Comparative Reflections on Modest Dress in Contemporary Judaism and Islam

By Raquel M. Ukeles

When I lived in Cairo in 1993–1994, I became friends with Manal, a young Egyptian woman who worked in a nearby post office. Manal, the first woman of her lower income family to work outside the home, wore a plain white headscarf (hijab) pinned at her neck. She described her hijab as spiritual armor, which signaled her pious status and provided "cover" for her pioneering effort to work and travel on her own.[1] Although I understood that Manal would wear a hijab, I was astonished to see how many wealthy students at the American University in Cairo (AUC) covered as well. Far from signaling a return to traditional female roles, these AUC students wear custom-made Hermès hijabs as they pursue professional degrees.

Much like the generational difference in observant Jewish circles on head covering, Egyptian and other Muslim societies have witnessed a recent trend of young women choosing to cover irrespective of, or even despite their mothers' practices. In both Muslim and Jewish cases, the head-covering phenomenon cannot be explained solely in terms of increased religious observance. By exploring comparatively the writings of contemporary Muslim and Jewish women regarding head covering, we can better untangle the web of religious law, cultural identity, and politics at play in discussions on modesty and physical appearance.

The similarities between Muslim and Jewish head coverings can often be a source of mutual understanding, but occasionally may trigger discomfort and even competition. In interfaith settings, on panels, and on "modest dress" blogs, women of the two religions share their personal reasons for dressing modestly and bond over the challenge of dressing counter-culturally in American society.[2] These shared experiences have practical outcomes – from a combined market for modest bathing suits to a "*hijabchique*" blogger who provides "an introduction to *tichels*" for fellow Muslims.[3] At the same time, especially in post-9/11 America, Muslim women more often experience negative stereotyping and even hostility because of their head coverings than do their Jewish counterparts. Likewise, Jewish women do not experience the pervasive criticism of the headscarf as a sign of women's subjugation as Muslims do in France and Turkey today, nor do they face legal obstacles for donning a headscarf in these contested locales.

According to one commentator, one reason that Jewish women do not cover their hair is to distance themselves from the association between head covering and "Muslim fundamentalism."[4] In one extreme case of an opposite reaction, a group of ultra-Orthodox women in Ramat Beit Shemesh consciously emulated the Islamic burka as a way of recapturing the mantle of religious modesty.[5] These intense reactions – whether sympathetic or critical – attest to the potent symbolism of the head covering even among natural allies.

Beyond the shared external similarities, *hijab* and *kissui rosh* both serve as the focal point for religious and cultural debates within their respective Muslim and Jewish communities. One realm of this debate is the legal question of whether a head covering is religiously mandatory. To understand this debate, a brief religious and historical background on *hijab* is necessary.

The term *hijab*, translated usually as "veil," refers not to a face veil but to material that covers one's head and neck/chest.[6] More generally, *hijab* refers to modest clothing that a Muslim woman wears in public – covering all of her body except her face and hands.[7] Unlike the prevalent Jewish practice of linking head covering to marriage, Muslim practice dictates that a woman begins to cover at puberty; in certain circles, Muslim girls begin wearing a hijab even younger.[8]

The Qur'an[9] does not explicitly mandate head covering, leaving room for some modern scholars to argue that it is not compulsory. Rather, the Qur'an commands both female and male believers to behave modestly toward the other sex by lowering their gazes and covering their private parts. In addition, women should "not show their adornments beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should let their cloaks cover their bosoms and not reveal their adornments except to their husbands, their fathers…[and other male members of the household]" [24:31].[10] In another verse, the Qur'an calls upon Muslim women to drape their outer garments over their bodies in a distinctive way when they go outside: "Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments hang low over them so as to be recognized and not insulted" [33:59].[11] Whereas the first verse mandates covering one's "adornments" as part of an Islamic code of modesty, the second verse dictates extra caution with regard to one's dress to protect Muslim women from unwanted male advances.

According to the Hadith literature, which includes reports of Muhammad's sayings and behavior and serves as the second source of guidance for Muslims, early Muslim women wrapped their bodies (and, by some accounts, their heads) in garments when they went outside.[12] There are also numerous reports that Muhammad enjoined girls reaching puberty to cover their heads and chests when praying.[13]

Classical jurists of Islamic law unanimously interpreted the Qur'an and Hadith sources as evidence that all women between puberty and old age are obligated to cover their heads and bodies. The majority of jurists permitted a woman to expose her face and hands, whereas a minority held that a woman must cover all parts of her body in public.[14] Moreover, some early jurists conflated the requirements of modest dress with Quranic restrictions on mobility imposed exclusively on Muhammad's wives [33:33; 33:53], following the general legal trend to regard Muhammad's wives as the model for all Muslim women.[15] The tendency to sequester women also reflected shifts in cultural norms; by the ninth century, Muslim rulers emulated the Persian aristocratic custom of *purdah* – keeping women in the home as a sign of one's wealth.[16] In this context, we can understand Maimonides' relatively "moderate" ruling that a woman should not be a prisoner in her own home, but that her husband can prevent her from going outside more than once or twice a month![17] Cultural norms remained fairly stable until the early 20th century, when the conflation between clothing restrictions and seclusion ended for all but an extremist minority of Muslims. Likewise, feminist movements during that period, supported by men intent on modernizing their societies, led many upper and middle class women to remove their headscarves.

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You Are What You Wear: Clothing in Biblical Interpretation

By Karen Miller Jackson

The *Tanakh* seems to draw our attention to clothing in many stories. It is highlighted in the stories of Adam and Eve's banishment from *Gan Eden*, of Joseph and his *ketonet passim* (coat of many colors), and of Esther who donned queenly robes, to name a few. How did the *parshanim* (biblical interpreters) reconcile this prominence of clothing, such a material thing, with Torah values? In the following sources, which just skim the surface on these issues, one can trace a consistent approach among the *parshanim*.

In *Tanakh*, the first depiction of people being dressed occurs as a reaction to sin. After eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve suddenly become aware of their nakedness and immediately cover themselves with a fig leaf. But the first real act of clothing Adam and Eve is carried out by God. God makes them *kotnot or*, garments of skin, before banishing them from *Gan Eden*. According to the *peshat* (the simple text) here, to be naked is a sign of weakness and vulnerability, and Adam and Eve were for the most part helpless to do anything to alleviate the situation. Whereas the *peshat* implies that Adam and Eve were physically helpless, Rashi understands this verse differently. The verse states, "And the eyes of both of them were opened and they knew that they were naked" (Genesis, 3:7). Rashi asks, "Even a blind person knows that he is naked. What did the Torah mean when it says "and they knew they were naked?" They had one *mitzvah* to keep and they failed to keep it." Thus Rashi transforms the literal meaning of this verse. Adam and Eve's nakedness, according to Rashi, was a deeper, spiritual deficiency. When they ate from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve realized that they were naked. Figuratively, their actions were laid bare. They had reached awareness that they had disobeyed God's command, their innocence was lost, and they became aware of their deficiency. According to Rashi, in the Torah, nakedness or being clothed is representative of a deeper state of being.

A similar idea is expressed by a midrash in *Shemot Rabbah* (*parashah* 1). The midrash comments on Ezekiel 16, which is understood to be a reference to God's taking Israel out of Egypt. Ezekiel 16 describes Israel as an abandoned baby who grows up to be a beautiful girl under God's care. However, when God finds her she is "naked and bare." God covers up her nakedness, just as He does with Adam and Eve. The midrash comments,

> **ואת ערום ועריה,** בלא מעשים טובים, לכך נאמר וירא אלקים שאין בידם מעשים ליגאל בהן.
>
> **And you were naked and bare:** Without good deeds. Hence it states,"And God saw that they had no deeds in their hands through which they could be redeemed."

In this narrative as well, nakedness is interpreted as a spiritual deficiency, an emptiness of *ma'asim tovim* (good deeds). In Ezekiel we are no longer talking about one *mitzvah*, but rather about the nation's failure to keep *mitzvot*, both those between the people and God and those between the people themselves, *bein adam lahaveiro*. Again, biblical interpreters take the reference to nakedness to mean something beyond the physical realm. The nation was spiritually empty; its people had treated each other badly and disregarded the Torah. In God's eyes they were spiritually naked. When God then clothes the girl of Ezekiel 16 and makes her beautiful, the prophet is telling us that the Jewish nation had reached such a low in their commitment to the Torah that they exhibited no goodness that God could look to and say that these people were worth saving.

In both of these contexts, a lack of clothing represents to the interpreters a failure to keep *mitzvot*, a religious emptiness; covering up symbolizes God's saving or protecting them, regardless of their failings.

If nakedness represents vulnerability and a deficiency of *mitzvot* or goodness according to the commentators, then correspondingly, specific clothing in the Torah must have significant meaning. One story in which clothing plays a prominent role is the Joseph narrative. One can see how the various names of attire that Joseph wears at different points correlate to his identity and experiences.[1] When Joseph is young, his father Jacob makes him a *ketonet passim*, literally a striped coat. This coat foreshadows both the ups and the downs in Joseph's future. On the one hand the *ketonet* is one of the sources of the brothers' jealousy of Joseph, which leads to their throwing him into a pit. When the brothers return to tell their father that Joseph seems to have been killed, they hold up the torn, bloody *ketonet* as evidence. On the other hand, it is significant that the *ketonet passim* is referred to later in the *Tanakh* as the attire worn by King David's daughter, Tamar, "which was worn by the virgin daughters of the king" (II Samuel 13:18). This suggests that the coat described in Genesis is also associated with

Anklets, Tripoli. Libya
Courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem

royalty and kingship, a hint of what Joseph's future holds, as he is to become the viceroy of Pharaoh.

Rashi expresses the idea that Joseph's clothing reflects a deeper aspect of his personality or foretells his future.[2] Based on a midrash (*Bereshit Rabbah* 84:8), Rashi defines the word *passim* as either a reference to royal clothes or as an acronym (PSYM) for the different groups or individuals to whom Joseph would be enslaved: P=Potiphar, S=*Soharim* (merchants), Y=*Yishm'elim* (Ishmaelites), and M=*Midyanim* (Midianites). In both cases, Rashi interprets the word *passim* as an allusion to Joseph's future experiences.

Moreover, when Joseph finds himself in the house of Potiphar and Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce him, a keyword which repeats itself often is the word *beged,* clothes. There is debate among the commentaries about whether or not Joseph wavered in his resistance to Potiphar's wife. In the verse, "She caught him (*bevigdo*) by his cloth and said, 'Lie with me,'" the phrase "by his cloth" also means "in his treachery." The double meaning of this word here leaves Joseph's innocence and blamelessness open to question.[3] Here again Joseph's clothes give us a specific window into his soul and reflect his deeper emotions.

Another biblical character whose clothes must not be taken at face value is Esther. When *Megillat Esther* states, "And it came to pass on the third day Esther wore (*malkhut*) queenliness," the Talmud asks, why does it say she wore "queenliness" and not queenly robes?[4]

ויהי ביום השלישי ותלבש אסתר מלכות, בגדי מלכות מבעי ליה! אלא: שלבשתה רוח הקדש. כתיב הכא ותלבש וכתיב התם (דברי הימים א' י"ב) ורוח לבשה את עמשי וגו'.

"And it came to pass on the third day and Esther wore queenliness." It should have stated "queenly clothing." Rather – the holy spirit clothed her. It is written here "and she wore" and it is written there, (I Chronicles 12) "Then the spirit clothed Amasai."

Once again, clothing in the *Tanakh* is viewed by the commentaries as reflecting something deeper and more spiritual. The unusual phrasing of the verse, combined with the idea that mention of clothing in the Bible is always symbolic of a biblical character's spiritual state, led to the interpretation that the specific description of her clothes meant that Divine prophecy was bestowed upon Esther to guide her in her role as savior of the Jews of Persia.

One final example of this phenomenon is found in the description of the clothing of the *Kohanim*. Most strikingly, the Torah devotes three entire chapters to discussion of the priestly garb (Exodus 28 and 29 and Leviticus 8). Moreover, it is also noteworthy that the Torah prescribes such elaborate dress for the *Kohanim* and particularly for the *Kohen Gadol*, who arguably holds the holiest position in Judaism, as it states, "And you should make holy clothing for your brother Aaron for honor and beauty" (Exodus 28). Here, as well, the commentators give the emphasis on material things in the Torah a spiritual dimension. The Midrash explains that the eight different articles of clothing that the High Priest wore atone for the sins of Israel, as do the sacrifices:

Necklace, hammered gold.
Mashhad, Iran.
Courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem

ואת הבגדים (ויקרא ח, ב). אמ' ר' סימון כשם שהקרבנות מכפרין כך הבגדים מכפרין.

Rabbi Simon says, just as the sacrifices atone so too does the clothing atone.[5]

The elaborate dress, according to Rabbi Simon, should remind the *Kohanim* of their important and lofty role as representing all of Israel. For example, the Gemara says that the pants worn by the *Kohen* atone for the sin of illicit relationships. Here, we see the complete antithesis of the nakedness of Adam and Eve. If Adam and Eve's nakedness is understood as an absence of *mitzvot*, the *Kohen* and his many articles of clothing represent layers of spiritual holiness. The *Kohen* may have dressed magnificently, but that is only because his clothing was reflective of his magnificent soul.

The recurrent emphasis on clothing, in particular rich majestic clothing, in several significant sections of *Tanakh*, suggests that it is not meant to be taken at face value. Hence, one can trace a recurring theme in the commentaries regarding the view of clothing in *Tanakh*. Clothing is never viewed only as a description of a character's outward appearance. One's state of dress or undress is repeatedly interpreted as a mirror into his/her religious soul and is a further reflection of one's character. Mark Twain said: "The clothes make the man." But according to the Torah, it is the man or woman who makes the clothes.

Karen Miller Jackson *has taught at the Drisha Institute in New York and at Matan HaSharon in Israel. She served on the JOFA Board from 2000-2005. She currently lives in Ra'anana, Israel.*

[1] For further discussion of the various clothes featured in the Joseph narrative see Sarah Steinfeld, "The Use of the Terms '*Ketonet', 'Beged', 'Simlah', 'Tza'if*' for Dress in the Book of Genesis," *Shma'tin* 128, 1997 (Hebrew).

[2] Rashi on *Bereshit* 36:3.

[3] James Kugel, *In Potiphar's House* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[4] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Megillah* 14b.

[5] Leviticus Rabbah 96:10.

The following personal essay was written by Beth Samuels z'l in 2000. Beth was a graduate of the Drisha's Scholars Circle and directed and taught at the Drisha High School Program, which is now named for her. After earning her PhD in mathematics from Yale, she was an assistant professor of mathematics at UC-Berkeley. A strong proponent of Orthodox women's participation in Jewish learning and ritual life, Beth taught Judaic subjects in Palo Alto, where she lived with her husband and two daughters and served as scholar-in-residence in many communities. She presented at numerous JOFA conferences on both biblical and talmudic texts and on aspects of body image, gender, and tzniut. *Beth died on January 5, 2007, at the age of 31 after two years of brave struggle with cancer. We are grateful to her husband, Dr. Ari Tuchman, for sharing this essay with us. May its publication be an* illui neshama *for Beth and a comfort to her family and to all who loved her.*

A memorial volume edited by Barry Wimpfheimer was recently issued, comprising three Hebrew articles and ten articles in English, including one that Beth had written about the function of numbers in Genesis. The wide-ranging and scholarly volume contains contributions by rabbis, academics, scientists, physicians and lawyers, all of them Beth's friends, mentors and relatives, (Wisdom of Bat Sheva: In Memory of Beth Samuels *z'l,* KTAV, New Jersey, 2009).

Covering My Hair

By Beth Samuels z'l

I recently celebrated my one-year wedding anniversary. I also celebrated a year of covering my hair. This complicated halakha plays such a central role in my daily routine. Berets, wigs, hats, falls . . . they are the last item I put on before I leave the house and the first thing I take off when I return home. In my new sacred and beautiful married life, *kissui rosh* (hair covering) seems to be my only unnatural adjustment. Several of my wedded friends recently have removed their sheitels, no longer wanting to struggle with the oppression. They want to feel the wind in their hair; they want to recognize themselves in the mirror; and most importantly they do not want to endorse a custom that at some time might have symbolized a woman's subordination to her husband.

In the Talmud, Tractate *Ketubot* 72a, we learn that a woman who leaves her house with her head uncovered may not collect her *ketubah* money in a case of divorce. The rabbis debate the origin and nature of this law: how much of her hair must be covered, in what locations it should be covered. Despite the varied opinions regarding its details, virtually all halakhic authorities agree that Jewish law requires a married woman to cloak her hair in public. (I have found a handful of responsa that claim that the Talmud's reference is to a woman who behaves inappropriately in public. They argue that since in today's society it is acceptable for a woman to reveal her hair, the halakha of *kissui rosh* does not apply today. In my opinion, it is difficult to rely upon these authorities, who are in the extreme minority.)

My halakhic conviction – my deep-held belief that the Jewish legal system with its Divine foundation offers the most meaningful and necessary lifestyle – forces me to keep my hat on. Faith in the system requires my acceptance of the system as a whole. While I may not understand (or even agree with) some details of the practical *halakhot*, I do adore and revere the larger endeavor. A part of me wishes that covering my hair for the sake of halakha would be enough of a reason to feel comfortable with the law. If halakha is ultimately God's will, then keeping any piece of it should be sufficiently rewarding and thrilling. However, I am influenced by Maimonides, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, and so many others who argue that we can and should search for logical, human reasons for the *halakhot*. By applying our intuitions to God's laws, we elevate the theological enterprise.

So what does a modern Orthodox married woman gain by covering her hair? Or more personally, what do I gain by covering my hair? The question, of course, becomes more complicated when I consider the ways in which I hide my hair. If my hats are meant to serve as external *simanim*, public signs of marriage, then how can I wear a fall? (My fall, by the way, looks exactly like my hair, only nicer). If my hats and wigs function as garments of modesty or as reminders of God above, like the k*ippah*, then why don't my single friends wear them? The rationale that a woman's hair becomes *ervah* (a nakedness or sexual enticement) after she is wed seems unconvincing. (In Tractate *Berakhot* 24a, we learn that several parts of a woman's body are considered *ervah* – including her pinkie finger! Since it is difficult to believe that the pinkie finger is considered to be particularly arousing, we understand that the Talmud is not claiming that these parts of the body are inherently *ervah*, but rather that men are forbidden to gaze at them in an erotic manner, especially while praying.)

So what lies at the root of this halakha? It seems that the essence of *kissui rosh* embodies both an objective standard of propriety and a more flexible, socially determined criterion of respectability. Jewish law always will obligate a married woman to wear something on her head in public, but the extent and form of the covering are dependent on the accepted standard of the religious women of her community. The law was first dictated in a period when seemingly all women, Jewish and non-Jewish, single and married, covered all their hair in public. As secular mores changed, the Jewish married women held on to the customs and coverings of their mothers from the earlier ages. Eventually, wigs became accepted in most circles as an alternate form of covering, shifting the focus from an external sign to an internal one. Since today as well, most observant women are maintaining the traditions of their European grandmothers, the halakha of *kissui rosh* has remained unchanged. In that sense, by wearing hats and wigs, I am consciously identifying myself with generations of pious Jewish women, following in their practices and footsteps.

Rabbi Saul Berman shared with me a unique insight into the essence of *kissui rosh*. The allusion in the Torah for head covering can be found in the description of the laws of *Sotah* (a women accused of infidelity). There it says, "*Ufara et rosh ha-isha*" (Numbers 5:18), that the priest must uncover or untie the woman's hair, seemingly to shame her. The words "*parua rosh*" (uncovered hair) also appear in connection with the laws of the *kohanim* (priests), for they are forbidden to let their hair

become *parua* or unkempt (Leviticus 10:6, 21:10). Perhaps this implies that when a woman binds her hair, she is likening herself to a priest. Just as *tzitzit* (similar to the *kohen's* head ornament, *tzitz*) can be viewed as priestly garments worn by men, a head covering can be regarded as a priestly garment worn by women. When I was in elementary school, I wanted to wear a *kippah* and *tzitzit* like the boys in my class. I wanted to display my Jewish pride publicly, and I desired the opportunity to constantly "wear" a *mitzvah*. In some sense my hat grants me that privilege now. Both *tzitzit* and hats serve as constant reminders that every Jewish man and woman are part of the priestly nation, with obligations to fulfill God's commandments. I will never forget the special moment that my husband and I shared on the day after our wedding when, for the first time, he donned his *tallit* and I, my hat.

Of course, my hair covering also allows me to prove to myself that I do not observe only the *halakhot* that I like and that are convenient. Since I grew up observing and loving Shabbat and kashrut, it is difficult for me to feel the sacrifice in keeping these commandments. Through hair covering, I demonstrate every day that I live my life by a higher standard. My hat and wig help me commit myself to a Godly system that need not always be comfortable. In that sense, my hair covering fits perfectly well into my new married life, a life that is constantly elevating my spiritual being.

Hasidic *Tzniut*

By Ysoscher Katz

One of the major dilemmas facing Jewish education today is the challenge of teaching t*zniut* - modesty. I believe that the study of Hasidism, although it may seem an unlikely source, can aid in our understanding of *tzniut* and help us develop a broader and more nuanced approach to teaching it in our schools.

Most Jewish educators would agree that teaching *tzniut* with tact and sensitivity is fraught with major obstacles. It is difficult to strike the right balance between being firm in matters of principle while at the same time communicating these principles in a sensitive, respectful, and non-threatening manner.

Of course, one can always adopt a traditional approach to teaching *tzniut*. This approach entails learning the pertinent *halakhot* with the students and inculcating them with a proper sense of *yir'ah* (trepidation), thereby ensuring that they fully appreciate the severity of the associated transgressions and violations.

However, for most contemporary educators, this approach is difficult. Educating about modesty in a coercive manner is both anathema to our modern sensibilities and an ineffective means of education.

There are many obstacles to teaching *tzniut* properly. Two problems, however, stand out:

1) *Tzniut* calls for modesty and demands temperance. The requirements of modesty in external appearance often necessarily demand that students temper their desire to express their natural beauty and to present themselves in an attractive manner. At times, the requirement of modesty can curtail and inhibit self-expression. Thus, an unreflective approach to teaching *tzniut* often calls for a prioritization of values: the value of modesty trumps the value of self-expression and the resulting cultivation of a positive self-image.

A sensitive approach to *tzniut* renders this approach untenable. It is wrong to teach our students that proper *tzniut* can only be attained by sacrificing one value for the sake of another. A healthy sense of self and the sense of pride in one's appearance is a God given right and blessing that no one should have to forfeit.

2) A tacit assumption underlying the prevailing understanding of *tzniut* is that the onus of creating a holy society is solely on the attractive individual – in practical terms, on the female. Usually this is translated as follows: because women may arouse inappropriate thoughts in men, it is their responsibility to dress and behave in a way that limits the potential for undermining the *kedusha* of the public sphere.

This view suggests that modesty is the exclusive responsibility of women and it shifts responsibility from the "transgressing viewer" to the women being viewed. (Unfortunately for the most part, *tzniut i*s considered an issue that only concerns women. Indeed, it is only recently that schools have started to emphasize that *tzniut* applies equally to men and women and should be taught to boys as well as girls.)

Having addressed some of the problematic issues concerning the teaching of *tzniut*, I would like to suggest that some of the solutions to these problems may be found in Hasidic texts which provide a rich body of largely overlooked material.

Conventional wisdom may suggest that *Hasidut* has little to offer a person with modern sensibilities. Indeed many scholars believe that Hasidism, in general, has a negative view of women.[1] However, a perusal of Hasidic texts on *tzniut* shows that this generalization is shortsighted. One can certainly find a few Hasidic texts regarding women that are difficult to reconcile with progressive and modern values. Nevertheless, since Hasidic literature has developed for more than two hundred years, in diverse geographical locations, one should not generalize about this vast body of texts on the basis of a few troubling citations. Hasidic masters do not speak in one voice. Rather, there is a multiplicity of opinions in Hasidic texts and lore. While some teachings are incompatible with modern notions, others offer more egalitarian views, which can serve to deepen our religious experiences.

My own experience of teaching in Modern Orthodox high schools and other settings has made clear to me that Hasidic sources can also help us enrich our discourse on *tzniut* and allow us to develop a more nuanced vocabulary when teaching our students the value of living a life of *kedusha,* even though for historical and sociological reasons these sources have not been influential in shaping thinking about *tzniut* in contemporary Hasidic educational institutions. The evolution of Hasidism from its early writings is a complex issue which is beyond the scope of this article.

When exploring Hasidic teachings, it is important to bear in mind the debate between Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber as to which texts should be analyzed when studying Hasidism.

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***Hasidic* Tzniut** *...continued from page 11*

This debate was played out on the pages of *Commentary* magazine during the 1960s.[2] Gershom Scholem strongly believed that the core of Hasidic teachings is to be found in the theological writings of its founders, while Buber believed that it is the legends that best convey the creativity and essence of Hasidism.

Adopting the positions of both Scholem and Buber, I hereby present two Hasidic texts on *tzniut*: one is of a theoretical nature and one is a legend. Taken together they offer us novel insights about *tzniut* and *kedusha*.

The first source is a text from the volume *Tzava'at ha' Rivash*,[3] "The Will and Testament of the Baal Shem Tov," an anthology of teachings and instructions attributed to the Baal Shem Tov and his successor, R. Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezhirech. In this volume, (p.41) R. Dov Ber is quoted as saying the following:

> אלא כך יש להתנהג בהסתכלות, אם הסתכל בפתע
> פתאום על אשה יפה יחשוב במחשבתו מנין לה זה היופי...
> על כרחך זה בא מכח אלוקי המתפשט בה, הוא נותן לה
> כח היופי והאדמימות, נמצא שורש היופי הוא כח אלוקי.

> However, this is the way one should conduct himself in matters of gazing (at women). If he suddenly glanced at a beautiful woman, he should think to himself "from where did she acquire such beauty"? …Surely, it comes from a divine energy that manifests itself in her, which endows her with beauty and rosiness. Thus, it emerges that the source of beauty is a divine energy.

While the ideas discussed in this text are frequently cited by those interested in *Hasidut*, never before has it been appreciated for its potential to offer a unique approach to *tzniut*. It promotes an appreciation of physical beauty and its divine essence as something to extol, not ignore.

Interestingly, Scholem and Buber also argued about the proper understanding of the idea this text is espousing.[4] While Scholem believed that Hasidic spiritualization of all of creation is a means towards transcending the material world, and that finding the divine core is a means of getting past the material essence of the world, Buber argued that Hasidic philosophy affirms the intrinsic holiness of the material world; beauty as it is physically experienced has inherent *kedusha*.

Contemporary scholarship largely sides with Buber, and following this view, the text from *Tzava'at Ha'Rivash*, can offer a radically new approach to teaching *tzniut*. Instead of physical beauty being an obstacle, it becomes a vehicle through which one can attain religious heights. Moreover the Maggid of Mezhirech teaches that physical attraction should not be demeaned but rather elevated and spiritualized. Such an orientation towards beauty has the potential of providing an antidote to the hyper-sexualized society in which we live today. It allows us to retain the sensuous quality associated with physical beauty, while at the same time transforming it from a mere hedonistic indulgence and lustful passion into a spiritual and sublime aesthetic experience. Adopting this orientation would provide educators with a more sensitive approach to *tzniut* than is currently in vogue in most schools.

As for the legend, Avraham Kahanah, in his book *Sefer Ha'Hasidut*[5] quotes the following story. The Seer of Lublin once spent a Shabbat with Rabbi Barukh of Mezhbizh, the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov. On Shabbat afternoon, when the family was having lunch together, the Seer was seated next to one of Rabbi Barukh's daughters. The Seer was not happy since he felt that it was not *tzanua* (modest) for a woman to be seated next to him. According to the story, R. Barukh sensed the Seer's thoughts and angrily asked him why he was upset adding, "the verse (Psalms 119:37) states: העבר עיני מראות שוא' —avert my eyes from seeing falsehood.' It says 'avert my eyes from the falsehood,' it does not say 'avert the falsehood from my eyes.' In other words, why are you angry at my daughter? It is not her responsibility to prevent you from sin. The onus is on you to avoid sinning." (Variations of this story and motif can be found in other biographies of R. Barukh. See, for example, *Botzina di nehora*,[6] p. 186).

This story offers a novel approach to *tzniut*. The Rebbe of Mezhbizh argues that preventing temptation is not the sole responsibility of the woman. According to his reading of the verse in Psalms quoted above, the recipe for creating a holy community does not require keeping women out of sight. Rather, it is the responsibility of the one who is tempted to avert his eyes and avoid temptation.

Taken together, the two early Hasidic sources can refine and enrich our understanding of modesty. Beauty is not a religious impediment to *avodat Hashem*. On the contrary, with practice, we can train ourselves to spiritualize our encounters with beauty and all that is aesthetically pleasing. These texts also place responsibility for *tzniut* and holiness on men. Accordingly, we can begin to teach that *tzniut* provides us with an opportunity to see beauty as holy, and to realize that the task of infusing the public sphere with holiness ought to be a joint task undertaken by both men and women.

Rabbi Ysoscher Katz *was ordained at Yeshiva Torah v'Yirah d'Satmar. He taught at Ma'ayanot High School for Girls in Teaneck, New Jersey for five years. He currently directs the Beit Midrash Program of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah.*

[1] The general attitude of Hasidism towards women and the scholarly treatment of this topic is a large subject and beyond the scope of this essay. Samuel Abba Horodecky, the nineteenth century scholar, wrote in his book *Ha'Hasidut Ve'Ha'hasidim* (Tel Aviv, 1943) vol. 4, p.68, that "the Jewish woman was given complete equality in the emotional, mystical, religious life of Beshtian Hasidism." Contemporary scholar of Hasidism, Ada Rapoport–Albert, however, refutes Horodecky's claims and considers his arguments unconvincing. See "On Women in Hasidism: S. A. Horodecky and the Maid of Ludmir Tradition" in *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky*, (London, 1988) pp. 455-529. More recently, Nehemia Polen has contended that Horodecky's assertions about Hasidic philosophy being open and inclusive have considerable merit and that, indeed, Hasidism was not only inclusive but occasionally even radically egalitarian. See "Miriam's Dance: Radical Egalitarianism in Hasidic Thought" in *Modern Judaism 12 (1992)* pp. 1-21.

[2] See Commentary Magazine, October 1961; September 1963. See also Scholem's *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971) pp. 228-250.

[3] Kehot Press. (Brooklyn, N.Y. 1998).

[4] See note 2 above.

[5] Warsaw, 1922.

[6] Machon Be'er Yitzchak. Brooklyn, NY, (1999).

Behold, You Are Beautiful

By Nessa Rapoport

In the matter of *tzniut*, the first question is theological. Why were we fashioned with bodies – when the Creator could have made us of souls alone? What is the purpose of our physicality; what manifestation of holiness does the vessel, the *kli*, of our bodies make uniquely possible?

I contemplate this question almost daily, fascinated by the relationship between a commodified perspective on women's bodies – dressed, designed, and made up, and now injected, reshaped through surgery, and objectified, if not debased, by much of popular culture – and my religious responsibility to my body, the necessary medium without which *mitzvot* cannot be undertaken nor *kedusha* revealed and released into the world.

The corollary to this intriguing paradox is that anyone who ignores, neglects, or – *has ve-halila* – abuses her body is tarnishing the vessel and desecrating the work of the Creator. We are rightfully protective of any means that enable us to exalt and beautify the Name. Our bodies are the most indispensable vehicles of all.

Rather than pretend we do not have bodies, then, we ought to engage in *hiddur mitzvah* in our relation to them, marveling not only in their function, as we do in most – although clearly not all – *birkot ha-shahar*, the morning's first blessings, but in our bodies' enhancement, as we would for any liturgical *kli*, whether the *rimonim* that adorn the Torah's handles or the scent of the *etrog*.

Yes, there is a place for the quality of *tzniut*, but not as a coercive idea that represses and inhibits 51% of the Jewish people. Which is not to say that I'm applauding the vulgarity of our age, the style of dress – or undress – to which my grandparents' generation taught me to apply the term *prost*. But the opposite of *tzniut* is not bad taste. Rather, like the sequestered impurity of *tum'ah*, *tzniut* is a complex religious category that seems, in contemporary life, to have lost all its other applications except in relation to women.

And let us not be naïve. A mental survey of the number of social exhortations regarding *tzniut* to anyone except young women is unassailable evidence that most strictures are not about all women – but are almost exclusively directed at the young. Rather than help young Jewish women view their bodies as exemplifications of the Creator's work, the edicts further objectify them, reifying their bodies solely into potential temptation for young Jewish men.

True Tales

Maaseh Alef: The literature of a Modern Orthodox summer camp, sent in advance to parents in order to communicate the camp's standards:

> *Dear Parents: Please help us support the values of camp by ensuring that your children dress with* tzniut. *This* middah *applies equally to boys and girls.*
>
> ***Girls:*** *Please do not bring the following items to camp: dresses or tops with spaghetti straps; tank tops or halters; any sleeveless or cap-sleeved shirts. Shorts and skirts must be knee length when seated. No bikinis or two-piece bathing suits; one-piece bathing suits only.*
>
> ***Boys:*** *No tank tops are permitted in the dining room.*

Maaseh Bet: The Israel program for Modern Orthodox teens that, in its clothing list, insists on only one-piece bathing suits for girls – and then compels the girls to swim in their clothes, even when there are no bystanders, for the entire length of the trip, while the boys are permitted to skinny dip when *they* are alone.

Maaseh Gimel: The following text from a Web site about *tzniut*:

> *In the more liberal Modern Orthodox community, women have a more relaxed dress code, and often wear sleeveless shirts, shirts with low necklines, or tight pants, and cover their knees with opaque tights, skirts, or sometimes pants. Stricter Modern Orthodox practice is for sleeves to reach the elbows and shirts to cover the collarbone, skirts to cover the knees, and to eschew pants in the presence of men. In the Haredi community, all married women cover their hair whenever non-family members are present. Women cover their elbows; wear skirts which reach a few inches below the knee, often mid-calf; generally avoid skirts with slits, preferring instead kick-pleats; cover their collarbones; wear stockings and closed-toe shoes; avoid certain colors, especially bright red. In some communities such as the Haredi community of Jerusalem, women wear loose vests over shirts.*
>
> *Men must wear shirts, with sleeves. Modern Orthodox men will wear shorts, but Haredi men will not, and many will not wear short sleeves at all.*

Like so many seemingly *min ha-shamayim* values from the immutable heavens, *tzniut* is hypocritical in relation to gender. It is also both culturally conditioned and age dependent.

When my grandmother was a girl, a woman's revealed ankle was scandalous, as was the relinquishment of hoops in floor-length skirts or of stays in Edwardian bodices. When she was a young woman, "bobbed hair," cut to chin length or shorter, was incendiary. In the spring of 1925, there was a riot in London because a woman wore a dress with transparent sleeves. *Ma'i ka mashma lan*? What do we learn from this?

So much for absolute yardsticks. As for age: By the time she reaches middle age, a woman is highly unlikely to wear spaghetti straps or miniskirts with bare legs. When we talk about *tzniut*, then, we talk mostly of constraints imposed on young women.

And yet when I see young Jewish women in their radiance, when I behold their physical beauty, I am suffused with the glory of Creation. When they are evidently able to savor their bodies – by the way they dress and ornament themselves – I am all the more joyful. My women friends and I vividly recall our youth, our inability to enjoy the loveliness we could not then see: What *bizbuz*, squandering.

...continued on page 14

Beautiful *...continued from page 13*

Please do not look to me, then, to enforce ever stricter communal norms that disguise or shroud the bodies of the young. The beauty of the young is miraculous. Let them embellish their bodies, if it gives them pleasure, enjoy their bodies for what they can do, for their well-being, and, yes, for their capacity to draw the eye of the world, and, some day, their beloved *re'im ahuvim*.

Dress is also a form of self-expression. How puzzling that each one of us is unique, bearing the once-only stamp of Infinity, and yet, increasingly, the observant Jewish community asks young women to dress alike, in an immediately recognizable "uniform."

Should our world nevertheless wish to level new stringencies upon young women, I hope that *tzniut*'s wardens will not cite fidelity to a more conservative past. Last summer I watched the recent documentary about the Rav, in which Dr. Tonya Soloveitchik appears at a dinner, decades ago, as the quintessence of dignity and grace. She is wearing an elegant black sheath, neckline and arms covered in what appears to be a single layer of sheer black chiffon.

Today, in mass communal regression, it is no longer possible to imagine transparent sleeves at an institutional dinner, to picture an honored woman leader dressed as the Rebbetzin was.

We began with a theological question: Why bodies? One response can be found in *Shir Ha-shirim*, Solomon's Song, which chooses physical beauty of all possible metaphors to express the passionate love between God and Israel. *Hinakh yafah ra'ayati*. Behold, you are beautiful, my love. *Hinkha yafe dodi*. And you, my love, are beautiful.

Unlike the dress codes of summer camp, the Song of Songs is an ode to mutuality; the ardor of a young woman for her lover, expressed as praise of his beauty, and his for her, embodying in language the great love between our Liberator and us. Notwithstanding the ArtScroll translation, which bypasses the ravishing, terrifying metaphor of *Shir Ha-shirim* by pretending that its allegorical interpretation is a translation, in this holy text a young woman speaks to us directly. Here we find her portrayed as a dove in the cleft of the rock, so often quoted as an image of *tzniut*. But we can find her as well, in much more intimate detail, with her chosen one, both enticed into deepening love by their beauty, and finding each other's bodies wondrous because of their love.

Across the history of our people, this young woman does not let the guards deter her from the fulfillment of her quest. She is telling us something important, something we – the elders, the guardians – seem to need to relearn continually: The escalating severity of *tzniut* in our day is not religion; it's sociology.

Behold the young women – and relax.

Nessa Rapoport's *most recent book is House on the River: A Summer Journey, a memoir of family and place.*

The following modesty broadside in Hebrew and English dates from Jerusalem in the 1930's. An approximate English translation follows.

בעזהי"ת. בי"ו עט"ר עש"ו

צו אויפמערקזאמקייט

א אידישע טאכטער, דארף נעהן אנשטענדיג בעקליידעט. דהיינו: א לאנגע קלייד, מים לאנגע ארביל, א געפאסטע האלדז, עס זאל זיך פון איהר לייב, ניט ארויס זעהן קיין טפח דרויסען ח"ו.

זאקן: ניטם קיין לייב קולייד, אין ניטם קיין דורכזיכטיגע.

א פערהיראטע פרוי: דעם קאפ צו מידעקט כדי דאס קיין האר זאל זיך ניטם ארויס זעהן.

לתשומת לב

הבת היהודית, צריכה ללכת בתלבושת צנועה, כלומר: שמלה ארוכה, שרוולין ארוכים בית צואר מצומצם, באופן: שלא יראה משוך בשדה טפח חוצה ח"ו.

טרכים: שלא מגוון העור, ושלא יהיה שוד הבשר נראה מתוכן.

והעאה: ראשה מכוסה כדין, באופן שלא יראה משערותי' חוצה.

כל כבודה בת מלך פנימה וגו' (תהלים מ"ה).

ATTENTION

A Jewish daughter must wear modest clothes: i.e., a long dress with long sleeves, and a tight neckline in a manner that no skin of more than a *tefakh* (a handbreadth) is visible, God forbid.

Stockings: Not transparent or skin color, and no skin should be visible through them.

A married woman's head should be covered according to *din*, so that no hair peeps out and can be seen.

"Because of her modesty she merited that kings (error in Hebrew spelling) **and prophets were descended from her."**
Megillah 10 (discussion in gemara of Tamar's veiling in presence of Yehudah in *Bereshit*)

"All the glory of the daughter of the king is within." (Psalms 45)

White Gloves and Uniforms

By Zipora Schorr

"Clothes make the man.
Naked people have little or no influence on society."
Mark Twain

רבי יוחנן קרי למאני מכבודתא
Rabbi Yohanan referred to his garments as
"those which give me distinction."
Bava Kama 91b

עז והדר לבושה
Strength and glory are her garments.
Proverbs 31:25

איזהו מכבד, המכבד את הבריות
Who is honored? Whoever honors others.
Pirkei Avot 4:1

Schools—Jewish and secular—have struggled for many years with the issue of dress codes. Should students be homogenized into a whole that emphasizes equality and helps blur the distinctions that arise from socioeconomic differences? Does that democratization destroy individuality and rob students, especially girls, of the ability to express themselves in a world that otherwise expects conformity of behavior? Is the visible breakdown of standards in the general culture so pervasive that it is nearly impossible to keep those forces out of our schools? And finally, is the only answer clearly defined standards that ultimately result in uniforms?

It took the better part of a decade to explore these questions and finally arrive at a satisfactory resolution in our school.

Beth T'filoh in Baltimore is, by title, a "community school," created to serve a student body with a wide range of religious observance. Our mission calls for "a modern approach to traditional Judaism," and we "welcome children from a broad range of backgrounds and beliefs, respecting the spiritual dignity of those beliefs" (a phrase adopted from Rabbi Norman Lamm). It is, nonetheless, a school that is governed by Orthodox practice. Our lower school has been in existence for more than 65 years, while our high school has just graduated its 20th class.

Our high school began with this guiding principle: to create a Jewish school that was a part of the existing culture, which would appeal to, in the language of the founders, "ordinary, normal American kids." It could be argued that, when the high school was founded more than two decades ago, times were different, and styles were not as outrageous. In truth, however, every era has its contemporary styles, and there are always standards that schools try to set that attempt to elevate its "citizens" above the existing culture.

In its early years, our high school allowed girls to wear slacks, even jeans, as was the rule in the lower and middle schools. But as the high school grew, we felt that our identity needed more definition. Were we trying to model ourselves on the progressive school down the road with its very loose dress code? Or were we more closely identified with the modern co-ed day schools, mostly in New York? And if the latter was how we saw ourselves, then the conclusion would be that jeans skirts were the norm. Inevitably, the skirts grew longer and longer, until they brushed the floor, and our students appeared sloppier and sloppier. As we began to reflect on our school's founding principles, we were forced to confront the very important question of whether external appearance is itself a cause of behavior that exemplifies a breakdown of values or merely a reflection of already held negative, or unacceptable, values.

The predominant view among my colleagues in the (secular) independent school community is that appropriate dress encourages appropriate behavior. Sloppy shirts and torn jeans encourage sloppy thinking, sloppy habits, sloppy attitudes, even sloppy relationships. Classically, this is a reflection of the saying that "clothes make the man" – a clear expectation that when you look nice, you'll act nice.

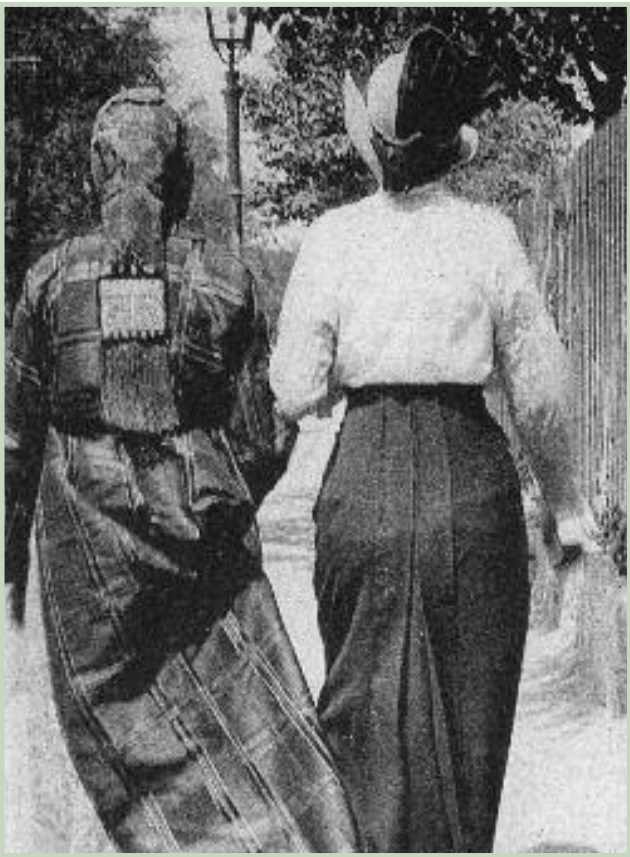
This argument began to resonate with us. So, rather than instituting a "uniform" per se, we instituted a "uniform look" and attempted to define that "look" as specifically as we could. As we worked our way toward a more definitive identity, we determined that slacks (not jeans) fit smoothly into that identity, with the understanding that they would not be too tight fitting (not a very objective standard!).

This initiative was an abysmal failure. The "dress code" was difficult, if not impossible to define and then to enforce, but one thing was certain: the students took advantage of every loophole they could find, and the external appearance of our student body reflected a certain looseness and an acceptance of that looseness. It was interesting that prospective parents who toured the school invariably commented on the way the students looked – not on religious grounds, but purely from the perspective of what was "appropriate" for a school that prides itself on rigor and professionalism.

> "…when you look nice, you'll act nice."

The questions posed earlier now took on greater relevance and meaning. To what extent did this new "dress code," this "uniform look," address those questions satisfactorily? Designer styles were still being worn, albeit in prescribed colors, so the issue of the haves and have-nots had certainly not been resolved. And although students continued to express their individuality we discovered that they channeled such individuality into the color of their socks, rather than into the creativity of thought we tried to encourage. Finally, it proved impossible to keep the pervasive negative values of society out of the clothing choices made by our girls. One mother told me, in a moment of candor, that she cringed each morning when her daughter left the house. Her daughter was a student council leader, a model student, even modest in her actions and behavior, yet she genuinely did not see that her shirt was too short, too tight, too revealing, and indica-

...continued on page 16



Two Centuries Meeting
Mother and daughter in Salonica
Early 20th century postcard

White Gloves ...*continued from page 15*

tive of everything she was not.

That was when we made the decision to require uniforms in the high school, followed soon after by the lower school and the middle school. No nuance, no interpretation, no "because it doesn't look nice" – but clear, defined and prescribed clothing (including the option of slacks for girls) from a specific manufacturer with a specific fit.

This approach is perhaps not *oz vehadar levushah* – but a significant statement about the value system of a school community that thinks beyond the external, but strives to create an environment in which external appearance and internal values are consistent. The transition to uniforms has been almost seamless. Parents of all school divisions have expressed to us their relief that they no longer have to confront daily conflicts with their children over their clothes. The clarity of the dress code with uniforms is an important factor in its enforcement. Of course students in middle and high school occasionally try to push the limits, but we have appointed one administrator as the "dress code chief" so that teachers are not put in a position where they have to be punitive about any lack of adherence to the standards.

The introduction of a uniform led to one profound change that was somewhat unexpected: male and female students essentially began dressing alike. This change served to minimize some of the sexualization of the girls' physical appearance and limit the centrality of appearance in general. It was only then that our girls – and their parents – understood a belief I had tried, so far unsuccessfully, to articulate and that I genuinely hold dear. It was really something I learned as a young child and that has informed my thinking ever since.

Let me share a simple experience that had a profound impact on me. When I was eight, my mother received a shocking phone call one morning; her brother had suddenly passed away and was being taken to Israel for burial. She needed to catch a plane very quickly to attend his funeral. I will never forget the image of my mother preparing to leave for the airport. She got dressed, put on lipstick, and then pulled on her white gloves – that symbol of refinement and civility. The eyes of a young child are discerning, and I asked my mother, "Aren't you sad? Why does it matter how you look?" And her reply is the reason why I never leave my house without my version of "white gloves," and why uniforms are our version of "white gloves."

She said, "It's *kevod habriyot*; it's not about me, but about God's creations, which I honor when I dress this way." She meant it, and she showed it. This holy rebbetzin, this Tehillim-saying woman to whom people came for "*berakhot*" (I guess if she had been a man she would have been a rebbe), valued God's creations and the *tzelem Elokim* in which we are created, and expressed these deeply held beliefs in the way she presented herself externally.

Perhaps that is the meaning of Rabbi Yohanan's phrase, "My clothing is my distinction." In the words of *Pirkei Avot*, "*Eizehu mekhubad, hamekhabed et habriyot*: Through the way that I dress, I honor others, and by so doing, I bring honor, and respect, to myself."

My girls—and their mothers—now understand.

***Zipora Schorr** has been the Director of Education of the Beth T'filoh Dahan Community School in Baltimore for over 30 years.*

A Jewish Girl Dressed for her Marriage Ceremony
Etching by T. White, 1768
The Turkish girl's head-dress is made up of a copper plate.
Courtesy of The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary

Tova Hartman on *Tzniut*

In a closely-argued chapter in her book, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism* (HBI Series on Jewish Women, Brandeis University Press, 2007), prominent feminist scholar Tova Hartman explores the concept of *tzniut* and what she terms its "radical ascendancy in prominence within the discourse of contemporary Orthodox Judaism." She draws similarities between the objectification of women in Western culture and in this discourse. As she says, "exiting religion does not necessarily equal an exit from the oppressive male gaze it channels; yet she suggests that the "concept of modesty, properly formulated, may ultimately be helpful in countering this gaze and its ill effects" on both men and women. The chapter, "*Modesty and the Religious Male Gaze*" should be read in its entirety. Below are a few extracts with the permission of the author.

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A plethora of books have been published within the last ten years that deal extensively with the issue of modesty *(tzniut)* from both Jewish legal (halakhic) and philosophical perspectives. Conventional wisdom within the Orthodox Jewish community has assigned a simple explanation to this trend: the recent fervor surrounding *tzniut* represents a necessary response to the progressive erosion of even the most basic standards of modesty within contemporary Western culture. According to this logic, the spike in the discourse is a gesture toward making sense of a rapidly changing world. Most important it is an act of resistance: a stopgap attempt to protect their communities from the corrosive effects of an exhibitionism that in modern secular culture has become more or less the norm.

pp. 48-49

Why is the vast majority of the literary output dealing with *tzniut* addressed to a female audience and marketed almost exclusively to a readership of women? And finally, why in the vast majority of cases, are the writers of these publications not women?...

...Foucault (*The History of Sexuality*, 1980) suggests a compelling explanation for similar trends of heightened cultural output, expressing amusement about a society that spoke endlessly, floridly, and provocatively about its sexual repression. Orthodox women can perhaps detect a similar (if inverted) irony in the case of religious men speaking incessantly and with great specificity—down to the finger, at times even the joint—about which areas of a woman are most arousing and why—all in the name of decrying the insidious inroads of prurience and lasciviousness into their communities. In one recent book, the subject of *tzniut* is broken down into chapter headings, each of which takes the name of a different female body part to be explored in meticulous halakhic detail (Aviner, S, *Am Klavi,* 1983; Ellinson, G, *The Modest Way: A Guide to the Rabbinic Sources,* 1992). Another contains illustrations of problematic body parts—collarbones, for example—in increasing states of undress: methodically mapping the halakhic status of the neckline's progressive plunge. (Falk. E.P., *Modesty: An Adornment for Life*, 1998) As Foucault writes: "What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret"(1980, p.35).

Following Foucault, one must hold out the possibility that to speak so stridently and ceaselessly of the need to cover itself reflects a kind of fervent immodesty that may well be a symptom of the very "problem" it proposes to address. Indeed, it seems increasingly likely that the current discourse is being defined by men—both rabbis and laypeople—in whose tone can be detected a heightened level of stimulation that reflects, one suspects, not only an antagonism to Western immodesty, but an implicit surrender to its corrupting effects.

pp. 59-61

Given the plight of women's bodies in Western culture, traditional society may in fact muster a nostalgic appeal. Better your body be plastered over and cast to the margins, one might argue, than stripped down and laid across a Bed of Sodom. Far from marginalizing women's bodies, however, the Orthodox male gaze has of late placed it front and center on the cultural stage. This trend of religious men speaking incessantly about women's bodies with great passion and specificity (this discourse being carried out under the pretense of "modesty") evokes with very little nuance Freudian ideas about sublimation, and the cultural irony so aptly noted by Foucault…

…It seems clear that an affinity between Orthodox and Western perspectives, despite the air of ecumenical achievement, raises the specter of new, potentially menacing threats to the minds and bodies of women and men. The heart of what is held in common by the sexual discourses of Orthodoxy and the West is that the discourse itself is shaped almost exclusively by males, and accepted by women as if by divine fiat. This lopsided disconnect itself would appear to be the source of all the various forms of corruption to which the different systems of gender give rise—ultimately as harmful to men as it is to women, and ultimately serving neither. The fact that the male gaze travels in only one direction—and the way that this solipsism allows and encourages men not only to see women, but to see themselves, as well as the way in which it causes women to hypersexualize both their own bodies and their ideas about men—is itself an essence of immodesty, a paradigm of promiscuity

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Wedding jacket, Russia, late 19th century, Cotton, lace
Collection of the Judah L. Magnes Museum

The Power of a Strand of Hair

By Tamar Biala

Human culture has long ascribed to human hair varied and wondrous powers. In different cultures, in both East and West, priests and ascetics searching for greater holiness would shave their hair or grow it for its supernatural powers (as did the biblical Samson). In patriarchal cultures, one of the ways to rule over women's bodies and control their power is by ruling over and controlling their hair. Most Western cultures, at one point or other, have demanded of women that they cover their hair and thus diminish – to some extent – their presence.

Hazal, who identified women's hair as a sexual organ (most famously in BT *Berakhot* 24a: "*se'ar be'isha ervah*"[1]) demanded that women cover it. The rabbis enumerated hair covering as one of the stringencies that Jewish women took upon themselves and ruled that a woman who uncovers her hair in public can be divorced and forfeits the monetary compensation of her *ketubah* (BT *Ketubot* 7:1).

One of the most difficult and often-told talmudic stories in this regard is that of Kimhit (BT *Yoma* 47a), the mother of no fewer than seven High Priests. I heard this story many times while growing up and again later – on the eve of my wedding – at my mandatory meeting with a rebbetzin at the offices of the Rabbinate in Jerusalem. This short and powerful tale, which appears in both Talmuds and in other sources, begins with the rabbis' astonishment and wonder at Kimhit's having merited so distinguished and sacred a group of sons.[2] "They asked her, 'what have you done to merit this?' And she answered, 'never in my life have the rafters of my home seen the braids of my hair.'"

As a child, I was very bothered by the technical elements of this tale. How did Kimhit shower? Did she ever comb her hair? As I grew older, I wondered if by this hermetic hair covering she merited having seven sons who were High Priests, how much more could she have obtained if she had made herself totally invisible!

There are other, lesser known stories in rabbinic literature regarding women's hair that provide a more critical, deeper, and nuanced approach. Alongside their halakhic discussions, Hazal, we know, developed a rich and varied world of midrash and aggadah, through which the rabbis made possible a critical perspective on the normative way of life depicted and demanded in their halakhic discourse. I believe that hair covering is one such area addressed in midrash and aggadah. In particular I would like to draw attention to two *midrashim* that presumably seek to fill in lacunae in the biblical text, yet seem to reflect a complex and critical view of the broadly stated requirement that women cover their hair.

Two young Jewish girls, Tunisia
Early 20th century postcard

The Wives of Shimi ben Gera and On ben Pelet and Their Hair

In *Bemidbar* 16 we read of the rebellion of Korah the Levite against the exclusive leadership of Moshe and Aharon. At the end of the story, On ben Pelet of the tribe of Reuven is mentioned as one of the rebels, but he vanishes from the rest of the narrative, which concludes with Korah and his followers being swallowed up by the earth. The Talmud (BT *Sanhedrin* 109b–110a) solves the mysterious disappearance of On with a story, in which On's wife saves him from involvement in the rebellious conspiracy and thus from a violent death.

> Rav said: On ben Pelet was saved by a woman. She (his wife) said to him (to On): What will you gain from this? Whether Moshe or the other one is the master, you are the disciple. (He said): What can I do? I was in their counsel and took an oath with them! She (On's wife) said to him (her husband): I know that the entire assembly is holy, as it is written, *for all the assembly is holy* (Num. 16:3). She said: Sit here and I will save you. She gave him wine and intoxicated him, and laid him down within. She sat by the tent-opening and undid her hair. Whoever came and saw her, turned back. And in the meanwhile, they (Korah and his followers) were swallowed up.

The Midrash does not expand on the reactions of the men searching for On as they come upon his wife. The terse language – "whoever came and saw her, turned back" – sharpens the unmistakable conclusion that a woman's uncovered hair is an impassable boundary for men.

The second midrash also appears in a context of revolt and rebellion against authority. In Samuel II we read of the flight of

David and his men from Absalom and his band of rebels, who aimed to seize the monarchy and depose David. David asks the priests Zadok and Evyatar to return the Ark to Jerusalem and serve there, along with their sons Ahima'atz and Jonathan as his spies. In the course of David's flight, as he and his party pass a place referred to as "Bahurim," one of Saul's kinsman named Shimi ben Gera appears, curses them, stones them, and rains dirt on them. In the meantime, while being trailed by a spy of Absalom, Ahima'atz and Jonathan try to sneak a message to David. They hide out in a well in the courtyard of a "Man of Bahurim."

> But a boy saw them and informed Absalom. They left at once and came to the house of a Man of Bahurim who had a well in his courtyard. They got down into it, and the wife took a cloth, spread it over the mouth of the well and scattered groats on top of it so that nothing would be noticed. When Absalom's servants came to the woman at the house and asked where Ahima'atz and Jonathan were, she told them that they had crossed over the brook of water. They searched, but found nothing and they returned to Jerusalem (Samuel II 17:18–20).

Midrash Yalkut Shimoni on Megillat Esther (Remez 1053), comments on this last scene and offers an expansive description of how the two were able to hide from Absalom's men. It identifies the woman who hides them in her well as the wife of none other than Shimi, earlier noted as a "man of Bahurim," and transposes Ahima'atz and Jonathan onto their illustrious fathers, Zadok and Evyatar, whom it refers to as "righteous men." This transposition is, to be sure, a common midrashic technique that turns the biblical test into a never-ending tale, and reflects Hazal's freedom and the sense of the sages that the Bible is theirs to continue.

> "...attributing too much sexuality to hair can ultimately weaken and even undo men's power over women..."

According to this text of the midrash:

> When Zadok and Evyatar fled, and Absalom sought to kill them, they found Shimi's door open. They entered, and descended into the well. Shimi's wife immediately covered it, spread groats over it, undid her hair and sat on the covering as if attending to her needs.
>
> The servants of Absalom came, and found her thus sitting, with her hair wild. They said: "could it be that the righteous are in the well and that one (i.e., the woman, Shimi's wife) sits atop them?" and then and there ran off.
>
> The Holy Blessed One said: because they (David's spies – Zadok and Evyatar) escaped by her hand, she will bring forth two righteous ones who will save Israel by their hand, namely Mordekhai and Esther (also like Saul and his kin from the tribe of Benjamin).

According to the Midrash, Absalom's men found the woman sitting on the well, with her hair undone and uncovered. It was inconceivable to them that the fleeing men, whom they considered "righteous," would be anywhere near the woman Absalom's men referred to disparagingly as "that one." They thus dismiss Shimi's wife as licentious because of the state of her hair, and David's spies are saved.

The Midrashists' Vision of Women Acting in Freedom

The authors of these *midrashim*, who, at some level, equated uncovered hair with complete impropriety, also presented the midrashic women as heroic redeemers. These two women have firm ideas about the way things ought to be, even if they are unable to express these views publicly and influence the collective. The wife of Shimi wants to help David preserve his crown, and On's wife believes that all are of equal standing before God and thus the rebellion of Korah was unwarranted. The midrashic authors pointedly express the fact that women have a moral message regarding leadership. Moreover, the midrashic women were able to promote the values and conceptions that Hazal sought to highlight through methods that would have been unavailable to their male counterparts – by violating the norms and taboos intended to repress and weaken them. Specifically, the women's acts of uncovering their hair were so unexpected and astounding that they were able to undermine the self-confidence of their pursuers. The men in the *midrashim* were so used to servile women under their command, who obeyed repressive norms, that they found themselves defenseless before these rebellious women.

Do we have here a rabbinic/midrashic call for women to oppose the norms of *kissui rosh*? Do we find here a recognition of women's rights to define and articulate their own sexuality? We cannot easily ascribe these goals to the midrashic authors. However, perhaps we can learn from the subtext of these *midrashim* that attributing too much sexuality to hair can ultimately weaken and even undo men's power over women and that, further, it would be difficult to suggest any direct correlation between *kissui rosh* and a woman's ethical stance or moral behavior.

Tamar Biala *co-edited* Dirshuni-Midrashei Nashim, *an anthology of* midrashim *written by contemporary Israeli women and published this summer by Yediot Aharonot and the Jewish Agency. She lives in Jerusalem.*

[1] This is usually translated as "A woman's hair is nakedness" or "A woman's hair is a sexual enticement."

[2] The story also appears in Yerushalmi *Yoma* 1:1, *Megillah* 1:10, *Horayo*t 3:2; *Vayikra Rabbah* 20; *Bemidbar Rabbah* 2; *Pesikta De-Rav Kahana* 26; *Tanhuma Aharei Mot* 9; *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* A, 35.

A Jewish Approach to Wellness

By Abbie Greenberg

Because our bodies are receptacles of our souls, and vessels of God's light, we must keep them healthy and consider carefully what we put into them. Traditional Jewish thought suggests that we must keep our bodies well for the sake of spiritual pursuits and in order to fulfill *mitzvot*. Today however, a focus on fitness is often seen as vain or improperly secular. It is thus interesting to see how far back in our tradition concerns with our physical selves and the balancing of Torah and physical activity can be found.

Already in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 82a), Rav Huna urges his son Rabbah to study with Rav Hisda. Rabbah resists, saying that Rav Hisda only focuses on secular matters: anatomy and hygiene. Rav Huna admonishes his son, saying, "He speaks of health matters, and you call that secular!"

Though some individuals in the Orthodox world may value exercise, to say that as a community we do so, either philosophically, or in an organized fashion, would be a stretch. Indeed, one finds a reluctance to focus on exercise, in part because time is so limited and time spent on sport is time not spent on Torah study or *hesed* activity. Although many of us are familiar with the Rambam's long discussions in the *Mishneh Torah* about the importance of exercise and healthy, measured eating, we rarely take the details of his many recommendations to heart. For example, Rambam states that a person "should engage one's body and exert oneself in a sweat-producing task each morning."[1] Despite the Rambam's words, this centrality of exercise is simply not part of normative Orthodox Judaism.

Many of us are also aware of the daily morning *tefillah* that focuses on our health and posture: "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who straightens the bent." Is this just a metaphor, or would participation in exercise that straightens our bodies so they are not hunched, stooped, bent, or subject to skeletal pain, not help us be true to the profound words of our prayer?

Martin Buber recorded a story of Rav Simhah Bunim, of Przysucha, who took very literally the words of our *tefillah* that relate to physical awareness[2]. According to the story, Rav Simhah arrived late for shul one Shabbat morning. When asked why he was so late, he quoted from *Pesukei d'zimra* (Psalms 35:10), which he had missed reciting because of his lateness: "All my bones shall say, who is like You, God?" How then, Rav Simhah asked, could he come to *daven* before his bones were all awake?

Most likely, we view the words of Psalms that Rav Simhah quoted in a metaphorical sense. However, anyone who has done yoga, or any type of intensive physical activity, knows that awakening our bones need not be simply a metaphorical act. It can be profoundly physical as well as mental, and these realms connect to the spiritual. Nowhere am I more mindful of how much yoga has awakened my bones, lengthened my spine, and grounded my stance than when I stand and prepare to say the *Shemoneh Esreh*.

In the twentieth century, Rav Kook went much further in connecting physical and spiritual health. He claimed that physical health is in itself a value in the process of repentance and that, in each human organism, there is a constant reciprocal relationship between body and spirit[3]. Rav Kook promoted a Zionism that strove to restore health to the body of the Jewish people so that its spiritual life could flower to its fullest.[4] He intended this restoration to occur not only on the metaphorical level in terms of the strength of the State of Israel but also with respect to the strength of every person: "Great is our physical demand. We need a healthy body. We dealt much with soulfulness; we forgot the holiness of the body. We neglected the physical health and strength; we forgot that we have holy flesh; no less than holy spirit..." He continues: "Our *teshuva* will succeed only if it will be – with all its splendid spirituality – also a physical return, which produces healthy blood, healthy flesh, mighty solid bodies, a fiery spirit radiating over powerful muscles..."[5]

A proper emphasis on physical health is

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Shrouds for a Woman
Probably German. Early 20th century,
Yeshiva University Museum, Gift of Margaret Berman

In many Ashkenazi communities, young women would sew their own shrouds, either when they got married as part of their trousseau, or else during pregnancy. Others would order the shrouds from the same person who made their wedding dress.

Jerusalem Exhibit on Head Covering

JOFA members who attended the 2002 conference will remember the exhibit of a photo essay by Na'ama Batya Lewin entitled "Ervah: Hidden Sensuality" which made clear that hair covering, a practice designed to preserve modesty, is today, one of the most public displays of religious observance and identification for Jewish women. Some of the photographs of the photographer herself wearing a variety of head coverings as she visited different Orthodox communities in New York were included in the Summer 2006 JOFA JOURNAL issue.

In an exhibit in Jerusalem this year, eight artists – six women and two men – focused on different aspects of head covering for Jewish women and explored issues of identity, Jewish law, feminism and freedom of choice. The exhibit, held at the Lifschitz Teachers College, was entitled "*Glu-yah*" and included works in a variety of media including painting, video, sculpture and photography. The exhibit encompassed a range of views: some pieces reflected a celebration of head covering as a declaration of personal choice as well as of required piety while others were more challenging, and questioned the role of head covering for religious women in contemporary society.

Sigal Adelman, Women in Black and White

"Women in Black and White" by Sigal Adelman comprised a series of 12 photographs: on the top row, six women with head coverings, and in the bottom row the same women without them. It was hard to recognize that the pictures were of the same women, and the series raised many questions, including: How does head covering change a woman? What is the relationship between secular and religious women?

A painting by Hanna Goldberg showed a woman whose head covering had been replaced by a transparent plastic bag, suggesting that head covering can be something that strangles a woman's freedom. A video by Pnina Geffen explored the halakha of head covering and described the ambivalent positions and tensions felt by married Orthodox women today who do cover their hair.

Sadly, the exhibit became mired in controversy when *hesder yeshiva* students, who had classes in the building, objected to the pictures of women on the walls. As a "consequence", all the representational images of women from the exhibit were taken down on the two days every week when the *hesder* boys were studying there, even though it was accepted that all the depictions were of heads, not of women's bodies and that all the depictions were "modest".

Interestingly, one of the women shown in a photograph was Rabbanit Kapah, the prominent Jerusalem personality known worldwide for her piety and acts of *hesed*. In the text accompanying her photograph, the Rabbanit wrote that, "In Yemen, even before marriage, as small girls we covered our hair like Arabs - it was forbidden that one hair should be seen; from the beginning *kissui rosh* was a regular thing for me. I even go to sleep with my head covered. I cannot take it off, it is impossible…even when I am alone in the house. That's the way we were born, that's the way we grew up, that's the way we live." Rabbanit Kapah herself saw nothing forbidden in the exhibit at all and was against any of the pictures being taken down.

The fact that this exhibit which the organizers had hoped would serve as an invitation for conversation among women and between religious and secular sectors of society became so controversial within the college where it was located, underlines how emotionally charged issues of women's clothing, appearance, and head covering remain. In the words of Jerusalem art historian, David Sperber, "The students and rabbis were interested in keeping women entirely hidden from the public eye, judging any feminine representation as inappropriate. Bringing up the dilemmas concerning head covering posed a threat to the yeshiva boys. The whole episode demonstrated the vast gap between the feminist statements of the exhibitors and the world of 'mainstream Orthodox males.'"

The Majestic and the Everyday: Clothing for Blessings and Prayer

By Chasiah T. Haberman

One of humanity's first errors was to hide from the all-knowing God among the trees of Eden (Genesis 3:8). So it is paradoxical, perhaps, that even in private prayer we cover ourselves to encounter God. This covering cannot be an attempt to hide anything. It cannot serve the function of interpersonal modesty or cultural expression. Regardless of what we wear, we are known and visible to our Maker, who probes the heart and searches the mind (Jeremiah 17:10). Our clothing must, instead, serve to signify something about our relationship to God, and to our bodies, in the context of prayer. The way we dress or cover ourselves for private prayer can provide a window into the possibilities of our self-image, not as subjects of the sexual or social gaze, but as creations and servants of God.

In the public eye, our clothing might express our status or our gender. It might honor or break with societal norms. It might serve as a decoration, or as a cultural marker, or as protection from the elements. As religious women, our clothing choices may be governed by laws that assume that our nakedness is sexual, distracting men from their prayers and threatening the boundaries of our marriages. Or we may dress in order to express our religious identity and affiliation. We may dress with an awareness of societal perceptions of our bodies as sexual objects, or as barometers of health, in need of perfection and maintenance. When we pray publicly, our understanding of the ways in which we are perceived may enter into our choices of dress for worship.

Our halakhic standards of dress for prayer depend on the particular prayer we are reciting, whether we have male or female bodies, and whether we pray publicly or privately.[1] As we examine the different requirements of dress for the various prayers, we may discover some basic distinctions among the *berakhot*, the *Shema,* and the *Amidah*. Similarly, as we look at the different ways in which men and women are obligated to dress for prayer, we can explore the separate roles of male and female bodies in the context of prayer. An understanding of the different requirements of dress in public and private prayer may illuminate the ways in which our social understanding of one another affects our communal and individual relationship with God.

We find the most minimal clothing requirements in the context of blessings. Reciting a *berakha*, a woman may simply sit in such a way that her genitals are naturally covered by her posture.[2] The Mishnah teaches, "The woman sits and separates her bread while naked because she can cover herself, but a man may not" (*Hallah* 2:3). We learn from this that a woman can make a *berakha* while naked, unlike a man, whose requirements of dress for blessings are stricter. Minimally, for *berakhot*, a man must cover his genitals with some kind of cloth and, according to most opinions, must do so in a way that creates a visual barrier between them and his heart (*Shulhan Arukh: Orah Hayyim* 74:1). The Rema points out that, although the practical result for men and women is different, the principle is the same. Women are simply built in such a way that their genitals, because they are more internal, are more separate from their hearts. According to the Rema, the difference in law is not based on an essential difference between the inner nature of men and women, but is rooted only in the architecture of their bodies (Rema, *Orah Hayyim* 74:4).

But the difference is still striking. In the presence of a man, if a woman reveals even a few inches of her body, where her custom is to cover it, he may not recite the *Shema* (*Shulhan Arukh: Orah Hayyim* 75:1). Yet in private, the need for covering is defined – not by the male gaze or even the interpersonal gaze – but by her own self-understanding. The Rashba explains that although the thigh of a woman can be considered "*ervah*" (nakedness) this is "specifically for others and for men, because they would be aroused, but not for herself, since it is written: a woman sits and separates her dough naked" (*Hiddushei HaRashba: Berakhot* 24a). In private, a woman is her own interpreter.

For both women and men, these minimal clothing requirements allow us to bring an awareness of the divine presence even to our most intimate moments: separating our dough, waking up in the morning, drinking a glass of water, immersing in the *mikveh*. The Rambam teaches us that these blessings were composed to allow us to "remember the Creator always" (Laws of *Berakhot:* Chapter I). They allow us to welcome an awareness of God into the familiar, everyday rhythms of our lives. As we bless God for the good and the bad (Mishnah *Berakhot* 9:5), we accept and celebrate that God has formed the world just as it is, and has made us and our bodies just as we are. We relate to the God who knows us completely, and the relationship is one of closeness and connectedness.

The standards of dress for the private recitation of the *Shema*, during which we accept the yoke of the heavenly kingdom (Mishnah *Berakhot* 2:2), are similar. A woman dresses as she would for *berakhot* (*Shulhan Arukh*: *Orah Hayyim* 74:4). As with blessings, the requirements for men are stricter. A man must cover his thighs and the area below them, in addition to separating between his genital area and his heart (*Shulhan Arukh*: *Orah Hayyim* 74:6). Although these guidelines are more stringent than those for *berakhot*, dress for the recitation of *Shema* is certainly not formal. In our private recitation of the *Shema* we accept the majesty of God within the context of our everyday existence: while at home and while traveling, upon sleeping and upon waking (*Devarim* 6:7).

The private *Amidah* finds us standing in a different relationship. The Talmud teaches us that, while reciting the *Amidah,* men and women must cover the area of their hearts (*Berakhot* 24b–25a; *Shulhan Arukh*: *Orah Hayyim* 74:6). Rashi explains that, when reciting the *Amidah*, a person "must see himself as though he is standing before the king and stand with respect, but for the reading of the *Shema* – he is not speaking before the king." Rashi teaches us that the ways in which we are covered reflect separate dimensions of the encounter between a Jew and God. This additional covering for the *Amidah* allows us to relate to God as a subject granted an audience with the King.

The *Tur* teaches us that it is proper to have fine clothing set aside for prayers that include the *Amidah*, "like the clothing of the priests, but not everyone is able to spend lavishly on this" (*Tur*, *Orah Hayyim* 98). In the absence of the Temple we encounter a majestic God by dressing in special clothes, to the extent that we are able to, in order to become like priests. We

reach beyond our everyday existence; we struggle with our ordinary selves, with God, and the world we know. We reach toward repentance. We hope. We pray for redemption, for the sick to be healed, for peace to come.

When we recite these same prayers, – the *berakhot*, the *Shema*, and the *Amidah* – in the context of community, however, our experience includes not only our relationship with God and our own self-perception but also our relationship with each other. We dress more modestly (*Shulhan Arukh: Orah Hayyim* 75). If we lead public prayers, we are required to dress in a way that our community considers respectable (*Shulhan Arukh: Orah Hayyim* 53). Social concepts of what is proper and dignified become part of our prayer experience.

Public prayer places our relationship with God in the context of our responsibilities to one another. Like any other communal responsibilities, they do not always serve each of us well or take all of us into account. *Mehitzot*, such as balconies or one-way glass, can imply that women distract men while men do not distract women, alienating men and women who don't fit this generalization. A uniform standard of dress may exclude those whose culture, gender identity, or economic class differs from that of the majority. As we set standards of dress for public prayer, we must be aware of their impact on the ability of each human being to relate to God. In community, we are capable of enabling each other to pray, of encouraging each other to maintain both a private and a public relationship to our Creator.

Each day can bring a Jew multiple ways of relating to God, individually or communally. We choose clothing that helps us enact and reflect these varied relationships. Our God is intimate and familiar, and knows us completely, and yet this same God is majestic and unknowable. That shifting dynamic reflects, perhaps, the texture of any enduring relationship. Our perspective changes, we struggle, we become close, we are awed. In the words of the Yom Kippur liturgy,

> We are Your lover, and You are our Beloved:
> We are Your treasure and You are our God:
> We are Your nation and You are our King:
> We are Your designated and You are our Designated.

Chasiah Haberman *teaches at the Drisha Institute. She received a BA in English Literature from Washington University in St Louis, is a graduate of the Drisha Scholars Circle, and has been a CLAL intern. She is an artist who creates paintings and ketubot.*

[1] The topic of head covering in the context of prayer is beyond the scope of this article.

[2] From a contemporary perspective, it is interesting to note that halakhic sources do not single out breasts as requiring covering in private prayer.

Jewish Sumptuary Laws and Dress Regulations

Through the ages, Jewish communities imposed restrictions on dress to prevent feelings of envy on the part of poor Jews, to lessen jealousy and hostility from non-Jews, and to avoid the fashions of non-Jews. Specific restrictions were placed on men's garments as well as women's, and on ostentation in banquets and limitations on other forms of entertainment such as dancing, gambling and card playing. Many of the restrictions were issued as *takkanot* at rabbinical synods from the thirteenth century on. The translations of the texts of a number of these regulations are given in the magisterial work, "A History of Jewish Costume" by Anglo-Jewish scholar, Alfred Rubens. These regulations are very detailed and give us an idea of Jewish life at the time as there are often complete listings of clothing, types of wigs and jewelry permitted or prohibited with exceptions mainly for brides and for the women accompanying them to the *huppah*.

> Women's cloaks which have already been made with open sleeves and are lined with fur, may be worn within the house but not in public, unless the sleeves are sewn or the cloaks are worn under an overcoat, so that the cloak cannot be seen at all. Also the coats of women which are lined with fur, must as far as possible be so made so as not to show the fur.
>
> **(Extract from Laws made by Commission held in Forli Italy, 1416)**

> No woman may wear on Saturdays or festive occasions more than four rings. Godmothers, midwives, those who conduct the bride under the *huppah*, those who conduct her to the synagogue for the morning prayers and the young bride herself on the Saturday following her marriage are allowed more than 4 rings…
>
> All coiffures made to imitate non-Jewish fashions like *godrons, en cheveux, fontages*, are strictly forbidden but young girls under 12 years of age are allowed to wear *en cheveux* coiffures…
>
> All ribbons of silk and taffeta of any color except black are expressly forbidden …
>
> Brocades of all kinds and colors or silk material embroidered with flowers regardless of the shade are forbidden except for religious ceremonies. Nevertheless for corsages and sleeves these materials are allowed.
>
> **(Extracts from Sumptuary Laws of the Jewish Community of Metz, 1690)**

Although the regulations set down fines as penalties for infringement, it is difficult to know to what extent they were observed. The fact that they had to be repeated so often perhaps indicates that they were hard to enforce and mainly expressed the views and values of the community leaders, while the community members were always anxious to adopt new fashions.

Strengthening Body Image: The School's Role and Responsibility

By Aliza Dworken Frohlich

Schools were once evaluated based on their ability to deliver the three "Rs": "reading, writing, and 'rithmetic." In recent years, however, schools have come to realize that they need to focus on a fourth "R"– resilience. Educators now understand that they must play a role in helping raise emotionally resilient young people who can cope with life's challenges, feel comfortable with themselves, and attain the requisite interpersonal skills to succeed. Our yeshivot and day schools are no exception. Despite the demands of our dual curricula, many schools have added classes that focus on social-emotional issues, including the topic of body image.

Body image education is the responsibility of the school because much of children's self-image develops within the social environment in which they live. Research indicates that cultural factors, at times combined with genetic and personality predispositions, are an overwhelming component of body image difficulties. Children spend most of their day surrounded by the intense body image pressures of the culture and the social environment of schools (e.g., to dress like the other students, to have a figure similar to what is expected in their community or school, to have athletic bodies and talents).

In fact, many of our schools already educate students about the changes of puberty, helping them understand the physical and emotional changes they are going through: self-image education must be a piece of that curriculum. In Jewish schools, we have the opportunity to teach the concept of *tzelem elokim*, that we have all been created and modeled on the image of God, and to emphasize the holiness of the *guf* (body) that God has granted us.

Moreover, body image is an issue that often interferes with a child's ability to learn. Students who are self-conscious and worry about their size, weight, and body are preoccupied, anxious, have low self-esteem, and are distracted from learning. Therefore addressing body image issues and challenges should yield educational benefits.

What is the goal of a curriculum focused on body image? Although we trust the curriculum will serve to prevent eating disorders, a more global goal is that our children will grow up with higher self-esteem. It can minimize the dissatisfaction that many have with their bodies, which often leads to depression, yo-yo dieting, and unhealthy choices.

The groundwork for such a program should be laid in preschool, at which point subjects such as self-esteem, diversity, and acceptance should be introduced. In fact, eating habits and body image issues begin to develop at that early age. Several years ago, I worked at a school in which nursery school students were requesting skim milk so they wouldn't "get fat." It is much easier to help younger students develop positive body images than to reverse negative ones. After its initial introduction in preschool, the crux of the body image curriculum should be implemented in late elementary school or the middle school years. This is the time most children enter their pubescent "growth spurt" and are deeply affected by their appearance.

An effective body image curriculum has several components.[1] In general, such curricula should be dynamic and experiential and should teach positive rather than negative lessons. Students must be helped to realize that puberty ushers in an array of physical and hormonal changes. For example, girls tend to gain weight during puberty, which is often frustrating, given that adolescence is the time when many girls become obsessed about losing weight. Between the ages of 10 and 14, developing girls can gain as much as 20 pounds in one year. Girls need to know that it is normal and healthy for them to gain that weight. Teachers should stress the importance of healthy eating habits and exercise and make it clear that, by making good choices, students will be able to avoid dieting, which is not usually successful in the long term.

It is also essential to help students develop realistic expectations about their appearance and to teach them to make the best of the bodies they have. Students need to develop a strong sense of self based on aspects other than the physical. Teachers should stress that our external appearance is only one aspect of who we are. It is also important to discuss how we choose our role models and how students can choose realistic and positive ones that reflect their values. The issue of role models is one that affects not only body image but also how our students choose which lifestyles to emulate. This is a perfect opportunity to have a frank discussion with students about how our Jewish values differ from what they see on TV, movies, and in the media. What is a role model in Judaism? What characteristics do we admire? Through learning about heroes and heroines in the *Tanakh* and presenting them as real people, students can find that the Torah can be a source for role models. As part of this discussion students can be taught to evaluate the extent to which the images they see in the media are unrealistic and create unfair expectations. It is hoped that this discussion will make them less vulnerable to the messages that bombard them.

Despite the importance of tackling these issues, schools may face several difficulties in setting up programs that address them. Many day school administrators believe it is nearly impossible to add another program to a day that seems filled to capacity. And although research indicates that an in-house staff member is more effective in implementing such a curriculum, many schools do not necessarily have faculty members who are equipped to do so. That role requires somebody who is sufficiently well versed in these areas and who is able to engage with and connect with the students effectively. It is also preferable for the instructor to have a deep knowledge of the Judaic perspective on body image and a sensitivity to the cultural issues of the community.

In addition, some maintain that a school program focusing on body image cannot combat the pressures students face outside of the school environment – community norms, family life, and the media – and would therefore be ineffective. In response to this concern, I would argue that educators have the power to speak directly to students about this reality and to help them understand how they can stay true to themselves despite external pressures. In addition, we are hopeful that we are raising a generation of parents who will be more sensitive to these issues as they raise *their* children.

Those of us who have worked to develop this programming continue to improve and fine-tune it. However, some areas still need significantly more attention, including teaching boys about body image. Although not to the same extent as girls,

boys feel significant pressure from the media and culture to be well built, tall, and slim. Research clearly indicates that the number of boys who are dissatisfied with their bodies has risen dramatically in recent years. Body image education is thus essential for boys as well, although their curriculum should be designed somewhat differently, which means separate-gendered classes for this topic would be most effective.

Another area of education that is imperative for boys involves their often unrealistic expectations of what girls "should" look like. I will not discuss here how these expectations affect *shiddukhim*. However, even earlier in their lives, middle school and high school girls are aware that boys comment on their bodies – both to them and behind their backs. Girls are deeply affected by the way they are perceived by boys, who must be taught to treat girls and women with respect, rather than objectifying them. This topic can be related to both biblical and talmudic themes. For example, classes can focus on the kinds of relationships that male characters in the *Tanakh* had with the women in their lives. Was there an intellectual relationship independent of the physical? If the women were described physically (e.g., "*yefat to'ar viyfat mareh*-of beautiful form and fair to look upon" as Rachel is described), what does that mean in a given context? How does the Torah feel about women and their role as physical beings? These are all important issues that students can and should consider as they mature.

Schools can take an interdisciplinary approach toward helping children think about body image issues. Science and literature classes are natural places to discuss these images. In Jewish day schools, another natural place is in *Limmudei Kodesh* classes. For example, in a halakha class one can explore the issue of "*V'nishmartem me'od l'nafshoteikhem*" (Deut.4:15) – staying healthy and protecting one's body. Discussion of the *halakhot* that prohibit self-mutilation would also be relevant and underscore that we are commanded to treat our bodies with respect. *Kevod hamet*, the centrality of even treating the body of the dead with respect, is another value that can illustrate the point. Teachers in *Tanakh* or Jewish philosophy classes can introduce topics such as vanity and the balance between looking good and caring too much about one's looks. Self-esteem and "*bishvili nivra ha'olam* – for my sake the world was created" versus "*anokhi afar va'efer* – I am but dust and ashes" are at the crux of body image, whereas being happy with the way God created one's body is an attitude that underlies positive body image – "*she'asani kirtzono* – who made me according to His will." All of these topics revolve around our being created *b'tzelem elokim*.

Conversations we have with students about *tzniut* – for both boys and girls – are an essential part of the curriculum. However, the focus on *tzniut* should not be rule-based, but instead should reinforce the notion that who we are within is more important than how we look on the outside. What does dressing in a provocative manner say about an individual's self-esteem? For girls, how does that behavior reinforce the notion that girls are to be objectified? In my view, *tzniut* is about self-respect and respect for our bodies. In addition, *tzniut* is not just about dress; it is about how we behave and about attitude. It is also about our relationship with God.

In addition to identifying faculty who can introduce and implement body image lessons, we need to focus more on general teacher training in the area of body image. Teachers and coaches exert significant influence on adolescents. However, they themselves may often lack sensitivity to these problems, or be unsure how to help the children with whom they work. By conducting in-service professional development classes for teachers and coaches, we can increase their awareness of growing body image disorders.

Schools must also take issues of verbal harassment more seriously. Teasing another child about his or her body – the typical "locker room" banter – is not acceptable. Intervening to prevent this harassment also creates a teachable moment for focusing on body image.

Parents can and must be advocates for programming in the area of body image. In fact, it was a partnership between determined parents and the administration at my school that helped bring more social and emotional programming to the curriculum. Parents need to assert that these issues are just as important to them as is their children's academic progress, and they should be included on committees that work to initiate such programs.

Ideally, there should also be a parent component to this endeavor: parent education is critically important. As parents, we need to make the effort to attend these workshops – to educate ourselves and send the message to the schools that we care. There should also be communication between school and parents about what is being taught, so that parents can expand on the discussion at home.

All of these aspects of a body image curriculum help target the fourth "R" – resilience. Educators and parents must join together to raise resilient children who realize that, as the author Kathy Kater states, "Who I am" is more important than "How I look" – a message consistent with and championed by Torah values.

Aliza Dworken Frohlich *is the Director of Guidance at Yavneh Middle School in Paramus, New Jersey. She has a doctorate in School and Child Clinical Psychology from Yeshiva University's Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology. She serves as president of the Yeshiva Counseling Network of the New York Metropolitan area.*

[1] Many of these components are discussed by Kathy J. Kater in her book, *Healthy Body Image Curriculum: Teaching Kids to Eat and Love Their Bodies Too!*, National Eating Disorders Association, 2005.

Jewish Women in Prayer

On March 1, 2009, JOFA partnered with the Jewish Theological Seminary, Women's League for Conservative Judaism, Women of Reform Judaism, the Abraham Joshua Heschel School, The Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, Kolot of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and *Lillith* Magazine in a groundbreaking inter-denominational conference titled "This is My Prayer – *Va'ani Tefillati:* Jewish Women in Prayer." The keynote address was given by Dr Aliza Lavie of the Department of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University and editor of the best selling "A Jewish Woman's Prayerbook". Attendees actively participated in a wide array of available sessions from "Halakhic Considerations in Innovating Prayers" to "The Theology of Personal Prayer" to "Prayer as Healing". The final plenary session included congregational spiritual leaders from the four main streams of American Jewish life, who all responded to wide ranging questions from the moderator, JOFA founding president Blu Greenberg. Participant feedback from the day-long conference was extremely positive. This was the first opportunity for many to share stories of personal prayer, as well as intimate moments of reflection, anxiety, fear and jubilation, and to gain inspiration, strength and comfort from the experience of a broad range of other Jewish women. The following is one response to the day by JOFA member Dedi Firestone, who writes of her overall impression of the day and the particular sessions she attended.

Conference Registration

Mahara"t Sara Hurwitz, Hebrew Institute of Riverdale N.Y., at Closing Plenary

Break-out Session

An Orthodox Woman Learns About Prayer

By Dedi Firestone

A number of years ago, my husband required major surgery to replace his knees. The only date the surgeon had available was on the 7th day of Pesah. We made arrangements for food in the hospital, and Bikkur Cholim found me an apartment a few blocks away. A day or so before the surgery we received a phone call from the hospital's chaplain, who had noticed our order for kosher food. Could she come by to visit after the surgery? Of course, we said, curious about the "female Reform rabbi." And so, on *shvi'i shel Pesah*, a Friday, while my husband was in the step-down recovery unit, the rabbi came by. She was older than us, and the rabbinate was her second career, one that she found very satisfying.

We chatted a bit, and then she asked if she could make a *Mi sheberakh*. My husband nodded yes and he gave her his name in correct form – *Borukh Yaakov ben Beyla Ita*. The rabbi expressed surprise that he knew the correct traditional formulation, while I wondered how she was ever going to remember it for Shabbat services the next day without writing it down. But then she took my husband's hands and placing them under her own on his chest, proceeded to recite the *Mi sheberakh* right then and there. It seemed so odd to us, so different from our normal experience, that we were speechless. And then, very unpredictably and to our great surprise, it became a powerful and meaningful moment.

That evening, back in the apartment, I was telling one of my roommates, whose father was in Sloan Kettering hospital, about our experience. In response, she told me that her husband, a rabbi, had done quite a bit of research on the *Mi sheberakh*, and learned that originally, the blessing was offered at the ailing person's bedside.

I had not thought of that event for a long time, but it came to mind after I attended a day-long conference called "This Is My Prayer – *Va'ani Tefillati*: Jewish Women in Prayer." The conference on March 1, 2009, was held at the Heschel School in Manhattan and was attended by 350 people – mainly women, but some men as well. More than 100 had been turned away for lack of space. The conference was sponsored by a number of organizations representing Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist denominations. For a few hours, women of all ages and religious backgrounds sat together talking and listening.

What are prayers? I learned about prayer as poetry and prayer as legacy, about rewriting traditional prayers, and using song to hear old prayers with new ears. Where do we pray? In shul, at home, on the way to giving birth while clutching a book of prayers! How do we pray? When do we pray? Is it only during the mandated periods of *Shaharit, Minha,* and *Ma'ariv* and over

the flickering lights of the Shabbat and *Yom Tov* candles? Is it also while standing with a child under the *huppah*, or while watching a life drain out of you during a miscarriage? And what do we say? Do the standard words of the *siddur* capture our fears and desires, or do we struggle with the liturgy? Does habit prevent us from achieving mindfulness when we pray? Does it matter if the words are in English or Hebrew? Are prayers that come unbidden to our lips at moments of stress or joy valid? Is it enough once a week to recapture our feelings as we sit in shul? Is it permissible to make up a prayer? What is the formula for prayer?

Some of the stories at the conference I heard were these:

* * * * *

"For the past four years, my daughter has been in rehab. She's a recovering drug addict. This week, she graduated from her program, and she's doing okay. But I remember back four years ago. . ." Here, the woman's voice broke, and she leaned forward, pausing to collect herself. Then she sat up and briskly continued. "I remember how I prayed then. Now, when I say the words "*Mehayyei Meitim*" – God who brings the dead back to life – I am overwhelmed at the meaning this and other prayers have for me."

* * * * *

A Reform rabbi told us how her husband had taken her on a trip to the Arctic Circle to view the aurora borealis, about which she was passionate. Unfortunately, it was too cloudy to see anything; she made the best of her vacation, but was clearly disappointed. Then, a few years later, on her way home from a conference in London, the airplane had to be re-routed – over the Arctic Circle. She was arguably the only person on board who was delighted. As luck would have it, she had a window seat and spent hours with her head pressed to the window. She described it for us: the white lights forming an undulating curtain across the sky, punctuated by a hem of red lights. Overwhelmed, she said, "I wanted to fall on my face," and then she quoted from the psalm: "You cover yourself with light as though it were a robe. You stretch out the heavens as though they were curtains" (Psalms 104:2). Her words were a prayer.

* * * * *

A long-time community activist told us how she had an anthropological view of prayers – that she often read the words wondering who in the past had said them and under what circumstances. My heart jumped in recognition. I often fantasized about the old *mahzorim* and *siddurim* with German translations that sit on my bookshelf, a *yerusha* – a legacy – from my father *z'l*. If I could go back in time and meet my great-great-grandparents, I could not talk to them, but I could go to shul and *daven* with them!

* * * * *

A professor at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College told us stories about her *frum* grandmother and, while acknowledging that her own practice of Judaism is much removed from that, asserts that it is precisely because of her grandmother, and the memories she has of her *davening*, that she became involved in Jewish life professionally. And then she showed us her legacy – her grandmother's *siddur* – and her own, lace-covered *siddur*, a gift from her grandmother on her wedding day.

* * * * *

One speaker read us parts of the eulogy she composed for her mother, who had passed away the previous fall. Her words were poetry and her poetry was prayer.

* * * * *

At the conclusion of the conference, Debbie Friedman was introduced. I had heard about this woman, a *hazzanit*, singer, and performer with many CDs and a huge following in the Jewish world – but I had never heard her voice. She sang her signature piece, "*Mi sheberakh*," with words echoing the prayers of the Rosh Hodesh *bentshing* I know so well. All around me, people knew the song and were singing with linked hands. Debbie would not allow any applause; this was prayer, and she wanted us to experience it that way. And so it was.

I am learning to recognize prayer in forms different from those I know and love in the *siddur*. The conference's keynote speaker was Dr. Aliza Lavie. Her book, *A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book*, a best-seller in Israel and recently translated into English, reveals that the tradition of original prayers written by women predates the eastern European *tehines* by many centuries, going back to the biblical Hannah, whose silent prayer in the Temple became the rabbinic paradigm for the *amidah*. Lavie's book unearths a myriad of inspiring prayers relating to women's lives, along with tantalizing biographies about the women who wrote them. I know that I plan to write down my personal *tefillah* for *lichtbentshing* to share with my daughters-in-law and granddaughter, and to add the blessings I composed the night before my own wedding, and those in honor of my sons' weddings. I hope the other women in my family will add to them, as we create a new family tradition that celebrates a time-honored custom – endowing the unique experiences of our lives as daughters, mothers, wives, and sisters with new meaning.

Dr. Anne Lapidus Lerner, Conference Chair

Audience at Break-out Session

Dr. Aliza Lavie
Delivering Keynote Address

Dedi Firestone *is an arts administrator and grant writer at Kupferberg Center Performances, Queens College. She lives in West Hempstead, N.Y.*

Reflections on Hair Covering: Then and Now

By Rachelle Isserow

Just before our wedding almost 55 years ago, I asked my fiancé if he wanted me to cover my hair once we were married. His response seemed cryptic and somewhat indirect. He had grown up in the Boro Park of the 1930s and 1940s, at a time in which few women covered their hair at all, much less wore sheitels. So he asked his father, who had *semikha* from the renowned Slabodka yeshiva and had studied at other Lithuanian yeshivot, if his mother – my husband's grandmother – had worn a sheitel. My father-in-law's response was the indirect answer I would subsequently receive. My husband claims that the answer was something akin to, "Haven't you any more important questions to ask me?" It seems that neither his paternal nor maternal grandmother wore a sheitel or kept her hair covered – certainly not in the house, within the family, as evidenced in several photos. My mother-in-law and two of her sisters, all fine religiously observant "Litvishe" women, did not cover their hair, not even when lighting Shabbat candles. (After our marriage, I, too, adopted that custom of blessing the candles without putting a doily on my head, much to my mother's horror. "It's a good thing you still light candles," she once chided me.)

Let me share another aspect of the hair covering question in my family background. My father came from a hasidic *Vishnitz* family, but my mother's side was not Hasidic and "very Hungarian." Both of my grandmothers kept their hair covered, each in a different manner. My Hungarian grandmother had a thick dark sheitel, and my hasidic grandmother wore what was known as a "*hoib*." As I understand it, a *hoib* was made out of thin strands of silk to resemble hair, but in no way did it look exactly like hair, as that would have undermined the whole point.

My paternal aunt and her daughters and daughter-in-law - my cousins - all wore sheitels. In fact they put on their sheitels right after the *huppah*. I recall that one of my feistier, rebellious cousins fought hard and "won" a victory: she did not put on her sheitel until the morning after the wedding.

In contrast, my mother did not, as a rule, keep her hair covered, though she grappled with her lovely print kerchief all Friday night, tying and untying the slippery silk. Of course she wore a hat to shul as did all women of that era. I recall an unsettling family incident when my cousin married into a prominent New York hasidic family in 1943, and his mother, my father's oldest sister, pointed out that since we were now related to this important family it would behoove my mother to wear a sheitel. My father was deeply offended, and the family relationship was strained for some time. Nevertheless, this cousin and his wife seemed to put the issue of hair covering into perspective and became among my mother's favorite couples, and to this day we are close.

What were the attitudes toward hair covering outside my immediate family? I grew up in the Washington Heights area of Manhattan in the 1940s and early 1950s, nestled between the German Breuer community and the more Modern Orthodox Yeshiva University (YU). The women at Breuer covered their hair as a matter of course, and we thought nothing of that. The women in the more American YU group did not cover their hair, and we also thought nothing of that. With very few exceptions, even the wives of the *rebbeim* at YU did not cover their hair all the time. All married women wore hats to synagogue services.

It was this world of my upbringing that motivated me to ask my fiancé the question about what hair covering was expected of me after marriage. However, it is significant that I asked him the question just before our wedding rather than early in our relationship. I understand that these days the issue comes up in the first meeting, and I find it disturbing that hair covering is so high up in the priorities of choosing a life-partner.

After we married in 1954, I did not cover my hair except to wear a hat to shul and possibly to communal dinners as was the style at the time. Only one of my close friends covered her hair all the time, rather symbolically, with one of those little "shells" that Audrey Hepburn wore in the movies of the 1950s. I remember my friend confiding in me that covering her hair was necessary to remind her that she was now a married woman and therefore should refrain from any flirtatious behavior. I should add that her young husband was one of the early *Kollel* students at YU.

We moved to the Boston area immediately after our marriage, and I recall that my friends there also did not cover their hair except in shul. I know that the hasidic *rebbetzins* did do so, but not the most prominent Lithuanian *rebbetzin*, even at public events. This was the norm until the hasidic community in

Jewish woman, Libya
Early 20th century postcard

Brookline grew, when we began to see a sprinkling of scarves and sheitels. Apart from regular shul services, here and there a woman would slap on a beret for a *shiur.* Another wore a hat all day on Shabbat; another covered her hair with a silk scarf but only on Friday nights.

In 1995 we moved to Israel. For a period of seven years, I taught at a religious (right of center) college for women in Jerusalem where married staff were required to cover their hair. I went overboard and kept my hair covered whenever I left the house for fear of jeopardizing my job. I enjoyed buying hats as they were easy to find. Yet I had to choose carefully as one could be identified by the type of hat one wore – big or little, fashionable or plain – and I did not want to be typecast too easily. Indeed my experience in Israel has been that the variety of styles of hair coverings – *kissui rosh* – are highly coded so that one can identify the group to which a woman belongs by her head covering. This holds true from the *Edah Haredit* to the *Dati Le'umi* groups. My sociologist friends tell me that the major impetus for choosing one head covering over another is to be identified as belonging to a particular subset. Anyway, after seven years, I was sorry to stop working, but was I ever happy to take my hat off. Free at last!

When I attend local feminist events in Israel and see so many women with their hair covered, I am puzzled. I cannot understand why so many feminists – women from all walks of life, from all regions in the country, no matter what their professions – choose to cover their hair today. Even at a local Jerusalem Orthodox egalitarian *minyan*, although some women choose no hair covering, others wrap their heads in multiple scarves and wear these scarves or small caps all the time. Indeed a whole industry of scarves and half-scarves is now thriving.

As I reflect on the history of hair covering and my observations both in the United States and in Israel, I am perplexed. Is hair covering a generational thing? When did the focus on hair covering start? I venture to say it became more commonplace about the time men stated to wear *kippot* in the streets (as opposed to hats or going bareheaded). I think both men and women have chosen to become more obviously Jewish in public. It is not only newly Orthodox women – the *ba'alot teshuva* – who seek rabbinic guidance and rulings rather than follow the traditions of their mothers or their families. I think that the desire to consult with rabbinic sources, however obscure, as well as the need to identify with what they see as more "authentic" traditions, seems to play a role in the choices many women now make. Do these women believe that their own mothers who did not cover their hair, while considering themselves totally Orthodox, were mistaken in their practice? Among older women who have begun to cover their hair all the time, I consider that the main motivation is pressure from offspring who are in the yeshiva world.

It also seems to me that the decision to cover one's hair in contemporary society is a public statement of modesty, a small protest against what is perceived as an increasingly sexual and immodest world of fashion. Are we now more that ever in need of this protection? Do we see a need to pull inward against the threat of the open society, reflecting an increased disenchantment with the Western world? Yet covering one's hair is motivated by more than modesty. In a religious women's college in Israel, the special excitement of brides trying on various head coverings was made into a charming, witty film by the college's audiovisual department. Is this a rite of passage? Is this a message to our openly sexual society: "We, too are sexually active, but … in our own way."

Ashkenazi woman reading Tzena Rena
Early 20th century postcard

Seeking to understand the growing prevalence of hair covering among Orthodox women, I asked one of the leading Israeli feminist journalists who is herself a *ba'alat teshuva* why she covers her hair. Did she not sense a whiff of patriarchy in the requirement for a married woman to cover her hair? She did not give me an answer, but only smiled at my question. I deduced from her silence, her smile, and her piercing look that, as a feminist, I should allow for choices. Well and good, but let us not judge the behavior of others. Each of us has adequate precedents upon which to base a personal decision about hair covering: one that is neither forced by social pressure nor by the agenda of others.

Rachelle Isserow *is a retired speech/language therapist, now living in Jerusalem. She spent many years volunteering in the Jewish communities of Brookline and Newton, Massachusetts. She counts herself among the early Orthodox feminist activists.*

Comparative Reflections ...continued from page 7

Among contemporary Muslims, most traditional scholars maintain that the hijab is obligatory. Conservative scholars, affiliated with the Wahhabi school of Saudi Arabia, go further and maintain that even the face veil is compulsory. And yet, a number of Muslim feminist historians as well as more liberal scholars (both in the West and East) have argued that the revelatory sources do not explicitly mandate a head covering and that classical legal scholars were influenced by cultural norms instead.[18] One need only look at the JOFA Web site's archive of articles on head covering to see parallel calls by some modern Orthodox scholars to reinterpret the traditional obligation on head covering based on shifting cultural norms.[19]

Beyond the legal issue, one finds that women's dress continues to be the touchstone of a cultural debate regarding Western values. Proponents of *hijab* argue that covering represents a rejection of Western materialism and superficiality in favor of piety and spirituality. Here, one finds a striking similarity with those Jewish writers on *tzniut* who see modest dress as the antidote to the hypersexualization of women in Western society. Consider, for example, the juxtaposition of Western superficiality and Jewish spirituality in the autobiographical article by Chaya Rivka Kessel, posted on the aish.com Web site:

> By embracing the laws of *tzniut*, we acknowledge that spirituality is, in its very essence, private and internal. *Tzniut* refines our self-definition. By projecting ourselves in a less external way, we become aware of our own depth and internality, and are more likely to relate to those around us in a deeper, less superficial manner. [20]

Rather than seeing *tzniut* as a system imposed upon women from without, Kessel viewed her decision to dress modestly as a process of self-actualization. As her female teacher once declared, "I will not allow myself to be objectified. I choose to reveal to whom I wish to reveal, *when* I wish to reveal."[21] For Kessel, the turn to modesty represents a neo-feminist act of choice.[22]

This theme of empowered choice echoes in the narrative of Canadian Muslim, Naheed Mustafa. In her article, "My Body Is My Own Business," Mustafa explains why she decided to wear a hijab:

> But, why would I, a woman with all the advantages of a North American upbringing, suddenly, at 21, want to cover myself so that with the hijab and the other clothes I choose to wear, only my face and hands show? Because it gives me freedom. WOMEN are taught from early childhood that their worth is proportional to their attractiveness. We feel compelled to pursue abstract notions of beauty, half realizing that such a pursuit is futile.[23]

These Jewish and Muslim writers both regard the act of covering up as a declaration of freedom and a rejection of the Western objectification of the female body.

However compelling the notion of modesty as an act of agency, the idea stands in tension with the way that both Jewish and Islamic literature on modesty place restrictions primarily on women. Instead of calling for a cross-gender focus on spirituality, writings on *tzniut* (and I would add, on Islamic dress) focus primarily if not exclusively on covering women to control the sexual appetites of men. As Tova Hartman argues, books on *tzniut* profess to emphasize a woman's spirituality, but actually delineate the titillating effects of female body parts upon the sexual drive of men.[24] In light of this dissonance, Hartman concludes that "despite being framed as the antithesis of Western values, religious discourse, and even practice, preserves precisely those unsavory elements with which it claims to be at war."[25]As she points out, religious women are caught in a double bind: either male religious scholars objectify women by trying to cover them up or the Western "male gaze" seeks to conquer women by stripping them down.[26]

Islamic feminists similarly struggle with the double bind of moving between a patriarchal religious system and the Western obsession with a women's sexuality. As African American Muslim scholar Amina Wadud writes, "In reality, the hijab of coercion and the hijab of choice look the same. The hijab of deception and the hijab of integrity look the same."[27] Although Wadud wears a hijab and traditional dress, she does not consider it to be a religious obligation or of moral value. Nevertheless, Wadud recognizes that others project their own assumptions about *hijab* on her.

The stereotypes embedded in women's clothing inevitably hurt all women. "For some people, if you cover your head you're ignorant, and for others, if you do not cover your head you are outside Islam," said Sharifa Alkhateeb, who founded Muslim women's advocacy groups in North America before her death in 2004. Although Alkhateeb wore a headscarf, she pointedly encouraged her three daughters to make their own decisions. She advocated downplaying the stereotyping and animosity, saying: "We are trying to take women beyond that whole discussion."[28]

For Wadud, the only way to transform the symbol of *hijab* is by linking one's physical appearance to words and actions. By choosing to wear the hijab while uttering ideas about gender equality and social justice, she is challenging pervasive assumptions about the *hijab* while reinvesting it with new meaning. To encourage her listeners to move beyond their assumptions about modest dress, Wadud recites what she calls her "hijab mantra" in public appearances: "If you think that the difference between heaven and hell is 45 inches of material, boy will you be surprised." And with theatrical flair, she often removes her own hijab and drapes it on her shoulders.[29]

In conclusion, the juxtaposition of Muslim and Jewish women's writings on modesty allows us to highlight the various ways that cultural values interact with religious norms. The act of reinvesting old symbols – such as *hijab* or *kissui rosh* – with new meaning is an age-old process found in all religious traditions that withstand major cultural shifts. It is striking, though, that even women who pointedly reject Western cultural values frame their decision to don head covering as an act of empowered choice, which stands as the archetypal Western feminist value. That is, not only are the norms that define modest dress influenced by cultural values but the very process of defining those norms is shaped by cultural – in this case feminist – values as well.

Raquel Ukeles *is a Golda Meir Postdoctoral Fellow at the Hebrew University, specializing in Islamic law and ritual. She completed her PhD in Islamic and Jewish Studies at Harvard University in 2006.*

[1] Sociologists and historians studying Egypt and Turkey have noted this phenomenon. For a broad historical analysis of the veil up until contemporary debates in Egypt, see Leila Ahmed, *Woman and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). For a discussion on Turkey in particular, see Nilufer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

[2] For an example of a panel, see http://jta.org/news/article/2004/11/02/12129/Forwomenofdiffere; for an example of a blog, see http://drawn-together-by-modesty.com or http://those headcoverings.blogspot.com

[3] There are now a number of modest bathing suit sites that cater to women of different religious traditions. See, for example, http://www.aquamodesta.net or http://www.hydrochic.com

[4] Erica Brown, "'A Crown of Thorns': Orthodox Women Who Choose Not to Cover Their Hair," in *Hide and Seek: Jewish Women and Hair Covering*, edited by Lynne Schreiber (NY and Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2003), p. 180.

[5] As M., a member of the group, explained, "The truth is that the women of Israel are lessening in God's eyes because the Arabs are more modest in dress. If the Jews want to conquer the Arabs in this land they must enhance their modesty." Libby Purves, "Going Under Cover: The Jewish Women Who Are Taking the Veil," *The Times Online*, March 7, 2008. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article3499122.ece

[6] The term, *hijab*, referred originally in the Qur'an not to clothing but to a physical partition or screen through which Muhammad's wives spoke to other men [33:53]. Whereas *hijab* refers to a covering of the head and neck, the term *niqab* refers to material that covers the face. Other common terms include the *burqa* (also called *chadri*), a black loose cloth/set of cloths used in Afghanistan and in some parts of Pakistan, and a *chador*, a long outer garment, often black, that most commonly is associated with Iran. The long robes worn by Arab women are called *jilbab/jalaba/galabiyya*, and the distinctive tunic and pants outfit of South Asia is called a *shalwar khameez*.

[7] Modest clothing is defined also as loose, nontransparent, and not worn generally by men. Here, one can find conceptual parallels with the halakhic concept of *beged ish* even if the practical implications are different (e.g., Muslim women wear loose trousers).

[8] With the exception of unmarried Yemeni Jewish women who, until recently, covered their hair as well. The Yemeni practice likely follows the position of Maimonides that "the daughters of Israel should not go with their heads uncovered (*paru'a*) in the marketplace, whether single or married" (*Mishneh Torah*, *Issurei bi'ah* 21:17). The *Tur* and *Shulhan Arukh* (*Even ha-Ezer* 21) also cite the position that unmarried women should not go to the market with their heads uncovered.

[9] "Qur'an" has replaced "Koran" as the proper English spelling for the sacred text of Islam.

[10] Classical Muslim scholars generally understood the term "adornment" (*zina*) to refer to all parts of a woman's body that are covered in public, namely all parts except her hands and face. In contrast, historians of Islam as well as Muslim feminists have argued that "adornment" refers only to a woman's chest, in response to the tendency among seventh-century Arabian women to wear garments open in the middle.

[11] Only free Muslim women were allowed to wear these distinctive garments; female slaves were forbidden to cover their bodies in this manner. Recent Muslim historians in the West suggest that Muslim dress from the outset was linked to economic status and to the protection of respectable women from the advances of men. See, for example, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, pp. 14–15.

[12] See, for example, *Sahih Bukhari*, Book of Ablutions (*Wudu'*), 4:148 and Book of Qur'an Commentary (*Tafsir*), 60: 282. Although there are Hadith traditions that mandate explicitly covering all but one's head and hands, their authenticity is not verifiable because there are gaps in the chain of transmitters.

[13] See, for example, *Sunan Abu Dawud*, Book of Prayer, 2: 641. The Hadith literature reports many different sayings of Muhammad on the theme of modesty for both men and women in prayer and the prevention of sexual distraction. For more details, see Fadwa al-Guindi, "The Veil Becomes a Movement," in *Women and Islam*, Volume 2, edited by Haideh Moghissi (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 80–81.

[14] Pre-modern scholars of Islamic law (*fiqh*) debated whether the Quranic verse enjoining women to cover body parts that are generally covered included or excluded the face and hands. The majority of scholars ruled that a woman did not need to cover her face and hands in public. See, Averroës, *Distinguished Jurist's Primer*, translated by Imran Khan Nyazee (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 1994), 1:126.

[15] Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an: Traditions and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), especially, pp. 115–18. At the same time, see Ruth Roded's discussion of the medieval cultural debate over women learning with men vs. seclusion in *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994), pp. 76–86.

[16] The veil as a sign of socioeconomic standing predates Islam by almost two millennia. According to a contemporary scholar of Iran, the earliest reference to a veil was found in an Assyrian legal text from the 13th century B.C.E. The text legislates that veiling is restricted to respectable women and prohibited for prostitutes [Nickie Keddie, "Introduction" in Keddie and Beth Baron, eds. *Women in Middle Eastern History* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991], p. 3]. It is interesting to consider, in this regional context, the behavior of Tamar in Genesis 38 of *covering* her face to mimic the appearance of a prostitute.

[17] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Ishut*, 13:13–14.

[18] See, for example, writings by Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, and Barbara Stowasser.

[19] http://www.jofa.org/social.php/ritual/dailypractic/haircovering

[20] http://www.aish.com/societyWork/women/Banishing_Barbie.asp

[21] Ibid.

[22] I borrow this term from Tova Hartman, who in turn follows Gila Manolson's use of "neo-feminist" to describe the return to modesty. Manolson, *Outside/Inside: A Fresh Look at Tzniyut* cited in Hartman, "Modesty and the Religious Male Gaze," in *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism*, p. 46.

[23] Naheed Mustafa, "My Body Is My Own Business," *The Globe and Mail*, Tuesday, June 29, 1993, Facts and Arguments Page (A26). This article has been reposted on numerous websites extolling the virtues of *hijab*.

[24] Hartman, "Modesty," pp. 46ff.

[25] Ibid., p. 46.

[26] Ibid., p. 57, p. 60.

[27] Amina Wahud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), p. 219.

[28] Carlyle Murphy, "Head Covering Divides Muslims," *Washington Post*. http://www.islamfortoday.com/hijab_america.htm

[29] Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, p. 219.

Coat of the *Agunot* and Garment of the *Sotah*

By Andi Arnovitz

Being female, I think I can confidently state that women have *always* had a complicated and stormy relationship with their clothing. There is the ongoing, eternal love affair with fashion, its trends and follies, and then there is the more complex, individual language of specific clothing: its implicit message, symbolism, and power.

As an artist, it is this language of connotation with which I am concerned. A specific garment has the power to convey layers of meaning that hint at history, oppression, trends, and ideas; often a piece of clothing can even provoke protest. A burka, a sari, a nun's habit, a wedding dress, a garter belt, a ball gown, a mink stole, an apron – without any written narrative, each image will bring in its wake stories, personal sentiments, and prejudices. All this, without anyone uttering a single word. This powerful visual language is the fertile territory I find myself returning to again and again.

As Jewish women, we come from so many parts of the world, and have such different native costumes, that no single ethnic garment loudly and clearly says "Jewish woman." Certain items of clothing do suggest certain kinds of Jewish women, but no single, universal garment unequivocally symbolizes us as Jewish women – certainly not the way in which a *tallit* or *tzitzit* says "Jewish man."

Because of the absence of such a quintessential garment, I create generic ones, which are often very simple and graphic, shapeless even. In these cases the message is contained in the materials and the execution, rather than in the clothing itself. There are two garments I have created that could, at first glance, be perceived as simple, artistic paper garments but on closer examination become Jewish and very female.

Within Judaism there are two women with peculiar and particular plights: the *agunah* and the *sotah*. The ritual for determining the guilt of the *sotah* (a wife accused of adultery) was reportedly never enacted, but remains a very strange and thorny chapter of the written Torah. The rabbis and the Gemara offer all sorts of apologetic explanations that state that this ordeal was never *really* used, but it is still a part of our sacred text. And the plight of the *agunah* continues to haunt us today. For committed Jewish feminists, the idea of each of these women makes us uncomfortable and fills us with anger, shame, and questions.

The Coat of the *Agunot*

by Andi Arnovitz

My "Coat of the *Agunot*" is made up of hundreds and hundreds of hand-printed *ketubot*, in which I use colors of *argaman* (purple), colors of royalty, to convey the nobility of an *agunah*. (I personally think that any *agunah*'s ability to get out of bed every morning and face the world makes her quite regal.) I then took these *ketubot* and tore them up into tiny pieces, a symbolic act, with these pieces acting as a perfect reflection of the state of her marriage (which is in fact in tatters). I reassembled all these fragments of *ketubot* into a coat – a massive coat of paper. Then I sewed shut the sleeves, the hem, and the front seam, as a metaphor for her state: a woman trapped, hemmed in by her *ketubah*; a women who wears her anguish like a heavy coat, each and every day; who is bound by it, unable to extricate herself. I left the threads hanging because she herself is hanging, her whole life suspended, waiting for another piece of paper to release her from this state.

I felt that clothing was the best vehicle for transmitting this message. A coat that becomes a burden, which can never be removed, with threads in which she becomes entangled and trapped, made out of something as mundane as paper but deliberately referring to that desperately needed piece of paper (the "*get*" that is withheld from her) – this "coat" allowed me to manipulate into it all these myriad statements.

The second garment I created to portray another Jewish woman in an equally troubling state is called the "Garment of the Accused Wife." In the fifth chapter of *Parashat Naso*, there is a brief but problematic discussion of the ordeal for determining the guilt of the *sotah*, the wife whose husband accuses her of committing adultery (note that there is no parallel ordeal for a husband suspected of infidelity). Without going into the rabbinic interpretations and justifications, a cursory reading of the verse in *Naso* reveals that the suspected wife is brought before the *Kohanim*, her hair is uncovered, curses about her including Hashem's name are written, some of the dirt from the *Mishkan* floor is added to a vessel of holy water, and the curses are put into this "bitter" water, which she is then forced to drink. If the woman is "innocent," her reward is the survival of her marriage and the conception of a male child. If, however, she is guilty, her womb distends, her flesh falls from her body, and she becomes a deformed and shunned outcast for all to see. (Some sources say she dies). All of this, of course, occurs while she is standing alone, in front of an audience of men, the *Kohanim*.

To capture this image, I used a very transparent Japanese paper to symbolize the *sotah*'s lack of privacy, her public ordeal. *Her* voice, *her* feelings in all this are invisible. In the paper I embedded hair, dirt and Hebrew letters taken from the biblical verse to portray, in graphic terms, the details of her ordeal. Her sexuality is of great concern to all involved. So sexually disturbing is the mere thought of a *sotah* that the

rabbis interpreted the Torah's juxtaposition of two topics (the *sotah* and the Nazirite) to imply that men who gazed upon a *sotah* during the ceremony would be compelled to take on the vows of the Nazir. I deliberately left hair sticking out from the hem of her skirt to represent genital hair, which is both repellent and titillating, as she must have seemed to the *Kohanim*. All the seams and edges are sewn with tiny stitches, a repetitive and tedious act, both as a tribute and an acknowledgment of her ordeal. Finally, I placed the garment in a glass vitrine, a display case, a glass closet because she is so very much on display. There is glass on all four sides because she becomes an "object" – displayed to all, with nowhere to hide.

Using clothing to give artistic expression to these two uniquely Jewish women, however troubling they may be, allowed me to transmit my ideas in a way that is familiar and accessible. We *all* relate to clothes: we love them, hate them, hide within them, use them to create statements. The entire fashion and advertising industry is based on the premise that "you are what you wear." Unfortunately, the cruel ordeal of the *agunah* persists as a problem in contemporary Jewish society. Perhaps one day she will be as archaic as the *sotah*. It is my hope that for these two Jewish women, I have created symbolic clothing that is at once familiar, but imbued with meaning, protest, and sensitivity.

***Andi Arnovitz** is an artist and writer living in Jerusalem. Her work can be viewed at www.andiarnovitz.com*

The Garment of the *Sotah*

by Andi Arnovitz

The Sheitel Memorandum

By Daniel Sperber

About five years ago a new issue suddenly erupted primarily in the *haredi* community: women were wearing sheitels (wigs) made from human hair coming from India. Some, perhaps even much, of this hair came from a place called Tirupati, in South India, where there is a Hindu temple. Pilgrims coming to this temple, before entering it, shave their hair and place it outside the temple entrance. Millions of Hindus come annually to Tirupati – perhaps as many as twenty thousand a day – and vast amounts of hair pile up. The temple authorities, apparently realizing that this hair could constitute an additional source of income, began, many years ago, to sell it to wig-making companies.

When the origin of this hair suddenly became known to a number of rabbis in England, Israel, and the United States – it had already been known to others and halakhically discussed many years earlier – they declared it "*tikrovet avodah zarah*," an idolatrous offering, something directly related to idolatrous practice, and hence "*asur ba-hana'ah*" – it was absolutely forbidden to derive any benefit from it. The resultant publicity of this ruling led to mass burnings of those very expensive sheitels.

Those devout women, who upon hearing that their sheitels were idolatrous immediately burned them, are to be lauded and applauded for their great piety. However, I imagine they were plagued with pangs of anguish, not only because they had to destroy what for them was a very costly and personal part of their apparel but even more because for many years they had been covering their heads with "idolatrous wigs," thereby trespassing – albeit unwittingly – one of the most serious prohibitions in Jewish law.

Numerous erudite responsa were written discussing all sorts of halakhic aspects of this issue, the vast majority of them concluding that the sheitels were to be destroyed. Some more lenient responsa counseled that the wigs be exchanged – not necessarily such a practical suggestion. Only the barest minimum ruled that it was permitted to continue to wear them.[1]

Unfortunately, virtually none of those learned sages had any real knowledge of India, Indian religion, or languages spoken in India, and I suspect that the majority had never even been in India, and certainly not in Tirupati. It is true that a small mission was sent for a few days to examine the temple, but none of the members had the competence or the linguistic abilities to make a real evaluation of the pilgrims' hair-shaving activities, as they themselves admitted. More surprisingly, or maybe not so surprisingly, they therefore consulted none of the international experts in the field of Indian studies[2] nor the local Indian rabbis and authorities living in Mumbai and Delhi.

One of the few rabbinic authorities to examine the issue systematically from all points of view was the renowned *posek* R. Menashe Klein (ha-Katan), whose numerous volumes of responsa are very widely acclaimed and also largely accepted within the *haredi* community. Incidentally, he surmised that approximately a million women wore such sheitels, whose cost was upward of a thousand dollars each, so that the total

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destruction of the wigs might amount to as much as a billion dollars; he pointed out that *hefsed merubbeh*, an enormous monetary loss, is an important consideration to be taken into account by a halakhist. Even if his assessment was somewhat exaggerated, the halakhic point is certainly pertinent. His conclusion was that the sheitels are not prohibited, but he counseled against wearing them for other reasons.[3]

His main arguments may briefly be summarized as follows. First, he described the situation in Tirupati, noting that the actual hair cutting takes place in a courtyard that is outside the actual temple and is not a part of it. Second, he affirmed what the local priests vigorously stated: the activity of hair cutting is intended as a form of spiritual amelioration, leading the individual to feel like a new and better person. But it is in no way a part of the religious ritual and therefore cannot be regarded as an idolatrous act. Third, he examined in depth the very widely held rabbinic view that present-day "pagans" cannot be viewed as idolators, citing the Talmud, Rambam, Me'iri, Beit Yosef, Rema, Hatam Sofer, etc.[4] Finally, he raised the issue of *hefsed merubbeh*, extreme monetary loss, alluded to earlier, as an additional halakhic consideration leading to a lenient, permissible ruling. He also strongly refuted the assertions of the English authority who had claimed to have examined the local situation at Tirupati, arguing that they were based on misevaluations.

Hence, and for all these reasons, he concluded that these sheitels are not to be branded as "*tikrovet avodah zarah*" and are not prohibited and certainly do not have to be destroyed.[5] Nonetheless, he ended by counseling that it be better not to wear such Indian sheitels, in order to keep a distance from even approaching idolatrous practice, just as a Nazirite is exhorted to keep his distance from a vineyard.

Without making an unequivocal statement as to whether the Tirupati hair constitutes "*tikrovet avodah zarah*" or not, my point is that the halakhic procedure whereby the rulings were concluded was highly flawed and therefore totally unsatisfactory. The *posek* (decisor) bears a great burden of responsibility before issuing a ruling that may bring about the loss of thousands of dollars to thousands of individual women and perhaps cause them deep anguish on learning that they had been trespassing so serious a prohibition.

* * * * *

On February 5–6, 2007, I participated in the first Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit in Delhi, India.[6] This summit was attended by a delegation of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, some prominent European rabbis, and major religious leaders of the Hindu Dharma. I was asked to participate, perhaps because I had served briefly as a rabbi in India many years ago and was therefore thought to have some understanding of Indian culture and religion.

Close to 30 Hindu religious leaders – acharyas and swamis – from all over India were present, including the venerable Sri Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and Acharya Arsha Vidya Pitham, and a very lively and probing dialogue took place. In our discussions we asked the religious leaders whether Hinduism is a polytheistic and idolatrous religion, and they all unanimously and most vigorously denied such an assertion, explaining the apparent outward manifestations of idolatry in a completely different fashion.

At the end of the conference, all the participants signed a "Declaration of Mutual Understanding and Cooperation." Perhaps the most significant clause in the whole document in this context is the opening one:

> The participants affirmed that:
>
> Their respective traditions teach Faith in One Supreme Being who is the Ultimate Reality, who has created this world in its blessed diversity and who has communicated Divine ways of action for humanity for different peoples in different times and places.

At a second Hindu-Jewish leadership summit, this one in Jerusalem and held on February 17–20, 2008, this declaration was further confirmed.

I wonder whether the learned rabbis who prohibited the use of Tirupati-based sheitels would have ruled differently had they had this document before them.[7] Perhaps not. Perhaps how Indian religious authorities understand their own religion is irrelevant to them. They know better, even if it causes the loss of millions of dollars and many, many heartbreaks…

***Daniel Sperber** is the Milan Roven Professor of Talmudic Research at Bar-Ilan University and president of the Jesselson Institute of Advanced Torah Studies. He also serves as rabbi of the Menachem Zion Synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem.*

1. In the journal *Or Yisrael*, vol. 36, pp. 13–126, 9/4/2004 and vol. 37, pp. 31–98, 10/1/2005, 23 responsa were published.
2. For example, Prof. David Schulman of the Hebrew University, an internationally acclaimed Indologist and Prof. P. V. Wiswanath, a devout Jew of South Indian origin, now living in New Jersey.
3. *Or Yisrael*, vol. 37, pp. 31–45, 10/1/2005. I do not discuss here the question of whether the wearing of any kind of sheitel is halakhically appropriate or whether a sheitel of any kind of human hair is permissible. These issues require a separate discussion and are not within the scope of this article. See, for example, the booklets of Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk: *Sheitels: A Halachic Guide to Present-Day Sheitels*, Gateshead 2002; *Oz ve'Hadar Levushah: Pe'ot*, Gateshead 2004.
4. *B. Hullin* 13b; Rambam, Mishnah Commentary to *Hullin* ibid.; Me'iri to Chapter 4 of *Avodah Zarah* ad init; Beit Yosef to *Tur Yoreh Deah* 124; Rema to *Shulhan Arukh* ibid., and 138:1, 4, 132:1; Hatam Sofer to *Hullin* ibid., etc.
5. I may add that Chief Rabbi Yonah Metzger also published a very systematic examination of this issue (in *Seridim* 22, pp. 238–253, 2005), and though he does not reach a clear conclusion urging further research, his is a cautious tendency to permissibility.
6. The summit was convened under the auspices of the World Council of Religious Leaders: An Initiative of the Millennium World Peace Summit, headquartered in New York, whose director general is Bawa Jain.
7. I have written a more detailed analysis of this issue in an article that will appear shortly in *Conversations,* published by the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, New York.

Beauty: An Inherent Jewish Value?

By Meira Levinson

Recently, I was poring over some of the stories of famous women in the Bible – the matriarchs, Queen Esther, and others – and a detail, one that I had not previously noticed, caught my attention.

All of these women are described as physically beautiful.

Sarah, Abraham's wife, is so beautiful that Abraham has to lie and declare he is her brother, rather than her husband, for fear that the Egyptians will kill him in order to claim her – a fear that is proven to be well founded when she is kidnapped and taken to Pharaoh. Rebekah is described as "very fair to look upon" and "a virgin" when Abraham's servant first meets her on his quest for a wife for Isaac. Rachel, too, was beautiful; in her introduction, the text lauds her as "of beautiful form and fair to look upon." Queen Esther is also a paradigm of beauty – in fact, her physical appearance is a central facet as a character in the Purim story: it is this outward beauty that causes King Ahasuerus to choose her, over all the other women, as his new wife.

Intrigued, I began to look for other instances of beauty in *Tanakh*…and realized that it is not only the women whose attractiveness is noted. Male characters are lauded for their physical appearances as well – Joseph, King David, and David's son, Absalom, are a few examples. Altogether, the number of times in which the biblical text goes out of its way to inform readers that characters are attractive – from figures as famous as the matriarchs to those as obscure as Job's daughters – is astonishing.

What was puzzling, to me, was the intent of the text. All of this emphasis on physical appearance would, naturally, seem to imply that beauty is an inherent value in Judaism (at least, from the biblical perspective). Yet this conflicts with all of the Jewish values I have ever been taught including aphorisms and fables that stress the importance of inner beauty, character and integrity, rather than what is on the outside. And, in fact, this dismissal of outer in favor of inner beauty stems from *Tanakh* itself; every Friday night, we quote Proverbs as we proclaim, "*sheker hahen v'hevel hayofi – isha yirat hashem hi tithallal* – Grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised."[1] How, then, can one reconcile these two seemingly contradictory ideals?

Italian silk dress, embroidery 18th century, dress completed second half of 19th century. Lent by Mrs. Noemi Papo.
Courtesy of U. Nahon Museum of Italian Jewish Art, Jerusalem
From exhibit, "Women of Valor" (until October 21, 2009)

One approach is to view beauty in *Tanakh* as a literary technique; in other words, *Tanakh* mentions the physical characteristics of certain personas to highlight internal traits. For instance, Rebekah's beauty seems connected, in the text, to her moral character. We are told that Rebekah is beautiful in our first introduction to her: "And the damsel was very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her;" yet the end of the sentence continues, "and she went down to the fountain, and filled her pitcher, and came up."[2] The next few verses describe how Rebekah passes the ethical test that Abraham's servant set – she not only offers water to the stranger but to his camels as well. In other words, the description of Rebekah's physical beauty is juxtaposed with a depiction of her moral fiber. Even the emphasis on her virginity, although it could be read as simply a further illustration of her comeliness (the iconic virgin as the epitome of "beauty"), more simply reads as a statement regarding her modesty – a modesty that is all the more highlighted by the fact that she is beautiful, yet does not engage in promiscuous behavior.[3] Rebekah's physical beauty, therefore, emphasizes her upstanding character.

The emphasis on the beauty of King David's son, Absalom, in contrast, seems to highlight his vanity: "Now in all Israel there was none to be so much praised as Absalom for his beauty; from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. And when he polled his head — now it was at every year's end that he polled it; because the hair was heavy on him, therefore he polled it — he weighed the hair of his head at two hundred shekels, after the king's weight."[4] Was there literally no other man in all of Israel who was as beautiful as Absalom? Or was that simply how he viewed himself? The tone of the text is lightly mocking; note the formality of the "polling" of his hair – an annual event – and the double entendre of "shekels," which act as a unit of weight, but also refer to a monetary currency. Perhaps these verses critique not only Absalom's implied physical vanity but also his more general sense of entitlement – a trait that becomes explicit through his rebellion against David.

Yet another example of beauty imagery as a literary tool are the appearances of Rachel and Joseph. Both are described as "of beautiful form and fair to look upon;"[5] in fact, Joseph's beauty is described in exactly the same terms as his mother's. This parallel description highlights what is, perhaps, a slight critique of Jacob – for Rachel's beauty presumably contributed to Jacob's greater love for her over Leah, and, so too, it was that resemblance and connection to Rachel that caused Jacob to favor Joseph over his brothers.

Reading every mention of physical beauty in *Tanakh* as a coded commentary on a character's personality can become reductive. For many figures – Sarah, Rachel, David, Esther, and others – the description of their attractiveness does not appear to be directly linked to any question of their moral fiber. What it is linked to, however, is narrative necessity.

Every time a character is described as attractive, it is for a purpose: Sarah, so that we understand why Pharaoh's servants kidnap her; Rachel's beauty arguably explains, perhaps, Jacob's favoring of her over Leah. Joseph's beauty is described immedi-

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ately preceding Potiphar's wife's attempts to seduce him, as is the beauty of Tamar, King David's daughter, before her half-brother Amnon rapes her. Batsheva's beauty serves to help us understand why David was so overcome with desire for her that he took Batsheva and sent her husband to die in battle; the beauty of Queen Esther and (the often overlooked) Vashti caused them to be chosen as wives for Ahasuerus.

King David is described as "ruddy, and withal of beautiful eyes, and goodly to look upon,"[6] as a "comely person,"[7] and as "of a fair countenance."[8] His beauty serves multiple purposes: it is a factor that causes Goliath to mock David,[9] and it is one of the qualities by which he is recommended to Saul as a harp player.[10] Most importantly, however, it appears in the text immediately following God's admonition of Samuel: "Look not on [Eliav's] countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have rejected him."[11] Given Samuel's instinctive choice of David's brother Eliav as a king and Goliath's mocking of David's "pretty boy" appearance, one might arrive at a counter-intuitive notion: although we usually think of beauty as an ideal, in this situation when Samuel has to choose a king and military leader for Israel, beautiful features would seem to represent the opposite of what one would want from a battle hero. Yet God tells Samuel that David is the right man for the job, despite his outer appearance, and it is precisely David's unthreatening image that causes Goliath to underestimate him.

"...*Tanakh* generally introduces beauty to explain a story line"

This is not to say that plot necessity obviates the literary readings of beauty imagery previously mentioned. To the contrary, various understandings of beauty often overlap with the narrative's purposes. Rebekah's moral excellence is, in fact, a plot necessity – because Abraham's servant is searching for a woman of strong moral character, the text emphasizes not only Rebekah's kindness (as shown by her drawing water for the animals as well as for Abraham's servant) but also her modesty (i.e., the fact that, even though she was beautiful, she still refrained from promiscuous behavior, and was "untouched by a man"). Similarly, Absalom's vanity and impetuousness are also essential to the plot, in both a general sense – his very self-centeredness and impetuousness contribute to his rebellion against David – and in a literal sense, as his exceptionally long hair ironically causes his demise.

What an understanding of beauty as a narrative tool does explain, however, is the seeming incongruity of the plethora of attractive characters throughout *Tanakh* and the sharp dismissal of outer appearance in favor of inner morality found in Proverbs. The latter offers us a value judgment – that physical "beauty" is false and that a woman who fears God is to be lauded. The narratives, in contrast, do not offer us value judgments. If beauty were meant as a value to be praised, then why would not figures such as Moses, Deborah, and Ruth also be described as "beautiful?" The opportunity is there – we know that Moses is humble, Deborah, presumably wise, and Ruth a woman of *hesed*. Rather, the narratives mention a character's beauty when it is crucial for plot development – either to highlight specific character traits or, more often, simply because physical appearance in and of itself is a critical plot factor.

Physicality is an inescapable component of reality. *Tanakh* is quite open about beauty and the sometimes unfortunate consequences of lust or even of misplaced love. That is one of the inspiring elements of the Bible – its honesty regarding human frailties and emotions. Yet, to misread the instances of beauty in *Tanakh* as lessons about the value of appearance does a disservice to the text, as well as to traditional Jewish values. As the verse describing the choosing of King David explains, "Look not on [Eliav's] countenance or on the height of his stature; because I have rejected him; for it is not as man seeth: for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart." The Bible may include descriptions of characters' outward appearances so that the resulting narrative makes sense to readers; at times these depictions may also reflect positive or negative lessons about the character's personality. Yet, these narratives serve a fundamentally different purpose than the pedagogic advice of Proverbs. Whereas *Tanakh* generally introduces beauty to explain a story line, Proverbs introduces beauty to highlight a moral lesson – that it is not the outer appearance that matters, from a Jewish perspective. Rather, it is the inner moral fiber of a person – and his or her fearing of God – that establishes, in truth, one's praiseworthiness and valor.

Meira Levinson *holds a BA in English and Environmental Studies and an MA in English Literature from the University of Pennsylvania. She studied at Midreshet Lindenbaum for two years and is currently pursuing a master's degree in Biblical and Talmudic Interpretation through Yeshiva University's Graduate Program for Women in Advanced Talmudic Studies.*

[1] Proverbs 31:30. All the biblical translations in this article are from the 1917 edition of the Jewish Publication Society translation of the Bible, available on Mechon Mamre [http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0.htm].

[2] Genesis 24:16.

[3] Rashi and Rashbam interpret the double terminology in this verse (i.e., the verse says both that Rebekah was a "virgin" and "neither had any man known her") to mean that not only was Rebekah technically a virgin but she had also refrained from other sexual acts; Rashi explains that it was the custom of the Canaanite girls to maintain their technical virginity while engaging in other forms of sexual behavior, and the text thus emphasizes that Rebekah was innocent of all this.

[4] Samuel II, 14:25–26.

[5] Genesis 29:17 re: Rachel; Genesis 39:6 re: Joseph.

[6] Samuel I, 16:12.

[7] Samuel I, 16:18.

[8] Samuel I, 17:42.

[9] The full verse of Samuel I, 17:42 reads, "And when the Philistine looked about, and saw David, he disdained him; for he was but a youth, and ruddy, and withal of a fair countenance."

[10] See Samuel I, 16:18.

[11] Samuel I, 16:7.

What is Hidden is Blessed

By Eve Grubin

Immersed in poetry ever since I was a child, I realize now that I have always gained spiritual sustenance from poems. As I grew into an adult, the world of poetry – writing, reading, coordinating poetry events, teaching poetry, being mentored by poets – sustained me. But over time it was no longer enough. My writing comes out of an urgency and a joy in language, and poetry friends and mentors provide some sense of community, yet it isn't a *life*. Many of my poetry mentors have Christian backgrounds, and Christian messages are embedded in their work and teachings; I became eager to embrace myself as a Jew; my Jewishness was slipping away from me. I was an overeducated poet and an uneducated Jew. I wanted to humble myself before my own religion.

As I became observant I noticed that religious Jews were careful to cover most of their bodies when in public, even in the summer; generally, the women I met dressed fashionably and elegantly but not provocatively. In her memoir, *Through the Unknown Unremembered Gate*, Emily Benedek writes about spending Shabbat for the first time in a neighborhood in Monsey, New York: "I look at a gorgeous dark-eyed woman with a baby in her arms and elegant clothes, silent, graceful. I see another woman, a blonde, with pale skin and fine features. She doesn't speak, but her body seems musical, her modesty like a song." Benedek is noticing a specific approach that can be found among women in religious communities – they take care to honor the gift of the body, and this care manifests itself by highlighting beauty modestly; a certain slant of light gleams through the reticence.

The power of reticence found among women and men who observe modesty in religious communities reminded me of the power of reticence in poetry. I think of the advice that Mary Oliver gave to poets: "Modesty will give you vigor. It keeps open the gates of prayer, through which the mystery of the poem streams on its search for form. Just occasionally, take something you have written, that you rather like, that you have felt an even immodest pleasure over, and throw it away." Modesty in dress, as well as in poetry, can open up an untapped well. Paradoxically, throwing away a seemingly stunning line of poetry or covering the body can lead to creative or erotic power.

The teachings of Judaism encourage people, especially women, to dress modestly because their inner worlds are considered to be so vivid and rich. The Hebrew letters that make up the word "inside" (*bifnim*) can also be found in the Hebrew word for "face" (*panim)*. That these two different words are made up of the same letters suggests that the outer and the inner are not opposites; rather, they are intimately connected and actually reveal one another.

Emily Dickinson explores this connection in her poem, which begins with these lines:

> The Outer—from the Inner
> Derives its Magnitude—

Not only does Dickinson suggest here that the outer draws its grandeur from what is inside (she goes on to write, "The Inner – paints the Outer –"), but she ends the poem with the idea that the mystery of the internal kingdom was not meant to be casually exposed:

> The Star's Whole Secret—in the Lake—
> Eyes were not meant to know.

After Eden, it is difficult to discern the divine purpose of the outer world; the purpose is inside, "in the Lake." What is holiest is secret, and we rush to hide what is most sacred to us; the sages wrote that "what is hidden is blessed." The Torah is carefully covered in shul. The Tabernacle that the Jews carried in the desert, which represented the dwelling place of God on earth, required special coverings to de-emphasize its sparkling exteriors; the coverings allowed the Jews to contemplate the awesome spiritual presence hovering below the surface. Hannah, the future mother of Samuel, prayed for a child by scarcely moving her lips.

The way the Torah itself was written reflects this concept of hiding the deepest meanings. The *midrashim*, orally transmitted stories at which the Torah's language hints, often offer the most nuanced textual interpretations. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, the contemporary literary and Torah scholar, describes midrash as the repressed unconscious of the Torah. "The midrash," Zornberg explains, "offers an answer to a repressed question." In other words, *midrashim* come out of what the Torah cannot say directly. Meaning lies in the white spaces between words. The pregnant silences in the Torah generate the hidden midrash.

God is not seen, but is hidden in the world. In fact, the word for "world," *olam*, in Hebrew, has the same root as the word for "hidden." The world itself, the veil of nature, gives us the opportunity to search for God. And "the veil" over the body, or the coverings we use to clothe our bodies, allows us to experience our internal richness. Isaac Bashevis Singer ended a story with these lines: "There are certain lights that must remain hidden, or else human free will would come to an end. There are certain unions that have no need to couple. There are certain truths that are perceived less the more evident they become."

And, as Emily Dickinson suggests in the following poem, the truth blinds us when it is revealed:

> Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
>
> As Lightning to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind—

I have always applied these lines to poetry, to the idea that when writing poetry we must hide "truth" or emotion in order to provoke feeling in the reader, who cannot be dazzled unless truths are slanted and given gradually. Now I see that these lines can also apply to slanting the truths of the body gradually. A modest poem and a modest woman restrain themselves in order to evoke the wildness of the inner life. When women are attentive to modesty in dress, they are being reticent about a cherished reality. In Emily Dickinson's words, they "tell it slant."

Eve Grubin's *book of poems,* Morning Prayer, *was published by The Sheep Meadow Press. Eve teaches at The New School University and runs the Arts Fellowship Program at Drisha.*

This piece was adapted from her essay, "After Eden: The Veil as Conduit to the Internal," which appeared in The Veil: Women Writers on its History, Lore and Politics *(U. of California Press, 2009).*

Food for Thought: Eating Disorders and the Jewish Community

By Esther Altmann

The body in our culture has become a dumping ground for a broad spectrum of emotional experiences and anxieties, and a concrete, socially sanctioned way of expressing self-doubts and existential angst. Many women live just under the radar of full-blown eating disorders as unhealthy eating behaviors have become normative, and perspectives on the female body distorted. Anorexia and bulimia are among the most emotionally and physically devastating disorders and are most prevalent within upwardly mobile demographic groups.

Jewish women are by no means exempt from these trends. The pervasiveness of eating disorders has affected the Jewish community, including the ultra-Orthodox sectors. Many Jewish women of all ages have chronic eating concerns and negative feelings about their bodies. I have found that young Jewish anorectics frequently receive communal endorsement of their emaciated frames. More than one mother has reported the need to ask other women at shul to stop complimenting their anorectic daughters on their weight loss and to stop voicing admiration for their discipline and restraint. Even within the ultra-Orthodox communities, proscriptions such as no television in the home, designed to protect members from problematic cultural influences, have not provided a successful shield.

Frequently, mothers of the adolescent girls themselves have histories of eating disorders or unacknowledged subclinical manifestations of eating disorders. These subclinical eating disorders can take the form of excessive exercise, chronic dieting, occasional vomiting, skipping meals, adhering to a rigid list of permissible foods, cooking for the family but eating different, less caloric meals, body preoccupations, and body image distortion. Teenagers are acutely aware of their parents' unhealthy eating patterns and may identify with parents who are essentially on permanent diets in order to be fashionably slim.

This preoccupation with the body is antithetical both to a feminist and Jewish perspective. From a feminist perspective, an imperative to curtail the appetite for food may be a symbol of a culture that demands that women limit their desires and not take up too much space in the world; women feel hungry when they are not permitted to fill their needs for power, comfort, and self-expression legitimately and may use food as a way of managing these suppressed needs. The "idol worship" of the body is also antithetical to Jewish thought and practice which traditionally view the body as the transient instrument through which we can engage in the fundamental religious goals of worship, study, and acts of *hesed*.

I am frequently asked whether there is a connection between Jewish rituals and values, and the problem of eating disorders in the Jewish community. Indeed, there are several popular views that seek to link Judaism and eating disorders and reflect the sociocultural context of modern Jewish life and practice:

1. The pressure of *shiddukhim* and the psychological impact on young women to marry early and have large families.
2. The fact that we celebrate Shabbat and festivals around meals with an overabundance of food.
3. The impact of the Holocaust, with its legacy of starvation, on the second and third generation of children of survivors and, more broadly, on the collective Jewish unconscious.
4. The practice of *kashrut*, which separates foods into permissible and nonpermissible categories analogous to individuals who suffer from eating disorders who separate foods into acceptable and not acceptable food groups.

Clearly, there are genetic, biological, psychological, and familial factors that culminate in an eating disorder. What role then, if any, might these particular phenomena play? In the larger American culture, not everyone develops eating disorders even though all women are bombarded by media messages promoting an unattainable ideal of thinness. Similarly, in the Orthodox world, girls and women do not all develop eating disorders though many are exposed to the pressures of the *shiddukh* system, young marriage, early motherhood, the *halakhot* of *kashrut*, the tradition of lavish meals on Shabbat, and the legacy of deprivation during the Holocaust.

First, it has been suggested that observant young women develop eating disorders because they have no voice, no other way to say that they are not ready to take on the responsibilities of wife and mother. Many young women (or their families) worry that they are not skinny enough to start dating for fear that they will be passed over for a girl with a better body. The abhorrent question, "*what size does she wear?*" is often quoted. Unfortunately, these *shiddukh* stories are not merely apocryphal. Some young men and women harbor the illusion that a perfect body will produce a perfect spouse and a perfect life.

We tend not to think about the issue of *shiddukhim* and marriage from a male point of view, and ignore the possibility of men's anxieties and insecurities. Young men may feel unready to meet this developmental milestone and therefore may ask some inappropriate and superficial questions. Perhaps they need help developing an awareness of their own needs and a vocabulary that would enable them to express uncertainties about themselves, women, sexuality, and marriage in more meaningful ways than by asking about dress size.

One way of thinking about the pressure of early marriage and large families is that each community imposes expectations on young adults and creates its own stressors. For example, many of the students I work with in my practice feel overwhelming pressure to gain admission to an Ivy League university. In cases where there is communal pressure toward early marriage, parents can work to mitigate these expectations by paying close attention to their child's emotional development. The appropriate age for marriage should not be decided by communal expectations but rather by the unique psychological needs of each individual.

Second, it has also been suggested that Jewish rituals and festivals, so intertwined with food and lavish meals, may interact with the problem of eating disorders. Although delighting in Shabbat and holiday meals is a deeply embedded tradition that is halakhically dictated, it is worth considering whether a tendency toward excess, an American vulnerability, has infiltrated the way we host guests on Shabbat and celebrate life-cycle events.

Of further concern is that, in some homes, Shabbat meals have lost the intimacy of a family experience and have become primarily festive social gatherings. Although the firmly rooted

tradition of *hakhnasat orhim* – inviting guests for Shabbat – is an inherent value, some families are either hosts or guests every week and thus rarely have a Shabbat meal alone. If families ate together during the week, this would not be of concern; however, I am dismayed at how expendable this fundamental building block of family life has become.

Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, a professor of epidemiology and expert on child nutrition surveyed approximately 5,000 adolescents and found that almost one-quarter reported eating family meals only twice a week or less. Her studies have concluded that families who do not eat together are more likely to have an adolescent who may be depressed, do poorly in school, use alcohol or drugs, have poor self-esteem, or have less nutritious diets than teenagers from families who eat together more regularly.[1]

Observant families state many reasons why they do not eat together; synagogue and school meetings, *shiurim*, extracurricular activities, late nights at work, no time to cook or shop for food, and pickiness about the food that is available. This is true both in families with mothers who work outside the home and in those where mothers do not. One consequence of families not eating together is that parents often do not realize that their child is eating abnormally until a full-blown eating disorder has developed. Shabbat meals are an optimal time to observe a child's reluctance to eat a piece of hallah or his or her odd eating habits.

Third, in stark contrast to our lavish festive meals, the Holocaust's haunting images of skeletal victims hover over the pathology of self-induced starvation. One theory is that an unconscious, collective identification with grandparents who survived or relatives who perished may underlie eating disorders in the Jewish community. Food, like money, becomes a symbol of safety from annihilation and may be overemphasized in families of survivors. Several psychotherapists who treat eating disorders within the Jewish community have wondered whether there is a higher rate of eating disorders in families of Holocaust survivors. I have observed this in my own practice, although there are very limited research data to support this clinical impression and it is possible that other family dynamics may be more significant indicators for the disorder.

Fourth, it is also the case that within halakhic Judaism, food is highly regulated: Blessings are recited before and after meals, hands are washed ritually before bread is eaten, and *kashrut* laws define permissible and non-permissible foods in ways that may not be so psychologically different from eliminating food groups such as carbohydrates and fats. Although compelling, this comparison may be misleading. There is little clinical material or empirical evidence to confirm the connection between patients with eating disorders and those who observe the laws of *kashrut*. Moreover, these laws have been practiced for more than 2,000 years, whereas the prevalence of eating disorders is a contemporary phenomenon. Additionally, Judaism is not the only religion or culture in which food is regulated and plays a central role. In a 2008 study, Sarah Weinberger-Litman, a New York health psychologist, sampled a large group of female Jewish high school and college students and found no significant differences in the frequency of eating disorder symptoms between Orthodox and non-Orthodox groups, suggesting that *kashrut* and Jewish observance may not increase one's risk of developing an eating disorder (Weinberger-Litman, personal communication).

Perhaps the more important question is not whether Jewish rituals and practices contribute to the problem of eating disorders but rather how the incorporation of Jewish values can help prevent the problem from arising. Some interesting research has emerged that supports the idea that religious experience can function as a potential buffer against eating disorders. Weinberger-Litman recently studied groups of Modern Orthodox high school girls in New York and Israel and found that an internalized religious orientation was correlated with a more positive body image and fewer disordered eating behaviors.[2] This finding suggests that personal religious beliefs may in fact mitigate negative feelings about the body or maladaptive eating habits.[3]

The biblical verse, "Take good care of yourselves and take great care of your souls" (*Devarim* 4:15), has been interpreted by the rabbis as a directive to avoid habits that may harm the body. Furthermore, the Jewish idea that all of humanity is created *b'tzelem elokim*, in the image of God, reflects the view that a spark of the divine rests within each of us. Individuals with eating disorders are disconnected from this internal spark. The challenge is how to harness the transformative power of Judaism to nurture both body and soul. I have no doubt that Jewish values and practices can be powerful, positive forces in this endeavor.

Nose ring, B'nei Israel community Bombay region, India
Courtesy of Israel Museum, Jerusalem

Esther Altmann, PhD. *is a psychologist in private practice in Manhattan. She specializes in the treatment of adolescents, families, and eating disorders; is a consultant at the Renfrew Center; and is on the teaching faculty at YCT Rabbinical School and the Drisha Institute.*

[1] Eisenberg, M., Neumark-Stzainer, D., et al. (2004). Correlations between family meals and psychosocial well-being among adolescents. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine, 158*, 792–796.

[2] Weinberger-Litman's research differentiates spirituality and religion; spirituality is a more transcendent, inner experience, and religion is a more communal, ritualized one.

[3] Weinberger-Litman, S., et al. (2008). The influence of religious orientation and spiritual well-being on body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in a sample of Jewish women. *International Journal of Child and Adolescent Health, 1*.

Olive Skirts, Khaki Pants, and Rifles: The Dress of Religious Women in the Israeli Army

By Shayna Weiss

During my first trip to Israel, I spotted a young woman on Har Herzl wearing an olive khaki skirt, and carrying an automatic weapon. I stared, and she stared back. We did not speak, but I remember my surprise that an observant woman could enlist in the Israeli army. I had simply never heard of such a thing.

Years later, when I needed a thesis topic, I decided to "return" to that woman and explore the world of *dati* women in the Israeli army. As part of my research, I visited institutions that prepare observant women for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and spoke with students and their teachers and rabbis. On my itinerary were Tokhnit Hadas (a division of Midreshet Lindenbaum) and Midreshet Be'er in Yeruham. In these programs, women spend one year learning before they begin their army service, and then return for another stint of learning after their service. (There is another similar program I did not manage to visit, at Midreshet Ein Hanatziv.) I also stopped at Tzahali, the first *mekhina* (one-year pre-army preparatory program) for religious women, which, although it has a significant learning component, focuses more on self-development as its goal. The majority of the participants in these programs came from Jerusalem and its environs or from the religious kibbutz movement. They represent one to two percent of the total number of observant female soldiers in the IDF.[1]

During my visit, I found that the issue of dress was paramount. The tensions surrounding clothing went far deeper than the choice between pants and skirts—they spoke to the core of the soldier's religious identities, as well as to matters of autonomy and representation for *dati* females in Israeli society.

In the IDF, everyone has a work uniform and a dress uniform. Although a female soldier could technically wear a skirt as part of her work uniform, almost no one chooses to do so because of the inherent impracticality of such an arrangement. In fact, many of the women told me that because of the nature of army life, pants are more modest than skirts. Female soldiers may however, request larger sizes of pants and alter them so that they are not as tight fitting as one often sees on other female soldiers. With respect to skirts, a standard-issue skirt is issued when requested. The skirt is notoriously large, long, and shapeless; however, the female soldiers are allowed to tailor the skirt as they see fit. The army makes a distinction between altering for fit and for fashion, permitting only the former. Of course, the line between the two is quite hazy, and here observant women are no different from their secular counterparts in pushing the limits. However, in deference to religious preferences, the army is significantly less likely to challenge the alterations made by a *dati* female.

I found it fascinating how many conversations there were about lengths, slits, and fit of army skirts among the women I visited – especially as their date of enlistment approached. It seemed that these conversations, which lasted for hours about the minutest details of tailoring, were a way for these women to allay fears about their upcoming service. By focusing on slits instead of army placements, these soldiers could concentrate on matters under their control rather than worry about their military service that both excited and terrified them. In addition, the loss of individuality that accompanied joining the military was partially offset by wearing a personalized, unique khaki skirt, different from any other army uniform.

The issue of work uniforms for religious women in the army is fairly uncomplicated. However, it is with respect to the dress uniform that the real controversy arises. This uniform is worn to official ceremonies, when a soldier is officially representing the army at meetings, and other important functions. Here too, female soldiers have a choice of skirts or pants. The religious institutions mentioned earlier strongly recommend that women choose skirts, whereas a significant group of female soldiers prefer dress pants. The concern of the schools is not only for modesty, although that undoubtedly plays a role. They also want these observant women to be easily identified as female religious soldiers – and the donning of a skirt links these women to the observant community, thereby challenging the community to consider these women as belonging to it. Moreover, the schools believe that when religious women wear skirts, Israeli society recognizes that these obviously observant women can fully serve their country just like their secular counterparts, challenging both religious and secular notions of equality and civic duty.

But it is exactly this equation of skirts with religiosity to which many of the soldiers object. Many of the women I spoke to did not normally wear skirts, except for Shabbat. Yet, they considered themselves full-fledged members of religious society and felt Torah and halakha were incredibly important to them. They resented the notion that, to be identified as observant to

Soldiers from Midreshet Lindenbaum's Hadas program at Graduation Ceremony.

the religious and secular public, they needed to wear skirts. They further spoke of functional (rather than legal) modesty – the *tzniut* associated with a pair of loose pants that would enable them to engage in more tasks while exposing much less of their body shape and skin to the outside world than a skirt would. Additionally, many women told stories about how wearing pants enabled them to challenge perceptions of religious women, and how the absence of a visible "signifier" of religiosity gave them a freedom to grow in ways unimaginable in their earlier, isolated lives in religious communities.

I was told of a time when a group of pants-clad female soldiers on their way to a Hanukah party stopped at a gas station to daven *Minha* by the side of the road. (The women were in their work uniforms, having come directly from their army base.) They attracted a considerable amount of attention from people who were only used to seeing men pray by the side of the road – a quintessentially Israeli prayer experience. A group of *haredim* approached the rabbi who was traveling with them and asked him what was occurring. Bemused, he explained that the soldiers were praying. The *haredim* objected, for they simply did not understand how women in military uniform, wearing pants, were capable of prayer. The rabbi again explained that the women were religious soldiers. By this time, the women had finished their prayers and overheard much of the conversation. In relaying this story to me, one of them commented that she was proud to be part of a group that demonstrated that Judaism was not the sole domain of those who demanded that women wear skirts. By wearing pants and praying publicly, she felt that she was challenging prevalent perceptions of religious women in the public sphere.

I want to make clear that observant people are not the only ones to make assumptions regarding the religious lives of these women. Many of the pants-wearing religious soldiers reported that they often had a difficult time convincing secular army commanders that they were indeed observant and therefore eligible for Shabbat accommodations and time off for prayer. One soldier told me about a friend who had married immediately before entering the army. When she arrived at the base, her hair covered with a brightly colored scarf, she was told by her commander that olive green or black were the only acceptable colors for head covering. She reminded him that men could wear whatever color *kippah* they desired and that she deserved that same right. He then relented, and she served with many differently colored scarves. A similar interaction was captured in a documentary about religious women in the Israeli army made by Peninah Greitzer, an Israeli filmmaker. In the film, Greitzer followed the women to the enlistment base, where all new soldiers are processed and receive uniforms, and shows an interaction with a clerk who is distributing military fatigues to the women. Each soldier is entitled to three sets of clothes. One woman asks for two pairs of pants and one skirt. The clerk explodes in anger: "You're either religious or you're not. Black or white. You can't be Sabbath observant and smoke a cigarette." He refuses to accommodate her request, and a supervisor has to be called to convince this very angry secular clerk that the request was legitimate.

The debate over which uniform an observant female soldier should wear is ultimately linked to the question of who claims these women: the religious world or the larger Israeli community. Are they the success stories of the religious Zionist world or the shining example of a diverse Israeli society? Although both sides wish to claim them, perhaps these women represent a new path in Israeli identity – a combination of two worlds. However, I would like to think that the choices of uniform will be made by the female soldiers themselves, rather than by their seminary teachers. As part of their religious development, it is crucial that these women become their own ritual actors and decide themselves what they should wear in pursuit of their life's work – whether in the battlefield or anywhere else.

Through my research, I came to realize that I too had to revise my earlier perception of the world of religious women and the Israeli army. Although the woman I saw on Mount Herzl was visibly observant, she may very well not have been the first religious female soldier I encountered. I too was guilty of placing people in boxes based solely on physical appearance and their associations, ignoring the complex lives of the observant women who serve in the IDF. Indeed, the controversy over observant female soldiers goes much further than skirts and pants. To me, its crux lies in the identification of warfare with masculinity; therefore (potentially) rendering the army uniform a form of forbidden cross-dressing for women. It is not only the pants that are masculine, but rather the entire enterprise. The Babylonian Talmud states in *Massekhet Nazir* 59a: "From where do we learn that women should not go to war with a weapon? The Torah states 'A woman should not wear that which pertains to a man'" (Deuteronomy 22:4).[2] Similarly, the controversies regarding the uniforms of religious female soldiers are manifestations of larger questions involving gender, religion, and nationalism in the State of Israel. I suspect that as long as these battles rage, the debates regarding khaki skirts will continue.

Shayna Weiss *is from Jacksonville, Florida, and received her BA from Brandeis University, where she wrote her senior thesis on religious women in the Israeli army. After a year in Drisha's Bet Midrash program, she is now a PhD. candidate in Israel Studies at New York University.*

[1] Altogether, roughly two-thirds of women who graduate from state-religious schools serve in *Sherut Le'umi* (National Service), and one-third enlist in the army. *Dati* women constitute between 5 to 10% of all female soldiers.

[2] The halakhic discussion regarding women and warfare is far from this simple. There are other sources (namely the seventh mishnah in the eighth chapter of *Sotah*) that seem to indicate that women are obligated to engage in some forms of warfare. However, the vast majority of religious Zionist rabbis in Israel advise against military service for women. Unfortunately, the exploration of these *halakhot* is outside the scope of this article.

Emerging Voices

We welcome future submissions from all high school students. Please email jofa@jofa.org

Cover-Up in Day Schools

By Shira Telushkin

The way that *tzniut*, modesty, is presented to girls in schools is critical to how it is perceived by them. There seem to be two general approaches. One is inner-directed, making modesty a matter of self-respect: it does not behoove a female to disrespect the holiness of her body by dressing inappropriately. The second approach is other-directed: one should not dress provocatively because it is insensitive to the men and boys with whom one comes into contact.

It is this second rationale that draws the most ire in Modern Orthodox day schools. The idea that girls must dress a certain way out of deference to their male peers, and that men should even dictate this significant form of self-expression, runs counter to their modern values. Many girls are unwilling to cover up simply to ease the way for their male counterparts, especially when there seem to be few parallel actions undertaken by men with respect to women.

Thus, it is obvious why the first explanation, personal self-respect, is more often articulated. It is more politically correct, more inspiring and more palatable to the female student; it does not require that girls tailor their behavior to accommodate the boys. The easier message to defend is that modesty is an inherent virtue, because our bodies are holy, created in the image of God, and private. After all, it's the same reason we cover the Torah scroll.

But is this truly the logic behind *tzniut*? Is this even the logic behind the standard Modern Orthodox school dress code that typically mandates a minimum of knee-length skirts and short sleeves? And is this message of *tzniut* really internalized by the female student body? I would say that it is not. The self-respect rationale may be paid lip service, but few people really see it as the true reason for practicing *tzniut*. And although it may be easier to defend morally, it is a difficult rationale on which to base a uniform standard of modesty. Such an argument may make girls feel better about the halakha, but I don't think it will make more girls keep *hilkhot tzniut* – the specific rules of *tzniut*.

I would suggest that most girls, whether they admit it or not, do not believe that the practical rules for *tzniut* are enforced in order to increase respect for the holiness of their bodies. Regardless of what is said, girls still associate dressing modestly with a male presence. After all, it is a more logical association. One can typically hear a girl complain, "Why can't we wear tank tops during gym if it's all girls?" On school Shabbatons, there are no regulations regarding sleepwear, because it will be seen only by females. Girls complain angrily when male teachers correct their lapses of school dress code, often asking, "Why was he looking?" All of these incidents indicate that girls understand that *tzniut* is about sexuality and the male gaze. Once the men are gone, it is no longer compelling.

Girls *feel* they should dress modestly out of deference to men, and the seeming unfairness of this decreases their respect for the halakha. Very few girls truly see a deeper or personal value in modesty. Therefore, enforcement of *tzniut* in school is met by resentment or bitterness, because the logic is deemed either sexist or apologetic. Given such a situation, it becomes clear why modesty is not a high value for many girls.

Obviously, girls also strongly relate clothing to looking attractive. Most girls do not care about *tzniut,* especially if it infringes on the main goal of looking attractive. Many of my friends understand that modesty is about not attracting male attention. But their goal in getting dressed is often *precisely* to attract male attention. If anything, perceiving the sexual basis for *tzniut* only reinforces a culture in which girls use dress to boost their confidence and garner response from the other gender. And of course the irony is that either way they are still dressing in response to men.

The difficulty lies in discerning whether these girls are correct in believing that self-respect is not the true reason for the laws of modesty. It seems a bit absurd to claim that modesty has nothing to do with male attention. Certainly, it is considered more inappropriate for men to see an immodest woman than it is for a woman to see an immodestly dressed woman. This is obvious. If Orthodox schools also claim halakha as the basis of their decisions, then it is clear that other issues, such as *kol isha,*[1] are solely male-dependent. Nobody believes that two women should not sing in front of each other.

Another argument against couching *tzniut* solely in terms of self-respect is that this approach also opens the door to a great deal of leeway. An objective standard ceases to exist. Any girl can judge for herself whether her outfit is degrading or inappropriate, and chances are that if a girl is wearing something, she probably doesn't think it is degrading. Therefore, it would seem to be a very shaky ground on which to build a strong and lasting argument for a certain standard.

On a purely logical basis, it seems that the type of *tzniut* dealt with in the Modern Orthodox world is indeed in reaction to male presence. The established boundaries on the body (knees, shoulders or elbows, and cleavage) all relate in one way or another to sexuality. Although boys cannot wear jeans and must wear button-down shirts (or ties), there is very little regulation in how casual or respectful a girl's clothing must be. This difference alone seems to suggest that the male dress code is about creating a respectful learning environment and the female dress code is about not looking provocative.

But since when has halakha, with its rich history of development, ever been single-faceted? There is no reason the two values of self-respect and modesty need to be seen as competing. I believe that schools need to take a stand and integrate both values without apology. In doing so, we must move away from a focus on body boundaries and mere adherence to rules. Teaching *tzniut* needs to be about its inherent value. Anyone

who has been in a Jewish high school knows that it is possible to look immodest within the parameters of an official dress code. A school that permits any knee-length skirt, regardless of how tight it is or how high the slit or how see-through the fabric, is not sending a message about what it means to respect your body. Schools should offer guidelines, as well as rules, and not be afraid to tell girls that they are dressed immodestly, even without pinpointing specific infractions. Girls tend to know what modesty looks like. Girls should not feel that it is acceptable to dress immodestly as long as they are technically within dress code.

If we truly want to establish modesty in dress and appearance in our communities, t*zniut* must be inculcated as a religious and spiritual value, for males and females, as a positive way to reclaim the holiness of one's body and not just as adherence to rules. Then it might succeed.

Shira Telushkin *graduated this year from SAR High School in Riverdale, New York and spent the summer as a fellow at Yeshivat Hadar in Manhattan. She is currently studying at Midreshet Migdal Oz before entering Yale University.*

[1] *Kol isha*, literally, "a woman's voice," refers to the prohibition of hearing a woman's (singing) voice. The nature, scope, and modern application of this halakha are beyond the purview of this article, but it clearly refers to the female voice being heard by a man.

Female Clothing in the Work of Ita Aber

Ita Aber has spent her life as a textile artist and textile scholar. Many years ago she discovered the Greek letter "Gamma" to be a symbol of women's clothing, and the Greek letter "Eta" of men's clothing on textiles found in the Masada excavations, as well as on fragments from the Bar Kokhba caves. She discovered these again in the murals of the third century synagogue at Dura Europos. According to Aber, while most cultures have different types of clothing for men and women, for Jews this was especially mandated by the biblical prohibitions against "cross dressing"(discussed by Devorah Zlochower in this issue – see p.1).

Since her discovery, Aber has used these symbols on many textiles she has created. For her "feminine creations", she has used "gammas" covered with silk as on women's amulets. The woman's *tallit* that she fashioned in 1977 uses a modified "gamma" as a primary decorative image.

With a deep knowledge of Jewish history – as well as her family background (one grandmother who came to Canada from Turkey and another who was originally German but spent some years in Poland before arriving in Canada), Aber is well aware of different Jewish customs and traditions. For example, Sephardic women's costume is known for its elaborate jewelry, but Aber also knew that in Ashkenazi communities, for a long time, bridal dresses were decorated with pearls, (a trade which is known to have been largely in the hands of Jews in many periods), and that head coverings were frequently adorned with ribbons and glass beads and later with pearls and jewels. This has affected her choice of materials. Aber has also utilized fishscales, cut, shaped or serrated, and stitched down one against the other on velvet or other material to create an effect of branches, stems or open blooming flowers, which her research has shown was used historically for objects such as matza bags made in Jerusalem in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as for the tops of Jewish women's slippers in Egypt and other places.

Aber's work combines deep tradition and fascinating whimsy and originality. On a white baby girl's naming dress, Aber embroidered colorful decorations and added the Hebrew phrase (in blue, not pink) with wishes for the baby for a life of Torah, *huppah* and good deeds – a phrase that has traditionally been used on *wimpels*, the binders painted or embroidered in many Ashkenazi communities out of the swaddling cloth used at a boy's *brit*. This girl's naming dress is now in the Ethnography Collection of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Girl's Naming Garment, Swiss lawn with cotton embroidery, 1980

Gamma and Eta, Embroidery on silk over wood, Coll. of Dr. Carmela Abraham & Dr. Steve Kubersky, White Plains, NY., 1987

Woman's *tallit* using modified gammas as decorative image on corners, with neckband of contemporary *Spanier Arbeit,* incorporating the two "alephs" of artist's name, 1977

Bridal Attire

Jews have very much been influenced by the customs, conventions, and fashions of the societies in which they have lived. Because of this, there have always been huge variations in the way Jewish women dress, which is most noticeable in Jewish bridal attire. Since there are no halakhic requirements for the way a *hatan* and *kallah* should dress for the wedding ceremony, weddings provided the occasion to dress as beautifully as one could as well as to display the social position of the bride and her family. Jewelry was always very important for the Jewish bride. The Midrash states that God Himself prepared jewelry for Eve when he brought her to Adam.

Traditionally in Ashkenazi communities the bride wore her best dress of any color, which would then be worn on other occasions. This was also the custom of non-Jewish brides. Illustrations in books by Christians about Jewish ritual and the depictions of the bride and groom under the *huppah* on *wimpels* (the decorated swaddling cloths used to mark the birth of a baby boy in many Ashkenazi communities) show that Jewish brides historically did not wear white.

White bridal dresses, which were extremely impractical, only became widespread in non-Jewish Western circles in the early 19th century. Queen Victoria's wedding in 1840 is often cited as a prime factor in their popularity, but the upper classes had always worn fancy ball-gown-like dresses, whereas poorer brides wore heavier "day dresses" that could be worn later for church and other occasions. The white wedding dress tradition quickly spread, and Jews readily accepted it perhaps because of the association with purity and innocence and the customs of wearing white on Yom Kippur and on the 15th of Av (*Tu b'Av)*. In German and Dutch communities, a bride and groom would often send each other silver belts called *sivlonos* belts that they would wear at the *huppah* linked together by a third belt to symbolize the union.

Keswa el Kbira. (Grand Costume)
Morocco, 19th-20th Century
Embroidered with metal threads
Yeshiva University Museum
Gift of Abrahan Pinto

In Oriental communities, Jewish brides traditionally wore very elaborate ceremonial costumes that were richly embroidered and often borrowed for the occasion. Because they were very expensive, the costumes made for weddings and festive occasions were worn for as long as possible. In many North African communities, brides wore black and red dresses in the style of Spanish costumes, embroidered with gold and silver thread, with semi-precious stones. Gold embroidery was often a craft in which Jews specialized. Interestingly, brides traditionally did wear white in Tangier.

In Morocco the elaborate eight-piece wedding outfit was only worn for the *huppah* and was often passed down from mother to daughter, although by the 20th century, existing bridal dresses would be shared by brides and bridesmaids in the family or community. Today, this "Grand Costume," the *keswa el Kbira,* is worn only for the henna ceremony preceding the wedding, and a white gown is usually worn for the wedding itself. The colors and the jewels of these costumes were fixed for different cities and different communities (such as green in Fez and Marrakesh, wine-red in Rabat, and purple, dark blue, and black in northwest Morocco). The bridal diadem (*sfifa)* in Morocco served to distinguish the Jewish bride from Muslim ones and gave her a royal look. Frequently, it was made of baroque pearls and pieces of gold jewelry with semi-precious stones on silk. Bridal earrings often had hooks at the top to attach them to the bridal diadem. In Fez, the bride would wear five gold bracelets on her right wrist and rows of gold necklaces. These would be passed from mother to daughter and lent to other brides in the family.

Silk Italian Wedding dress, 1894
Courtesy of U. Nahon Museum of Italian Jewish Art, Jerusalem. Donated by Lionella Vitterbi Neppi Modona, Florence

In Yemen, the traditional bridal costume is particularly elaborate and heavy, and generally copied Muslim bridal costumes, though there were significant differences in the details. The Jewish bride's headgear, for example, was more symmetrical than that of the Muslim bride and consisted of different ornaments. A woman called a *shareh* would specially prepare the bride before her wedding; sometimes she actually owned the complete bridal outfit that she would bring. In San'a, the bride wore leggings, embroidered in an exclusively Jewish pattern; a red garment, which apparently has a symbolic meaning related to fertility; a white garment, and a gold brocade coat made of imported material from India, with many rows of heavy necklaces made by Jewish silversmiths. The necklace or *labbeh* was traditionally given to the Yemenite bride by her father or fiance. At the wedding it would be attached to the sides of her headgear so that it hung down framing her chin, and later she would wear it during celebrations following childbirth and other festive occasions. The bride's high towering head-dress, the *tishbuk*

lulu, was made of pearls and flowers. The heavy jewelry was considered a protection against possible evils. Branches of rue at the sides of the bride's face and neck and in her hands were believed to ward off the evil eye. Elaborate bracelets were also given to the bride by her father or her future husband, and she would wear up to five on each arm. She would also wear up to ten rings on each hand in a fixed order. Israeli ethnographers have noted that Yemenite bridal costumes in Israel now revive the bridal costumes of the capital city San'a rather than those of other regions.

Devorah Isaac Bitran of Boston in traditional Yemenite costume during henna ceremony preceding her marriage in Summer 2005

In Turkey, where the traditional wedding dress was an *entari*, there was a transitional period in the 19th century when Jewish brides would wear heavy velvet dresses called a *bindalli* with a scrolling or branchlike pattern of embroidery resembling a Tree of Life. This would then often be given to the synagogue to make a *parokhet* or a cover for the *sefer* Torah. By the beginning of the 20th century, under the pressures of modernization, most brides wore white, Western-style dresses for the actual wedding, and the more traditional costumes were likely only worn for celebrations like the henna ceremony.

In India, Cochin brides would wear white as they did on Yom Kippur and Hoshana Rabbah; the basic garment was a wrap skirt, a *podava*. The women of the community were often professional embroiderers, and the bridal costumes were silk with fine gold embroidery; frequently they were passed onto girls from poorer families. When the woman died, her *podava* would be placed on top of the coffin until burial. Among India's *B'nei Israel* community, the bride would wear a white sari at the wedding as opposed to non-Jewish brides who wore a traditional red sari.

Bridal diadem, Tetuan or Rabat, Morocco, 20th century
Courtesy of Israel Museum, Jerusalem

Among wealthy Bukharan families, a goldsmith would be invited into the bride's house before the wedding to make the jewelry for the bride's dowry and he would stay until the job was completed. The jewelry would remain the bride's property and would be passed onto her daughters when she died. Among Cochin Jews, a Hindu goldsmith would be invited to fashion a pendant from a gold coin, and he worked under the supervision of the community's elders. Among the *B'nei Israel* in India, the father would dip the necklace into a cup of wine and place it around his daughter's neck. As among non-Jews, the wife would never take this necklace off while her husband was alive.

According to a very old custom, until the second century the bride was crowned with a "Jerusalem of Gold" bridal crown, a golden crown depicting the walls of Jerusalem. According to the *Shulhan Arukh*, since the destruction of the Temple a bride cannot wear a crown of silver or gold, but can wear a head-dress of other materials. This goes back to the book of Proverbs: "For they shall be as a chaplet of grace for your head" (1:9). We have evidence that bridal crowns, or myrtle, olive and flower wreathes were worn during the ceremony in talmudic times and into the Middle Ages. Often the wedding veil was a gift from the bridegroom to the bride. While many have adapted the custom of lace for the veil, Hasidic brides wear very heavy veils that completely cover the face. The Ashkenazi custom is to have a veiling ceremony (called the *bedeken* from the German word to cover) where the *hatan* covers the face of the bride and the verse of the blessing for Rebekah: "O sister, be thou the mother of tens of thousands" is said since Rebekah traditionally covered her head for the first time when she met Isaac.

Wedding dress, Turkey, 19th century
Velvet, metallic thread
Collection of Judah L. Magnes Museum

Many Sephardim do not have a veiling ceremony; the brides wear a thin veil so there is no possibility of deception as in the biblical story of Jacob and Leah. A traditional custom among Turkish Jews was for the bride to wear the veil that had been used at her naming ceremony. In Afghanistan sequin embroidery was applied to the scarves that the bride wore at her betrothal ceremony. The sequins would be in the shapes of phrases like *mazal tov* or *ben Porat Yosef* – Joseph is a fruitful bough (Genesis 49.22), which was considered to be a great symbolic blessing – or in the shape of *magen david*s, *hamsas*, and Trees of Life. Sequins were also used to decorate the fans that the Afghani bride carried at the wedding ceremony, which were made of braided palm leaves, covered with silk, and then decorated.

linked with how and what we eat. Jewish tradition has elaborate guidelines for how we are to approach food: what we are permitted to eat, when we may eat it, how it must be prepared, and what types of blessings we are to recite over each bite that enters our mouths. Given this religious framework, one might assume that Jews would have a healthy relationship with food. However, we fall victim to the same food fads and eating related health problems that plague society at large. When the words "Jews and food" are mentioned together, the reverence our tradition has historically had for food is not the first thing that comes to mind. Instead, we recognize, often with humor, how linked our holidays and celebrations are with food customs and with eating. No significant date in the Jewish calendar is properly observed without either an overwhelming abundance or complete absence of food. Our celebrations are famous for fare ranging from bagels, lox, and rugelach to full-blown, all-you-can-eat smorgasbords.

An examination of some of the disconnect that has developed between Jews and our ancient links with food, can help us regain a more positive and healthful attitude towards eating. While agriculture dictated the lives of our ancestors, contemporary Jews must often reference a list to learn which *berakha* to say on a given piece of food. Many foods we consider "traditional" today result from the efforts of hungry people to ensure that no animal parts went to waste. Ironically, we now scour specialty food markets for exotic ingredients to prepare the "traditional" foods that were once simply the local fare of our dispersed diaspora ancestors, valuing the wisdom we find in a recipe over our own fresh and local ingredients. There are modern secular food movements called "slow food" (a counter to "fast" food) and "local food" which urge people to know and appreciate how food is grown and harvested, and if possible, to participate in these activities themselves. Like fitness trends, Orthodox Jews are not at the forefront of these food movements. However, one can argue that the *berakhot* that we recite over food in our tradition promote the same type of awareness and reverence these movements encourage.

The formulation of the food *berakhot* not only allows us to thank the Creator for something with which to fill our bellies, but also demands that we have knowledge about the origins of our food. To choose the correct blessing, we must know how a given food grows (on trees or closer to the ground, for example), what key ingredients a dish contains, and what type of processing a food has undergone before it arrives on our table.

Our *berakhot* also indicate in their wording a concern for the nutritional content of food. "*Birkat hamazon*" literally means "blessing over sustenance." The *berakha* ending with the words, "*borei minei mezonot*" gives thanks to "the One who creates sustenance." We have a *halakhic* obligation to give thanks to God for all the food we choose to eat, even "junk food" that can be detrimental to our health. Nevertheless, the words of our food *berakhot*, if recited with intention, are a constant reminder to put into our bodies, God's vessels, food that is nourishing. And a *berakha* said on a food eaten when truly hungry, is, in most cases, said with a level of intention far greater than a *berakha* mouthed over food eaten past the point of hunger. In short, Judaism has provided us with thoughtful food *berakhot*, and these, if said with *kavvanah*, are likely to lead to more healthy eating.

Three Tunisian Jewish Women
Early 20th century postcard

The questions of how and what we eat and how we treat our bodies are both physical and spiritual, and they are definitely Jewish questions. Both our *tefillot* and our *berakhot* would be more meaningful and our eating would be more healthful if we took the time to explore and consider these issues seriously. At the same time we should recognize that our religious traditions do give us a framework for relating properly to our physical selves.

For further reading:

In Defense of Food, by Michael Pollan, Penguin Press, 2008.

Food for Thought: Hazon's Sourcebook on Jews, Food and Contemporary Life, www.hazon.org

Torah Yoga: Experiencing Jewish Wisdom Through Classic Postures, by Diane Bloomfield, Arthur Kurzweil Books, Jossey-Bass, 2004.

***Abbie Greenberg** is a former JOFA board member, a mother of five young children and a potter. She had the pleasure of being exposed to "Torah Yoga" which integrates Torah study and yoga practice, by Diane Bloomfield, its founder.*

[1] Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Madda*, *Hilkhot De'ot*, 4:2.

[2] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim, Vol. 2: The Later Masters*. Schocken 1948, p. 249.

[3] *Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality*, edited by Lawrence Kaplan and David Shatz. New York University Press, 1995. See in particular the essay by Norman Lamm, "Harmonism, Novelty, and the Sacred in the Teachings of Rav Kook, pp. 155-177, especially p.172.

[4] David Singer, "Rav Kook's Contested Legacy", Tradition 30:3, 1996, pp. 6-20.

[5] *Orot, Annotated Translation of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's Seminal Work* by Bezalel Naor, Jason Aronson,1993, p.189.

Clothing and the Law

Do religious women suffer any discrimination today because of their clothing? It is evident that women who consider that their religion requires certain very distinctive clothing like the hijab have problems in countries with a strong focus on secularity, such as Turkey or France. Known for its *laïcité* or aggressive secularism, France, as well as Turkey, forbids women from wearing veils in public space like courts and universities. In 2004 a law - generally understood to target Muslim headscarves - was passed in France forbidding the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols in state schools. (Part of the French defense against charges of the law being aimed at Islam was that it covered *yarmulkes* too!) In a country with a rapidly growing Muslim population, President Sarkozy has spoken out strongly against full or nearly full covering of women's heads or bodies, claiming that: "The burka is not a religious sign. It is a sign of subservience, of debasement" and is not "welcome on the territory of the French Republic."

In the United States, choices of clothing for religious reasons are viewed as acts of religious self-expression which should be protected against state interference, and, indeed, that the state should help protect within limits of issues such as public safety. The subject of clothing discrimination for religious women comes up mainly in employment situations with mandatory uniforms, such as in factory and transportation contexts, which do not significantly affect the Jewish community. After losing their jobs, women have brought discrimination lawsuits against employers who were not prepared to make accommodations in the workplace for workers who do not wear pants. In one case, a group of female Muslim employees challenged the uniform policy of an in-flight catering company in Minnesota that would have forced them to wear pants and sport shirts. Claiming that this violated Islamic standards of modesty, they achieved a revised policy that gave them the option of wearing ankle length non-flowing skirts under long-sleeved lab coats. In this case the employers were willing to accommodate as long as the women's clothing conformed to health and safety regulations.

According to Marc Stern, Acting Co-Executive Director of the American Jewish Congress and leading expert on Church –State issues, there have been a number of American cases involving allegations by Pentecostal Christians of legal discrimination because of job requirements for women's clothing. In one Illinois case in 2000, an armored car guard was terminated by the security firm, Brinks, because she refused to wear pants, even after stating that pants are prohibited by her religion, and after offering to make her own skirt out of the company's pants material. She was rehired two years later after intervention by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission but then laid off again two years later, with the company claiming economic reasons. In another case, a Pentecostal Christian woman sued the New York City Transit Authority, claiming that they discriminated against her, by rejecting her request to wear a skirt in her job as a bus operator, and then terminated her when she refused to wear pants. She had complained that the standard issue uniform requiring pants, was against her religion, and brought in a letter from her pastor confirming that according to the American Pentecostals she may only wear skirts which cover her knees. In some other cases, compromises had been reached with the wearing of culottes, but this bus operator had been told by her pastor that culottes were not acceptable. She was prepared to wear either a skirt the same length as the Transit Authority culottes, or a "skort"- defined as a pair of shorts with a flap or panel across the front and sometimes the back to resemble a skirt. Neither of these, she claimed, would compromise safety regulations or liability requirements. The plaintiff defeated an attempt by the Transit Authority to dismiss her complaint and the case is still pending. An unanswered question in these cases is the extent to which customer preferences as opposed to safety considerations are legitimate factors to take into account in the formulation of dress codes. In other employment cases, they are not, but as regards "religious clothing" some, though not all, courts allow employers to do so.

In recent years as the Muslim population in America has grown, issues have arisen in different jurisdictions regarding the ability to limit the wearing of veils in schools and in court

...continued on page 50

Tunisian Jewish Woman, Early 20th century postcard

Book Corner

By Jennifer Stern Breger

The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious

By Avivah G. Zornberg
Schocken Books, 2009, $27.95

Many JOFA members have had the privilege of hearing Avivah Zornberg give her remarkable "*parashat hashavua*" *shiurim* in Jerusalem. While her two earlier books focus on Genesis and Exodus, here Zornberg takes twelve biblical narratives, and examines midrashic and Hasidic readings of these narratives, drawing on a wealth of literary and psychoanalytic sources ranging from Henry James, Kierkergaard, Julia Kristeva, Yeats, Emerson, Walter Benjamin, and of course Freud to explore the relation between consciousness and unconsciousness. She offers fascinating insights on the relationship between religion and psychoanalysis. There are chapters specifically focused on biblical women – Rebekah, Ruth and Esther – but the whole book is worth careful study. In talking about Abraham and the significance of his leaving the familiar and starting on his journey, Zornberg quotes and discusses the amazing midrashic analogy in *Bereshit Rabbah* comparing our forefather with a young woman urged to forget her past and move confidently forward as she starts a new life in marriage, based on the line in Psalms 45:11: "Listen daughter and see, and incline your ear, forget your own people and your father's house." Beautifully and poetically written, this volume is not an easy read but one that perceptively suggests profound possibilities in understanding the biblical narrative. As Zornberg concludes the book, "This is the Torah, that like its teacher, can never be fully known, that is always discontinuous, of which we ask, 'Who are you?' and rejoice in the silence that animates its response."

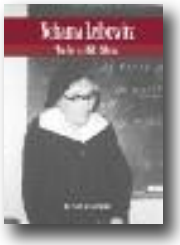
My Dear Daughter: Rabbi Benjamin Slonik and the Education of Jewish Women in Sixteenth-Century Poland

By Edward Fram
Hebrew Union College Press, $39.95

Sefer Mitzvot Nashim (*Eyn Schoen Frauenbuechelein*) by Rabbi Benjamin Slonik was the most popular of the Yiddish books written for Jewish women in the 16th century to explain how the women's *mitzvot, (niddah*, taking of *hallah* and candle lighting) were to be observed First printed in 1577 in Cracow, the text was reprinted many times and also translated into Italian. It has a very intimate style and begins: "My dear Daughter, see and mark well what I am teaching you here", incorporating much ethical and didactic literature. Although there had been opposition in the past to the popularization of the laws for women in Yiddish for fear that women would ignore their rabbis' instructions, Slonik, pupil of both the Rema and the Maharshal, saw the importance of women understanding the details of the laws that applied to them. He even says that sometimes ignorance of the law led to unnecessary stringencies. Edward Fram, senior lecturer at Ben Gurion University, has produced a splendid and illuminating volume. The second part gives the entire Yiddish text on facing pages with its English translation. The first expertly discusses the history of halakhic handbooks, the implication of printing for literacy, women's education and the roles of Jewish women at the time of Slonik's writing in Eastern Europe, and shows how Slonik incorporated the recently published *Shulhan Arukh*. This is a wonderful book that makes accessible a valuable primary source and puts it in context for the modern reader.

Nehama Leibowitz: Teacher and Bible Scholar

By Yael Unterman
Urim Publications, 2009, $33



Yael Unterman has written a long, but very readable volume devoted to the biography, scholarship and impact of the renowned *Tanakh* teacher Nehama Leibowitz who died in 1997 at the age of 92. Unterman's focus is on how Nehama has been remembered by friends and pupils and those she influenced and to whom she was a role model. Many will be surprised to learn that Nehama married her paternal uncle, thirty one years older than she in 1930, according to Unterman for love, and they remained married until his death in 1970. The volume contains many wonderful pictures of Nehama and her family, including her parents, her husband and her brother, Yeshayahu Leibowitz to whom Unterman devotes a whole chapter, exploring similarities and differences between the two. Unterman assesses Nehama's Zionist philosophy and discusses her influence on future generations of bible scholars. A fascinating section explores whether Nehama was a feminist. Nehama herself always said she was not and refused to be so classified, seeing no reason for women to take on extra *mitzvot* to meet their considered spiritual needs. Nevertheless, she has had tremendous impact on women by serving as a role model of a scholar and bible commentator as well as teacher. Her work has also validated the Tanakh as a central text of study for both men and women.

Once Upon A Chodesh: Tales and More of the Montreal Women's Tefillah Group; 1982-2007

By Barbara Miller Nirenberg
LithoExpress, 2008, $54 +$9 shipping and handling

It is rare that we review a book that is printed privately. But this 282-page volume marked a very special occasion - the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Montreal Women's

Tefllah Group. It is a beautifully produced book and contains the history of the group, and personal essays, together with biblical, midrashic, halakhic and literary excerpts from both historical and contemporary women, and even an international directory of women's prayer groups. The Montreal group, founded by prominent feminist Orthodox scholar, Norma Baumel Joseph, has been meeting continuously since 1982 once a month on Rosh Hodesh except when this falls on Shabbat, and alternates between two Orthodox synagogues. In the early 1990's Barbara Nirenberg compiled and produced a beautiful *siddur* called *Siftei Chanah* specifically for the group. The commemorative volume gives a feeling of the specialness of the bond that connects the members of the group, their spiritual yearning, their intellectual curiosity and love of traditional Jewish life, and exemplifies a warm love of text and of history. The section that includes the personal feelings of group members about their attendance and participation, is especially meaningful.

The volume can be ordered through LithoExpress, 1134 rue William, Montreal Quebec, H3C 1P8. A portion of the proceeds from the sale goes to the Coalition of Jewish Women for the Get.

Meneket Rivkah: A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women by Rivkah bat Meir

Edited with an Introduction and Commentary by Frauke von Rohden
Jewish Publication Society, 2009, $55

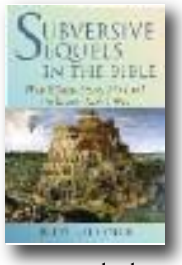
The Yiddish book, *Meneket Rivkah*, "The Nursemaid of Rebecca", was likely the first book written by a Jewish woman. This book of ethics for women, first printed in 1609, is often talked about, but this edition now makes it accessible to English speaking readers. Frauke von Rohden provides a Yiddish text with a separate English translation and detailed scholarly commentary as well as an extensive introduction. This gives us an understanding of the life and times of Rivkah bat Meir, often known as Rivkah Tiktiner, and shows us how the book relates to other books of ethics and morals directed at women. She concludes that in many instances this text presents a uniquely positive view of women and female piety. The title of the book is a play on the author's name and refers to the phrase in Genesis 35:8 which notes the death of Rebekah's nurse, Devorah, who traveled with her mistress when she left her home to marry Isaac. There is something of the unraveling of a mystery story as Dr. von Rohden traces what we know of this important writer and her book, how it was first printed posthumously, was studied and written about by Christian Hebraists in the early 18th century and was even the subject of a dissertation in Latin. She describes how the two extant copies were rediscovered; one, now in the German University of Erlangen from the Prague 1609 edition, and one from the second edition, published in Cracow in 1618, which is in the JTS library in New York. Interestingly, the memorial book of the Altneushul in Prague refers to Rivkah Tiktiner as "*Rabbanit,*" and it is unclear whether this means "female rabbi" or "female teacher" (on the title page of the book, she is referred to as the *darshanit*, or "female interpreter"). It is clear from the memorial book entry, and as well from the text of her tombstone in the Old Prague Cemetery that this exceptional woman was highly esteemed as a teacher and preacher during her lifetime. To quote from the printer's introduction to the first edition in 1609:

> Whoever has ever heard of or seen such a novelty; has it ever happened in countless years, that a woman has written something of her own accord… (She) named the book *Meneket Rivkah* to be a commemoration for herself and in honor of all women. It shows that a woman can also compose works of ethical instruction and good biblical interpretations as well as many men.

Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other

By Judy Klitsner
Jewish Publication Society, 2009, $35

This book is a study of literary interconnections within the Bible. Judy Klitsner, Senior Lecturer at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem where she has taught for the last 18 years, shows that often parallel passages serve as what she terms "subversive sequels" to texts that precede them and can be seen as "reconsidering" earlier concepts and ideas. Moving skillfully between biblical text and commentaries, Klitsner addresses passages that are often difficult for modern sensibilities. Three chapters examine the evolving role of women in the Bible. Klitsner proposes that the story of Eve should be seen as the foundation for numerous sequels that sometimes reinforce and sometimes overturn its assumptions and conclusions. These sequels are the topic of the separate chapters that follow. Among other insights, Klitsner suggests that Rebekah's first encounter with Yitzhak leads her to fall down from her camel i.e., becoming more reactive and not as independent as she had been previously. Klitsner's close reading of the text in the book of Judges gives us insights into the character of Devorah, who defines motherhood in radically new ways—calling herself a "mother in Israel" because of her leadership and impact, not because of having physically given birth to children. In her analysis of the story of Hannah, Klitsner shows how Hannah pleading for herself and being a full and open partner with her husband can be seen as a "subversive sequel" to many of the earlier biblical narratives involving women. According to Klitsner, the way these stories relate to one another expands the view of biblical women beyond simplistic classifications and stereotypes and leaves room for continuous new meanings and interpretations. Singularly faithful to the biblical text, which Klitsner reads closely and with great respect, this book is fascinating and radical in its implications and inspires the reader to see surprising connections in language and in themes.



Tova Hartman ...continued from page 17

and coercion from which other distortions arise.

In fact, the Biblical imperative that serves as the source for the Jewish paradigm of *tzniut* speaks directly in opposition to this imbalance: *hatzne'a lechet im elohekha* (Micha 6:8: Walk modestly with your God). The choice of preposition here is telling and precise: not under, not behind, but *with*. Clearly implied here is that inherent to any true model of modesty is an equality, a "*with*ness," between the partners involved. And if indeed we are, as men and as women, given the condition of modesty, fit to walk with God, is it possible to conceive that we are unfit to walk modestly *with* each other? Men and women are here enjoined equally in the responsibility to view themselves not according to the images of each other that we have generated through generations of cagey anxiety and misguided notions, but in the far more fearless and forgiving gaze of the divine. Thus we must open ourselves to the possibility of a modesty discourse that is *not* solipsistic and top-down, that places limitations upon an encompassing male gaze, and takes into consideration the implication of a female gaze that does more than simply respond to male needs. Instead of blithely accepting that women and men are from two different planets—and then suiting them up as babies in their little pink and blue space suits, assuming that this is simply the natural course—we must examine the ways in which we are responsible for what has happened. We have been outfitting our sons and daughters for different journeys to different atmospheres—some of which make it very hard for them to breathe (See Bordo, S. *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private,* 1999*)*. We must consider how, in our well-intentioned attempt to equip them for survival, we often unintentionally send them throttling off into dizzying orbits that serve neither their own deepest spiritual needs, nor the personally meaningful, practically expansive, and communally redemptive imperatives of *tzniut*. In short, we must create another cosmology, wherein men and women inhabit the earth together—our synagogues together—not as two different species, but as one holy community, together embodying the directive of walking with God.

IT'S A WEDDING: WHY BLACK?

In certain periods, external authorities prohibited Jews from wearing particular colors. Often, in Islamic countries, only Muslims were allowed to wear green. But Jews also had regulations and conventions about colors, and these continue. Many Haredi, and particularly Hasidic communities, ban women from wearing red, seen by some historical sources as associated with idolatry, loose behavior and immodesty. Today, in many Orthodox communities, both Haredi and modern Orthodox, there is a proliferation of black in women's clothing. Whereas previously one specifically did not wear black at a wedding, now the mothers of the *hatan* and *kallah* and even very young bridesmaids are often dressed in black. Is this just a fashion trend—black is chic—or does it reflect something deeper? Some say the choice is based on economic reasons—black being something that can be worn repeatedly and go anywhere. But could reasons of modesty or self-effacement be propelling this convention, or perhaps a desire to dress in the color that men dress in, without transgressing prohibitions of cross dressing?

Visit www.jofa.org to access the JOFA JOURNAL Summer 2008 review of *Understanding Tzniut: Modern Controversies in the Jewish Community* by Rabbi Yehuda Henkin (Urim Publications, 2008). This book provides an insightful discussion of Jewish legal sources dealing with women's dress codes and contemporary halakhic and hashkafic views relating to *tzniut* and other issues.

Clothing and the Law ...continued from page 47

houses. The state of Michigan, this year, amended its rules of evidence to give local judges discretion over deciding whether women can be fully veiled in court (this has been challenged by the ACLU), and there have been rulings that for safety and public order considerations, a woman's face has to be fully visible on her driver's license. None of these developments, as yet, directly affect Orthodox Jewish women who follow practices of *tzniut* in their dress or cover their hair.

There are, however, issues beyond legal discrimination. There is also the question of whether religious women feel restricted in their choice of employment by clothing issues and whether their clothes and appearance lead them to feel uncomfortable because of social pressures. We would be happy to receive feedback from readers and are prepared to publish letters on this subject in a future JOFA JOURNAL issue.

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