

***“Tzniut (Modesty) in Reform Judaism and  
Its Educational Applications”***

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This thesis explores the Jewish value of *tzniut* (modesty) with the ultimate goal of incorporating *tzniut* as a value in Reform Judaism, particularly in educational settings. In its traditional understanding, *tzniut* regulates sexuality and temptation in the public realm through restrictions on women's appearance and behavior. While modesty is something that applies to men and women, the bulk of the responsibility for *tzniut* is upon women. Categories for *halakhot* related to *tzniut* include: hair-covering, rules for modest dress, *yichud* (men and women being alone together), *kol islah* (the voice of woman), and marital relations. Advocates of traditional *tzniut* speak about how it protects one's inner spiritual core, showing that *tzniut* can be more than these *halakhot* and external indications of modesty. For a Reform Jewish setting, traditional applications of *tzniut* would be incompatible. Therefore, in this thesis I define modesty as a connection between the internal and external selves, wherein the internal self acts as a guide to determine one's external appearance—clothing, makeup, speech, actions, and choices about behavior.

In our secular society, of which Reform Jews are a part, young women are increasingly being sent the message through media and peer pressure that their bodies are more important than their inner selves. Girls of increasingly younger ages are encouraged to dress in a sexually provocative and mature manner and women of almost any age are encouraged to focus on their external selves, sometimes leading to the detachment from their inner sense of self-worth.

Modesty as defined by a connection of internal and external selves can be of immense value to young women as a way to make decisions for themselves while ignoring the negative messages being sent by society and peers. *Tzniut* can be applied to a

broad range of topics such as caring for one's body, making choices about one's appearance, combating peer pressure, carefully making choices regarding one's sexuality. These applications are woven throughout many materials used in Reform Jewish educational settings, indicating that *tzniut* can be incorporated into this liberal Jewish context. The final chapter of this thesis is a mother-daughter retreat on modesty, designed to give mothers and daughters the opportunity to dialogue about *tzniut* and its implications for the choices they make in their lives.

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to Micah, my husband, colleague, and best friend. Thank you for your editorial suggestions, as well as your endless patience and encouragement.

## Chapter 1:

### Overview of Modesty

#### Definition of Modesty

The word “modesty” conjures up several images. Perhaps what comes to mind is an Islamic woman’s *chador*, or veil, or a long skirt and high collar of an Orthodox Jewish girl. Or, maybe the image is that of a young woman blushing, too modest to admit to her high test score or recent award. The idea of modesty has existed for centuries and over time, attitudes towards modesty have changed and evolved. Before exploring modesty in depth in this thesis, it is important to define it in broad terms.

English, unlike many other languages, conflates both humility and sexual modesty into one word. In French, *modestie* refers to one who is modest and humble, and *pudeur* for one who is sexually modest. In Latin there are also two words: *modestia*, or respect for decency, and *pudor*, a consciousness of behavior or dress. Greek has four different words: *sophrosyne*, or self-restraint; *hagneia*, concern for purity and chastity; *aischunē*, shame in dishonoring man-made codes; and *aidōs*, shame or awe in sexual matters. But in English, two meanings are combined into only one word. “Modesty” can be humble, as in “having moderate estimation of one’s abilities or worth” or sexual, as “the damping down of one’s allure.”<sup>1</sup>

Modesty, as defined in *Character Strengths and Virtues*, “refers primarily to the moderate estimation of one’s merits or achievements and also extends into other issues relating to propriety in dress and social behavior.”<sup>2</sup> It is usually approached in behavioral

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 83.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Peterson and Martin E.P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004), 463.

terms and how one is affected by the presence of another. For example, one is modest when he lowers his expectations of his success in answer to a classmate's question, even though he is not being fully honest. Modesty can be included under the category of "temperance," one of the six core moral virtues that "emerge consensually across cultures and throughout time."<sup>3</sup> Temperance includes strengths that protect against excess. Modesty, especially when speaking of humility, keeps people free of self-preoccupation. "When individuals strive to maintain a certain image of self, they may find that doing so creates a psychological burden. The load may become so heavy that it prompts a need to escape, sometimes through destructive means such as substance abuse, eating disorders, masochism, or even suicide."<sup>4</sup>

The concept of modesty has been around for centuries, although it has been understood differently at different times. In the medieval period, women were expected to be modest and medieval Christianity emphasized the related ideas of chastity and sexual purity. Chastity was held up as the spiritual ideal for men and women because it was angelic and pure. In society generally, the medieval body was classified according to age, health, sex, and purity.<sup>5</sup> In a medical text (c.1300), a woman's body appeared for the first time in a medical diagram. Her legs were closer together than a man's for propriety's sake.<sup>6</sup> Models of chaste women were presented as a series of enclosures: her body

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 28. The six core virtues are wisdom/knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 470. This citation was in reference to modesty as humility, although I believe the same is true for sexual modesty. As will be apparent in this thesis, sexual modesty and related issues are directly connected to one's perception of self. It is argued by some that a lack of female sexual modesty leads to destructive behaviors arising from an inauthentic sense of self (See Chapter Three, pages XX-XX).

<sup>5</sup> Roberta Gilchrist, "Medieval bodies in the material world: Gender, stigma, and the body," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (New York: Manchester UP, 1994), 43-61; 44.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Camille, "The Image and the Self: Unwriting Late Medieval Bodies," in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Sarah Kay and Mimi Rubin (New York: Manchester UP, 1994), 62-99; 84.

encompassing her heart and her soul, her heart encompassing “God’s chamber.”<sup>7</sup>

Medieval women were symbols of a man’s virility and power. Knights were defined by their relations with women (chivalry), and women were used by men to impress other men and show superiority. The “trophy wife” existed to advertise a man’s masculinity.<sup>8</sup>

In 1631, Richard Braithwait published *The English Gentlewoman*. The frontispiece shows a woman surrounded by various virtues that add up to a modest gentlewoman. One can see “Apparell, Behaviour, Decency, Complement, Estimation, Fancy, Gentility, Honour” with appropriate drawings. Braithwait wrote, “Modesty must be your guide, virtuous thoughts your guard, so heaven be your goale. [sic]”<sup>9</sup> It was apparent that Braithwait viewed modesty as something a woman must observe if she is to get into heaven. In 1899, Havelock Ellis described modesty as common to both sexes but “...more peculiarly feminine, so that it may almost be regarded as the chief secondary sexual character of women on the psychical side.”<sup>10</sup>

While modesty today is a value that could apply to both men and women, it is still primarily a feminine quality. As Tamar El-Or, who studied ultra-Orthodox women and their world of modesty, wrote, “Modesty is the basic, broadest, and most inclusive standard of a woman’s behavior. It can measure an entire range of her activities—her dress, her speech, her education, the way she educates her children, her work at home and outside of it, and more.”<sup>11</sup> While El-Or was speaking about Jewish women, this definition

<sup>7</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, “Chaste Bodies: Frames and Experiences,” in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Sarah Kay and Mimi Rubin (New York: Manchester UP, 1994), 24-41; 27.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 164.

<sup>9</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 100.

<sup>10</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Tamar El-Or, “Paradoxes and Social Boundaries: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women and their World,” in *Israeli Women’s Studies: A Reader*, ed. Ester Fuchs (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2005), 143.

could be applied more broadly. Women in America—Jewish or not—are judged on their modesty or immodesty in their external appearance. In our society today, immodesty and a focus on the external self is often what is held up as a positive value. Modesty is then equated with shyness or discomfort with the exposure of one's body, something that is viewed negatively by the media and general society.<sup>12</sup>

### Modesty in Judaism

In Judaism, the value of modesty is known as *tzniut*. It is derived from Micah 6:8, “He has told you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God

[וְהִצַּנְעָ לֶכֶת עִם-אֱלֹהֶיךָ].”<sup>13</sup> The concept of *tzniut* has grown from this verse into a wide variety of definitions. *Tzniut* can be defined as sexual integrity<sup>14</sup> or the control which separates humans from animals.<sup>15</sup> When thought of in this way, *tzniut* are rules that keep sexuality, particularly female sexuality, within careful limits to avoid temptation and transgression. Laws of *yichud*, or men and women being alone, hair covering, and sexual intercourse are part of this category.

*Tzniut*, though, is more than just a category of *halakhah*--it refers to one's inside identity, even one's sense of self. In a teen reader on modesty for Orthodox girls, *tzniut* is defined as looking inwards for strength, not outwards for acceptance.<sup>16</sup> In a similar guide, a woman wrote, “*Tzniut* begins with looking past your more superficial layers and

<sup>12</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 89.

<sup>13</sup> Jewish Publication Society, *Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: JPS, 1999), 1349.

<sup>14</sup> Maurice Lamm, *Living Torah in America: Derekh HaTov* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1993), 24.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Novick, *B'tzelem Elohim (In God's image): Making Jewish Decisions About the Body* (United Synagogue of America), 19.

<sup>16</sup> Malka Touger, *Just My Style: A Tzniut Reader For Teens* (Brooklyn: Judaica Press, 2003), 65.

seeing who, on the deepest level, you are capable of being. *Tzniut* means gradually learning how to convey an important message to others—and instilling it in yourself. The message that *tzniut* asks you to project is ‘internality’: that of all the parts of you, it is your innermost self by which you want to be defined...The challenge of *tzniut* is to project every aspect of yourself in such a way that it draws the focus to your true identity.”<sup>17</sup> This understanding of modesty asks women to focus on their inner identity and spirituality, not their external appearance. If women are focused within, their external appearance will send a message reflective of their inner identity and confidence.

*Tzniut* is ultimately about having an outward appearance that reflects a positive internal message. Women should constantly be aware of their dress, appearance, behavior, and speech, since these are the visible signs of internal *tzniut*.<sup>18</sup> Jewish women should look quietly distinctive in their modesty—well-put-together and feminine—but should do so in order to reflect their inside self, not out of a desire to draw attention to themselves.<sup>19</sup> Modest Jewish women presumably do not draw attention to themselves through their appearance because they do not need that validation. They are not seeking approval through outside compliments, particularly those that come with attracting male attention. The real meaning of Jewish modesty is expressed in the *J Girl's Guide* as having to do “with being confident in your innermost core and wanting to live from that core. That is the place of your authentic self, the place where you confront your true feelings and cannot hide from them.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gila Manoloson. *Outside Inside: A fresh look at tzniut* (Southfield, MI: Targum, 1997), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Touger, *Just My Style*, 62.

<sup>19</sup> Manoloson, *Outside Inside*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Penina Adelman, Ali Feldman, and Shulamit Reinharz. *The J Girl's Guide: The Young Jewish Woman's Handbook for Coming of Age* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005), 86-87.

In our current society, Reform Jewish young women are generally not taught about *tzniut* to the same extent Orthodox women are. They are not restricted in their clothing or interactions with men from a *halakhic* perspective. However, they face tremendous pressure to give a certain external message. They, like other non-Jewish young women, are pressured to wear revealing clothing, to engage in sexual activity, to seek the perfect body through unhealthy behaviors. This is where the value of *tzniut*, this inner strength and confidence, can enter and provide some Jewish support. It can avoid an “addiction” to being noticed and helps women be more than just “what they do,” emphasizing identity over performance.<sup>21</sup> *Tzniut* can, when understood from a Reform Jewish context, be a vehicle for building one’s self-esteem because it encourages women to think not only about what they wear but who they truly want to be inside. Unfortunately, there is a trend among young women to feel negative about their appearance which in turn leads them to feel badly about their inner selves.<sup>22</sup> This understanding of Jewish modesty as “inner core” and self-confidence can challenge that trend.

### **Modesty in Non-Jewish Religions**

In July 2007, a *New York Times* article described how Agudath Israel, an ultra-Orthodox group, was supporting non-Jews who were required by their faiths to dress modestly. Agudath Israel advocated for a Pentecostal woman who was taught by her church that she should not wear pants but was forbidden by the Manhattan Transit Authority to wear a skirt for safety reasons. They filed an *amicus curiae* brief for a case

<sup>21</sup> Manoloson, *Outside Inside*, 64, 69-70.

<sup>22</sup> Adelman, Feldman, and Reinhartz, *The J Girl's Guide*, 86.

involving a Muslim woman who was not allowed to wear a *hijab* at Alamo car rental. And of course, they also supported Jews, such as an Orthodox Jewish woman in an osteopathic college who thought her clothes were too revealing.<sup>23</sup>

The Jewish concept of *tzniut* is not the only religious idea of modesty nor is Judaism the only religion with certain requirements for modest dress. Before exploring *tzniut* and modesty from a Jewish perspective in the rest of this thesis, here is an overview of some other religions' current views of modesty and modest clothing.

### *Christian Biblical Sources*

As in Judaism, modesty is primarily a feminine issue in Christianity. There are several Old Testament biblical sources for Christian understandings of modesty, beginning with Adam and Eve covering their nakedness in the garden in Genesis 1 to Deuteronomy 22:5, "A woman must not put on a man's apparel, nor shall a man wear a woman's clothing; for whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord your God."<sup>24</sup> The other biblical sources emerge from the New Testament and focus on inner beauty and decent behavior. In 1 Peter 3:3-5, women are taught that beauty should come from the inside out: "Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God

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<sup>23</sup> Samuel G. Freedom, "ON RELIGION; Of Disparate Faiths, But of Like Mind on Dress Code," *New York Times*, July 14, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> JPS, *Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 421.



used to make themselves beautiful.”<sup>25</sup> This is very similar to the understanding of *tzniut* as the inner strength or spiritual core. Christian women should, according to Peter, allow their internal self to shine through instead of wearing showing ornaments. 1 Timothy 2:9 makes the same point but points to good works as well, saying, “Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness.”<sup>26</sup>

Christian modesty is not only understood as clothing and appearance but as behavior and virtues as well, especially with regard to sexuality. Romans 13:13-14 says, “Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” Modesty is linked to controlling one’s sexual desires in this passage and is linked to one’s values in Colossians 3:12: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.”

<sup>27</sup> A modest Christian woman will clothe herself not with showy clothing but with Christian values and Jesus Christ.

The Christian understanding of modesty, similar to the traditional Jewish value of *tzniut*, places a certain moral responsibility on women to not lead men to sinful thoughts and urges. Matthew 5:8 speaks of a man looking at a woman and lusting after her, thus

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<sup>25</sup> Shannon Ethridge and Stephen Arterburn, *Every Young Woman's Battle: Guarding Your Mind, Heart, and Body in a Sex-Saturated World* (Colorado Springs: Water Brook Press, 2004), 54.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Mohler, “Modeling Modesty” in *Courtship & Dating: So what's the difference?*, by Dennis Gundersen (Sand Springs, OK: Grace & Truth Books, 2006), 82.

<sup>27</sup> Ethridge and Arterburn, *Every Young Woman's Battle*, 93.

committing adultery in his heart, Galatians 6:2 refers to “bearing one another’s burdens,” and Luke 17:1-2 has Jesus’ teaching that one should not lead others to sin. All of these place responsibility on women to ensure their appearance does not lead men to sin. This is summarized by the following paragraph written to Christian women: “So, sisters, as we shop and we go to our closets daily, let us fight the urge to conform to this world; let us aspire to the inner beauty that is precious to God; and let us bear our brothers’ burden by not distracting them with tight and revealing apparel. Let us make modesty our policy.”<sup>28</sup>

### *Current teachings about Christian modesty*

While modesty is taught to both young men and young women, it is primarily emphasized with the latter. Parents of daughters are taught about modesty as well, that is, to ensure they support their daughter in maintaining her virtue. Modesty is said to be about a relationship with God. If modesty is a challenge for a young woman, she should address first her love for God.<sup>29</sup> Many books addressed to young Christian women present as a reward and as a goal the concept of saving oneself for a husband and that future husband’s desire for her. A woman’s body is a source of control over men because it can attract them; modesty is controlling that power. The goal for a young Christian woman is to save this allure as a “secret” and only share it with her husband.<sup>30</sup> She also should be aware of the effects her clothing has on men, since men are generally more visually stimulated than women. Christian women must remember the “battles men face

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<sup>28</sup> Dennis Gundersen, *Courtship & Dating: So what’s the difference?* (Sand Springs, OK: Grace & Truth Books, 2006), 90.

<sup>29</sup> Dannah Gresh, *Secret Keeper: The Delicate Power of Modesty* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2002), 65.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

to stay pure as they are stimulated visually by a woman.”<sup>31</sup> The concept of “loving your neighbor as yourself” applies to modesty—loving one’s neighbor means helping ‘godly’ men stay pure by not presenting an immodest appearance.<sup>32</sup>

Christian modesty is not about hiding beauty but is about inner beauty and confidence. The modest girl does not have to flirt with men because she is confident in herself and God’s will for her.<sup>33</sup> She does not try to manipulate men through her dress, her flirtations, or other expressions of the contemporary culture. Interestingly, while Christian women are told they have this power over men, they are also taught that they should not overpower men by trying to flirt to boost their egos or pressuring men into having sex. Adam was given rule over Eve, thus women should not overpower men by trying to artificially boost their self-confidence.<sup>34</sup>

Modesty among Christian women is also about self-image and sense of self-worth. A modest woman will force a man to “invest in [her] life to one day enjoy [her] allure” because he will not be able to see or touch her body.<sup>35</sup> She has more value because she keeps her body private. Christian women are also encouraged to focus on their inner beauty and relationship with God. Outer beauty, as Proverbs 31:30 says, is fleeting, but fear and love of God will last.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Mohler, “Modeling Modesty,” 83.

<sup>32</sup> Ethridge and Arterburn, *Every Young Woman’s Battle*, 93.

<sup>33</sup> Gresh, *Secret Keeper*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> Ethridge and Arterburn, *Every Young Woman’s Battle*, 85.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

### *Christian Guidelines for Modest Dress*

In the Christian view, clothing should model a sense of modesty and sexual integrity and shows compassion towards others' interests by not trying to lead men to sinful thoughts. The current trends in women's clothing do not necessarily meet these needs. One author made reference to the labels on the "X-hilaration" clothing line for girls six years old and up which say, "There are no rules. Whether you choose to dress crazy or dress to thrill—make a statement, make a scene, wear what you want and it won't be wrong."<sup>37</sup> The clothing that is marketed as popular draws more attention to a young woman's sexual appeal than to her inner beauty. The effect of clothing is described as indicating whether someone should treat you with respect or not. Dressing provocatively does not encourage respect from others.<sup>38</sup> Parents' roles are to ensure that their daughters do not buy immodest clothing such as halter tops, mini skirts, tight shirts, or low-cut jeans, not only to preserve the modesty of their daughters but also to protect their sons.<sup>39</sup>

There are several suggestions in books on Christian modesty for how a young woman determines whether her clothes are appropriate and modest. One book suggests that a young woman ask herself the following questions about her clothing:

*Are my actions loving to others?  
Is this something I'd be proud of?  
Is this my highest standard?  
Is this in line with my convictions?  
Am I dressing for attention?  
What is my motive for wearing this?  
Will this benefit others?<sup>40</sup>*

<sup>37</sup> Mohler, "Modeling Modesty," 77.

<sup>38</sup> Ethridge and Arterburn, *Every Young Woman's Battle*, 89.

<sup>39</sup> Mohler, "Modeling Modesty," 84.

<sup>40</sup> Ethridge and Arterburn, *Every Young Woman's Battle*, 29.

Other guidelines include making sure one's underwear or backside cannot be seen with a certain pair of pants, that a shirt does not gap around the buttons or show bra straps, and that fabrics not be see-through. These guidelines are discussed not only for everyday clothing but also for church dress.

### *Mormon Dress Codes*

While there is no universal Christian standard for modesty, there is a very strict set of guidelines for what young Mormon men and women should wear. The rules of modesty are based upon the premise that God gave each person a body and it is his or her responsibility to care for it and show it respect. The guidelines begin with: "Your body is God's sacred creation. Respect it as a gift from God and do not defile it in any way. Through your dress and appearance, you can show the Lord that you know how precious your body is. You can show that you are a disciple of Jesus Christ."<sup>41</sup>

Modest dress is a reflection of inner beliefs and influences others' actions. The standards of modest dress apply at all times; if a young man or woman only wears modest clothing at certain times, it sends the message that modesty is important only when it is convenient.<sup>42</sup> Immodest clothing is defined, as it was in general Christian sources, as short skirts or shorts, tight clothing, exposed midriffs, bare shoulders, or low-cut shirts. The basic guideline is for a young person to ask, "Would I feel comfortable wearing this in the Lord's presence?"<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Church of Latter Day Saints, "For the Strength of Youth: Fulfilling Our Duty to God" (n.p., 2001), 14.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 16.

### *Pentecostal Dress Codes*

The Pentecostal guidelines for modest dress are slightly more stringent than the general Christian suggestions. While they do apply to men, the issue of modest dress is mainly focused upon women's clothing and appearance. Women and men are encouraged to avoid expensive or extravagant clothing and jewelry in order to show concern for charity and the needs of others.<sup>44</sup> Women are encouraged to have long hair but men should always have short hair, according to 1 Corinthians 11:13-15. Further, women should avoid drawing the attention of men through their appearance: "The apostolic Christian woman seeks to emulate all the fine virtues of Christian womanhood, so she carefully and prayerfully selects her attire in order not to unduly expose her body to the stares of the public. She is no so old-fashioned as to look like a monstrosity, but she is deliberately methodical in choosing clothing that will dignify her womanhood without provoking the stares of the opposite sex."<sup>45</sup>

The Biblical guidelines for Pentecostal female modesty are summarized by the following list of topics: modest (not tight or revealing), moderation of cost, inclination towards godliness and decency, avoidance of outward adornment, shamefacedness and sobriety, and distinction between male and female.<sup>46</sup>

### *Modesty in Islam*

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and in light of the current war in Iraq, it is clear that Americans generally are not well-informed about Islam as a religion

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<sup>44</sup> United Pentecostal Church International, "The Scriptures Decree Modesty in Dress," (n.p.: Word Aflame Press, n.d.).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

and culture. In an internet search for “modesty in Islam,” many articles detailed the mistreatment of Muslim women wearing headscarves or the ongoing debate in Europe over whether headscarves and traditional Muslim dress should be permitted, indicating that modesty for Muslim women is a political as well as religious issue. This section provides basic information about Islamic female modesty and how women today are seeking to be modest in a modern American society.<sup>47</sup>

The Islamic rules of modesty are similar to Jewish rules of *tzniut* in several ways: there are rules for men but modesty is primarily a feminine issue; the rules seek to avoid women gaining attention through their external appearance; and there is disagreement about how the rules of modesty should be implemented.

The requirement to dress modestly comes from the Quran, particularly from two different verses: “Say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty or ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof,” and, “O prophet! Tell they wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close around them. That will be better so that they may be recognized and not harassed.”<sup>48</sup> The symbol of Islamic female modesty is the *hijab*, or headscarf. *Hijab* refers to head-coverings as well as to modest clothing for the rest of one’s body. The following are requirements of modest dress for Muslim women: the clothing must cover the entire body with only the hands and face visible (there is disagreement as to how much of the body must be covered; the material should

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<sup>47</sup> This section was difficult to research because of my own limited background knowledge of Islam. Much of the scholarship about Islamic modesty focused around head covering and veils and assumed pre-existing knowledge. I performed a large portion of the research for this section on the internet to put the focus on current issues in Muslim modesty, rather than the philosophy or ideology in religious sources.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., citing Quran 24:31 and 33:59, respectively.

not be transparent; the clothing should be loose so the body's shape is not apparent; female clothing should not resemble clothing for males; female clothing should not resemble the clothing of non-Muslim women; the clothing should not have bold designs; clothing should not be worn solely to gain attention or status.<sup>49</sup>

Although these requirements for modest dress are a departure from mainstream non-Muslim fashion, many Muslim women are finding ways to follow the rules of modesty in modern ways. A new magazine, *Her Modesty*, is marketed toward Muslim women with the goal "to display how sisters can be covered yet still feel good about themselves and how they look."<sup>50</sup> All of the pictures feature Muslim women who observe *hijab*, even though the magazine recognizes that not all the readers choose to cover their hair. The author of the magazine wrote in her blog about a picture of a model who wore modest Muslim fashion and *hijab* but had heavy makeup and a "seductive" look, "I think modesty is more than just what you wear—It's also about how you carry yourself."<sup>51</sup> Another Muslim woman, Gehad al-Khalek, spoke to CNN about her decision to wear *hijab*. "I want to shift the attention from my outer self to my inner self when I deal with someone, I don't want them to look at me in a way that wouldn't suit me."<sup>52</sup> Both of these young women show the attitudes that modesty is about more than their external appearance and observing rules of modesty can actually put more focus on their inner selves.

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<sup>49</sup> Syed MA Rahman, "Seven Conditions for a Woman's Dress in Islam," <http://islamfortoday.com/7conditions.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> Muslimah Media Watch blog, "Her Modesty: A New Fashion Magazine for Muslim Women," 11/13/07, <http://muslimahmediawatch.blogspot.com/2007/11/her-modesty-new-fashion-magazine-for.html>. The magazine is currently not yet in publication, but has a website: [preciousmodesty.blogspot.com](http://preciousmodesty.blogspot.com).

<sup>51</sup> *Her Modesty* magazine, February 2008, <http://preciousmodesty.blogspot.com>.

<sup>52</sup> Brian Rokus, "Muslim women: My headscarf is not a threat," August 21, 2007, <http://www.cnn.com>. This article was part of a series of reports connected to the CNN program "God's Warriors."



In January 2007, the “Burqini” was released by Aheda Zanetti of Australia. The Burqini is a swimsuit for women designed to follow Islamic modesty laws while eliminating excess material (which poses a safety risk while swimming). The swimsuits cover everything except the hands, feet, and face. A similar swimsuit, Splashgear (from Shereen Sabet of California), achieves the same purpose. Over 6000 orders came in online for the Burqini, and not all of them were from Muslim women. Non-Muslims who are self-conscious or have sun-sensitivity are finding these modest swimsuits very appealing.<sup>53</sup>

Islamic modesty is not only about clothing, but also about interactions between men and women. These rules have received public attention as accommodations are increasingly being made in communities in the United States. In Lincoln Park, Michigan, Fitness USA responded to requests from Muslim women and walled off the co-ed section from the women-only section of the gym so men could not see Muslim women exercising. In north Seattle, Washington, a public pool established swim times with no men, including male lifeguards, present so Muslim women could attend. This is not viewed as positive by all members of the Muslim community. Walid Phares, a professor of Middle Eastern studies at Florida Atlantic University, sees these requests as Wahhabism, the more conservative branch of Islam, trying to represent all Muslims in the United States. Salam Al-Marayati, the executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, disagreed with Phares. “Whether a woman wants to cover her hair or not is her personal choice. As long as it’s not imposed on the rest of society then I don’t see any problem.” Ebrahim Moosa, a professor of Islamic studies at Duke, said the requests were

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<sup>53</sup> Laura Fitzpatrick, “The New Swimsuit Issue,” July 19, 2007, *Time* online, <http://www.time.com>.

actually attempts to integrate with American culture and show “that America can become their home.”<sup>54</sup> Accommodations to Islamic modesty are seen as too conservative by some, but to others it is viewed as an attempt to bring religious and secular culture together. Overall, it seems that Muslim women are working to find ways to combine their religious modesty with their desire to be a part of American culture. Modesty is not only a religious observance, but as with other religions, it is a way to bring the focus from the external appearance to the internal self.

### **Scope of this thesis**

*Tzniut* is not something that we automatically envision in a Reform Jewish context. After all, it is focused primarily on women and Reform Judaism emphasizes gender equality. In its *halakhic* interpretation, *tzniut* requires certain modes of dress and behavior that would be interpreted as contrary to many of the principles of Reform Judaism and the modern society in which it exists. However, *tzniut* as defined in the previous section can be more than just long skirts and hair coverings—it can provide a value that can benefit young women’s self-esteem and confidence. When appropriately defined and incorporated into a Jewish educational setting, it can be a part of the conversation of developing a positive self-image and inner confidence which in turn can have effects on certain types of behaviors that involve the body: sexual activity, eating disorders, and the like.

Modesty is a broad topic. *Halakhically* speaking, *tzniut* is an enormous corpus of literature and laws. It includes, as mentioned earlier, laws of *yichud*, hair covering, and

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<sup>54</sup> Oren Dorell, “Effort to accommodate Muslim women’s modesty spurs debate,” June 13, 2006, USA Today online, <http://www.usatoday.com>.

dress. It also relates to the laws of *taharat mishpachah* (family purity), it governs sexual intercourse, doctor's visits, work environment, speech, prayer, and study. *Tzniut* is so broad that it is impossible to discuss it all within the scope of this thesis. Therefore, while Chapter 2 is an overview of traditional Jewish understandings of modesty, I will ultimately be using *tzniut* relating to clothing and appearance to envision modesty in a Reform Jewish educational context. I have chosen this particular area because it translates very well into the modern (non-Jewish) world and the pressures that young women face and it brings together the tension of internal sense of self and external appearance that is a fundamental part of *tzniut*.

## Chapter 2: An Overview of *Tzniut* from the Rabbinic and Orthodox Perspectives

### General Overview

To say that the rabbinic understanding of *tzniut* is a broad topic is an understatement. The traditional *halakhic* applications of *tzniut* have been developed by generations of scholars from the Talmud until today and encompass many things: sexuality, marital relations and family purity, hair covering, clothing, *yichud*, conversation, prayer, and study. An entire thesis could be written on any one of these topics; in that spirit, I will provide an overview of the traditional rabbinic position from Talmudic times until today regarding *tzniut* and some of its areas of application in Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities.

### Rabbis , Women's Bodies, and Sexuality

When we think about the rabbis of the Talmud, the concept of male-centered authority may come to mind. The rabbis had the authority to legislate on all aspects of life, including those that are expressly female. Given their perspective as men, the rabbis had to operate from a certain construction of the female body when determining *halakhah* relating to women, acting as the “readers of women’s bodies.”<sup>1</sup> They did not simply ignore women’s bodies or render them invisible, “nor do they construct them as incomplete, unfinished, and hence inferior versions of male bodies. Culturally and historically, they had such an option at their disposal. Instead, the rabbis chose to

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 150.

construct women's bodies as different from men's, differently human, with differing cultural significance."<sup>2</sup>

The rabbis viewed women's bodies as different from men's and recognized that, as a result, women were perhaps the best readers of female bodies. Despite this, the rabbis still retained ultimate authority. This still exists today, as evidenced by an Orthodox rabbi who in his introduction to a book for women on family purity said that after feedback from women in his community, large portions of the book had been re-written.<sup>3</sup> Notice, though, that despite the women's corrections he was still the author of the book and the ultimate authority for his community on these issues. When talking about menstruation, virginity, and related topics, it makes sense that women may know more than men because they have the actual physical experience. However, the rabbis of the Talmud (as well as some rabbis in today's world) had to balance the idea of women as the readers of women's bodies and their own rabbinic authority in such matters. Thus the rabbinic notion of modesty imagines women as the readers of the female body and men as the interpreters of such readings. In this way, the Talmud creates a theoretical possibility for women's space that is not under a male gaze because women will act as the actual "readers" of the women's bodies.<sup>4</sup>

This is theoretical since there was rabbinic discomfort with the idea of relying upon women to determine certain *halakhically*-significant issues, such as when a woman has achieved adulthood (the onset of menses). The reliability of the witnesses, those actually doing the examination, becomes extremely important because of the potential

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<sup>2</sup> Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 129.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Shaul Wagschal, *Taharas Am Yisroel*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Jerusalem: Judaica Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 150.

implications: determining a woman's marriageability, virginity, or impurity. While women did the actual examinations when necessary, the rabbis were still the ultimate authorities. Whenever possible, the rabbi did the "examination," such as of a cloth with menstrual blood. This brings up the idea of "rabbi as gynecologist"—the rabbis examined various bloodstains and made *halakhic* determinations from them.<sup>5</sup> Women may have been the "readers" of the female body, but rabbis did not cede their authority.

Rabbinic modesty dictates that there is a separation between women and men. Limiting contact between men and women helps to avoid sexual intercourse occurring outside of marriage.<sup>6</sup> For rabbis, modesty conflicts "with the desire to control, discursively and institutionally, women's bodies" because it encourages men to abstain from sources of sexual arousal.<sup>7</sup> Male sexual desire dictates several of the *halakhot* relating to sexuality and modesty. Men have a strong *yetzer hara*, or evil inclination, and as a result their sexual desire is strong and a constant threat.<sup>8</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 4:1 says, "Who is powerful? One who conquers his own sexual urge."<sup>9</sup> The rabbis provide several ways to restrain male arousal: men should avoid conversation with women, even one's own wife (*M. Avot* 1:5); women process behind men in a mourning procession (*P.T.*

<sup>5</sup> Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 150-151.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis D. Solomon, *The Jewish Tradition, Sexuality, and Procreation* (Lanham, NY: University Press of America, 2002), 33.

<sup>7</sup> Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 150.

<sup>8</sup> Michael L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish: Rabbinic Rhetorics of Sexuality* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 159-160. B.T. *Kiddushin* 40a comments on the strength of male sexual desire, as do B.T. *Sukkot* 51b-52a; B.T. *Berakhot* 61a; B.T. *Sanhedrin* 99b; and B.T. *Moed Katan* 24a.

<sup>9</sup> Moshe Zemer, "Sexuality in Jewish Law and Tradition," in *Sexual Issues in Jewish Law: Essays and Responsa*, ed. Walter Jacob with Moshe Zemer, Solomon B. Freehof Institute for Progressive Halakhah (Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom Press, 2006), 19-30; 20.

*Sanhedrin* 2:4, 20b); when a man is overwhelmed with sexual desire, he should engage in Torah study or think of the day of his death (P.T. *Berakhot* 4:1, 7d).<sup>10</sup>

Men have strong, almost uncontrollable sexual urges, but the rabbis also take the view that women want sexual intercourse and lack self-control. B.T. *Ketubah* 65a says that the more wine a woman drinks the more sexually solicitous she becomes, and after 4 cups of wine “she will solicit even an ass.”<sup>11</sup> B.T. *Ketubah* 8b says, “Everyone knows why a bride enters the wedding canopy,” that is, she wants sexual intercourse.<sup>12</sup> Women are also viewed as “light headed” or lacking in self-control to the point that a man cannot be alone with two women, lest they take advantage of him. Rashi’s comment to B.T. *Kiddushin* 80b is that women will go so far as to pretend they or their children are dead in order to have the pretext for privacy to enable a sexual liaison.<sup>13</sup> The rabbinic view of women is that they can be “light headed,” lack self control, and want sexual intercourse—a dangerous combination from the rabbis’ perspective.

Modesty in the rabbinic view is essentially about legislating sexuality, which is a private matter. In B.T. *Makkot* 24a, the rabbis explain that if “walk humbly” (from Micah 6:8) is applied to things not usually done in private, how much the more so should it be applied to private matters.<sup>14</sup> Since sexuality is private and not easily legally legislated, control is exerted through other areas such as medicine, religion, and social relations.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 163-164.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>14</sup> Alyssa Gray, “The Ministering Angels Told me: Bavli Nedarim 20a-b and Its Medieval Interpreters,” in *Sexual Issues in Jewish Law: Essays and Responsa*, ed. Walter Jacob with Moshe Zemer, Solomon B. Freehof Institute for Progressive Halakhah (Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom Press, 2006), 31-81; 57.

<sup>15</sup> Michael L. Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 8.

Generally speaking, Judaism takes a positive view towards sexual activity within marriage while defining modest marital relations and sexual norms. Sexual intercourse should not take place in a non-private place,<sup>16</sup> nor should it take place by daylight or candlelight.<sup>17</sup> The rabbinic texts on sexuality, which ultimately are part of the rabbinic understanding of modesty, use subtle techniques to maintain authority and persuade people to follow these prescribed sexual norms. For example, married couples will have sexual relations in private and in the dark because the rabbis say that the most beneficial time for conception is in the middle of the night (when it is dark).<sup>18</sup> “Patriarchal cultures typically balance overt (or forceful) control of women’s bodies with indirect or symbolic ways of enlisting their allegiance.”<sup>19</sup> This social rhetoric is often very persuasive, using threats of human or divine intervention, the categorization of activities as those practiced by “the other,” and eugenics.<sup>20</sup> One passage from B.T. *Nedarim* 20a exemplifies the eugenics argument:

*R. Yochanan b. Dahavai said, ‘The ministering angels told me, why are there lame children? Because they [their fathers] turn over the tables [have intercourse with their wives on top]. Why are there dumb children? Because they kiss that place. Why are there deaf children? Because they talk during intercourse. Why are there blind children? Because they look at that place.’*<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> P.T. *Hagim* 3:2, 78a.

<sup>17</sup> B.T. *Niddah* 16b-17a, from Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 297.

<sup>18</sup> B.T. *Niddah* 38a, as cited by Menachem M. Brayer. *The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature: Volume 2, A Psychohistorical Perspective* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing, 1986), 26.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Sered, “Replaying the Rape of Dinah: Women’s Bodies in Israeli Cultural Discourse,” in *Jews and Gender: Studies in Contemporary Jewry XVI*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 191-208; 192.

<sup>20</sup> Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Boyarin, “Women’s Bodies and the Rise of the Rabbis: The Case of Sotah,” in *Jews and Gender: Studies in Contemporary Jewry XVI*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 88-100; 92.



Certainly the desire for children who do not have any of these physical challenges would encourage many men and women to obey the rabbis' sanctioned sexual norms. An additional incentive for obeying sexual norms is presented in B.T. *Shevuot* 18b, in which it is said that modesty in intercourse will yield male children. Any of the passages that use these types of arguments "stigmatize certain sexual practices, provide for unfettered male control of marital sexuality, and stress that sexual behaviors have eugenic consequences for children."<sup>22</sup>

Many of the narratives about sexuality are related to power struggles, symbolic of the rabbis trying to control women's bodies and sexuality. The rabbis imagined two threats from non-marital sex and women in general. One is that wives and daughters who have uncontrolled sexual intercourse threaten husbands and fathers; the other is that women as temptresses and seductresses threaten men through promiscuity and adultery.<sup>23</sup> This perceived threat to men from women's power is reflected in Talmudic passages that relate to struggles between men and women, such as in this passage from B.T. *Nedarim* 20a-b.

*R. Yochanan said: These are the words of R. Yochanan b. Dahavai, but the sages say, 'Anything that a man wishes to do with his wife, he may do so, analogously to meat that comes from the shop. If he wishes to eat it with salt, he may; roasted, he may; boiled, he may; braised, he may. And similarly with fish from the store of the fisherman.'*<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Gray, "The Ministering Angels Told me: Bavli Nedarim 20a-b and Its Medieval Interpreters," 32. Other references that include a eugenics argument against sexual practices include: B.T. *Niddah* 31a-b and B.T. *Gittin* 70a.

<sup>23</sup> Satlow, *Tasting the Dish*, 155.

<sup>24</sup> B.T. *Nedarim* 20a-b as cited in Boyarin, "Women's Bodies and the Rise of the Rabbis," 92.

Men have control over marital sexual relations and the manner in which they occur. This is emphasized further in a later part of the passage that says rebellious children occur because of several characteristics in their parents, and a wife who seeks intercourse from her husband will have such a rebellious and sinning child.<sup>25</sup> It is permissible for women to make their husbands want to have intercourse but women are not allowed to explicitly request it, so again men maintain the control over sexual relations.

### **Biblical Examples of *Tzniut***

The *Tanakh* contains examples of modest behavior in women, men, and even God. In Genesis 18, when three messengers (angels) come to see Abraham, they ask where Sarah is. Abraham replies that she is in her tent, which the rabbis interpret as her being modest.<sup>26</sup> Rebekah, when she was about to meet Isaac, put on a veil and covered herself before he saw her. This too is an example of modesty.<sup>27</sup> *Tzniut* also appears in the creation story. *Bereshit Rabbah* 16:2 says:

*"After Hashem created Adam, He considered the different parts from which he would form Eve. He said: 'I will not create her from the head—so she should not be light-headed or high-headed and haughty; not from the eye—so she should not pry and look where unnecessary; not from the ear—so she should not be eager to hear gossip; not from the mouth—so she should not be a chitchat; not from the heart—so she should not be desirous or jealous; not from the hand—so she should not reach out where improper; not from the foot—so she should not venture out where appropriate. From where shall I create her? From a very private place in the body: from an internal limb, the rib—so she will be tznuah.'"*<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Gray, "The Ministering Angels Told Me," 35-36. This passage is a continuation of B.T. *Nedarim* 20a-b.

<sup>26</sup> Sarah Leah Oberlander, ed. *Tzniut: The Jewel in our Crown* (Monsey: Bas Melech, 2005), 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> Genesis 24:63-65. Interestingly, the Lubavitcher Rebbe describes Tamar as modest because she wore a veil. However, if one reads Genesis 36:14-15 it says that Tamar covered herself and that was how Judah knew she was a harlot. This may seem contradictory, but Tamar's role as grandmother to King Saul and Isaiah may have been a reward for her modesty.

<sup>28</sup> Malka Touger, *Just My Style: A Tzniut Reader For Teens* (Brooklyn: Judaica Press, 2003), 9.

It is also possible to read *tzniut* in clothing in the creation story. In Genesis 3:21 it says, “And the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.” By clothing Adam and Eve, God teaches the importance of *tzniut* and covering one’s body.<sup>29</sup>

In the Exodus story, the rabbis teach that the Jewish people were redeemed because of their modesty. Jewish men, but especially Jewish women, retained their modest dress and were not influenced by the Egyptians.<sup>30</sup> *Tzniut* appears in Leviticus as well, where it refers to the priest wearing a “fitted linen tunic” (Leviticus 6:3). This is interpreted by some as meaning the tunic was the appropriate length.<sup>31</sup> Later, in Deuteronomy 24:15, *tzniut* is commanded when it says: “Let your camp be holy; let God not find anything unseemly among you and turn away from you.”<sup>32</sup> This is interpreted as meaning that *tzniut* and holiness must be observed in every aspect of Jewish life.<sup>33</sup>

There are also examples of God’s modesty in the *Tanakh*. In Exodus 33:17-23, Moses asks to see God but is only allowed to see God’s back. This is an act of modesty; a modern interpretation is that God is being modest about disclosing the divine sex.<sup>34</sup>

The question arises as to why there is not more in the Torah about *tzniut* given how important it became in Jewish life. There is a suggestion offered that it is “a compliment to Jewish women and girls that the Torah does not go into great detail on

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<sup>29</sup> Touger, *Just My Style*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> *Midrash Lekach Tov*, Shmot 6:6, as cited in *Beautiful Within: Modesty in Concept and Dress as Taught by the Lubavitcher Rebbe*, by Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, trans. Sholom B. Wineberg (Sichos in English: Brooklyn, 1995), 5.

<sup>31</sup> Touger, *Just My Style*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Jewish Publication Society, *Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: JPS, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> Schneerson, *Beautiful Within: Modesty in Concept and Dress*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, “The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book,” in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 17-46; 32.

matters of *tzniut*, for it shows that God puts His trust in Jewish women and girls. They have a natural feeling for *tzniut* and will even go beyond the halakhah in expressing how much they value and treasure this way of life.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Halakhot Regarding *Tzniut***

As stated earlier, *tzniut* is a very broad topic with many *halakhot* and rabbinic opinions. This section is a brief overview of some of the major areas regarding *tzniut* from a traditionally observant perspective.

#### *Hair Covering for Married Women*

The requirement for married women to cover their hair originates from the *Sotah* ritual in Numbers 5. If a wife is thought to be unfaithful, she undergoes a ritual at the Temple in which the priest makes her drink bitter waters. If she was not unfaithful, she is immune to the effects of the bitter waters; if she did commit adultery, her belly and thigh will sag and distend. In describing the ritual, the Torah says (in Numbers 5:18): “After he has made the woman stand before the Lord, the priest shall bare the woman’s head...”<sup>36</sup> *Sifrei Bamidbar* comments, “And you shall uncover the head of the woman; we learn from this that the daughters of Israel covered their heads.”<sup>37</sup> The obligation to cover hair

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<sup>35</sup> Touger, *Just My Style*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> Jewish Publication Society, *Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 291. For the entire *Sotah* ritual, see Numbers 5:11-31.

<sup>37</sup> *Sifrei Bamidbar* 11, as cited in Lynne Schreiber, “Halachot of Hair,” *Hide and Seek: Jewish Women and Hair Covering* (New York: Urim Publications, 2003), 197-209; 198.

is not derived from the rabbinic construct of *tzniut*, but actually was derived from the Torah and then made part of *tzniut*.<sup>38</sup>

A woman's hair is a symbol of sexuality and attractiveness—one need only to look at current shampoo commercials to notice that hair is used to highlight a woman's eroticism. This is described by Chana Kahn, a psychotherapist, as follows: "A woman in a commercial for a hair product throws back gleaming, glistening locks and poses seductively for the camera. From this, the message is clear that, 'Hair is something that enhances one's sexuality and attractiveness. It's meant to be seductive.'"<sup>39</sup> Hair represents a woman's sexuality, so the covering of a woman's hair preserves her sexuality for her husband. Some say this is not only to conceal sexuality related to hair but also to conceal the sexuality that is part of marriage. Once a woman is married, it is assumed that she is engaging in sexual relations with her husband and thus her self-image is changed so she may appear less innocent and more sensual. Covering hair then represents the commitment to keeping sexuality within the marriage and publicly declares that a woman is married.<sup>40</sup>

The obligation to cover hair is generally only applied to married women since the *Sotah* ritual is possible only for a married woman. However, there are some communities where unmarried women will cover their hair or pull it back so it does not draw attention.<sup>41</sup> In contemporary literature there is a debate as to whether hair covering is custom or law (to determine whether it is necessary to observe it or not). Rambam in

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<sup>38</sup> Schreiber, Lynne ed. *Hide and Seek: Jewish Women and Hair Covering* (New York: Urim Publications, 2003), 11-33; 21.

<sup>39</sup> Schreiber, *Hide and Seek*, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Gila Manoloson. *Outside Inside: A fresh look at tzniut* (Southfield, MI: Targum, 1997), 45-47.

<sup>41</sup> Schreiber, *Hide and Seek*, 21.

*Hilchot Ishut* separates what is *da'at Moshe*, or law, and what is *da'at Yehudit*, or something that has been customarily observed in communities and is viewed as required practice. He takes the position that the Torah commands women to not expose their hair in public and the custom is for women to increase their standards of modesty, therefore both married and unmarried women should cover their hair.<sup>42</sup> The position of the Lubavitcher Rebbe is that hair covering is an explicit law from the *Shulchan Aruch*, not just a custom.<sup>43</sup> Several other sources seem to agree that hair covering is not merely a custom but a requirement that married women are obligated to follow.

While authorities agree that hair covering is a requirement for married women (whether it is a custom or law), there is disagreement over the amount of hair to be covered and the manner in which it should be covered. Some say that every strand must be covered while others view that as a stringency and allow a *tefach*, or hands-breadth, of hair to show.<sup>44</sup> There is a position taken by Rabbi Yehuda Henkin, that *kisui rosh* (covering the head) refers to covering the head only. Thus, long hair need not be covered as long as the hair on the head is covered. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein takes the position that all married women must cover every strand of hair.<sup>45</sup> Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's wife did not cover her hair, so some scholars teach that there is no obligation to cover hair when modesty women generally do not.<sup>46</sup> Married women cover their hair even in a semi-public place where men usually are not present. Scrupulous women cover their hair

<sup>42</sup> Schreiber, "Halachot of Hair," in *Hide and Seek*, 201. Schreiber quotes Rambam's *Hilchot Ishut* 24:12.

<sup>43</sup> Schneerson, *Beautiful Within*, 19. See *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 75.

<sup>44</sup> Schreiber, *Hide and Seek*, 12-13.

<sup>45</sup> As reported by Schreiber, *Hide and Seek*, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Schreiber, *Hide and Seek*, 27. Some of the sources for this position: *Sefer Yehoshua* #89; *Sefer Chukat Hanashim* 17; *Sefer Sanheria* p.201-2; *She-eilot u'Tshuvot Mayim Chayim* 2:110; *Otzar Michtavim* #1884.

even when alone, but this is usually not a requirement.<sup>47</sup> Ashkenazi women usually wear wigs although Sephardi *poskim* ruled against wearing wigs. Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef prohibits wigs since “she who goes out with a wig, the law is as if she goes out with her head uncovered.” If one does not know that a woman is wearing a wig, it is misleading.<sup>48</sup>

Hair covering is viewed by many women as a positive action. Chana Kahn says, “On the positive side, some young women might see issues of modesty as sending them a message that their bodies are special and need to be treated with dignity and respect.” Other women who contributed to Lynne Schreiber’s book about hair covering, *Hide and Seek*, spoke about how special it was to have their hair belong to them and their husbands. However, hair covering and standards of modesty can be negative when shame is used. Kahn gives the example of a woman who wants to wear bobby socks instead of stockings but is called a slut for doing so.<sup>49</sup> The same is true for hair covering—if one does it because of positive intentions then it may enhance her sense of self-esteem, but if she is doing it because she would be shamed if she did not then it may not help her self-confidence. The intention behind *tzniut*, whether it is hair covering or dress or something else, is what determines if it enhances a woman’s self-esteem.

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<sup>47</sup> Rav Yitzchak Yaacov Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael: A Woman's Guide to Jewish Observance, Volume I* (Oak Park, Michigan: Targum Press, 1985), 84. Sources: *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim* 75:2 and *Even Ha-Ezer* 21:2. It is *da'at Moshe* to cover hair in public, and *da'at Yehudit* to cover hair in courtyard or semi-public place.

<sup>48</sup> Schreiber, *Hide and Seek*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Schreiber, *Hide and Seek*, 18.

## *Yichud*

*Yichud* refers to situations where a man and woman, other than husband and wife, are alone without a chaperon and are not likely to be disturbed.<sup>50</sup> The prohibition is derived from Leviticus 18:6, "You may not become familiar with one who is prohibited to you." The rules of *yichud* are designed to avoid situations in which a transgression may occur because of sexual attraction.<sup>51</sup> It is generally not permitted except among certain relatives and husbands and wives. The rules of *yichud* apply for adults, that is, girls over twelve years old and boys over thirteen. Once a girl is over twelve, she is only allowed to be with boys younger than nine. Once a boy is thirteen, he is only allowed to be alone with girls under three years old.<sup>52</sup> *Yichud* is permitted among relatives to a limited extent. A woman is allowed to be alone with her grandfather, father, son, grandson, or brother. The Talmud allows for siblings to temporarily live together if necessary.<sup>53</sup> However, a woman is not allowed to be alone with her father-in-law, brother-in-law, son-in-law, uncle, nephew, cousin, adopted son older than nine, or stepson older than nine.<sup>54</sup> The prohibition of *yichud* is removed if any of the following are present: a man's sister, daughter, mother, or grandmother; or a woman's father, son, grandfather, brother,

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<sup>50</sup> Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 117. *Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer* 22 and *Otzar haPoskim* 22:1 define *yichud* and include forests, fields, and beaches if no one else is present. *Yichud* is prohibited in the defined situations by Jewish law, because Torah prohibits *yichud* between people who are not allowed to marry or where a woman is in *niddah*. For further information, see *Tosafot Shabbat* 13a, *Me'iri Kiddushin* 80a, *Sefer haChinuch* 188, and *Teshuvot haRashba* 587.

<sup>51</sup> Rabbi Shmuel Neiman, *9:00 to 5:00: A Guide to Modest Conduct for Today's Workplace* (Monsey: Gross Bros. Printing, 2001), 29.

<sup>52</sup> *Shulchan Aruch Even haEzer* 22:1, as quoted in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 118.

<sup>53</sup> *Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer* 22:1 as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 119. B.T. *Kiddushin* 81a allows for siblings to live together temporarily.

<sup>54</sup> *Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer* 22:1, as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 119.



mother-in-law, or husband's sister. There is also no prohibition if a girl between ages five and nine or a boy ages nine to thirteen is present.<sup>55</sup>

There are laws that govern physical contact between relatives. Parents are allowed to kiss their children of the opposite sex even after marriage and the same is true for grandparents and grandchildren. However, a man may not kiss his niece. Additionally, any "God-fearing person" should be stringent.<sup>56</sup> A woman is not allowed to kiss any male over nine years old except for her husband, father, grandfather, son, or grandson. She should be careful at joyous occasions and family events where kissing may occur.<sup>57</sup> The Rambam is very strict about kissing and hugging between relatives who are forbidden to marry: "A man who hugs or kisses a forbidden relation, even a blood relative to whom there is no sexual attraction, such as his pubescent sister or his mother's sister...is committing a degrading, forbidden, and foolish act. One should not draw close to any forbidden relation, old or young. The only exceptions are a mother and her son or a father to his daughter."<sup>58</sup> This is designed to limit the possibility for sexual attraction between people who are forbidden to marry.

Women are not allowed to shake hands with men, except for specific relatives, even if they are wearing gloves. Similarly, a Jewish man should not shake the hand of a Gentile woman.<sup>59</sup> Prohibitions against physical contact also apply in the workplace.

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<sup>55</sup> *Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer* 22:2 and Rambam *Hilchot Ishut* 22, as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 123. B.T. *Kiddushin* 81b will also allow for the prohibition of *yichud* to be removed if their step daughter is present.

<sup>56</sup> *Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer* 21:7, *Iggeroth Moshe Even haEzer* Vol.1 60, *Iggeroth Moshe Yoreh De'ah* Vol.2 No.137, as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 108.

<sup>57</sup> *Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer* 22:1, as quoted in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 109. Fuchs says that Torah law does not forbid kissing between blood relations who are not permitted to marry, but rabbinic law forbids it as a safeguard.

<sup>58</sup> Rambam, *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 21:6, as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 110.

<sup>59</sup> Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 110.

There should be no shaking of hands or physical expressions of affection, nor should hands touch when passing objects between men and women. Further, a woman should not serve a man at work in the manner in which she serves her husband at home.<sup>60</sup>

Open doors are a way to lessen the prohibition against *yichud*. If a door is open to the street and people are walking by the street, or if a door is unlocked and people usually enter without warning, it is permissible for a man and woman to be alone in that room. However, if the man and woman are fond of each other, they should not be alone in a house even with an open door.<sup>61</sup>

There are also guidelines for *yichud* in a car or taxi. A woman is permitted to be alone with a man in a car when traveling through an area with passers-by. If the car will be on the highway or away from people, there should be at least one other man in the car. If a woman must travel alone in a taxi at night to fulfill a *mitzvah*, there must be other cars on the road.<sup>62</sup> *Tzniut* dictates that a woman or girl should not be alone with a man, and thus should never take a taxi alone with a male driver.<sup>63</sup>

The rules regarding *yichud* clearly try to limit situations in which men and women may be tempted into sexual activity. It is an important aspect of *tzniut* since modesty is about avoiding arousing another's sexual desires. If a woman is committed to *tzniut*, that is, not leading men to temptation, she will be scrupulous in avoiding situations of *yichud*. The same is also true for men who are committed to avoiding temptations.

<sup>60</sup> Neiman, 9:00 to 5:00, 14-17. See *Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer* 21a and 21:5, and *Tur Even HaEzer* 22.

<sup>61</sup> *Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer* 22:9 as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 121-123.

<sup>62</sup> *Iggeroth Moshe Yoreh De'ah* Vol.2 No.83, as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 129.

<sup>63</sup> Oberlander, *Tzniut: The Jewel in Our Crown*, 56.

### *A Woman's Voice, or Kol Ishah*

A woman's voice, like her hair, is a source of attraction. The Talmud refers to it as *ervah*, a source of eroticism.<sup>64</sup> A man is not allowed to listen to a woman sing, although he may listen to his wife singing in private if she is not *niddah* and he is not in prayer.<sup>65</sup> A man may listen to an unmarried girl sing as long as he is not sexually stimulated by it and she is not *niddah*. Since any girl over eleven years of age is assumed to be *niddah*, men may only listen to girls under the age of eleven.<sup>66</sup> Men are not allowed to listen to women singing in synagogue. At a bat mitzvah ceremony, if men are present then women (including the bat mitzvah girl) may not sing.<sup>67</sup>

*Tzniut* regarding a woman's voice also applies in conversations. The Lubavitcher Rebbe points to the Torah's information about our ancestors as a sign for how we should conduct ourselves. Conversations should be conducted in a modest manner as a result.<sup>68</sup> In the workplace, conversations between men and women should be professional in nature. There should not be inquiries about personal lives or complements except for occasional complements for a person's work. Further, men and women should not refer to themselves as "we," thus implying that they are a unit.<sup>69</sup> There should be no nonverbal communication either.<sup>70</sup>

Modest speech means women should not talk loudly or scream because that will draw unnecessary attention to them. It also guides the content of conversations. Women

<sup>64</sup> B.T. *Berakhot* 24a, as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 93.

<sup>65</sup> *Shulchan Aruch Even haEzer*, and *Beit Shmuel Even HaEzer* 21:4, as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 93-94.

<sup>66</sup> Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 95.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>68</sup> Schneerson, *Beautiful Within*, 6-7.

<sup>69</sup> Neiman, *9:00 to 5:00*, 7-10. The prohibition against using "we" is derived from B.T. *Eruvin* 53. There are also prohibitions against joking or laughing together, as well as engaging in nonverbal communication.

<sup>70</sup> Rambam, *Sanhedrin* 7, as cited in Neiman, *9:00 to 5:00*, 12.

should be careful of what they say and to whom they say it, since Proverbs 31:26 says, “She opens her mouth with wisdom.”<sup>71</sup> Using profanity is prohibited, and modest speech depends at times upon euphemisms. Just as the rabbis of the Talmud used euphemisms to discuss anatomy and certain bodily functions, modest speech should take care to use euphemisms when necessary.<sup>72</sup>

### *Modesty Relating to Prayer*

A woman’s voice is distracting to men during prayer. So, while a man can listen to his wife singing most of the time, when he is praying he should not hear any woman even his wife. In fact, if he does hear a woman singing while he is reciting *Shema*, he should repeat it without the preparatory or concluding blessings.<sup>73</sup>

The modesty of one’s clothing becomes important during prayer. A man can only recite *devarim shebikdushah* (literally “words pertaining to holiness”) in the presence of a modestly-dressed woman whose upper arms and thighs are covered. He cannot pray or study holy texts in front of an immodestly-dressed woman, even if he is not looking at her.<sup>74</sup> Women should be modest in their clothing for prayer as well, although restrictions are less stringent for them. In the case of reciting blessings at the *mikveh*, women must be modest by ensuring they are in the water when saying the blessings and should hold their

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<sup>71</sup> Touger, *Just My Style*, 62.

<sup>72</sup> Bernard Novick, *B'tzelem Elohim (In God's image): Making Jewish Decisions About the Body* (United Synagogue of America), 27.

<sup>73</sup> *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim* 75:3, *Mishnah Brurah* 75:16-17 and 76:2, as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 96-97.

<sup>74</sup> *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim* 75:1 as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 74. *Mishnah Berurah* 75:1, 75:7, 75:29-30 presents the opinion that a man may recite prayers in the presence of an immodestly-dressed woman if he turns his entire body in the opposite direction.

arms around their waist to separate their heart and genital area.<sup>75</sup> According to the Talmud, there is greater stringency applied to men because they are more prone to erotic thoughts than women.<sup>76</sup>

### *Modesty in Clothing*

Clothing is perhaps the most visible sign of *tzniut*. Traditionally, the consequence of immodest dress is understood as leading others to sin and violating Leviticus 19:14: "You shall not set up a stumbling block in front of a blind person." Men are forbidden from gazing upon immodestly dressed women, so women going around with parts of their bodies uncovered lead men to violate these laws. Immodest dress is also prohibited because it is following the ways of non-Jews, violating Leviticus 18:3: "You shall not walk in their ways."<sup>77</sup> Modest clothing is important for prayer because some believe that God notices the modesty of our dress. In Song of Songs 2:14 it says, "Let me see your face, let me hear your voice," perhaps meaning that God notices our appearance before listening to our prayers.<sup>78</sup>

The laws of modest dress originated with weaving. Jewish women, according to the *Mishnah*, did not weave in the marketplace and the *Gemara* explains that this was because weaving exposes a woman's upper arms.<sup>79</sup> Arms above the elbow must be covered, as do the areas below a woman's collarbone and above her knees. Any of these

<sup>75</sup> Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 76-77. See *Mishnah Berurah* 74:16, *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim* 75:4-5.

<sup>76</sup> From B.T. *Ketubot* 64b, cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 78.

<sup>77</sup> *Y'chaveh Da'ath* Vol.3, No.67 and *Iggeret Moshe Yoreh De'ah* Vol.1 No.81, as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 70. Prohibitions against seeing an immodestly dressed woman can be found in *Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer* 21:1, *Mishnah Berurah* 75:7, *Iggeret Moshe, Orach Chayim* No.40 and *Even HaEzer* No.56.

<sup>78</sup> Touger *Just My Style*, 38.

<sup>79</sup> P.T. *Ketubot* 7:3, 72b, as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 70.

areas constitute *ervah*.<sup>80</sup> There is a difference of opinion as to the area below the knee—how much of it is *ervah*. *Mishnah Berurah* says that below the knee is not *ervah* and it must only be covered if that is the practice of the community. It is generally the case that women will wear stockings so the leg is covered to some degree.<sup>81</sup> Lubavitcher Chasidim, along with some other communities, follow the more stringent custom that below the knee is *ervah*. Thus, dress length should be at least three to four inches below the knee and women should not wear sandals or open-toed shoes.<sup>82</sup>

Deuteronomy 22:5 states that a woman should not wear a man's garments. An issue arises as to whether or not it is permissible for women to wear pants. Some opinions say that women should not wear pants under any circumstances; other opinions allow for pants as protection from cold or for exercise if no men are present. Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef wrote that while pants made for women do not violate Deuteronomy 22:5 they are still immodest and draw attention to a woman's figure and should only be worn temporarily for protection from cold.<sup>83</sup>

According to the *Shulchan Aruch* girls should wear modest clothing in public beginning at age three. However, there are some leniencies with clothing for young girls. Under age six, a girl can wear a short skirt and tights, but after age six should have skirts that cover her knees. After age eleven, girls should dress modestly in their fathers' presence. At all times girls should be modestly dressed when in the synagogue.<sup>84</sup>

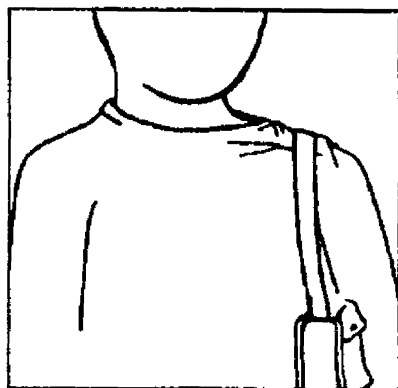
<sup>80</sup> Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 71-72. See *Mishnah Berurah* 75:2, 75:7; B.T. *Ketubot* 72b, B.T. *Berachot* 24a.

<sup>81</sup> *Mishnah Berurah* 75:2 as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 73. See also *Minchath Yitzchak* Vol.6 No.10.

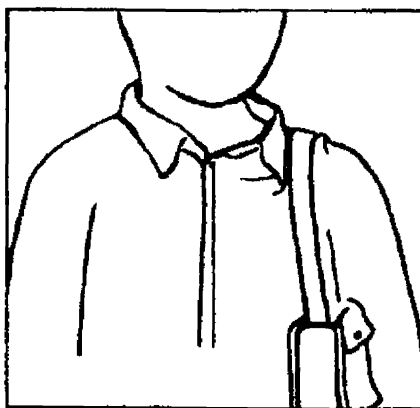
<sup>82</sup> Oberlander, *Tznius: The Jewel in Our Crown*, 54 and 67.

<sup>83</sup> *Yabia Omer* Vol.5 *Yoreh Deah* 14:3, as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 102. See also *Yabia Omer* Vol.6 *Yoreh Deah* 14:7, *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 182, *Minchath Yitzchak* Vol.2 No.108.

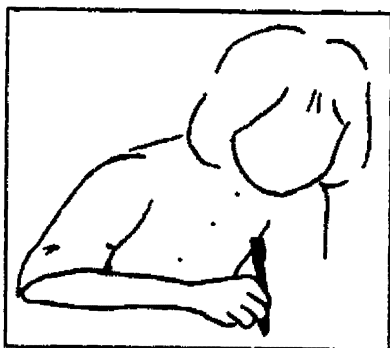
<sup>84</sup> Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 78-79.

**SHOULDER BAG**

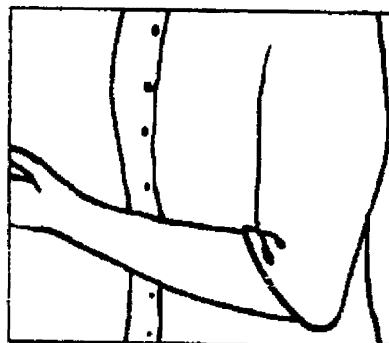
Carrying a shoulder bag carelessly can cause exposure

**SHOULDER BAG**

A bag can cause exposure even if the garment has a collar

**NOT KOSHER**

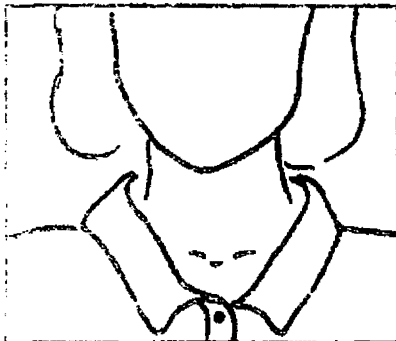
Elbow exposed

**NOT KOSHER**

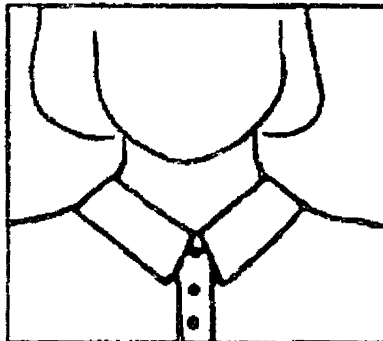
Sleeve within 3" of elbow -  
unreliable and Ossur  
according to all opinions

**Figure 1: Diagrams of modest tops.<sup>85</sup>**

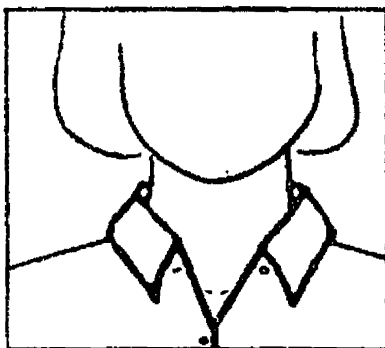
<sup>85</sup> Figures 1-3 are from Oberlander, *Tznius: The Jewel in our Crown*, 89-95.

**NOT KOSHER**

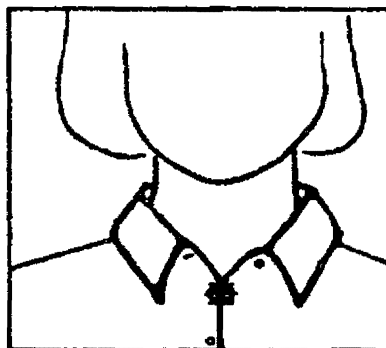
Although top button closed  
front exposed\*

**KOSHER**

Top button closed;  
front fully covered

**NOT KOSHER**

Top button open causing  
front to be exposed\*

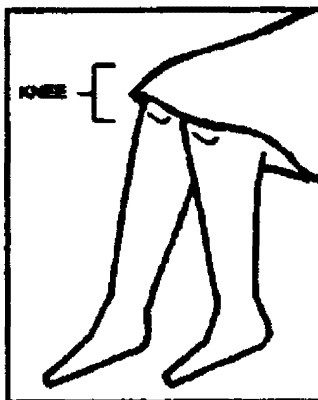
**KOSHER**

Extra closure inserted between  
top and second button

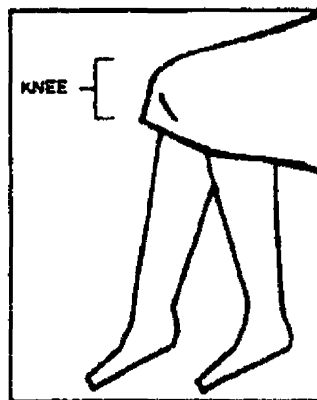
\*Note: When shoulders are straight the collarbone is usually higher up than when the shoulders slope down.

**Figure 2:** Diagrams of modest necklines.

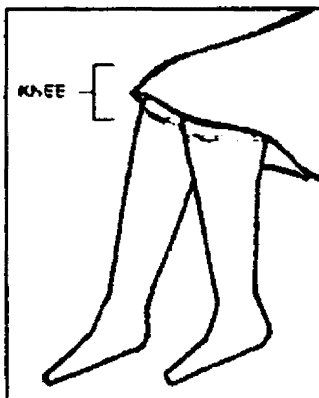


**NOT KOSHER**

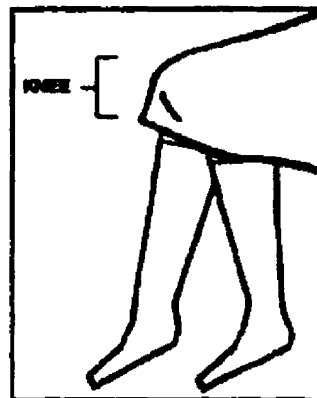
**Knees only partially covered**

**KOSHER**

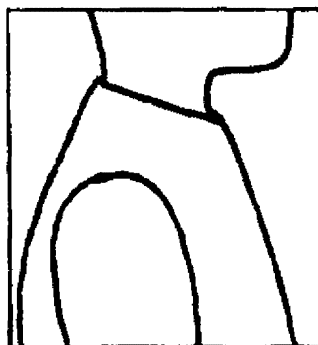
**Knees properly covered**

**KNEE-HIGHS**

**Two faults; short skirt  
and knee-highs**

**KNEE-HIGHS**

**Although skirt is Kosher  
knee-highs are unreliable  
and should not be worn**

**BACK - FRONT**

**Neck ends higher at back  
than at front**

**Figure 3: Diagrams of modest skirt and shirt lengths.**

Women are supposed to dress modestly and not try to attract male attention through their appearance. This also includes restrictions on the use of cosmetics. Women may not wear strong perfume in public and should not wear exaggerated makeup in public.<sup>86</sup> However, a modest woman will “give the most attention to her appearance when in the company of the person who should be most important to her—her husband.”<sup>87</sup> She may wear makeup in order to be attractive for her husband as well.

In Israel, modest clothing can be a serious issue. Local and national government offices instituted “modest” dress codes for women workers after complaints from some ultra-Orthodox men. A supermarket changed its dress code to require skirts and long sleeves, even going so far as to keep skirts in the back in case women wore slacks.<sup>88</sup>

### **Tzniut is a Woman's Responsibility**

Everyone is responsible for *tzniut* since Deuteronomy 16:18 says: “You shall appoint judges and policemen at all your gates,” with ‘your gates’ referring to every individual.<sup>89</sup> At the same time *tzniut* applies primarily to women. Women are responsible for *tzniut* in order keep men from becoming sexually aroused and allowing them to focus on spiritual matters. The basic idea is that women are responsible for the effect their appearance has on men.<sup>90</sup> This is not only referring to modest dress, but any activities that “may lead male onlookers to perceive them [the women] less than spiritually.”<sup>91</sup> The *Shulchan Aruch* prohibits a man from deliberately looking at a woman when his intent is

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<sup>86</sup> *Eicha Rabbah 4, Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer 21:1* as cited in Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 104.

<sup>87</sup> Manoloson, *Outside Inside*, 40.

<sup>88</sup> Susan Sered, “Replaying the Rape of Dinah: Women's Bodies in Israeli Cultural Discourse,” 194.

<sup>89</sup> Malka Touger, *Just My Style*, 25.

<sup>90</sup> Manoloson, *Outside Inside*, 18.

<sup>91</sup> Manoloson, *Outside Inside*, 36.

to derive pleasure. A woman who violates this prohibition by attracting male attention is considered to be as guilty as the men she causes to look at her.<sup>92</sup>

There are those who say that this does not negate the female body, but employs it for a 'higher purpose than self-display.'<sup>93</sup> Jewish women following the rules of *tzniut* de-emphasize their external qualities to allow their internal characteristics to shine through.<sup>94</sup>

This is exemplified by Psalm 45:14, which is often quoted in regards to *tzniut*:

כָּל־כְּבוֹדָהּ בַּת־מֶלֶךְ פְּנִימָה "All of the honor of the king's daughter is within." The

focus is on what is inside, not the outer qualities. The Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote, "The woman's body reflects, in a sense, more of Hashem's essence than does that of a man.

The woman has the ability to create within herself new life, a new creation, a something from nothing. This power...is derived from the essence of Hashem."<sup>95</sup> He continues,

"There are some who erroneously believe that the laws of *tznius* 'restrict' a woman and are insulting to her honor. The truth however, is precisely the opposite."<sup>96</sup> In this view,

modesty applies primarily to women in order to honor them and preserve their unique role in Judaism. As one Orthodox woman wrote to encourage *tzniut*, "If we are oblivious to what anyone else thinks, then we can be at peace with ourselves, knowing that all of the tedious tasks we do don't go unnoticed by God. This is a perfect example of what *tzniut* is all about."<sup>97</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Neiman, *9:00 to 5:00: A Guide to Modest Conduct for Today's Workplace*, 21.

<sup>93</sup> Manoloson, *Outside Inside*, 39.

<sup>94</sup> Schreiber, *Hide and Seek*, 21.

<sup>95</sup> Oberlander, *Tzniut: The Jewel in our Crown*, 12.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>97</sup> Yael Weil, "You've Come a Long Way Baby," in *Hide and Seek: Jewish Women and Hair Covering*, ed. Lynne Schreiber (New York: Urim Publications, 2003), 35-39; 38.

A story was told by a Haredi woman speaking to a group of women to encourage them to be careful about *tzniut*: “There was a flute in the Temple. A pipe flute, thin, smooth, and simple. The flute had an incomparably pleasant and beautiful sound. The king so loved the flute that he ordered that it be plated in gold. They took it to the best craftsmen and plated it with the finest gold. The flute lost its sound. When they took the gold off, it once again played with a wondrous sound. This is the way Jewish women are—our beauty lies in our simplicity.”<sup>98</sup> The moral of this story is the essence of this view of *tzniut*: that focus on outer beauty can obscure a woman’s inner beauty.

Advocates of traditional *tzniut* also say (as a positive result) that modesty keeps women in their homes caring for their households. The understanding of “The honor of the king’s daughter is within” means that women should not be involved in the public arena, but should instead be focused on their homes.<sup>99</sup>

There are, of course, those who disagree with the traditional view of *tzniut* as a woman’s responsibility. “In Orthodox ritual discourse, the most commonly specified ends are modesty and purity—attributes that are considered particularly important, yet terribly precarious, in women. Women, it seems, are defined as intrinsically immodest, a state that can be corrected only partially and temporarily through strict dress codes, ongoing supervision, and confinement to the domestic sphere.”<sup>100</sup> There is a two-fold message being given to women in Orthodoxy today: that women are more likely to be seduced by current fashion and must be admonished to dress modestly; and women are dangerous to

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<sup>98</sup> Tamar El-Or, “Paradoxes and Social Boundaries: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women and their World,” in *Israeli Women’s Studies: A Reader*, ed. Ester Fuchs (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2005), 133-149; 141.

<sup>99</sup> Oberlander, *Tzniut: The Jewel in Our Crown*, 42-43.

<sup>100</sup> Sered, “Replaying the Rape of Dinah: Women’s Bodies in Israeli Cultural Discourse,” 193.

men when improperly clad or socialized. This is summarized by a sign in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem: "A woman who wears immodest clothing causes the Divine Presence to depart and leads many to sin."<sup>101</sup>

As stated earlier, the rabbinic view of *tzniut* limits sexuality from the public realm and places that responsibility primarily on women. This is something that continues into Jewish communities today. In her study of an ultra-Orthodox community in Israel, Tamar El-Or took the position that modesty is employed whenever there is a need to oversee a woman's activities.<sup>102</sup> She also wrote that modesty acts as an 'insurance policy' that ensures women do not have too much contact with the outside world.<sup>103</sup> Rabbis are not the only ones who admonish women about modesty; El-Or found that women came to speak to other women about the importance of maintaining *tzniut* in their lives.<sup>104</sup>

### **Effects of a Woman's Modesty**

As with the rabbinic view of sexuality, modesty is enforced both explicitly and subtly. While women are subject to *halakhot* that define modest appearance and behavior, their observance is encouraged through the benefits they are taught will come from their modesty. A modest woman is rewarded with protection for herself and her household and will merit healthy children. The story is told about Kimchis, whose modesty in covering her hair led to having righteous children: "Kimchis had seven sons, all of whom merited to serve as *Kohanim Gedolim*, high priests. The sages asked her, 'What have you

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>102</sup> El-Or, "Paradoxes and Social Boundaries: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women and their World," 143.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 144.

done to merit this?’ She answered them, ‘The rafters of my house have never seen the plaits of my hair.’”<sup>105</sup>

Hair covering can also yield other rewards, as the *Zohar* says: “Her children will enjoy increased stature over other children; moreover, her husband shall be blessed with all blessings, blessings of above and blessing of below, with wealth, with children and grandchildren, etc.”<sup>106</sup> Modesty is thought to have such an effect that the Lubavitcher Rebbe suggests to a man whose brother is having male and healthy children (while he himself is not) that it probably has to do with the brother’s wife covering her hair.<sup>107</sup> One of the most important responsibilities of a traditional Jewish woman is to have healthy children and male children are especially prized. To be told that modesty will assure them of children would be a powerful incentive for traditionally observant women.

A woman’s modesty also benefits her home and household. “*Chazal* tell us that the sanctity of the home, the foundation of Jewish life, is maintained primarily through the laws of *tzniut*. *Tzniut* creates an atmosphere of holiness and wholesomeness that permeates family life.”<sup>108</sup> The spirit of modesty that a woman has can “turn her home into a fortress.”<sup>109</sup> Again, the incentive of a healthy family can increase a woman’s observance of modesty.

Some of the guides that encourage women to be modesty include anecdotes about the benefits of *tzniut*. One story tells of a woman coming to ask a blessing from the Rebbe for her daughter to have a good *shidduch*. The Rebbe asks about her virtues and,

<sup>105</sup> B. Yoma 47a as cited in *Beautiful Within: Modesty in Concept and Dress as Taught by the Lubavitcher Rebbe*, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, trans. Sholom B. Wineberg, 10.

<sup>106</sup> *Zohar* 111, 126a as cited in Schneerson, *Beautiful Within*, 20;

<sup>107</sup> Schneerson, *Beautiful Within*, 25.

<sup>108</sup> Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael*, 69.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

when pressed, the woman says that her daughter does not go out with the girls in the neighborhood on Shabbat afternoon because she considers it immodest to be out when men are walking to *shul* and *yeshiva*. The Rebbe praises her *tzniut* and thanks God for sending a good match for his son.<sup>110</sup> Just as *tzniut* can protect a woman's home, it also can lead to her finding a good husband.

Another anecdote praises *tzniut* as saving a young girl's life. A teenage girl during *Kristallnacht* was worried about being seen and the soldiers knowing she was a Jew. Her plan was to let her hair down and open her top collar button to look like a 'carefree' girl, not a scared Jew. She let her hair down but could not bring herself to open her top button, thus violating her life of *tzniut*. When she reached her family safely, her mother told her that *tzniut* saved her life—the girl had forgotten that she was wearing a Star of David necklace that would have been visible if her collar was open.<sup>111</sup>

In Deuteronomy 23:15 it is said: "Let God not find anything unseemly (literally, nakedness) among you and turn away from you." This is cited as a possible consequence of immodesty; without modest conduct, God may turn away.<sup>112</sup> Without modesty, it is said that Jews—individually and communally—are in danger. The Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote, "Adherence to the principles of *tznius* has been a key factor in the secret of our survival both materially and spiritually. Throughout the generations people's lives were sometimes saved in the merit of *tznius*."<sup>113</sup> Modesty through dress or not trying to dress like non-Jews can strengthen Jewish identity and can ensure the continued existence of

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<sup>110</sup> Touger, *Just My Style*, 51-52.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>112</sup> Jewish Publication Society, *Hebrew-English Tanakh*; based upon reference from Touger, *Just My Style*, 21, and Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk, *Sheitels: A Halachic Guide to Present-Day Sheitels*, (Gateshead, 2002), 6.

<sup>113</sup> Oberlander, *Tznius: The Jewel in Our Crown*, 7.

the Jewish people.<sup>114</sup> Modesty also can, in the words of another rabbi, “cause the power of Yishmael to be curtailed if not totally neutralized” and will cause peace and messianic redemption.<sup>115</sup>

A leaflet circulated among modern Orthodox communities in Israel in the 1990s cited immodesty as the reason for diseases and afflictions:

*Why has disease increased in our generation? For example, uterine cancer, breast cancer, skin cancer, AIDS, foot pain? Isn't it because of the immodesty of our generation? And why are there more Caesarean sections? Isn't it a punishment for uncovering the stomach? Remember: the length of the skirt must be at least 10 cm. below the knee. In short: Dress and behave modestly and so save yourself from trouble and curse. As a result of participating in and being present at mixed weddings, dancing, swimming, and these kinds of things, much sorrow and terrible things have happened: much adultery and prostitution, destruction of many good families, and especially sorrowful—masses of people, women, and children have been left broken, hurt, and miserable.*<sup>116</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Schneerson, *Beautiful Within*, 6.

<sup>115</sup> Falk, *Sheitels: A Halachic Guide to Present-Day Sheitels*, 44.

<sup>116</sup> Susan Sered, *What Makes Women Sick?: Maternity, Modesty, and Militarism in Israeli Society* (Hanover: Brandeis UP, 2000), 123. The preceding part of the leaflet reads as follows: *To my sister—do not feel jealous. There is nothing to be jealous of—you are worth more! Don't be jealous of girls who go in immodest (parutz) clothing. You are the modest ones—from you will come the continuation fo the building of Israel. You are the modest ones—in your merit Israel is holy and pure. The Holy One, Blessed Be He, looks after you, and He hates, hates, hates the ones who go in immodest clothing. There are men who do not manage to control their urges and look at those women who go around immodestly—those women are the pathetic ones, they look for attention... You should know—after men use immodest girls, they throw them away like used toilet paper. No man thinks of them seriously for marriage, for building a warm house with true and sincere love. With those girls, it isn't love, just cheap and fleeting sexual desire. And you, the modest and respectable one, the kosher Jewish woman. You are treated seriously like a woman of stature. You will merit Gan Eden. You will have the merit to bring righteous sons into the world. You will have the merit to continue the generations of Israel. You are the one whom the Holy One, Blessed Be He, admires and loves. The woman who goes immodestly dressed inherits hell in the next world and in this world. More than that, she shows to the public that she suffers from lack of attention and so she looks for attention from skirt-chasers in the street. The woman who goes with a short skirt—she reveals the place of her stench, the place from which comes out stinking feces, stinking blood, stinking urine. And every place that the immodest one goes, she draws after her bad spirits, impure spirits, the spirit of prostitution. So stay away from the company of ones like those. They are not suited to you. It is not your level. You, who wants holiness, must run away like from fire from women like that, so that they will not cause you trouble and destroy your house (for example, by stealing your beloved husband)....*



Sometimes the ‘affliction’ is more deliberate. Susan Sered found that several ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in Israel posted signs that say, “Parking and passing through [the neighborhood] in immodest clothing is absolutely forbidden. We are not responsible for damage caused to those who disobey. You have been warned,” thus saying that any attacks that may happen are the fault of the immodestly-dressed woman.<sup>117</sup> There were reports of attacks on over thirty female employees of the Ministry of Education (which is near *Meah Shearim*, an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood) who were said to be immodestly dressed. These attacks involved verbal abuse, spitting, and rock throwing. The men from *Meah Shearim* said, “They [the women] pollute the eyes of our children.”<sup>118</sup> A recent incident in October of 2007 involved five ultra-Orthodox men beating a religious woman who refused to move to the back of the bus so men and women would sit separately, as well as the male IDF soldier seated beside her. These men are part of a group advocating for “kosher” buses that have men and women seated in separate sections.<sup>119</sup> Just as modesty yields certain benefits, immodesty clearly can lead to problems for some women. Sadly these problems are sometimes deliberately inflicted.

## Conclusion

The traditional views of *tzniut* are complex and cover many areas. The Rabbis began with a certain understanding of the female body and tried to keep sexuality out of the public arena by regulating interactions between men and women and legislating

<sup>117</sup> Sered, *What Makes Women Sick?*, 135.

<sup>118</sup> “The Ultra-Orthodox Attempt to Control Jerusalem is Being Waged Over the Bodies of Local Women,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 9, 1996 as cited in Sered, *What Makes Women Sick?*, 133.

<sup>119</sup> Jonathan Lis, “5 Haredi men beat woman who refused to move to back of bus,” *Ha'aretz*, October 21, 2007.

modesty. This has led to rules regarding *yichud*, hair covering, dress, women's voices, and marital relations. Modesty in the traditional view encompasses almost every aspect of life.

Traditional *tzniut* is also mainly applied to women. While men should be modest, women are primarily responsible for making sure they themselves are modest and not leading men towards sin. The rules of *tzniut* govern and limit women's actions and appearance. Some take the view that this enhances the status of women and places the focus on their inner beauty while others criticize the traditional view of *tzniut* as restrictive and negative. Advocates of traditional *tzniut* give numerous anecdotes about the benefits of leading a modest life. They encourage the observance of *tzniut* by attributing rewards such as health, male children, and the survival of the Jewish people, to leading a modest life. Some of the modern warnings against immodesty encourage observance through threats of disease and violence, although these are certainly the extremes.

### Chapter 3: A Modern Argument for Modesty

#### Introduction

Published in 2000, Wendy Shalit's book *A Return to Modesty* sparked a discussion of whether American society has lost its respect for female modesty, leading to many problems facing women today. In 2007, Shalit followed up with a new book, *Girls Gone Mild*, which continues her argument for female modesty in our society. These two books are the most comprehensive argument I found for an inclusion of modesty in today's society. This chapter will discuss views of modesty, current examples and effects of immodesty in society<sup>1</sup>, and benefits that female modesty could provide.

#### 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Western European Views of Modesty

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, modesty was viewed as a way to control women and protect men and there was disagreement over whether this was a positive or negative idea. Some, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, viewed modesty as a construction by men to subordinate women.<sup>2</sup> Bernard Mandeville saw modest as counterbalancing the "violent natural desire" that women have.<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, "Modesty is nothing. It is only an invention of the social laws to protect the rights of fathers and husbands, and to maintain some order in families."<sup>4</sup> David Hume, a Scottish philosopher, also viewed

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<sup>1</sup> The argument for modesty is based around the idea that women face pressure to present a certain external image. There are many ways in which "immodesty" (a disconnect between internal and external self) is encouraged—clothing, makeup and hairstyles, relationships, sexuality. I have chosen to focus primarily on clothing because it has parallels with traditional Jewish understandings of clothing and there are numerous examples for the contemporary argument for the inclusion of female modesty.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Wallstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792, as cited in Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the lost virtue* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 111.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Mandeville, 1724 as cited in Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 115.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, 1758, in Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 109.

modesty as a social function to assure men of the paternity of their children.<sup>5</sup> This was a shift from the earlier position of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in which modesty was viewed as a positive quality among women. Richard Allestree wrote in his book *The Ladies' Calling*: “And if we consider modesty in this sense, we shall find it the most indispensable requisite of a woman; a thing so essential and natural to the sex, that even the least declination from it is a proportional receding from Womanhood, but the total abandoning it ranks them among Brutes.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Current Attitudes towards Modesty**

Looking to today's society, we still see ambivalence with regard to modesty. Shalit makes the case that modesty is viewed by most as a negative value, sometimes assumed to have resulted from trauma or other ‘problem.’ She writes, “Why is sexual modesty so threatening to some that they can only respond to it with charges of abuse or delusion?” There is an assumption that a woman acting “modestly” (dressing modestly, not engaging in sexual activity) must arise because of sexual abuse, incest, trauma, or a fear of sex.<sup>7</sup> Modesty is also sometimes associated with religious extremists such as the Taliban, making modesty something to be feared as “extreme.”<sup>8</sup>

Shalit argues that modesty is a positive value for individuals and society as a whole. She defines modesty as do many other Jewish authors cited in earlier chapters, as an internal approach to life or a way to show one's “true self.” Modesty can be keeping

<sup>5</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 109. See *Treatise of Human Nature* by David Hume, 1739.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling*, 1673, as cited in Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 96.

<sup>7</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 6. One online commentator was quoted as saying, “Modesty was based on a ‘fear and loathing of sex.’”

<sup>8</sup> Wendy Shalit, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to be Good* (New York: Random House, 2007), 269.

secrets: "Having secrets seems to be a way of asserting one's essential dignity, one's importance in the world...if nothing is secret, nothing is sacred."<sup>9</sup> This sounds similar to Dannah Gresh's *Secret Keepers*, a book written for Christian women to encourage them to keep their bodies "secret" for their husbands.<sup>10</sup> Or, modesty can be a reflex, "arising naturally to help a woman protect her hopes and guide their fulfillment..."<sup>11</sup> Modesty can also be internal power, and "it is respect for this 'power within' that once made it impossible for men to view women merely as sexual objects."<sup>12</sup> This is perhaps the most important definition of modesty in connection with secular society because Shalit argues that immodesty is manifested in an objectification of women. A twenty-year old made a similar point in an essay in *Seventeen* magazine entitled "The Art of Modesty": "It's not easy getting guys to pay attention to your beliefs and values, but if you don't let them see too much of what's outside, then they have to pay attention to what's inside." This young woman wears knee-length skirts and buttoned-up shirts to show "I'm more than my body."<sup>13</sup>

### **A Lack of Female Modesty**

There is some modesty that is instinctual among young girls at the age of puberty, manifested as embarrassment and blushing around boys.<sup>14</sup> However, young women are under tremendous societal pressure to push any instinctual modesty aside in favor of provocative clothing and behaviors. Dr. Mary Pipher, a psychologist, wrote:

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<sup>9</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 134.

<sup>10</sup> Dannah Gresh, *Secret Keeper: The Delicate Power of Modesty* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2002). For a discussion of modern Christian perspectives on modesty, see Chapter I of this thesis, pages 9-12.

<sup>11</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 94.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-154.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

*"With puberty, girls face enormous cultural pressure to split into false selves. The pressure comes from schools, magazines, music, television, advertisements, and movies. It comes from peers. It comes from parents, from mothers who also suffered from the emphasis on being thin. Girls can be true to themselves and risk abandonment by their peers or they can reject their true selves and be socially acceptable. Most girls choose to be socially accepted and split into two selves, one that is authentic and one that is culturally scripted. In public they become who they are supposed to be."*<sup>15</sup>

This pressure to not be modest can be seen in many different ways. One could look at some of the articles in magazines for young women: "Shy's Girl's Guide to Making Man Contact," "How Not to Die of Embarrassment," or "Risk-Free Seduction Tips for the Sexually Shy." The message is clear—overcome shyness and push aside instinctual modesty to go after men and sex<sup>16</sup> even if it means separating or negating your authentic self. In a February 2008 issue of *Seventeen*, the editor wrote that the magazine "polled 1,000 of the cutest guys we could find to figure out how they think...if I'd had this peek into a guy's mind when I was in high school, it would have saved me *weeks* wondering what my crush/friend was thinking. (Yes, I had a major crush on my best guy friend—doesn't everyone?)." She encouraged readers to email her about their biggest crush, sending the messages that girls should have crushes on boys and spend time wondering what they are thinking, and girls should also be willing to share their feelings with the general public.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), as cited in Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 92.

<sup>16</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 63. These articles appear in May 1997 *Cosmopolitan*, May 1997 *Mademoiselle*, and April 1996 *Mademoiselle*, respectively. Shalit points out other articles that encourage sex without guilt, suggesting women have a one-night stand without regret, because that is what a confident woman does, or other behaviors that disregard modesty.

<sup>17</sup> *Seventeen*, February 2008, 12. After reading Shalit's books and examples from magazines, I decided to undertake some informal research into what magazines are saying in 2008. I read *Seventeen*, *Teen Vogue*, and *Cosmo Girl* (the teenage version of *Cosmopolitan*). I have incorporated some of my "findings" in this chapter as more recent examples of what Shalit discussed in her first book.

Shalit writes, "We are human beings, and we are always ashamed of *something*. We've just mixed up the proper objects of our shame. We are ashamed of smoking, but not see-through clothes for young girls."<sup>18</sup> Magazines and media send the message that young women should be ashamed of being shy, not of having sex without committed relationships. The increased promiscuity on television sitcoms, the availability of pornography on the internet, and the growing tolerance of sexual jokes and talk in public show that, "We live in a highly sexualized society, one that promotes insatiable sexual longings. There is a continuous flaunting of sensuality in comedy and on television. Unwed mothers serve as television and Hollywood heroines."<sup>19</sup> In a similar way, this 'misplaced' shame is seen with the issue of coed college dormitories, the issue that began Shalit's arguments for modesty. Coed dormitories and bathrooms challenge the 'modest' notions that unmarried men and women should sleep in separate areas and may be more comfortable in gendered bathrooms. Shalit herself was made uncomfortable by coed bathrooms at Williams College. She also cites a 1997 incident in which five Orthodox Jewish students asked Yale University not to place them in coed dorms, but their request was refused despite the diverse cultural housing options that exist. "Apparently diversity ends where religious morality begins."<sup>20</sup> Despite the many campuses that have coed dormitories, "some [students] quietly confessed that the permissiveness of residence life sometimes made them uncomfortable."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 61.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis D. Solomon, *The Jewish Tradition, Sexuality, and Procreation* (Lanham, NY: University Press of America, 2002), 4. In 1999, statistics showed that 52% of high school men and 48% of high school women were sexually experienced, and 85-90% of college seniors had engaged in sexual activity. There seems to be an increased permissibility for premarital sex, and some of the specific reasons for the high incidence of premarital sex were rebellion, birth control, and erotic advertising (page 35).

<sup>20</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 61.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

Prior to finding themselves in coed college dormitories, young women and girls have pressure to be more sexualized, or put another way, girls today have pressure to be “bad” and invulnerable. Dr. Pipher writes, “Girls today are much more oppressed. They are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized, and media-saturated culture...as they navigate a more dangerous world, girls are less protected.”<sup>22</sup> Shalit writes, “Today girls are generally brought up to assume that they have no special vulnerability, because that would be sexist. Being as promiscuous as any man is taken to be a badge of one’s liberation.” There is pressure to hide vulnerability, such as painful emotions after break-ups or even being in love.<sup>23</sup> Without this vulnerability, women are expected to be able to engage in sexual behaviors without any emotional toll. They have to struggle for reasons to say no to sexual advances. Prior respect for modesty gave women support to “test men’s character, in order to find a suitable partner. Without this support, a woman who doesn’t want to sleep with a man is insulting him.”<sup>24</sup>

Shalit argues that this immodesty, the pressure to have sex and to be invulnerable as well as the focus on external appearance, leads to problems such as self-mutilation and eating disorders. Dr. Pipher reports that her clients who are not sexually active are the ones who do not have eating disorders or self-mutilate. Those who are sexually active often have a “‘deadness’...that comes from inauthenticity, from giving away too much.”<sup>25</sup> Shalit views eating disorders as a way to reassert control over the external self that has been taken away by society:

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<sup>22</sup> Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, as cited in Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 91.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.



*"When modesty was given a sanction, women not only had the right to say no to a man's advances, but her good opinion of him was revered. Today, on the other hand, when our popular culture tells us that women should lust equally to men and feel comfortable about putting their bodies on display in coed bathrooms, on coed beaches—coed everything—women seem to be reporting that they feel only more at the mercy of male desire. The anorexic disfigures her body to become unwomanly because if she no longer has the right to say 'no,' at least she has her body language at her disposal. So, natural modesty has a way of reasserting itself, even in desperate and neurotic fashion."*<sup>26</sup>

The updated edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* described this social pressure as telling women to "keep quiet and look sexy for men...in patriarchal societies, women gain status through relationships with men, and appearance serves as a measure of our desirability as sexual partners."<sup>27</sup> This pressure by society for women to put their bodies on display, to act like men with regards to dating and sex, and to put aside any vulnerability or embarrassment takes away their control over their bodies. Shalit argues this control is reasserted through behaviors like self-mutilation, anorexia, or bulimia, problems that are becoming all too common among young women today. These problems arise even among self-confident women because they are pressured to see their body as their truest self. In a blog on "Modestly Yours," a blog about modesty linked to Shalit's website "Modesty Zone," one young woman wrote, "To many people in our postmodern times, self-esteem is all about sex appeal...Ladies, consider whether you would prefer to be complimented on: your long legs or your accomplishments. Of course a healthy body is itself an accomplishment. But if our self-esteem is foremost tied to the look of our

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>27</sup> The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A New Edition for a New Era* (New York: Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, 2005), 7.

bodies, will we focus more on improving our character traits or our abs?"<sup>28</sup> This young woman makes an important point, that a woman sometimes faces societal pressure to be all about external appearances and sexuality. When this is what comprises a woman's sense of self, there are many potential problems that may arise, and when the body is not perfect or able to measure up to society's ideal, it leads to low self-esteem and possibly destructive behaviors. A disturbing new cultural trend, "wannarexia," involves young women engaging in eating disordered behaviors in order to lose weight because they have a desire to be anorexic or a belief that it will make them popular. While not actually an eating disorder or a clinical diagnosis, wannarexia shows how young women feel pressure to be thin or to use unhealthy methods to achieve thinness.<sup>29</sup> A *Marie Claire* poll found that 57% of women would have a one-night stand with a stranger for money, but only 41% would gain weight for money. The pressure to have a certain type of body is very strong among women. Placing self-worth on one's external attractiveness leads to problems, especially when bodies change.<sup>30</sup>

As bodies are held up as the ideal, the examples of a woman's "true self," a woman's comfort with her body is judged by her willingness to show it to others. "Nowhere is the politicization of dress more evident than in our deep-rooted belief that a girl of woman who undresses for the general public is 'comfortable with her body,' whereas one who keeps her body hidden is 'ashamed of it'...Only women are called upon

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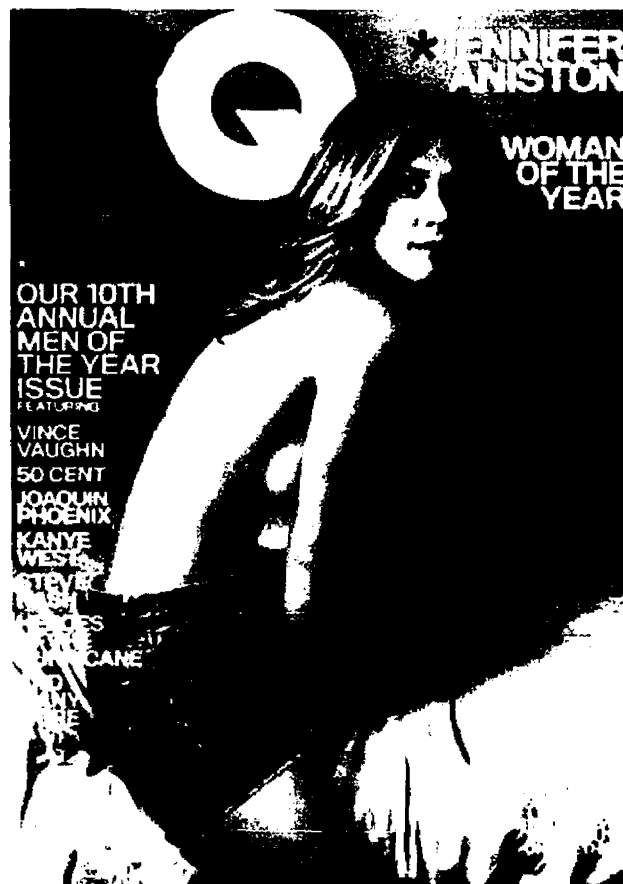
<sup>28</sup> "Is Self Esteem Just Sex Appeal?" Modestly Yours blog, October 26, 2007, <http://blogs.modestlyyours.net>.

<sup>29</sup> Valerie Bauman, 'Wannarexic' girls yearn for eating disorders, USA Today, 2007. I initially was introduced to "wannarexia" in the January 2008 issue of *Teen Vogue*.

<sup>30</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 163-165.

to prove that they are 'comfortable' in this way. There is no equivalent for men."<sup>31</sup> There are several examples of this in current media. Actresses, such as Halle Berry in *Swordfish* (2001), are paid more to bare breasts than to stay dressed. Jennifer Aniston, as *GQ*'s first "woman of the year" in 2005, was asked to be topless on the cover (See Figure 1).

Looking at both provocative magazine covers and movies, it is clear that nudity is held up as an ideal. A woman who is willing to "bare it" is confident, while those who refuse are embarrassed by their bodies.<sup>32</sup>



**Figure 1:** In its entire 10 years of "Men of the Year" issues, December 2005 was the first time a woman was pictured on the cover of *GQ* magazine.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 156.

## Modesty and Clothing

The current trend in women's fashion seems to be for women to show off more of their bodies. While some believe that revealing clothing reveals the individual, it actually leads men to focus only on certain body parts. This raises a justifiable reaction among women, why should they have to take men's reactions into consideration when they dress. Some say, "Well, that's his [the person looking at her] problem. *I'm* comfortable with my body."<sup>33</sup> However, the way a woman dresses presents a certain kind of image. In some cases, such as with doctors, more modest dress yields increased professional respect.<sup>34</sup> "The reality is that everyone dresses to project an image, not only for comfort, yet often we do not consciously stop and think of what we want that image to be." Women should feel that they have the right to choose what image they want to project and can choose to dress in any manner they choose, but young women especially have trouble asserting those choices.<sup>35</sup>

Young women today face peer pressure—from males and females—to dress a certain way. This pressure for conformity is hard to ignore for many girls. One *New York Times* article on clothing and peer pressure followed teenagers in Miami. They spent hours dressing to go to the mall, and then went shopping to create their "Jewish American Princess" look with brands such as Abercrombie, Buffalo Jeans, Juicy Couture, Tiffany necklaces, and so on. "'It's not what you wear; it's how you wear it: if it's too short or too long, if it goes with the rest of your outfit,' Ally says [a 12 year old girl]. Whole days

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>34</sup> Erin N. Marcus, "When Young Doctors Strut Too Much of their Stuff," *New York Times*, November 21, 2006. This article described how young female doctors dressing in current fashions, including short skirts, revealing tops, and high heels, were viewed as less professional compared to more modestly-dressed doctors.

<sup>35</sup> Shalit, *Girls Gone Mild*, 162-3.

of silent treatment could befall a girl who slips up and rolls her Mavi jeans a quarter inch too high. She says, 'You can't make them happy. You can wear something they really like, but if you wear it again, they say, 'What are you wearing it again?'' The article continues to describe how girls dress to impress other girls, because girls undergo "sizing, fit made into a verb: the girl-to-girl assessment of clique uniform. It can be cruel and picky and uniformity is the best way to survive."<sup>36</sup> Even the girls who do not like it cannot help caring what the other girls think and thus most fall into this "uniformity." There are some distinctions between the colors that the girls wear, but overall they try to be like everyone else until they are out of high school, then presumably free to wear whatever they want. The article describes a store in Coconut Grove, Florida: "The staff intuitively understands the customers, having themselves weathered the middle-school passage into their current incarnation as trend-tracking clerks...Girls slip into the pink chairs...as the clerks present the outfits that will show them how to seem. That someone knows what they need is an unquestioned relief."<sup>37</sup> The mothers were also interviewed and one mother said, "The pressure here is a killer. To deny them [the daughters]—it's sick to even use the word 'deny'—but you give into that. If a couple of things are going to make her life easier, then I'm all for doing that, but not to excess, but with the conversation that goes with it. If they can understand the psychology behind what's being done to them, it gives them an edge on the important things."<sup>38</sup> Whether the psychology is understood or not, many of these mothers will spend \$200 on a specific purse or shirt so their daughters fit in.

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<sup>36</sup> Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, "The Tyranny of Cool," *New York Times*, November 14, 1999.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Another *New York Times* article described a different type of pressure—the bat mitzvah dress. In this regard, young women preparing for a rite of passage feel pressure to be fashionable, thin, and adult, even if their bodies have not fully caught up. “After searching for dress up clothes in woefully understocked preteen departments, here’s what they [the owners] discovered: there’s almost nothing worse than being a twelve year-old girl whose body parts are growing, or not, at radically different speeds, who needs to get up in front of everyone she knows and look good not only for Grandma but for the boy she has a crush on. Not to mention the girls in her class, those seventh-grade style editors who will see even the slightest faux pas and never forget it. Or so she thinks.”<sup>39</sup> At this bat mitzvah dress boutique in New York, which also can provide dresses for First Communion, prom, and sweet sixteen parties, it is possible to spend up to \$300 for a suit or dress off the rack or five times that amount to have a custom-made gown. The owner described it as follows: “On the day of their bat mitzvah, they want to look like they’ve stepped out of a magazine...they want spaghetti straps and V-waists which make their stomachs look flat, and full poufy skirts.”<sup>40</sup> The article follows mothers and daughters coming into the store to find dresses to fit this image. One mother carefully kept anyone from seeing her daughter’s custom-made gown, lest they try to copy it. Both mothers and daughters found themselves succumbing to the pressure of a certain expectation. Despite their changing bodies, young girls are being pushed to look a certain way. This store tries to help mothers and daughters, believing that if the girls have the right dress, they will feel good about themselves. None of the mothers in the article seemed to want to look at

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<sup>39</sup> Alex Witchel, “Age 12, Needs Dress,” *New York Times*, February 23, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



it the other way around, with the external appearance less important than their self-esteem.

In one of her books, Shalit quotes a fifteen year old girl who told her brother, “I don’t *want* to dress like a slut. It’s only when I go to school, *I have to*. All the girls in the school dress like sluts.” She explained that she would be made fun of if she wore “comfortable” clothing.<sup>41</sup> Many teenage girls who dress in revealing clothing are self-conscious about it, but ignore the “natural thermometer” that is their self-consciousness. Women in short skirts may continually ask, “Do I look okay?” but “no amount of reassurance can satisfy them, because they feel at their very core exposed.” Modesty in clothing can allow “freedom to think about things other than ‘do I look okay?’”<sup>42</sup>

Modest dress is not only about the amount of one’s body that is exposed. Hiram Power’s *Greek Slave* (1846) depicts a nude woman whose downcast eyes are taken as an indication of modesty (Figure 2).<sup>43</sup> Protestant ministers held this up as an example of feminine modesty even though the statue depicts a naked woman! There are several societies in which there may be partial or full nudity but rules exist to create a sense of modesty. In New Guinea, women turn around if someone is paying close attention to their bodies. In the Pelew Islands, men can be punished by fines or death if they pass without permission by women who are bathing. The Andamanese women will not change their leaf aprons around one another. Havelock Ellis wrote, “[As long as there is]

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<sup>41</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 67.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

<sup>43</sup> Hiram Powers’ *Greek Slave* as an example of “nude but modest” was mentioned in several sources including Wendy Shalit’s *A Return to Modesty* and Dannah Gresh’s *Secret Keeper* (see Chapter 1).



consciousness of perfect propriety alike in the subject and the spectator, nakedness is entirely compatible with the most scrupulous modesty."<sup>44</sup>



**Figure 2:** *Hiram Powers' Greek Slave (1846)*

So if the amount of nudity shown is not the indication of immodesty, what is? To some extent, immodest clothing is considered immodest with respect to the conventions that have gone before. Each generation to some extent changes the mode of dress of the previous generations and may be considered immodest as a result. Sometimes immodesty is determined by intention. A New York Times article explored the world of lingerie

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<sup>44</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 67-69.

shops for Orthodox Jews. While Orthodox Jewish women are careful to observe the traditional laws of *tzniut*, they also purchase risqué lingerie once they are married. “Squeals of embarrassment could be heard one day recently from a curtained dressing room, where an eighteen year old Orthodox bride-to-be slipped into a sheer white negligee and feathered bedroom slippers, part of her wedding trousseau. ‘I’ve never been exposed to anything like this,’ she said, ‘Your whole life, you’re expected to cover everything, and then all of a sudden, the wedding’s over and nothing’s covered. I’ve never even held my fiancé’s hand.’”<sup>45</sup> The lingerie is not immodest when it is purchased privately and is used to enhance marital intimacy, according to Rabbi Avi Weiss. A woman should look attractive to her husband and lingerie is part of that. This can be transferred into the non-Orthodox world: certain things are modest or not based upon the intention and the situation. One could argue that some current fashions may not be immodest in certain settings (such as a nightclub, rather than a school) or when worn by certain age groups (ten year-olds wearing low-cut jeans and spaghetti straps versus someone of college-age choosing to wear such things). At the same time, one could argue that if immodest clothing objectifies women for the benefit of men, risqué lingerie or any revealing current fashion that is worn for the benefit of a husband or to attract a man would be immodest. To a large extent, immodest clothing is a matter of personal taste and depends upon the motivation of the person wearing it.

Or, one could look at a simple definition in an issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine:

“Yes, it is possible to look too sleazy. Does your skirt run up to your crotch when you sit down? Is your cleavage bounding out of your blouse? On dates, avoid racy leather

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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Hayt, “Where Lingerie Sells to the Orthodox,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1998.

miniskirts and fishnets...”<sup>46</sup> These are things almost everyone would agree is immodest because they are sexually provocative and objectify women, but only those extremes are considered immodest. With only those exceptions, there is disagreement about what constitutes immodest dress. This was exemplified in a story on NBC’s *Today* show about Kyla Ebbert, a young woman who was told by a Southwest Airlines representative that she was dressed in an outfit that was too revealing for her to fly. Gary Kelly, the CEO of Southwest Airlines issued a statement: “We don’t have a dress code at Southwest Airlines, and we don’t want to put our employees in the position of being the fashion police. But there’s a fine line you walk sometimes in not offending other passengers.”<sup>47</sup> In response to the story, over 1000 readers posted comments. One response said, “Pants make much more sense than a mini skirt on a plane. But the deciding factor for me was when this woman sat down on the Today show set—she flashed her underwear for everyone to see.” Another viewer wrote, “let it go... What somebody wears is THEIR choice not someone else’s. Ugly—beautiful, or whatever, if you don’t like it, just look at the beautiful things that you do like.”<sup>48</sup> There was no agreement as to whether Ebbert’s clothing was unreasonable or immodest. The same problem exists as some schools attempt to regulate what they see as extremely immodest clothing. One Chicago school sent an eighth-grader home because she was wearing a see-through top without underwear. An Arlington, Texas, school instituted a “cleavage crackdown.”<sup>49</sup> The current

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 69, citing *Cosmopolitan*, April 1997.

<sup>47</sup> Dan Fleschner, “Update: Too Sexy to Fly?”, allDAY: Today’s Family Blog, posted September 17, 2007, <http://allday.msnbc.msn.com/archive/2007/09/17/364435.aspx>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Shalit, *Girls Gone Mild*, 148-149.

trend of low-cut jeans with visible underwear and the very recent trend of wearing underwear as outerwear are seen as problematic for school settings.

Interestingly, parents sometimes seem to facilitate this kind of clothing and immodesty. In the example of the Chicago school, the parents of the eighth-grader complained about the teacher and the principal, claiming the problem was with them and not their daughter's clothing. Shalit cites the baby tees that say "shopping ho," the "child pimp and ho" costumes sold online, and the phenomenon of "prostitots" as examples of parents sending messages to their girls to encourage provocative dress. One grandmother said, "You should see the blank looks on my granddaughters' faces when I start in on how maybe an eight year old doesn't need to have her belly hanging out or wear sexy phrases across her chest. Because they think I am wrong: they DO have to wear that to fit in."<sup>50</sup> A young woman tried to explain this by saying, "I think parents either consciously or subconsciously usually want their children to be like them. As our culture becomes coarser and coarser, so do the 'values' that we teach to our children."<sup>51</sup> Not all parents are willing to go along with the trends. Celia Rivenbark criticized them most bluntly in her book, *Stop Dressing Your Six Year-Old Like a Skank*: "Now that my kid is practically of childbearing age (is six the new sixteen?), I must choose from ripped-on-purpose jeans and T-shirts that scream things like 'Baby Doll' and 'Jail Bait,' not to mention a rather angry 'Girls RULE and Boys DROOL!' where an embroidered flower with a buzzing bee should be...When did this happen? Who decided that my six year-old should dress like a

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 157.

Vegas showgirl?”<sup>52</sup> She continues, “When you see a size seven shirt that says ‘SEXY!’ or a mom and her little girl strolling through the mall in matching shorts with ‘JUICY’ scrawled across the butt, you have to wonder what the hell is going on. The saddest part about all this is that if you dress like you’re a twenty-two year old going out to a club...you don’t get to enjoy being a little kid.”<sup>53</sup>

There are young women and parents who go against the current fashions and want to see a change not only in what they wear, but also in the clothing that is available for purchase. Some are inspired by religion, such as Funky Frum, founded by Rachel Lubchansky, and Marabo, a store for Muslim women founded by Brooke Samad. Samad said, “They [her customers] may believe in Islam, but at the end of the day, they’re a young Muslim woman in this country and they want to go shopping and get what’s hip and stylish.”<sup>54</sup> Others simply want modest clothing. Tedd Doucette, a father of five daughters, started Hannah Lise because his wife had to sew clothes in order for their daughters to dress modestly. Chelsea Rippey, frustrated by the low-rise pants and short tops, founded Shade Clothing, which sells undershirts to be worn under crop tops, swimwear, and semiformal dresses. In 2006, Hannah Lise did three million dollars in sales; in that same year, Shade Clothing had nine million dollars of sales. Marshal Cohen, chief industry analyst for NPD Group, a market research firm, attributes the sudden interest in modesty as a reaction to the extreme immodesty of current fashions.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Celia Rivenbark, *Stop Dressing Your Six-Year-Old Like a Skank, And Other Words of Delicate Southern Wisdom* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>54</sup> Kimberly Palmer, “Anti-Britney: The New Look,” US News & World Report online, April 15, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

In 1999, a group of mothers of daughters in Catholic schools created "Pure Fashion," a program to help girls ages ten to eighteen to become leaders and learn about etiquette and community service. Their creed is that "virtue is the most important 'must-have' for every season." They have fashion shows that display modest clothing, which Lindsay, a fifteen year old, says are able "to show other people that you can dress modestly and still look good."<sup>56</sup> Another fifteen year-old member, Robin, said that pushing sexualized clothing on younger girls shows that society does not value women. By not wearing sexy clothing, she is not allowing herself to be defined externally.<sup>57</sup> In addition to the "Pure Fashion" movement, young women like Ella Gunderson have petitioned major department stores to start carrying more modest fashions. Ella and her sister were encouraged while shopping at Nordstrom's to get jeans that were too tight because that was "the look." When they looked for a different style, they found all of the pants were tight and showed the midriff. Ella wrote to Nordstrom's and said there should be more than one "look" available to shoppers. This sparked many changes in several stores, including Nordstrom's new line "Modern and Modest."<sup>58</sup> Similarly, in October 2005 the Allegheny County "Girls as Grantmakers" program boycotted t-shirts at Abercrombie and Fitch stores with phrases like: "Who Needs Brains When You Have These?" or "Do I Make You Look Fat?" and "Blondes are adored, brunettes are ignored. I had a nightmare I was a brunette." This Girlcott was intended to reduce competition among young women by removing these kinds of shirts from popular stores. Other Abercrombie and Fitch shirts that were not to the "Girlcott" standards were: "School is a

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<sup>56</sup> Shalit, *Girls Gone Mild*, 147-153.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

great place to meet boys,” “Boyology Major.” “Freshman 15 (with 15 boys’ names),” and a shirt for men, “Plays Well With D Cups.” Ultimately, the young women were brought to the company headquarters for a conversation with executives and have effected some changes in the products, a symbol of which is a new t-shirt that says, “Cute and Classy.”<sup>59</sup>

Shalit argues that modesty is more appealing to young feminists. Certainly the “Girlcott” shows young women who are turned off by immodesty, and Ella Gunderson and “Pure Fashion” show women interested in modesty. In Shalit’s opinion, young feminists are trying to stress dignity more than rights, moving away from the “sex-positive” culture that exists now.<sup>60</sup> The “girl power” attitude has led to some backlash and young women have more conflict with the sexual revolution than their mothers’ generation.<sup>61</sup>

Society, in Shalit’s view, actually limits women through this immodesty and focus on bodies and sexuality. Young women are in many cases unable to make choices for themselves about their clothing and external messages as peer pressure and societal pressure encourages them to behave and dress in a certain way. Ella Gunderson says, “I don’t think that people-pleasing is a bad thing because, like, it’s natural for girls to want to make people happy. But some girls—I don’t know—it’s like they’re trying to find what happiness is and our society is not letting them find it.”<sup>62</sup>

There is an assumption among some that modest means quiet, but ‘modesty’ in this context does not mean a woman cannot be outspoken. “People are often surprised

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 224-226.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 210-211.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 187.

when the modest girls are the most outspoken ones, but it's not at all unusual."<sup>63</sup>

Stephanie Wellen Levine, a professor at Tufts University, studied Lubavitch Chasidic girls for a year. She found that the more observant the girl, the less likely she is to worry about "pleasing" boys. Further, the girls were more likely than their modern Orthodox peers to make comments in response to boys' comments about their looks. When some boys commented on the girls passing by on a bus as, "Ugly, ugly, ugly, so-so,..." one of the Lubavitch girls said, "Excuse me, but I know which bus never to take again," silencing all of the boys. Lubavitch Chasidim follow the *halakhot* of modest dress, so these girls were dressed "modestly" yet were not afraid to speak out. Levine attributes this to the peer support these girls have in their lifestyles. They do not feel alone in their decisions and their questioning certain authorities and behaviors.<sup>64</sup> However, the average secular girl in American society may not have this support, making it harder to question the pressures, assumptions, and behaviors around her.

Using clothing, it is possible to see the impact of "immodesty" broadly construed, or said differently, society's loss of female modesty. There is a focus on sexuality and a pressure to send certain external messages, not to focus internally or to uphold modesty. This immodesty is encouraged by the media, by peers, and sometimes even by parents.

### **Modesty as a Solution**

Modesty, according to Shalit, is the answer to many of these problems. When female modesty was upheld as a positive value by society, women were respected as ladies and this respect made women powerful. Sexual harassment was not the issue that

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 188-189.



it has become today.<sup>65</sup> “In essence, a culture that respects a specifically female type of modesty is one that regulates and informs the relation between the sexes in a nuanced—not, significantly, in a legislated—way.”<sup>66</sup> Many of the issues described in this chapter fundamentally arise from how women and men interact. There is an expectation of women to dress in a certain way to be attractive to men and to engage in sexual intercourse without love and relationships. To be fair, there is also an issue of how women interact with one another because peer pressure also forces young women into certain dress and behaviors. Shalit believes that society currently encourages women to be like men, to be less emotionally vulnerable with respect to relationships and sexuality. “The myth of sameness, instead of helping to cure the insecurity [of women], seems to fuel it...[Modesty] made women equal to men as women.”<sup>67</sup> Modesty makes femininity something more ‘eternal.’ Shalit writes about clothing extensively because currently so much emphasis is put on women’s external appearance. An inclusion of modesty moves the emphasis to femininity, creating more respect for women as women and restoring some control and confidence to them.

Turning the focus inward to one’s sense of self and identity rather than one’s clothing and external appearances can foster increased self-esteem among young women. As said earlier, young women currently have difficulty in most cases asserting their own choices of what to wear and how to behave in the face of peer and societal pressures. A United Synagogue Youth (USY) program written for teenagers on Jewish values related to the body taught, “...an unnecessarily excessive emphasis on looking beautiful can

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<sup>65</sup> Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 46.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-108.

affect a person's basic self-concept and inhibit full growth as an individual."<sup>68</sup> When young women are more concerned with what is inside rather than what society expects them to look like on the outside, it is possible that it will be easier for them to assert some of this personal autonomy.

Jewish tradition encourages modesty and this autonomy. Women would customarily dress the same on Yom Kippur and Tu b'Av in white dresses (those who did not have would borrow one) so that when men were looking for a spouse they would focus on the individual woman's character rather than her external appearance.<sup>69</sup> It is said that the Israelites merited being freed from Egypt because the women maintained their distinctive, modest dress instead of following the Israelite customs, and the *Shulchan Aruch* said, "...you shall not say, 'Because [people of other nations] walk about dressed in [the royal color of] purple, I too, will walk about dressed in purple; because they walk about in helmets, I, too, will walk about helmeted...'"<sup>70</sup> Judaism praises maintaining distinctive dress, rather than dressing like everyone else. Unfortunately, while Jewish modesty suggests dressing in a way that reflects one's inner self, the messages young women receive in society tells them to dress like everyone else even when they do not want to. Rabbi Maurice Lamm wrote, "Judaism tells us that popularity should come from acting in ways that earn the genuine respect of others—not in dressing the way others dress...Judaism demands that you be honest with yourself. A person who is only imitating others soon loses respect for himself."<sup>71</sup> Rabbi Laura Geller wrote, "Who is to

<sup>68</sup> Bernard Novick, *B'tzelem Elohim (In God's image): Making Jewish Decisions About the Body* (United Synagogue of America, n.d.), 44.

<sup>69</sup> M. *Ta'anit* 4:8, as cited in Novick, *B'tzelem Elohim*, 41.

<sup>70</sup> Maurice Lamm, *Living Torah in America: Derekh HaTov* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1993), 18.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

judge [what is modest]? Each individual should be encouraged to make his/her own decisions based on his/her own understanding of the sanctity of personhood.”<sup>72</sup> In a liberal Jewish setting and the secular world, young women can dress according to their idea of modesty, basing it on their understandings of personhood and self.

## Conclusion

Modesty, according to Wendy Shalit, is a value that seems to be lacking in today's society. This loss of female modesty has devastating consequences for young women: a loss of self-esteem, pressure to be inauthentic, and a focus on the body as the more important aspect of self, possibly leading to eating disorders and self-destructive behaviors. Shalit argues that reinstating modesty, a way for women to understand and view themselves in a uniquely feminine way, is an answer to many of the problems facing young women today.

Judaism has always advocated modesty through the value of *tzniut*. The lack of modesty in secular society, which affects liberal Jews, can be addressed through *tzniut*. Young women are being told by society to follow their peers and show off their bodies as their true selves. Judaism combats this idea by telling women their true selves begin from within. *Tzniut* is a way for women to think about their inner selves first and allow their inner selves to guide their external appearances. This definition is broad enough to include many different ideas of what constitutes “modesty.” In the next chapter, these different ideas will be identified in a variety of materials used in Reform Jewish education and an understanding of *tzniut* for liberal Jews will be developed.

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<sup>72</sup> Novick, *B'tzelem Elohim*, 42.

## Chapter 4: Modesty in Reform Jewish Educational Resources

### Introduction

Having defined modesty within traditional Judaism and examined the modern argument for female modesty, I now want to begin to envision *tzniut* in a Reform Jewish educational context. In its ideological understanding, being modest means focusing on one's inner self and not one's external appearance.<sup>1</sup> This self-understanding leads to making personal choices about the external messages one sends through her behavior, dress, speech, and choices. Before situating this idea of modesty into Reform Judaism, I wanted to see if there were ways in which aspects of *tzniut* were already included. By looking at materials published by Union for Reform Judaism (URJ/UAHC) Press, Behrman House, and ARE (textbooks and materials likely to be used in Reform Jewish educational settings), I tried to find anything that could be construed as modesty or that would potentially provide an opportunity to introduce *tzniut* as a value. Rather than focus on what was missing, I tried to broadly define modesty and read it into the texts whenever possible.

I also examined some children's versions of biblical stories. Bible stories are complex, so while children learn a basic version of the story, as they grow into adulthood they learn more layers of the stories and thus the Biblical stories continue to be relevant

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the ideological part of the traditional view of *tzniut*, separate from the *halakhic* implications. Although Orthodox Jews have specific guidelines and laws for what is modest, the basic idea underneath these laws (as taught in books for young women) is that women should be focusing on their internal selves and spiritual core more than their external selves. See page X of this thesis and Malka Touger, *Just My Style: A Tzniut Reader for Teens* (Brooklyn: Judaica Press, 2003); Gila Manoloson, *Outside Inside: A Fresh Look at Tzniut* (Southfield, MI: Targum, 1997); and Penina Adelman, Ali Feldman, and Shulamit Reinharz. *The J Girl's Guide: The Young Jewish Woman's Handbook for Coming of Age* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005).

in their lives. “The Bible has long been the inspiration for a stirring source of stories for children, a way to pass on heritage, values, themes, archetypes, and role models within the context of a story.”<sup>2</sup> In a similar way, fairy tales for children serve a purpose in teaching values and lessons to children, such as how to make independent choices, go out into the world, and find one’s inner confidence.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, biblical stories written for children are another medium for teaching lessons and might include aspects of modesty, if not modesty outright.

In my research, I have found a few overarching categories in these educational resources that I believe constitute aspects of modesty or opportunities for modesty to enter in: creating a sense of self; peer pressure and making choices; responsibility in actions; caring for one’s body; and sexuality and relationships. Biblical figures are woven as examples throughout and I discuss them throughout the categories. The Book of Esther, with its various interpretations that demonstrate inclusion of modesty, and the URJ’s new *Sacred Choices* curriculum are discussed separately. From this survey, I developed a conclusion of how modesty can be included in a Reform Jewish educational setting.

### **Creating a Sense of Self**

One aspect of modesty is obviously creating a sense of self because without self-understanding, it is difficult to take control over the messages one sends through her appearance, actions, or choices. So, conversations about creating a sense of self and

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<sup>2</sup> Hara E. Person and Diane G. Person, *Stories of Heaven and Earth: Bible Heroes in Contemporary Children’s Literature* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

understanding one's values and ethics could be a natural venue for modesty for all ages.

In a book published by the UAHC Press entitled *Where Do You Stand? Jewish*

*Consciousness on Campus*, there is a brief chapter devoted to a discussion of college as a time to find one's inner self.

"For some of you, going away to college is your first long-term experience away from home and the carefully planned values and self-discipline your parents spent so many years instilling in you are, for the first time, now open to question...If you haven't already, you will probably spend much of your first year asking some of the most basic questions about life: Who am I? What do I like to do? With whom? What are my beliefs? What kind of person do I want to be?"<sup>4</sup>

These are questions that tap into the foundation of *tzniut*—understanding who I am and how that self-understanding impacts how I act, dress, speak, and make choices.

To encourage college students to engage with these questions is to encourage them to begin to have a sense of modesty, a sense of self-understanding and respect. These questions are not limited to college-aged students, but also apply to younger children.

*Count Me In: Jewish Wisdom in Action*, published by Behrman House, explores the concept of self-worth and self-respect: "To develop self-respect, or self-esteem, we must treat ourselves with kindness and dignity and ask others to do the same."<sup>5</sup> This essentially asks students to value themselves, respecting their own preferences and points of view. This, in turn, leads to having respect for one's own choices instead of being easily persuaded to make decisions based upon others' opinions (which enters into a different category, that of peer pressure). An activity included in the book asks students to answer the question "What makes you *you*?" by describing their best quality, such as kindness or

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Cohen, "To Do or Not to Do: Peer Pressure" in *Where Do You Stand? Jewish Consciousness on Campus*, ed. Allan L. Smith (New York: UAHC Press, 1997), 287-290; 287.

<sup>5</sup> Gila Gevirtz, *Count Me In: Jewish Wisdom in Action* (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, 2005), 23.

truthfulness, that helps them to add to the goodness of creation. They are then asked to think about qualities they would like to develop in their lives, culminating in writing a prayer asking for the willingness to strengthen these qualities in themselves.<sup>6</sup> This activity also could be a vehicle to introduce modesty as it encourages students to think about the values they hold and the internal qualities to which they aspire. In *The Explorer's Bible: Volume 2* published by Behrman House, this sense of self is explored in a slightly different way through the study of Elijah. After the students learn about how many Israelites worshiped false gods, the textbook shows a modern version of idolatry—materialism. There is a picture of a boy on a couch in a suit with toys around him while the text above the picture reads: “Today we have our own kinds of false gods. We may look to celebrities or fashion to tell us what we want and how to behave. We put our faith in things that we can see and touch...At times we may treat our possessions as idols, believing they can make us better than we are. But they cannot. They are only things. What would it really take to become a better you?”<sup>7</sup>

Creating a sense of self apart from the materialism of our society is also a way to think about modesty. When we think about immodesty of current fashions, the materialism is part of what keeps young women purchasing these clothes. If we taught about having moderation in our material possessions, perhaps asking students how important it is to have the latest fashions or electronics in contrast to other ways to spend money, this can be a way to begin a conversation about modesty in terms of clothing, spending money, and other related issues.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>7</sup> Scott E. Blumenthal, *The Explorer's Bible, Volume 2: From Sinai to the Nation of Israel* (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, 2007), 104.

## Peer Pressure and Making Choices

Children of all ages face peer pressure to make certain kinds of choices. As children get older, the peer pressure may become more dangerous as it leads to high-risk behaviors. In many of the texts for students of varying ages, peer pressure in some form was discussed. For college students, *Pirkei Avot 4:1* is cited, “Who is wise? One who learns from everyone. Who is strong? One who controls his own impulses. Who is rich? One who is happy with his portion.” The lesson drawn from this text is that others should have some influence over us, but we should not be easily swayed by the desires of others.<sup>8</sup> Another story is given: “Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol said, ‘In the world to come they will not ask me, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’” This is interpreted for the reader as “the only standards we should hold ourselves to are our own.”<sup>9</sup> Near the end of the chapter, the idea that we should avoid peer pressure is made very explicit: “Only we know what is best for ourselves. Only by remembering our needs and acting on our own beliefs will we avoid caving in to pressures urging us to do things that are not right.”<sup>10</sup> Although this is speaking about general peer pressure, it is possible to see how this could be viewed as an aspect of *tzniut*. If we remember our own needs and hold to our own standards, we will make good choices about our lives and actions.

For slightly younger students, the concept of making good choices is presenting in conjunction with the lesson about the *yetzer tov* (the good inclination) and the *yetzer hara* (the evil inclination) which the rabbis teach us we have from birth. We have free will, but

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<sup>8</sup> Cohen, *Where Do You Stand?*, 287.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.



must overcome the evil inclination and strengthen the *yetzer tov*. As it says in *Count Me In*, “Our tradition teaches that because we have free will, we are each responsible for our choices no matter what other people do.”<sup>11</sup> In another Behrman House book, *Ethical Literature*, a lesson on Maimonides is the forum for a discussion of free will and making independent choices. Maimonides taught that God is all-knowing yet we are responsible for our actions. “When we deny personal responsibility, we barter away our freedom as well. Responsibility is a burden that liberates, enabling an individual to say, ‘I can make of my life what I choose.’”<sup>12</sup> Both of these lessons are encouraging students to see making their own choices as a positive adult responsibility.

Woven within other textbooks are brief activities or images that relate to the idea of combating peer pressure. In *The Explorer’s Bible Volume 1*, there is a section called the “Moral Compass,” with a picture of a young girl with a compass and map. The text says, “If we want to know which direction to go in our lives, we use a different kind of compass: a moral compass. Each of us has a moral compass that helps us make good decisions.”<sup>13</sup> In Volume 2 of the series, there is a character called “Captain Courage,” a female superhero who eats “snizzle snap cereal” to build up her positive attitude and courage so she can face her fears and make good choices.<sup>14</sup> Whether it is intentional or not, the use of females for these pictures sends an additional message that girls should have the ‘courage’ to make their own good decisions for themselves. As discussed in earlier chapters, young women often struggle to focus on their inner selves and cultivate

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<sup>11</sup> Gevirtz, *Count Me In*, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Morris J. Sugarman, *Ethical Literature* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1987), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Scott E. Blumenthal, *The Explorer’s Bible, Volume 1: From Creation to the Exodus* (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, 2006), 50.

<sup>14</sup> Blumenthal, *The Explorer’s Bible, Volume 2*, 29.

inner strength. By using female characters, these books send an extra message about combating peer pressure to female students, if only subliminally.

Two other books use an open-ended exercise related to peer pressure. In *The Gift of Wisdom*, a UAHC-published textbook on the prophets, there is an activity called “Keeping Up With the Neighbors” in which the students should draw or describe an instance when they wanted something because everyone else had it. The lesson is that we should focus on what we have, not just follow what others do and have.<sup>15</sup> In *Making a Difference*, published by Behrman House, there is a ‘Self-Portrait’ exercise: “Your teen years can be filled with many new adventures and pleasures, such as a first love and a driver’s license. But they also may include increased pressure, often exerted by friends and other peers, which can affect your ability to be true to yourself, to think independently, and to be who you are. One way to resist negative peer pressure is to know what you believe in and care about. List ten values and beliefs you have that can be your personal “Ten Commandments”—that can help you care for and be true to yourself.”<sup>16</sup> This particular activity touches on peer pressure but also on creating a sense of self; often these two categories are intertwined.

Peer pressure is without question seen as a negative thing if gone unchecked. While the traditional texts are used to show that it is important to consider others’ opinions, ultimately our goal for students is that they feel confident in making their own decisions without being subject to unhealthy peer pressure. The trend among young adults, especially among young women, is to go along with what others are doing

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<sup>15</sup> Steven E. Steinbock, *The Gift of Wisdom: The Books of Prophets and Writings* (New York: UAHC Press, 2001), 64.

<sup>16</sup> Bradley Shavit Artson and Gila Gevirtz, *Making a Difference: Putting Jewish Spirituality Into Action, One Mitzvah at a Time* (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, 2001), 80.

because of the risk of being “uncool” or ostracized. This is shown through clothing, sexuality, and other behaviors—what might be pointed to as “immodesty.” Young women need to be given the tools with which to combat peer pressure, beginning with having a sense of confidence in their own judgment, or a sense of modesty. These textbooks weave these lessons into larger lessons, making them a part of Jewish education at a variety of age levels.

### **Responsibility for One’s Own Actions**

Along with creating a sense of self and combating peer pressure, there are many references in these educational resources about taking responsibility for one’s actions, whether they relate to how we take care of ourselves or how we interact with others. There are several biblical models for taking responsibility for ourselves and our actions that are referenced in these textbooks as well.

In *The Explorer’s Bible*, there is a picture of a little girl giving *tzedakah*, followed by this explanation: “When the Children of Israel reached Canaan, finally able to enjoy their freedom, God tells them to ‘faithfully observe the Teaching that Moses gave to you.’ God reminds us that freedom gives us choices.”<sup>17</sup> We all have freedom and the responsibility to make choices; when we make positive choices we honor that responsibility and gift of freedom. Our actions are more important than our appearance. In *Count Me In*, it says, “In fact, the human body and soul were formed to work together...How we act, not how we look, reflects that we are creatures made in God’s

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<sup>17</sup> Blumenthal, *The Explorer’s Bible*, Volume 2, 36.

image.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore part of being *b'tzelem Elohim*, made in God's image, is about how we act and the internal choices we make, not our external appearance. When we take responsibility, we are recognizing that we are created by God in God's image.

Part of taking responsibility is speaking up for what is right. Abraham is held up as an example of speaking out, in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. In volume 2 of *The Explorer's Bible*, a picture of two girls marching for peace in Israel is alongside the story of Abraham arguing with God—the implication is that we can, like Abraham, make our voices heard for good.<sup>19</sup> An additional lesson from the picture is that girls as well as boys can speak out on issues. A different UAHC-published textbook on *Pirkei Avot* cites *Pirkei Avot* 1:14, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” and teaches the lesson that we must care for ourselves, but we must also be present for others.<sup>20</sup>

Sometimes being present for others and speaking up for what is right involves *tocheichah*, rebuke. A lesson on Daniel contains this modern lesson: “Judaism teaches us to let others know when they have done something wrong... This rebuke is called *tocheichah*. Like Daniel, our challenge is not only to speak up but also to do so in a way that is both respectful and appropriate... When we privately and respectfully rebuke someone for behaving inappropriately, *tocheichah* can be an act of kindness.” Accompanying this text is a picture of a young girl in the foreground looking sad with other students in the background, apparently an image of *tocheichah* gone wrong.<sup>21</sup> Prophets are presented as examples of speaking up, even if it means rebuking others. In

<sup>18</sup> Gevirtz, *Count Me In*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Blumenthal, *The Explorer's Bible, Volume 1*, 58. The story of Abraham advocating for the innocent of Sodom and Gomorrah can be found in Genesis 18:17-33.

<sup>20</sup> Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz, *A Bridge to Our Tradition: Pirkei Avot* (New York: UAHC Press, 2001), 55.

<sup>21</sup> Blumenthal, *The Explorer's Bible, Volume 2*, 146.

*The Gift of Wisdom*, one activity asks students to figure out characteristics of a prophet. The students read four different biblical texts about prophets: the story of Eldad and Medad speaking prophesy outside the Tent of Meeting; God saying that prophets will be spoken to in dreams; Balaam speaking to Balak; and God saying that a prophet will be brought up among the people and God will put words into the prophet's mouth.<sup>22</sup> From these texts, the students try to figure out what kinds of people are the prophets. Modern examples are given: "Think of a prophet as: A newspaper columnist who writes editorials that challenge government and businesses to behave differently, a football coach who yells at his team when they aren't working hard enough, but who comforts them when they lose, a poet or folksinger who writes songs that are sometimes sweet, sometimes bitter, sometimes soothing, and sometimes angry."<sup>23</sup> The implication is that these prophets have traits that are desirable in our modern times. Students should learn to speak up against what is wrong and encourage people to do what is right.

There are several biblical figures who speak out or act in accordance with their responsibility to do what is right. Joshua is presented as a strong prophet, and God says several times to Joshua that he should "be strong and courageous."<sup>24</sup> Assuming responsibility for one's actions involves having strength and courage. Saul is said to be a "modest king" because at first he was hesitant and modest (humble) about assuming the throne and even ran away and hid from his responsibility. Eventually when he was brought to the people, they were happy to have him as king and he assumed his

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<sup>22</sup> See Numbers 11:26-29; Numbers 12:6; Numbers 22:38; and Deuteronomy 18:18.

<sup>23</sup> Steinbock, *The Gift of Wisdom*, 10-11.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 16. See Joshua 1:1-11.

responsibility towards them.<sup>25</sup> Not all of the biblical examples are male. Rahab, who protects the spies at risk to herself, is cited as a courageous woman.<sup>26</sup> In *Daughters of Eve*, a children's book about women in the bible, examples are given of women's bravery in protecting the Israelites. Judith, who seduced a general to King Nebuchadnezzar and beheaded him, acted with courage to protect her people. Abigail, whose abusive husband had refused to feed David and his army, sent food to David in order to avoid starting a war. She is rewarded for her courage with a marriage to David. Both of these women took responsibility to act for the benefit of their people.<sup>27</sup> Other strong women such as Deborah, Elkanah, Hannah, and Peninnah, are also presented in textbooks. *The Gift of Wisdom* includes an activity that asks students to look at the meaning of these names and think about these women's personality and the importance of their actions.

Modern female figures are also presented as examples of living up to the responsibility towards ourselves and others. A UAHC-published book, *The Mystery of Being Jewish*, offers several examples of strong female women as the author tries to determine what or who is a Jew (in addition to numerous male figures such as Theodor Herzl, Natan Sharansky, and Sigmund Freud). Betty Friedan, a prominent figure in the feminist movement is given as an example of who is a Jew and is quoted as saying, "This is a two sex revolution and, when it is completed, we will have new and honest patterns of life and profession, where ability and not gender count."<sup>28</sup> Her fighting for equality for women in all areas is a way in which she met her responsibility to work for the benefit of

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 67. See I Samuel 10:21-24.

<sup>26</sup> Steinbock, *The Gift of Wisdom*, 25. See Joshua 2:1-24. Later on in the textbook, Rahab is compared with Delilah, p.50.

<sup>27</sup> Lillian Hammer Ross, *Daughters of Eve: Strong Women of the Bible* (New York: Barefoot Books, 2000), 58; 77-78.

<sup>28</sup> Molly Cone, *The Mystery of Being Jewish* (New York: UAHC Press, 1989), 48.

others. Elizabeth Holzman, who at age 31 was the youngest woman elected to Congress, was described as shy except when working for something she believes in, such as searching for Nazi war criminals or drawing attention to the plight of Soviet Jewry.<sup>29</sup> Rosalyn Yarow, a physicist, and Helena Rubenstein, the founder of a world-famous cosmetic enterprise, are also examples of strong women.<sup>30</sup>

There is obviously a plethora of ways in which the idea of responsibility for one's actions and the responsibility to help others can be expressed educationally. Whether through biblical figures, modern figures, or traditional texts, students are taught that as Jews, there is a responsibility to do what is right for both ourselves and others. This is connected to *tzniut* because it speaks to the idea of an inner core, a sense of what is right and wrong and the confidence to act accordingly. The use of strong female role models, both biblical and modern, also helps to teach this lesson to young female students.

### **Caring for One's Body**

Caring for one's body, also known as *shmirat ha-guf*, is universally accepted as a positive Jewish value because we are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Caring for our bodies is presented as a religious duty: having good health habits, nurturing healthy relationships, and handling stress in a healthy way are all positive Jewish actions.<sup>31</sup> In *The Explorer's Bible*, caring for our bodies is presented as one of the responsibilities that come with God's gift of free will. "As we grow older and more mature, we earn more freedom...But with more freedom comes more responsibility. We

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 137-140.

<sup>31</sup> Arston and Gevirtz, *Making a Difference*, 79.

become responsibility for wearing a helmet when riding a bike, responsible for getting enough sleep, and responsible for not eating ten cupcakes on the way to school.”<sup>32</sup> The students reading this textbook are young enough that their parents are still responsible for ensuring they do these things; the lesson is that one day they will need to take responsibility for themselves. These examples speak to the idea of avoiding high-risk behaviors and of making healthy nutritious and behavioral choices.

Substance abuse is presented as a part of *shmirat ha-guf* for older students. In *Where Do You Stand?*, a lesson is presented on caring for one’s body in this way beginning with a text from *Shulchan Aruch*: “Since it is a requirement from God that the body of a human being be healthy and perfect, because it is impossible for a human being when ill to comprehend the knowledge concerning the Creator, it is therefore necessary to shun all things that tend to injure the body and acquire habits that make the body healthy and sound.” The chapter continues with the lesson, “Both body and soul are divine gifts to us. The soul is eternal, but the body exists only for a time. The idea that we must care for everything in the world was thus meant to apply to our bodies as well as our souls. We are, in short, banned from ruining the work of our creator.”<sup>33</sup> Avoiding deliberate harm to our bodies is part of our responsibility arising from being created in God’s image. “Ruining one’s body” could be using drugs or alcohol; unhealthy eating; cutting or self-mutilation; and other destructive behaviors.

A list for *shmirat ha-briyut*, of protecting one’s health and body, encourages students to care for themselves in very specific ways:

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<sup>32</sup> Blumenthal, *The Explorer’s Bible, Volume 2*, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Kerry M. Olitzky, “Substance Abuse in the Jewish Community,” in *Where Do You Stand? Jewish Consciousness on Campus*, ed. Allan L. Smith (New York: UAHC Press, 1997), pp. 301-305; 304.



1. Appreciate the person you are. "Be aware of your strengths and value the special qualities that make you *you*."
2. Create balance in your life.
3. Develop personal guidelines for how you want to treat yourself.
4. Avoid tobacco.
5. Avoid alcohol and other drugs.<sup>34</sup>

As with the responsibilities to do what is right and creating a sense of self, caring for one's body can be considered part of *tzniut* because it involves having a sense of self-worth and respect for one's own body. Underneath all of the traditional laws of modest dress and action is the idea that our bodies are made *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, and by caring for our bodies and being careful what is exposed we do honor to God's creation. Further, making 'modest' choices involves acting out of one's inner self-worth, not according to external expectations. Therefore, immodest choices could include using drugs or allowing oneself to be mistreated within a relationship. The concept of *shmirat ha-guf* encourages young adults and children to value their bodies and make choices accordingly.

### **Sexuality and Relationships**

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, *tzniut* is essentially about limiting sexuality in the public realm as well as restricting opportunities for temptation into sexual acts.<sup>35</sup> As such, lessons or questions that relate to students' sexuality, relationships, and related choices are very relevant to a discussion of modesty.

The creation story is a good place to begin a discussion of sexuality because the story is, at its essence, about Adam's and Eve's discovery of their sexuality. It is,

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<sup>34</sup> Artson and Gevirtz, *Making a Difference*, 83.

<sup>35</sup> See pages 19-25 of this thesis.

according to *Stories of Heaven and Earth: Bible Heroes in Contemporary Children's Literature*, a developmental model for children into adulthood as Adam and Eve, “through their disobedience, manage to gain responsibility over their own lives, their sexuality, and the mortality that sets them on a course towards death but, at the same time, enables them to live fully realized lives.”<sup>36</sup> The creation story shows Adam and Eve making a mistake, but at the same time gaining power over their own lives and the choices they make. It is a story about growing up—the serpent acts as a catalyst for leaving the garden and coming out of the age of innocence. The discovery of one's sexuality is visible in several versions of the creation story. Warwick Hutton's *Adam and Eve: The Bible Story*, contains an illustration of a serpent wrapped around Eve's legs.<sup>37</sup> Shirley Van Eyssen's version is even more overtly sexual. Adam and Eve are illustrated completely nude and anatomically correct. At first, before eating from the tree, “Adam and Eve felt only the warm glow of belonging each to the other, and to God.”<sup>38</sup> Later, Eve is tempted by the serpent into eating the apple: “Eve's outstretched fingers met the blush-bloomed skin of the apple, caressed and closed about it. What harm could there be in taking one small bite? Her teeth sank sharply into its succulent fruit. The snake hissed with pleasure.” In this way, Eve eats from the apple, glimpsing the adult world of sexuality, and cannot turn back.<sup>39</sup>

Interestingly, fairy tales function in a similar way to the creation story. Most of the fairy tales told to children today are ‘sanitized’ versions of overtly sexual originals. Red Riding Hood, in one telling, willingly gets into bed with the wolf. “Snow White,

<sup>36</sup> Hara Person and Diane Person, *Stories of Heaven and Earth*, 52.

<sup>37</sup> Warwick Hutton, *Adam and Eve: The Bible Story* (1987), as cited in *Stories of Heaven and Earth*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Shirley Van Eyssen, *In the Beginning* (Venice: Harlan Quist, 1970), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Van Eyssen, *In the Beginning*, as cited in *Stories of Heaven and Earth*, 44.

Sleeping Beauty, and the Princess in 'The Frog Prince' are all young women in conflict with their mothers or mother figures over their developing bodies and budding sexuality. As a result of their passive nonresistance...these heroines cross the threshold into maturity and are rewarded with marriage to a prince."<sup>40</sup> While these are not Jewish stories, they are included in here because they also serve as an opening into the discussion of sexuality and the responsibility that comes with crossing into adulthood. It is also likely that many Jewish children are as familiar with these fairy tales as they are with any biblical stories.

Sexual relationships are not really topics for younger children, but relationships and marriages can be discussed. In *Sefer ha-Aggadah: The Book of Legends for Young Readers*, published by UAHC Press, the wives of ancient rabbis are included among the stories. Rachel, the wife of Rabbi Akiva, is portrayed as persevering and supportive of her husband. She encouraged him to study and in return he said, "Rachel made me happy, wealthy, and wise: happy through her love for me, wealthy because she trusted me; and wise because she sent me to study Torah."<sup>41</sup> Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir, is presented as being knowledgeable in Torah and laws and the story is told of how she piously waited until the end of Shabbat to tell her husband of their sons' death in order to preserve the joy of Shabbat.<sup>42</sup> Both of these stories portray devoted women in supportive roles to their husbands' success. While this is not necessarily considered a positive value in today's society since the role of spouses have changed, it is positive that the women

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<sup>40</sup> Person and Person, *Stories of Heaven and Earth*, 237-238.

<sup>41</sup> Seymour Rossel, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah: The Book of Legends for Young Readers, Volume 2: Tales of the Sages* (New York: UAHC Press, 1998), 47.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 56-59.

are recognized in our texts and students learn about their contributions to Jewish tradition.

The biblical figure of Ruth was also included in a children's book as an example of a modest and virtuous woman. In *Daughters of Eve: Strong Women of the Bible*, Ruth is presented as modest and passive. Naomi, Ruth's mother in law, tells her to dress up in Shabbat clothes, uncover Boaz's feet while he slept, and lie down by them. "Ruth felt very uneasy about Naomi's plan, but because she loved her, she agreed to do it... Time passed [waiting by Boaz's feet]. Ruth felt her actions were shameful."<sup>43</sup> The biblical text itself does not indicate any hesitation on Ruth's part, but in this children's version Ruth is hesitant about seducing Boaz. When he wakes up, he covers her but "did not touch her, for he knew that she was a virtuous woman."<sup>44</sup> In *The Explorer's Bible*, a midrash from *Ruth Rabbah* is adapted to teach about Ruth's modesty: "When Boaz first saw Ruth, he was impressed by her modesty and respectful manner. While the other women gathered whatever grain they pleased, Ruth obeyed the law and gathered only what had been left behind. While the other women were busy talking with the workers, Ruth was reserved and hardworking. Because of these qualities, Boaz sought to inquire about her."<sup>45</sup> After reading this text, students are invited to write their own midrash about the Ruth story.

For older students, traditional texts are used to enter into a conversation of sexual relationships and sexuality. In *Ethical Literature*, Nachmanides is cited in relationship to sexual relations. "Nachmanides places human sexuality in the mainstream of religious definition and moral responsibility. Sexual intercourse, he insists, is 'holy and pure'

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<sup>43</sup> Ross, *Daughters of Eve*, 49-50.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>45</sup> Ruth Rabbah 4:6, as cited in Blumenthal, *The Explorer's Bible*, Volume 2, 59.

because it is created by God.” Further, “the sex drive is perceived as a dynamic force which can be used either to create or enhance or degrade and destroy.”<sup>46</sup> The questions included as part of the lesson encourage students to think about sexuality in society at large:

- What do you consider the main sexual problem in our society? Can you point to the causes of this problem?
- Most people agree that we have undergone a sexual revolution in recent years. What do you think are its key issues?
- How would you explain the concept of ‘love and will’ as it is set forth by Nachmanides?
- Two pervasive attitudes which tend to diminish respect for women are sexual harassment on the job and the response to rape wherein the victim bears the responsibility. The statements that ‘She must have been asking for it’; ‘with what she was wearing what do you expect’...characterize these attitudes. What is your response to these remarks?<sup>47</sup>

Although the textbook is almost two decades old, it asks students to think about how society considers sexuality and how women are perceived in the context of society’s attitude. This discussion is certainly relevant today for teenagers, especially in connection with questions related to *tzniut*.

In his UAHC-published book, *Sex in the Texts*, Paul Yedwab discusses the traditional Jewish view of the role of women and men in sexual relationships. In the ideal, Martin Buber’s I-Thou relationship is a model for sexual relationships because both parties are equal, not trying to use the other in any way or viewing the other as an object (as in an I-It relationship).<sup>48</sup> However, the traditional view is that women are potentially dangerous to men because they tempt men into sexual intercourse. *Berachot* 24a is cited: “Rav Isaac said, ‘A handbreadth of exposed flesh on a married woman constitutes sexual

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<sup>46</sup> Sugarman, *Ethical Literature*, 32.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Yedwab, *Sex in the Texts* (New York: UAHC Press, 2001), 17.

incitement.' In which way? Should we say, if one gazes at it? But has not Rav Sheshet said, 'Why does the Torah enumerate the ornaments worn outside the clothes as well as the undergarments (Numbers 31:50)? To tell you that if a man gazes at the little finger of a woman, it is as if he gazed at her secret place...R. Chisda said, 'A woman's leg is a sexual incitement'...Samuel said, 'a woman's voice is a sexual incitement'...R. Sheshet said, 'A woman's hair is a sexual incitement...'”<sup>49</sup> Yedwab uses this as a way to discuss the standards of dress implied by the text. As already discussed in this thesis, modesty is often understood as standards to dress to limit temptation towards men; Yedwab includes this although he does not refer to it explicitly as *tzniut*.

Another section of the book addresses how traditional texts view women going after men. *Kiddushin* 2b reads, “Why did the Torah state, ‘If any man take a wife’ (Deuteronomy 22:13) and not ‘If any woman take a husband?’ Because it is the way of a man to go in search of a woman, but it is not the way of a woman to go in search of a man. This may be compared to a man who lost an article. Who goes in search of whom? The loser goes in search of the lost article.” Yedwab asks the questions: Can a woman ask a man out? Should she? If this text had been written by women, how might the issue be addressed?<sup>50</sup> This also is related to *tzniut* because it addresses the role of women vis-à-vis men. Consider Wendy Shalit’s assertion that women in our society are being encouraged to act like men regarding relationships<sup>51</sup>; Yedwab’s inclusion of these texts could provide an opportunity for a discussion of this issue.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>51</sup> Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 107-108. This is discussed in more detail in chapter three of this thesis, pages 54 and 70.

In *Where Do You Stand?*, the concept of a Reform Jewish sexual ethic is discussed. Even though Reform Judaism rejects *taharat mishpachah*, family purity, because of the notion that women are “impure,” it accepts the tradition’s view that sex is not something to be indulged in wantonly at any time.<sup>52</sup> “Although Jews are commanded to have sex, we are forbidden to do so with anyone but our spouse. Anyone who has spent time with ultra-Orthodox Jews knows the rigor with which they follow this prohibition. During prayer, men and women are separated so they cannot see each other. At weddings and other *simchas* [sic], men and women dance only with members of their own sex. Finally, ultra-Orthodox men and women will not even touch a member of the opposite sex (except for their husband or wife). Although these rules seem extreme and, at times, sexist, they also illustrate just how seriously traditional Judaism views sexual relations.”<sup>53</sup> The goal in presenting the ultra-Orthodox view of sexual relations appears to be to instruct Reform Jewish teens and college-aged students to take care with their relationships and sexual choices. “The Jewish tradition, even as it impels us to explore our own sexuality, asks us to be careful about how we approach it. It asks us to appreciate the wonder and the seriousness, the glory and the danger, the beauty and the majesty of sexual affection between two people.”<sup>54</sup>

This approach to sexuality is advocated more subtly in *The Mystery of Being Jewish* when Dr. Ruth Westheimer is presented as an example of a strong Jewish figure. “Dr. Ruth” used Jewish texts regarding sexual pleasure but also encouraged safe sex. “She was backed up, not only by her own Orthodox Jewish background, but by solid

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<sup>52</sup> Mark Glickman, “Jewish Sexual Ethics” in *Where Do You Stand? Jewish Consciousness on Campus* ed. Allan L. Smith (New York: UAHC Press, 1997), pp. 317-320; 319.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

Jewish wisdom that has come down through the ages.”<sup>55</sup> She wrote and spoke publicly about sexuality when most people were embarrassed to speak talk about it. The inclusion of Dr. Ruth as a notable Jewish figure brings in, albeit indirectly, the Jewish value of enjoying sex and the Reform Jewish value of openly discussing sexuality and sexual choices.

### *The Book of Esther*

Any text, be it biblical, rabbinic, or modern, can be interpreted in different ways to teach a variety of lessons. As ancient texts are reread through modern eyes, they can be used to teach about sexuality, relationships, and the corollary, modesty. With the Book of Esther, this manipulation can be seen through several different versions of the story written for children. The use of biblical stories to teach lessons to children, lessons such as *tzniut*, is demonstrated through versions of the Esther story.

The Book of Esther has strong sexual undertones. What is often portrayed as a “beauty contest” was actually virgins being sampled sexually by the king, making Esther victorious because she pleases the king the most.<sup>56</sup> Later in the story, Esther touches the golden scepter, which might not actually be a literal image, and at the end, Haman is found by the king lying on the couch where Esther reclined (Esther 7:8). This is an indication of attempted rape or treason, but is often avoided in retellings of the story.<sup>57</sup> Esther and Vashti represent a dichotomy of female sexuality—Esther as good and Vashti as bad. “Vashti is the sultry seductress, invited to titillate her husband’s courtiers. Esther

<sup>55</sup> Cone, *The Mystery of Being Jewish*, 144.

<sup>56</sup> Person and Person, *Stories of Heaven and Earth*, 238.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.



is the pure, virtuous, modest maiden who does as she is told. In her chasteness and purity, she is like a Joan of Arc figure able to rescue her people and serve as an eternal model of proper behavior for young girls. It is the men who have the power to choose their style of obedience and to exert their authority over others.”<sup>58</sup>

Vashti is an example of disobedience. Vashti refuses to dance or appear before the king, and “some of the retellers of the story have felt a need to provide an explanation for Vashti’s refusal to heed the king, perhaps out of a belief that children need to know whether or not her punishment is justified. Children are taught to obey the adult authority figures in their lives, like parents and teachers, and at the same time to use good judgments when told what to do by peers.” The question becomes, when reading the Esther story, whether Vashti was being disobedient or using good judgment?<sup>59</sup>

In many versions of the Esther story, Vashti is essentially a neutral character. She refuses to obey the king’s order and is banished and as a result, a search for a new queen begins. It is in this search that Esther is presented in a modest light. In *Queen Esther Saves Her People*, Mordechai tried to hide Esther from the king so she would not be harmed. However, Esther’s beauty was widely known and she was taken to the palace anyway (Figure 1).<sup>60</sup> Similarly, in *Daughters of Eve*, Mordechai wants to hide Esther but there is a penalty of death for hiding a beautiful girl from the king. During her childhood, Esther was taught about *mitzvot* and was ‘beautiful physically and in her speech.’ When the edict is passed down, Esther says she will go and God will protect her. “Esther kept her head down and her face hidden behind a soft veil. As she walked, among the crowd,

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>60</sup> Rita Goldman Gelman, *Queen Esther Saves Her People* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1998), no page numbers.

she was afraid. 'What am I doing here?' she thought. 'These innocent women are offering themselves as if they were items for sale.' She shivered and bent her head even lower. 'A woman is not a water-jug, to be bought at the market.'" (Figure 2)<sup>61</sup> In both cases, Esther is presented as modest because she is not eagerly going to be considered by the king. In the second example, Esther is not only modest but she wonders at the other women's immodesty. In *Esther*, Esther goes willingly to be considered by the king but is shown in a veil with her eyes closed while the other women are depicted with bare arms, uncovered hair, and defined breasts. (Figure 3)<sup>62</sup>

Once Esther has been chosen to be considered by the king, she is put in a place where all the women are prepared with oils and fragrances for a year before meeting the king. In *Queen Esther Saves Her People*, "Though she was offered robes that sparkled with gold, and necklaces that radiated with diamonds, Esther chose to wear a simple white dress. When she entered the king's chambers, it was her natural beauty that sparkled and radiated. The king was overwhelmed."<sup>63</sup> She is depicted wearing a white dress with long sleeves against a background of other women dressed in a variety of colors (Figure 4). In *Daughters of Eve*, Esther refuses to eat anything but vegetables (perhaps she is observing *kashrut*) and when she goes to the king, she refuses perfumes and gowns saying, "I will be myself."<sup>64</sup> "When Esther approached, simply dressed in the clothes of an ordinary Persian woman, her face scrubbed clean and her long hair hanging

<sup>61</sup> Ross, *Daughters of Eve*, 82-84.

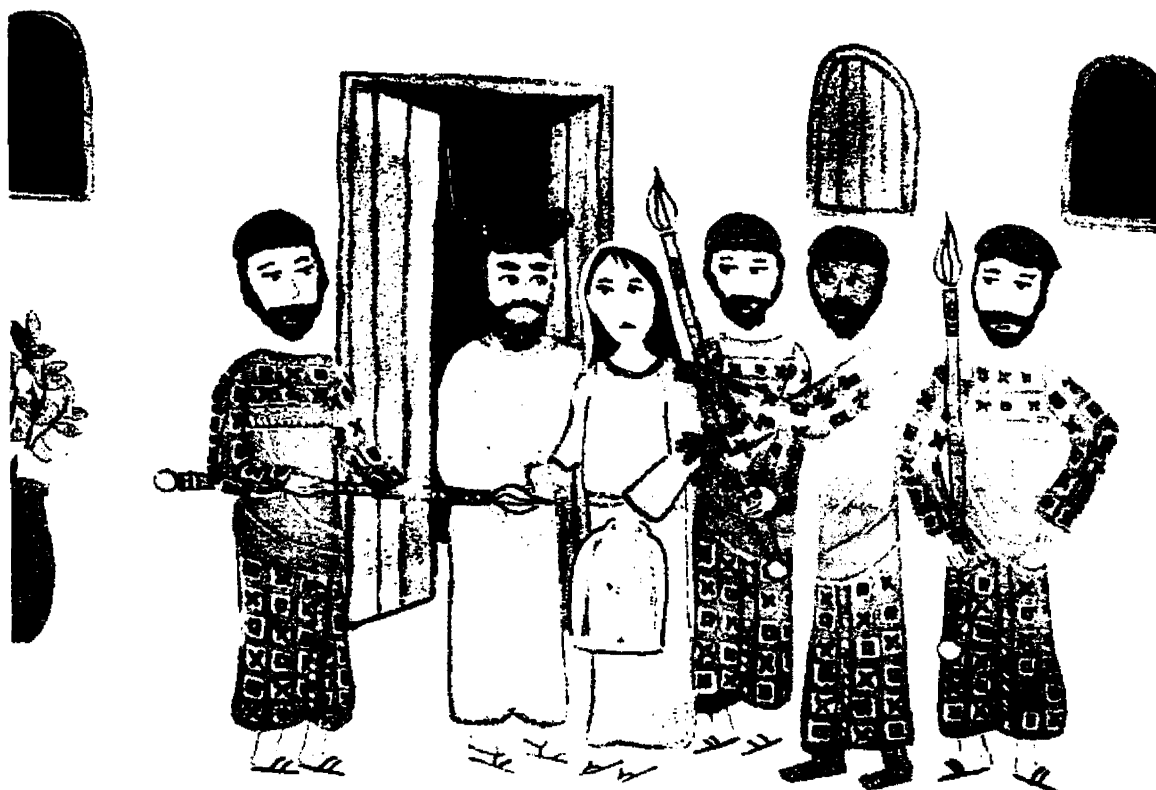
<sup>62</sup> Lisl Weil, *Esther* (New York: Atheneum, 1980), no page numbers.

<sup>63</sup> Gelman, *Queen Esther Saves Her People*.

<sup>64</sup> Ross, *Daughters of Eve*, 85.

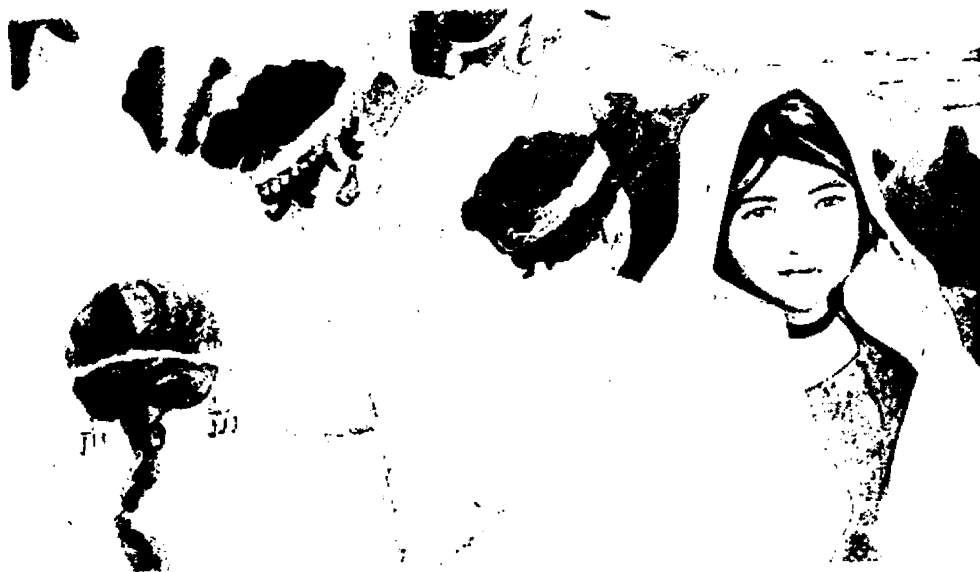
straight down her back, he gasped. He had never seen unadorned, natural beauty before.

She was splendid in her purity.” (Figure 5)<sup>65</sup>



**Figure 1:** In Rita Golden Gelman’s *Queen Esther Saves Her People*, Esther is clearly unwillingly going with the king’s guards to be considered for marriage to the king.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 86.



**Figure 2:** In Lillian Hammer Ross' *Daughters of Eve*, Esther is veiled and looking away as she thinks, "A woman is not a water-jug, to be bought at market."



**Figure 3:** Esther as portrayed in Lisl Weil's *Esther*, wearing a veil with her eyes closed.



**Figure 4:** Esther appears in her natural beauty and “the king was overwhelmed” in *Queen Esther Saves Her People* (below).



**Figure 5:** In *Daughters of Eve*, Esther appears in her natural, unadorned state and “was splendid in her purity.”

In both of these stories, Esther is very explicitly attractive because she is not trying to be. The king is overwhelmed and attracted to her purity, modesty, and simplicity, not her adornments. In *Daughters of Eve*, not only is Esther modest, she is pious. On the occasion of her wedding to the king, Esther insists on sending food to poor people in honor of their wedding.<sup>66</sup> Later in the story, Esther's modesty is contrasted to Haman's wife. In *Queen Esther Saves the Day*, Haman's wife is pictured in their bedroom, lounging on the bed wearing a sleeveless dress while Haman is naked from the waist up.<sup>67</sup>

Esther ultimately uses her beauty in a virtuous way to achieve a higher purpose—the safety of her people. However, holding beauty up as an ideal is problematic in our time. “Though being beautiful might have been an acceptable goal for girls in times past, beatify is a more problematic concept today. That beauty is still an idea to aspire to is attested to by the ongoing popularity of beauty pageants, Barbie Dolls, and makeup sets for girls; modern girls are also expected, like boys, to be brave, smart, and successful. Contemporary retellings of the story of Esther must navigate carefully between the emphasis the biblical story places on beauty and more current, balanced views regarding women.”<sup>68</sup> This analysis of the Esther story is exactly the problem the retellings try to address: Esther's beauty should not be fake or inaccessible. If the lesson is that Esther is modest, that is, comfortable with herself and sure of her inner strength, she does not need the current fashions or a lot of makeup in order to feel and be beautiful. She does not need to be sexually promiscuous or aggressive in order to be desirable; she can just be

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>67</sup> Gelman, *Queen Esther Saves Her People*.

<sup>68</sup> Person and Person, *Stories of Heaven and Earth*, 236.

herself. Esther is also an ideal in a different way—she maintains her Jewish identity and does not hide from it.

### *Sacred Choices*

After Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, spoke at the Houston Biennial in 2005 about growing concerns for adolescents and the importance of providing a Jewish context for the decisions they face, particularly the choices related to sexuality, the *Sacred Choices* initiative for middle school students was developed.<sup>69</sup> The purpose of the *Sacred Choices* curriculum is to provide lessons and resources to congregations and their families about making Jewish decisions related to sexuality.

In 2005, a study prepared for NBC News and *People* Magazine indicated that 87 percent of young teens have not had sexual intercourse and 91 percent say it is not okay for thirteen and fourteen year olds to have sex, however 43 percent say that oral sex is not as big of a deal as intercourse, while 12 percent of young teens have engaged in oral sex.<sup>70</sup> Further, 66 percent of teens will have had sexual intercourse by the time they graduate high school and 33 percent of older teens engage in oral sex.<sup>71</sup> There is pressure for teens, from their peers and the media, to be sexually active. *Sacred Choices* aims to support both teens by providing a foundation to make decisions about health and behavior, giving them tools to navigate relationships, and offering Jewish answers to many of their questions. It also supports parents by offering guidance as they help their

<sup>69</sup> Laura Novak Winer, ed. *Sacred Choices: Adolescent Relationships and Sexual Ethics, Middle School Curriculum* (New York: URJ Press, 2007). The Middle School module is the only one currently available; the High School module should be released in Winter 2008 and apparently will include some direct mentions of *tzniut*.

<sup>70</sup> "Young Teens and Sex" in *People* magazine, January 31, 2005, as cited in *Sacred Choices*, 3.

<sup>71</sup> "National Survey of Adolescents and Young Adults: Sexual Healthy Knowledge, Attitudes, and Experiences," The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Menlo Park, California, March 2003, as cited in *Sacred Choices*, 3.

children during the difficult period of adolescence, developing communication skills to use with their teens, and providing information about their children's development so they can better respond to their teens' needs.<sup>72</sup>

*Sacred Choices* has two enduring understandings: (1) My body and soul—including my sexuality—are gifts from God; and (2) Jewish tradition provides guidance in making sacred choices about how I use and care for those gifts and in coping with the consequences of my choices. There are essential questions, including “How does the way I treat my body and soul matter to me, to God, and to others...?” and “How is the guidance that Judaism provides in consonance with the message in the greater society, and how is it countercultural?”<sup>73</sup> These ideas are part of the value of *tzniut* because of the idea of self-respect and treating one's body and soul with care, and also because acting modestly involves listening to one's inner self even when that means acting differently from societal and peer expectations. The Orthodox view is that our bodies are gifts from God and by treating ourselves with modesty we show appreciation for that gift. In a similar way, the Reform perspective is that we care for our bodies because they are holy creations. By encouraging students to view themselves—their bodies *and* their souls—as holy and valuable, this curriculum lays a foundation for modesty. Asking students to think about the choices they make regarding their bodies and their souls (their external and internal selves) is asking them to be modest because it asks them to focus on their senses of self and to use that to make choices. These choices may relate to sexuality, but they may also relate to the clothing one chooses to wear, the things one says, the way one engages in relationships with others, and so on. Interestingly, by including the idea of

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<sup>72</sup> Winer, *Sacred Choices*. 4.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



Judaism sending a countercultural message as part of the “essential questions,” it is made clear from the beginning that sometimes the right action is to challenge societal pressures. Modesty is about each person choosing for herself the messages she wants to send through her choices, actions, clothing, speech, and relationships. The message that peers and society sends tells young people to act in one way; modesty invites them to choose differently based upon their inner selves.

The first lesson is about communication and assertiveness, providing students with ways to communicate their feelings in a strong way. Students are introduced to passive, assertive, and aggressive communication and have to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. *Pirkei Avot* 1:14 “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” provides a textual basis for three strategies: asserting, listening, and buying time to think, which students then have opportunities to discuss and practice.<sup>74</sup> Modesty can be read in here to some degree, because making choices for oneself may necessitate communicating with others. Having the confidence to speak out against something that bothers us is part of having inner strength and a sense of modesty.

Two other lessons include ideas related to *tzniut*. The second lesson in the curriculum is about self-worth and believing that each of us has gifts and unique talents. How we see ourselves affects almost everything we do. The distinction is made between humility and pride, reminding students that being humble does not mean having low self-esteem.<sup>75</sup> This is the core idea of modesty, having a sense of self-worth. Although *tzniut* is not discussed in this lesson, it easily fits into the idea of focusing on one’s inner

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

strengths and qualities. The last lesson for students is about peer pressure. As discussed earlier in the chapter, making good choices rather than go along with peer pressure is part of modesty. Two of the scenarios provided for student discussion relate to issues of modesty—clothing and sexuality. The first speaks to the issue of current fashions:

*Stephanie is at the mall with her mother. They go into a store and Stephanie sees an outfit that she just loves! It's what all of the other girls are wearing: a short miniskirt and a strappy tank top. Stephanie begs her mother to let her try it on, and her mother reluctantly lets her. But once it's on, her mom freaks. Her mother says that it's inappropriate and that it makes her look cheap. Stephanie doesn't really love the outfit on her, but she still really wants it because all of her friends are wearing outfits like it. Her mother will not let her have it. The next day Stephanie returns to the mall with her friends. They go into the same store, and Stephanie tells her friends about how horrible it is that her mother wouldn't let her get it. Her friends all tell her how cool the outfit is and urge her to buy it anyway. Stephanie uses her allowance to buy the outfit, planning on keeping it a secret from her mother—she can always change into it after she goes to school in the morning.<sup>76</sup>*

Students are asked to brainstorm the people and factors influence Stephanie and then rank which ones should have had the most impact and least impact on her decision. Although the clothing itself is not discussed, this scenario directly challenges students to think about what they choose to wear and why. It is not asking students to judge the modesty of the clothing, but rather the reasons Stephanie wants to wear that outfit and send the messages that go with it.

The second scenario is about a girl named Amanda who is on a bus for a bat mitzvah party. She is encouraged by her friends to go to the back of the bus with a boy she likes. Even though she is uncomfortable with him touching her, she does not say

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 98.

anything. As with the earlier scenarios, students brainstorm factors in Amanda's decisions and rank the level of influence these factors should have had.<sup>77</sup>

In both scenarios, Stephanie and Amanda are testing the boundaries of what they are comfortable with and peer pressure is part of both of their decisions. What makes these scenarios noteworthy is that they both address aspects of modest choices and the difficulty that arises with defining modesty in a Reform context. In the first scenario, Stephanie wants to wear something that many other girls are wearing. The issue that arises is not whether the clothing is appropriate in the students' eyes, but how Stephanie should decide whether she wants to wear it. This is what modest clothing in a Reform context is about: not *what* one wears as much as why she chooses to wear it and whether she wants to send the messages that accompany such clothing. The Orthodox idea of modesty specifies what that clothing should look like; in a Reform context, we cannot necessarily specify what clothing is modest and should be worn. While there is room to say what might not be appropriate for services or religious school, the fact is that many Reform Jews would balk at being told that they should not wear current fashions because they are simply not 'modest.' Instead, modest clothing in Reform Judaism is about choosing what to wear and choosing to send certain kinds of messages. If a young woman wants to wear low-cut jeans after making the decision for herself (not because of peer pressure), then perhaps that is modest. The challenge in teaching about modest clothing in a Reform context is that we must focus on the messages that clothing sends and the way one chooses whether or not to wear it. Helping students to make choices for

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 100.

themselves based upon their inner selves, not peer pressure, is the foundation for making modest choices.

To some extent, the same is true for the second scenario about Amanda kissing on the bus. The existence of a curriculum like *Sacred Choices* indicates that there is a need to help teens make sexual choices in a Jewish context. However, the point of *Sacred Choices* is not for students to abstain from premarital sex, but rather to carefully make safe and holy choices for themselves. The message sent by this scenario is not that Amanda should not have kissed Justin, but that she should have stopped when she was no longer comfortable. When considering modest sexual choices in today's world, it is difficult to specify what is modest and what is not. We all agree having unsafe sex or being pressured to be sexually active is wrong, but we do not say that premarital sex generally is wrong. As with clothing, we can talk about the method more than the specific outcome. We can encourage students to talk to adults and to make choices for themselves based upon what is comfortable, not what their peers are pressuring them to do. We can teach about safe sexual practices and provide safe space for students to talk about their concerns, feelings and questions.

The *Sacred Choices* middle school curriculum teaches students about several ideas that are related to *tzniut*. Although it does not explicitly teach about modesty, many lessons relate to modesty or even provide foundations for a discussion of what constitutes modesty. As discussed in relation to the lesson on peer pressure, there are challenges that come with discussing modesty in a Reform context. Perhaps that is why modesty is left unmentioned even when it could be included. Looking at where *tzniut* could be more

directly used in *Sacred Choices* and where it already exists demonstrates the limits on defining modesty in Reform Judaism.

## Conclusion

By looking at several educational materials that are used in Reform Jewish educational settings, I was able to see that modesty can in fact be read into the lessons. Whether it is talking about peer pressure, making good choices, caring for one's body, or sexuality, there are several areas where *tzniut* is present but unmentioned or could be included. The story of Esther is one example of a way in which modesty is subtly taught.

The major lesson gleaned from this survey of materials is that modesty in Reform Judaism has limits. In an Orthodox setting, modesty is taught with very specific outcomes in terms of dress, behavior, sexuality, and speech. The community teaches young people, particularly young women, to have a strong sense of inner self-worth and confidence, but also specifies what that looks like on the outside. In a Reform setting, the outcomes are not universally agreed upon. There is not communal agreement as to what constitutes modest dress or behavior. There seems to be agreement on the ideas that we should care for our bodies—healthy eating, exercise, avoiding drugs, responsible drinking—and that we should avoid harmful peer pressure. Pressure to engage in sexual activity and having unsafe sex is also seen as negative. However, when it comes to areas such as clothing or sexual activity, areas in which there is a wide spectrum of what is seen as acceptable (if not always preferable), it is more difficult. We may agree that students should be modest, but cannot define what type of clothing or level of sexual activity is “immodest” in a universally-accepted way.

Therefore, *tzniut* in Reform Jewish education should be focused more on the process of listening to one's inner self to make decisions about one's external appearance and less on the outcome, or what that external appearance should look like. Modesty is about having a healthy sense of self-worth, having internal awareness, making choices because that is "what I want/need/believe" instead of what society or peers are encouraging. Then modesty can be applied to decisions about what one wears or how one behaves. *Tzniut* is about choosing what is holy and about deciding what is right "for me." When applied to clothing, modest clothing for one girl may look different from another. In terms of sexuality, it will vary based upon the teen and his or her relationships and situations. By focusing on modesty as a value for life and a way to make good Jewish decisions, we provide students with a tool to use throughout their lives. By not focusing on the end result, we give students a framework to live healthy Jewish lives without trying to control what they choose. In the spirit of Reform Judaism, we encourage students to make choices armed with the knowledge that modesty provides them: knowledge of themselves and their own individual needs.

## Chapter 5: A Mother-Daughter Retreat

### Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated how aspects of *tzniut* were already present in many educational materials and also envisioned how modesty could be further incorporated into a Reform Jewish setting. This chapter seeks to present an educational program on the topic of modesty. However, *tzniut* is a challenging topic educationally for many of the same reasons that make it an appealing topic. First, *tzniut* is a broad topic that is also difficult to define. Within a traditional understanding, modesty encompasses most aspects of a woman's life. There is a clear dichotomy between modest and immodest, with clear guidelines and rules. In a liberal definition, modesty is about the external self and connecting it to the internal self. There is no clear picture of immodest and modest, so a conversation about *tzniut* is about values and personal decision-making, not explicit examples. What is often viewed as "immodesty" in today's society is actually a result of objectification of women's bodies by the media and society. Young women are especially vulnerable to this idea that their bodies, their external selves, are the most important and this focus on the external self can often lead to young women choosing to ignore or separate their internal selves from their outer selves. The result is that young women feel inauthentic, ignoring their true selves, and instead present an external "shell" that they believe society, peers, and media expect them to have. Therefore, a liberal understanding of modesty is more than just "not immodest." Instead of a dichotomy, there is a wide range of pieces that comprise a modest person. *Tzniut* is about more than having a specific external self—it is about understanding the internal self, listening to it,

figuring out how to decipher messages sent by the media and peers, learning how to ignore negative messages that focus only on the external self, how to use the internal self to determine what the external self should look like (instead of the other way around), and more. There are many steps to creating a concept of *tzniut* for Reform Jews, meaning that it cannot be taught in a single lesson.

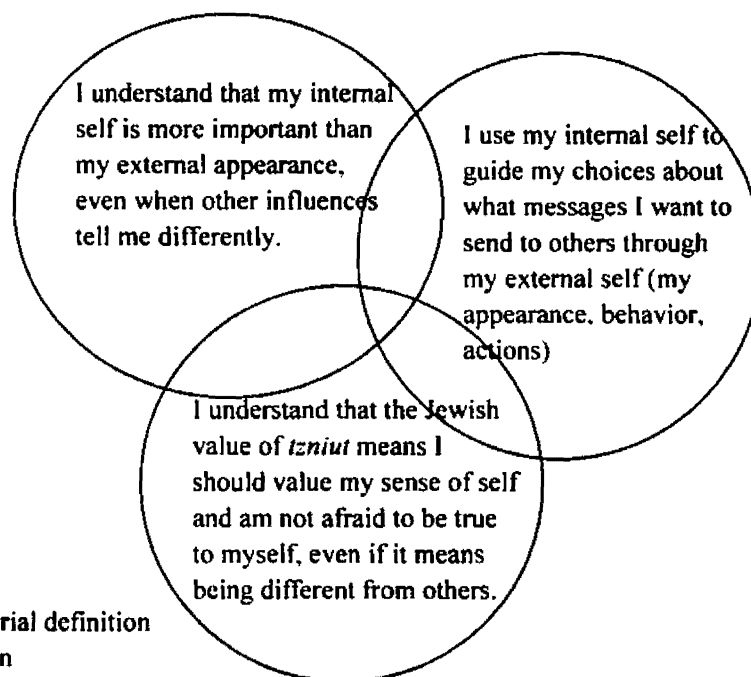
A second challenge is that the concept of modesty is not concrete for liberal Jews. As said before, the Orthodox Jewish understanding of *tzniut* is a clear division between modest and immodest. If a conversation about *tzniut* were to be directed towards Orthodox Jewish teenagers, there would be concrete ways to discuss it. Guidelines for clothing would be an important topic and would have explicit rules: no exposure of skin below the collarbone, above the elbows, above the knees, or of the midriff area. Because of the cohesion that exists in Orthodox Jewish communities on certain values and rules, these clothing guidelines would be acceptable to teenagers and their families. The same would be true of restrictions on dating or being alone with a member of the opposite sex and other categories that are a part of the traditional understanding of *tzniut*.<sup>1</sup> In a Reform Jewish context, we do not have the communal agreement that Orthodox communities have when it comes to what Jews wear, how Jewish teens engage in relationships, and other boundaries. To bring *tzniut* to the concrete, placing a comparison of modest and immodest, would potentially lead to alienating teens and their families who do not agree with the restrictions that imposes. For example, if a program about *tzniut* in a Reform Jewish setting includes teaching that female Jewish teenagers should not expose their shoulders or should always wear skirts to synagogue, these rules would exclude the

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<sup>1</sup> For more examples of the Orthodox Jewish understanding of *tzniut*, see chapter two of this thesis, pages 19-48.



practices of several families. Does that mean that women who wear pants to services are immodest? What happens if a teenager does want to expose her shoulders? Is she no longer welcome in this community? While this may seem extreme, it is likely that concrete rules regarding modesty would leave some people feeling they are not welcome, or at the very least, are being negatively judged by their community. Therefore, *tzniut* should be discussed and taught as a value, a way to live one's life and make decisions for oneself. A program about *tzniut* should have more abstract conclusions, leaving the concrete decisions to each individual and family. This is why this retreat emphasizes understanding our individual selves, making decisions from our inner sense of self, and creating a broad definition of modesty. One could think of it in terms of a Venn diagram, with all of the pieces overlapping to form a "modest person":



**Figure 1:** A pictorial definition of a modest person

While *tzniut* could be taught in a traditional classroom environment, the topic lends itself to creative programs that incorporate multiple generations. Like the Union for Reform Judaism's *Sacred Choices* program<sup>2</sup>, where students and parents participate in the program in both separate and joint sessions, programs about modesty can incorporate both students and parents in various permutations of mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. Modesty is a generational issue to a large extent because what is considered immodest in one generation is often modest in the next. One's age and experience and upbringing will inform her judgment of what is modest and appropriate. Therefore, a multi-generational program can be an excellent way to explore the topic of modesty.

The idea of 'modest' and 'immodest' is different from other topics because it can involve a broader audience than parents and children. For example, modest dress for the synagogue setting is not simply a decision made by parents and children because other congregants and perhaps even Temple administrators may have strong opinions. Our society at large has strong opinions about what constitutes modesty and our religious communities are likely no different. Another program about modesty could involve students and adults who are not related, perhaps the teen youth group and the Temple board, to discuss what Jewish modesty means for their particular synagogue. This particular program is designed for a mother-daughter retreat and could be expanded to a multi-generational retreat of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters.

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter Four (pages 100-106) for a more complete discussion of the *Sacred Choices* curriculum.

## **Program Background**

This retreat is designed for mothers and daughters to have an opportunity to dialogue about modesty and the issues it raises. A challenge that arose during the writing of the program was where the mothers' main focus should be. Are mothers discussing modesty in the context of their daughters, their own lives, or some combination of both? This question was never fully answered, but for the most part mothers and daughters are talking about modesty in the context of the daughters' experiences. There are, however, opportunities throughout for mothers to discuss their own life experiences in addition to the activities that focus more on the daughters.

The age group for this retreat is mothers and daughters of middle or high school-age. It may be helpful to limit the size of the group by focusing on one age group at a time; in other cases, including both middle and high school aged girls may be better for the community. What is important is to give mothers and daughters a chance to explore this issue together as well as to provide each cohort of women the opportunity to dialogue with one another. If there are enough young women to split them into age groups (middle school and high school, or over-sixteen and under-sixteen, etc) the facilitator may want to consider that division. It is possible that in some communities, grandmothers may be interested in attending. It is easy to include an additional generation in this program; where it says "divide into a mothers' group and a daughters' group" a "grandmothers' group" can be added.

While this program is written as a "retreat," the timing can take on many forms. Where an actual retreat site is available, having an overnight would allow for the entire program to take place at one time, allowing more opportunities for rest, reflection,

worship, singing, and other activities. This program could also be done as a daytime program, although multiple sessions would better allow for a comfortable pace as well as time for worship or reflection. Obviously the facilitators should incorporate breaks or elongate programs as the group needs. These pauses are intentionally omitted—every community has different populations, needs, and comfort levels and facilitators should adjust the program to best meet those needs. Content information is provided throughout to help the facilitators to feel comfortable with the topic and to be able to “go with the flow” in the discussions when appropriate.

The retreat program has five major themes:

- **Defining modesty:** Everyone brings some association, positive or negative, with the idea of modesty. Those associations are explored and the traditional Jewish value of *tzniut* is taught. *Tzniut* is defined as focusing on our inner selves and allowing our sense of self, not messages from peers and society, to determine our actions, beliefs, appearance, and choices. The traditional understanding of modesty includes several elements that are incompatible with our Reform Jewish perspective.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the focus throughout the program is on modesty as a tool to help women focus inward and control the external messages they send. It is essentially a tool for making choices.
- **Having a sense of self:** In a Reform Jewish setting, modesty is about understanding one’s inner self and making that more important than one’s external appearance. In

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<sup>3</sup> As stated earlier, I believe that many of the concrete elements of a traditional understanding of *tzniut*, such as specific rules for dress, *shomer negiah* (not touching a member of the opposite sex), *yichud* (being alone with a member of the opposite sex), *kol ishah* (not hearing the voice of a woman), and various rules for married women, are not part of Reform Jewish practice and are incompatible with the lives many Reform Jews choose to lead. For more specific details, see Chapter Two of this thesis.

order for that to happen, one must first have and be connected to one's sense of self. Adolescent females especially have difficulty with self-esteem and being different from their peers. Adult females may also struggle with self-esteem and feeling self-worth that is defined from within. Individuality and having a core sense of self must be celebrated and encouraged throughout this retreat.

- **Messages In and Out:** Young adults are being bombarded with messages from the media, peers, and society at large. Some of these messages encourage the objectification of women—focusing on the external rather than the internal. Young women are being told that their bodies are most important, not their inner selves. At the same time, we all choose what we wear, how we act, what we say—we choose the messages we send out. Part of this program is about deciphering the messages we are being sent as well as the messages we are able to send, empowering participants to control the messages they want to send by going from the inside-out, not the outside-in.
- **Communication:** Adolescence is a time when parents and children struggle to communicate effectively with one another. When speaking about modesty, which involves choices about external messages and appearances, communicating without being judgmental is especially important. Many activities will encourage mothers and daughters to communicate with one another in groups and one-on-one, and the importance of communication and support will be explored.
- **Making choices and judgments:** Modesty is subjective—what is an acceptable external message to one person may be inappropriate to another. The value of *tzniut* encourages us to make choices for ourselves based upon our inner selves and core

spirituality instead of blindly following others' opinions. This is ultimately the program's goal—to encourage young women to make choices and to help daughters and mothers dialogue about how that decision-making process should work.

***Enduring Understandings:***

- The Jewish value of *tzniut* (modesty) encourages me to value my inner self over my external appearance. They are connected, but my inner self takes priority.
- I control my external self and the messages my appearance, behavior, actions, and choices send to others.
- The choices I make about my external self are made from my sense of inner self and healthy support systems, not dictated by external forces (society, media, peers).

***Essential Questions:***

1. What is special about me? How would I describe aspects of my inner self?
2. What are some of the external messages that are sent to me by my peers, the media, and society?
3. What about my external self sends messages to others? How do I decide what external messages I want to send?
4. How do I judge what is “modest”—what external messages would be compatible with my inner sense of self? Who can I look to for help?
5. How do I incorporate the Jewish value of *tzniut* into my everyday decisions about myself?

## Timeline

0:00-0:15	Welcome, nametags, refreshments
0:15-0:35	Introduction and Icebreakers
0:35-1:05	Modesty is More than 'Covering Up'
1:05-1:40	Internal and External Selves
1:40-2:30	Self-portrait, Inside and Out
2:30-3:15	Magazine Activity
3:15-4:00	Messages We Send Out
4:00-4:45	What We Would Like You to Know
4:45-5:15	Communication Strategies and Role-Plays
5:15-6:15	<i>Ervah</i> and Modesty—Some Things Should Remain Private?
6:15-6:45	Influences on our Decision-Making: A Jelly-Bean Poll
6:45-7:15	What are the Tough Decisions that I Face?
7:15-7:45	A Mother-Daughter Covenant

## **Part I: Introductions**

### **Materials:**

Nametags for each participant; pens or pencils; markers; paper or nametags with the names of famous Jewish women; tape.

### **0:00-0:15      Welcome, nametags, refreshments**

As participants come in, they should be given nametags and write the following in the corners: **top right corner**, one activity we enjoy doing together as mother and daughter; **top left corner**, one important attribute of my inner self; **lower right corner**, something I would never wear in public; **lower left corner**, my favorite comfort food.

Any other check-in things relating to the retreat should be done at this time.

Refreshments are a great way to encourage socializing while waiting for all the participants to arrive.

### 0:15-0:35 Introduction and Icebreakers

The introduction should introduce participants to the facilitators and should thank everyone for attending this program. This series of icebreakers can be used to encourage introductions among participants (feel free to insert others).

First, have everyone look at their nametags and what they wrote in the corners. The participants should stand up and find someone else who has the same (or similar) answer written in the **top right corner** (an activity they enjoy doing as a mother-daughter). The pairs should introduce themselves to one another. Then, participants should find someone with the same or similar answer written in the **top left corner** (an important attribute of my inner self). The pairs should introduce themselves to one another. The same should be repeated for the **lower right corner** (something I would never wear in public) and the **lower left corner** (my favorite comfort food). If participants cannot find a match, they should pair up with someone they do not know. If the group is not too large, facilitators can have the pairs introduce themselves and their shared answer.

For the next icebreaker, facilitators should tape a single piece of paper or nametag with one of the following names of famous Jewish women on it to each participant's back (so they do not know what is written on the nametag). Use these names or add your own:<sup>4</sup>

- **Eve (from the bible):** First woman, ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

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<sup>4</sup> This list is by no means exhaustive and facilitators should feel free to add names of women who have been studied in religious school or adult education programs. This biographical information provided here is basic, enough to help participants who are "stumped." Additional information can be found online.



- **Sarah (from the bible):** Abraham's wife; had a son (Isaac) when she was "advanced in age"; was passed off as a sister by Abraham on multiple occasions
- **Rebekah (from the bible):** Isaac's wife; mother of twin sons (Jacob and Esau); convinced Jacob to trick her husband into giving him a blessing
- **Rachel (from the bible):** one of Jacob's wives; was said to be very beautiful; mother of Joseph and Benjamin
- **Leah (from the bible):** one of Jacob's wives (Jacob accidentally married her, thinking she was Rachel); mother of seven sons and a daughter, named Dinah.
- **Tamar (from the bible):** was married to one of Judah's sons, Er, and then his brother, Onan, both of whom died; she deceived Judah into sleeping with her when he would not marry her to his other son.
- **Esther (from the bible):** became queen of Persia, saved the Jews from destruction at the hands of Haman.
- **Ruth (from the bible):** the daughter-in-law of Naomi; she converted to Judaism ("Your people shall be my people"); married Boaz and was the grandmother to King David.
- **Golda Meir:** first female prime minister of Israel from 1969-1974
- **Rabbi Sally Priesand:** first woman ordained as a rabbi in the United States (in 1972).
- **Dr. Ruth Westheimer:** known as "Dr. Ruth"; born in Germany in 1939 and later emigrated to Israel and then the US; most famous for her radio and TV talk shows about human sexuality.

- **Barbra Streisand:** Academy award-winning actress and singer; performed in *Funny Girl*, *Yentl*, and *Meet the Fockers*.
- **Bette Midler:** also known as “The Divine Miss M”; award-winning singer and actress; performed in movies such as *Beaches* and *The Stepford Wives*.
- **Henrietta Szold:** founder of Hadassah: The Women’s Zionist Organization
- **Natalie Portman:** born in Israel; award-winning actress, appearing in films such as *Closer*, and the *Star Wars* prequels.
- **Sarah Silverman:** an off-the-wall, generally inappropriate, Jewish female comedienne.

Each participant has a name of a famous woman on her back and must figure out who that person is. Everyone else can see the name of the person, so they can answer questions about her to help the person guess who she is. Each participant can only ask one question per person, ensuring that the group “mixes.” Once the participant guesses her famous persona correctly, she can sit down, and the program continues until most or all of the participants have guessed their identities correctly.

## **Part II: Defining Modesty**

*The first activity begins the process of defining and understanding modesty. Everyone has their own preexisting attitudes about modesty that must be addressed before we can formulate a definition. Participants will be introduced to the Jewish concept of tzniut, modesty, and how it is more than how much of our bodies are covered. The understanding of modesty will unfold throughout the retreat, but this is the foundation upon which the rest of the program will build.*

**Materials:**

Easel and easel pad or dry erase board; markers; copies of Handout 1 for text study of Micah 6:8

**0:35-1:05      Modesty is More than ‘Covering Up’**

First, ask participants to brainstorm what they think of when they hear the word “modesty.” Record the results on chart paper or a dry erase board (if there is a large group, consider brainstorming in smaller groups and then posting each group’s results).

- Possible results might be: Orthodox, wigs/hair coverings (*shaytels*), skirts, covering up arms and legs, Muslim, *hajib* (veil worn by some Muslim women), Taliban, old-fashioned, strict, not revealing, no sex, hiding, secretive, humble, not arrogant or prideful, etc.
- Ask the group what items on the list are positive and circle them. What may seem negative at first glance could be argued to be positive. For example, literature for Orthodox women extols the virtues of *tzniut* because women are keeping their sexuality and beauty private and not showing off or being objectified. Modern Christian books encourage “secret-keeping”—parts of our bodies are kept secret until the time comes for them to be shared (marriage). Wendy Shalit, a young female author who has written books arguing for modesty in our society, says, “Having secrets seems to be a way of asserting one’s essential dignity, one’s

importance in the world...if nothing is secret, nothing is sacred.”<sup>5</sup> Encourage differences of opinion to be discussed where appropriate.

Explain that modesty is a Jewish value and in Hebrew is referred to as *tzniut* (צניעות).

While it is a value that applies to everyone, it is traditionally focused upon women. *Tzniut* can refer to not being arrogant or prideful, but more often refers to sexual modesty, which is the focus for today's program.

- In small groups, have participants read Micah 6:8 and answer the discussion questions (Handout 1):

הָגִיד לְךָ אָדָם מָה טוֹב וּמָה-יְהוָה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ כִּי אִם-עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט  
וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצָּנֶע לִפְנֵי עַם-אֱלֹהֶיךָ :

"He has told you, O man, what is good, And what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice And to love goodness, And to walk modestly (*hatz'neah*) with your God."

- What are the three things the prophet Micah says that God requires of us?
- What does it mean to "walk modestly" with God?
- Does walking modestly relate to doing justice and loving goodness? How?
- Bring the groups back together and go over the questions they discussed.

Wrap up the discussion with the following: Walking modesty means being aware of the external messages we are sending. Traditionally, Jewish law has used *tzniut* as the reason for married women covering their hair, women covering their elbows and knees and collarbones, for women to not wear excessive makeup, for women to sit separate from men at services. Some members of *klal Yisrael*, Jews around the world, follow these

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 134. For a Christian perspective, see Dannah Gresh's *Secret Keeper: The Delicate Power of Modesty* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2002).

rules, but for most Reform Jews, these laws are incompatible or even contrary to the lives they choose to lead.

However, the spirit of *tzniut* is not these laws. Even those who follow the traditional laws agree that modesty is about more than the external appearance and rules. It is actually really about focusing on what is inside, our inner selves. Modesty means that the messages our external selves send—our actions, behavior, clothing—should be compatible with and originate from our sense of inner selves. When there is a disconnection between the two, we are only focusing on our external selves and this can lead to immodesty, unhealthy choices, and low self-esteem. This is the definition of modesty that will be used in this retreat—how to connect our inner and outer selves and make choices using our inner selves as a guide.

At the same time, today's program is not just about modesty: it is about mothers and daughters spending time together to talk about important issues. There will be times for mothers and daughters to be in separate groups, other times for everyone to be together, and also some times for mothers and daughters to spend time one-on-one. Everyone should remember to respect one another's privacy. Mothers and daughters should not share anything about the other they believe would be embarrassing or uncomfortable [It is important for daughters to not feel that their mothers are talking about them]. Overall this should be an enjoyable day and a time for dialogue and communication.

### **Part III: Having a Sense of Self**

*Since tzniut is about inner selves connecting to outer selves, this next section explores our internal and external selves.*

#### **Materials:**

Copies of Handout 2 for text study; posterboard (1 per participant); regular envelopes (1 per participant); blank paper; markers; pens or pencils; tape.

#### **1:05-1:40 Internal and External Selves**

Mothers and daughters should divide into separate rooms, and then get into small groups of 4-6 to study Psalm 45:14, Proverbs 31:25, and *Berachot* 28a (Handout 2).

#### **From Psalm 45:14**

*“All of the glory of the king’s daughter is within...”* כָּל-כְּבוֹדָהּ בַּת-מֶלֶךְ פְּנִימָה

#### **Questions:**

1. What do you think this verse means?
  - a. If “the king” refers to God, then what might this verse mean?
  - b. If we read it as “All of the glory/beauty of the king’s daughter is directed inward,” how does the meaning change?
2. This verse, with different interpretations, appears in many Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jewish texts that advocate traditional observance of *tzniut* (modesty). One such passage reads, “*Tzniut*, as the Jewish way of life, requires that we cover our bodies, which are holy, but we do not cover those parts of us which enable us to

reveal our *neshamah* (soul). This is the message in “The glory of a king’s daughter is her inner real self.”<sup>6</sup> What do you think of this idea?

3. What are ways that you could envision glory or beauty in yourself or others? What are ways that glory is outside? What are ways that glory is inside?

From Proverbs 31:25

“*She dresses in clothes of strength and glory*”

עוז-וְהִדָּר לְבוּשָׁהּ

Questions:

1. What do you think this verse means?
2. This verse is part of a poem called *Eshet Chayil* (“A Woman of Valor”). It is traditionally read by a husband to a wife on Shabbat and speaks to all the different responsibilities of running a home and caring for a family. For mothers: what are some things about which this verse speaks? [*Sample answers: having the energy to take care of my family; strength to fulfill responsibilities of being a mother; glory because of the honor that comes with being a parent*]
3. This verse has also been interpreted as applying to young women who are trying to live modest lives. For daughters: what are some ways in which you might need strength and glory to live a life of *tzniut*, or modesty? [*Sample answers: knowing when to say ‘no’; looking for clothes that are not too revealing, which takes a lot of time; being willing to be different*]

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<sup>6</sup> Malka Touger, *Just My Style*, 50.

Berachot 28a

*“Rabban Gamliel used to say, ‘Any student whose inside is not like his outside should not enter the house of study.’”*

*Commentary: On the day that Rabban Gamliel was overthrown as the head of the house of study at Yavneh, they added hundreds of seats to accommodate all the new students who wanted to enter.”<sup>7</sup>*

Questions:

1. What is the basic assumption that Rabban Gamliel made? [*Sample answers: that it is possible for the inside and outside to be the same; if a student has a different outside from his inside, he cannot fully learn; it is possible to know that one’s inside and outside are different*]
2. What does the commentary tell us about Rabban Gamliel’s idea? [*Sample answers: most people do not have insides and outsides that are the same; many people wanted to learn but did not meet Rabban Gamliel’s criteria*]
3. Do you think it is possible for a person’s outside and inside to be the same?
4. Should a person’s outside and inside be the same?

After 10 minutes, the mothers and daughters should come together and divide into different groups of 4-8 to discuss their answers to the questions.

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<sup>7</sup> B.Berachot 28a, as cited in Laura Novak Winer, ed. *Sacred Choices: Adolescent Relationships and Sexual Ethics, Middle School Curriculum* (New York: URJ Press, 2007), 171.



**1:40-2:30      Self-Portrait, Inside and Out**

Transition into this activity by explaining that, as Rabban Gamliel alluded, we all have internal and external selves. To some extent, we have the power to choose what remains internal and invisible and what becomes a visible part of our external selves.

Each person should take a piece of posterboard, a piece of paper, an envelope, a pencil/pen, and some markers. Facilitators give the following directions: On one side, draw an outline of a head and shoulders. Write or draw how you see your external self. Then, on the piece of paper, write about your internal self: what makes you unique; what are some of your internal qualities or characteristics; what are some values that you believe are important. When you are finished, put the paper about your internal self inside the envelope and tape it to the back of your poster. Participants should be encouraged to spread out and work individually.

After 15-20 minutes, mothers and daughters should pair up and share their external portraits. As they are comfortable, they can use the guiding questions to talk about their internal selves:

- Share your external portraits and explain what you wrote/drew. Is there anything that you believe is missing from your mother/daughter's portrait, something that you see in her that she did not include?
- Share some of the aspects of your internal self that you wrote down (only the ones you feel comfortable sharing) and ask the other person if they can think of a time or example when they saw that quality in you.

- If there are aspects of your internal self that your mother/daughter has not seen, talk about how that makes you feel? Do you believe you express these qualities, or do you keep them hidden?

After 10-15 minutes, come together as a group to discuss the following:

- What is symbolic about sealing our “inner selves” in the envelope?
- Is it possible that aspects of our inner selves can be external? [*As our personalities become evident to our family and friends and colleagues, internal qualities become part of our external appearance. For example, if one of our inner qualities is belief in God, perhaps that is evident to others through our attending services, talking about prayer, using the phrase “thank God,” and so on.*]

Summarize along the following lines: As we see, we have a lot of control over what is part of our external selves. Being compassionate or caring, loyal or loving, are internal qualities that can be expressed through our actions and behavior towards others. We control those expressions, along with our clothes, our outward appearance, our words, and so on. Part of modesty is controlling what is external and preserving something internally.

#### **Part IV: Messages Coming In and Going Out**

*Having explored our “inner selves,” the program now moves to another theme—understanding and sifting through the messages being sent by media, society, and peers, and controlling the messages we send through our external selves. Our media today often objectifies women, sending the messages that a woman’s true self is her body. To young*

women, this message is sent through fashions and magazines encouraging confidence in asking out a boy. Shyness is held up as a bad thing, even though shyness can be a form of modesty and protect women from a feeling of vulnerability. For adult women, the message sent by the media is that they should fight aging to avoid losing their youthful bodies. The increase in cosmetic surgery, especially after childbirth, indicates that youthful is better, but natural changes and aging are not<sup>8</sup>. Both mothers and daughters are being encouraged to focus on their bodies. The message is that if your body is good, everything inside will work out, although it should be the opposite.

Peer pressure is also important. Young women are encouraged to dress in more revealing clothes, to start looking at boys, eventually there will be pressure to engage in sexual and high-risk activities. The message going to young women is that they should focus on their external selves and push their internal selves away. They are being encouraged to send messages of sexuality, overconfidence, and maturity (negative), through their appearance, behavior, and relationships. As psychologist Dr. Mary Pipher writes,

“With puberty, girls face enormous cultural pressure to split into false selves. The pressure comes from schools, magazines, music, television, advertisements, and movies. It comes from peers. It comes from parents, from mothers who also suffered from the emphasis on being thin. Girls can be true to themselves and risk abandonment by their peers or they can reject their true selves and be socially acceptable. Most girls choose to be

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<sup>8</sup> Natasha Singer, “Is the ‘Mom Job’ Really Necessary?” in *New York Times*, October 4, 2007. This article detailed the increasing trend of post-pregnancy cosmetic surgery—the tummy tuck, liposuction, and breast lift known as the “mom job.” The surgery is being marketed as “correcting” the physical changes that occur with pregnancy.

socially accepted and split into two selves, one that is authentic and one that is culturally scripted. In public they become who they are supposed to be.”<sup>9</sup>

*The program will begin by identifying the variety of messages being sent to female adolescents. The rest of the program will be about the messages that young women can choose to send, connecting the internal and external so their external is an extension of their true selves, not a result of outside pressures. Right now, most women allow these external pressures to control the messages their external selves send; modesty says we should go from the inside-outward. If we want to make our external selves look a certain way, we should do it because it matches our internal sense of self, not because our peers or the media tell us to.*

#### **Materials:**

Copies of current magazines read by teenage females (*Cosmopolitan*, *CosmoGirl*, *Teen Vogue*, *Marie Claire*, *YM*, *Seventeen*); copies of handout 3; 5 pieces of easel paper, posterboard, or butcher paper; blue markers (1 for each mother); black markers (1 for each daughter); tape.

#### **2:30-3:15 Magazine Activity**

Mothers and daughters should separate and form small groups (different from the previous activity). Each group should be given a current magazine, such as *Cosmopolitan*, *CosmoGirl*, *Teen Vogue*, *Marie Claire*, *YM*, *Seventeen*. The groups should go through their magazines to answer some questions:

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, as cited in Shalit, *A Return to Modesty*, 92.

**Mothers:**

1. Have you read any of these magazines in the last year? Do your daughters read them?
2. Look through the table of contents and read the article titles out loud. What are some of the themes?
3. Look at one or two articles that caught your eye. What seem to be the major messages of the articles?
4. Flip through the magazine and look at some of the advertisements. What messages are they sending?
5. Thinking about the messages of some of the articles and advertisements—do you feel they are good messages for your daughters? Why or why not?
6. What do you think your daughters would think of this magazine? Why?

**Daughters:**

1. Have you read any of these magazines in the last year? How did you get access to them?
2. Look through the table of contents and read the article titles out loud. Are there any that surprise you? What seem to be the major topics?
3. Look at one or two articles that caught your eye. What are the major messages of the article?
4. Flip through the magazine and look at some of the advertisements. What messages do you think they are sending?

5. Thinking about your answers to the previous questions...do you like the messages this magazine is sending (through advertisements and articles)? What are some positive ideas and what are some negative ideas?
6. What do you think your mothers would think of this magazine? Why?

Come together into a larger group. Have pieces of butcher paper or posterboard on the walls with the headings: "Messages from the magazine articles and ads"; "Messages from commercials and advertisements"; "Messages from my peers"; "Messages from my family"; "Messages from Temple community and Judaism." Ask mothers to write in blue and daughters to write in black (or some other two colors) and write messages that they feel they receive under the following headings. Mothers should write about themselves and the messages society sends them, not about their daughters. At the end, ask everyone to walk around and read the lists. Guide the group in discussing the following questions:

- What are some general reactions?
- What are the places where mothers and daughters seemed to agree? Are those messages positive or negative? Does it surprise you that both generations feel they receive these messages?
- What are the places where mothers and daughters seemed to disagree? Are those messages positive or negative?
  - In places where daughters receive a message that mothers did not write down, ask if mothers ever felt they were sent those messages. Invite them to share in a way that shows potential for empathy.

- Mothers, are there messages your daughters wrote up there that you wish they were not being sent?
- Which messages speak the loudest to you?
- Go through each heading. Are the messages being sent primarily about external self, internal self, or equally about both?
  - With the category of “messages from my Temple community and Judaism,” facilitators may want or need to add additional concepts. Highlight Jewish values or ideas that relate to *tzniut*, the body, or the self, and invite mothers and daughters to suggest tangible ways to incorporate these values in their lives. Possible values include:
    - *B'tzelem Elohim* (“in the image of God”): We learn in the creation story that we are all created *b'tzelem Elohim*. From this value, we learn that we should treat others with respect and we should also care for our own bodies because all people are in the image of God. [*Possible answers: not gossiping about someone's appearance; not making fun of someone because of how they look; maintaining personal hygiene; choosing not to tattoo or pierce body parts; exercising; eating healthy foods; seeing a doctor for regular checkups*]
    - *Kedushat ha-guf* (“holiness/sanctity of the body”): This is the phrase used throughout the *Sacred Choices* curriculum. It refers to the idea that our bodies are sacred and holy and is connected to *b'tzelem Elohim*. “*Kedushah*,” or holiness, is a weighty idea that speaks to more than just caring for our physical body. [*Suggested answers:*

*taking time for myself; recognizing my self-worth; choosing not to engage in sexual behavior until I am ready; not using drugs or alcohol; not tattooing; only dating people who treat me with respect]*

- *Neshamah* (“soul”): While this program speaks about inner and outer selves, one could also think about her inner self as her soul. Every morning service—weekday or Shabbat—includes the prayer “*Elohai neshamah*” which thanks God for breathing our souls into us. Invite participants to think about ways they nourish and care for their souls. *[Suggested answers: praying; taking time for myself; spending time with friends; volunteering; participating in temple activities such as services or study]*
- *Makom kedushah* (safe/holy space)<sup>10</sup>: The Jewish community or congregation may be a safe space for mothers and daughters because of the friends and support that exist. Rabbis, cantors, youth advisors, educators, religious school teachers are all resources available to mothers and daughters.

Facilitators should leave plenty of time for discussion and “go with the flow” when possible. This is the first time in this program where mothers and daughters may be openly speaking to one another (even teaching one another) about issues important to them and that dialogue should be encouraged.

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<sup>10</sup> Unlike the other Jewish values, which are commonly known and discussed, “*makom kedushah*” was developed within the context of this thesis and program. While it literally means “holy space,” there is also a word-play because “*makom*” is one of the many names for God. Speaking about holy space is not just about the physical space, but the sense of the Divine and spiritual space.



The wrap up for this section should emphasize that this dialogue will continue throughout the rest of this program. There are clearly a lot of messages being sent towards us, telling us both positive and negative things. How much we listen is ultimately our choice. Modesty invites us to listen but to ultimately let our inner selves guide us. Focusing on positive, healthy messages will increase our sense of self-worth and better connect our inner and outer selves.

### **3:15-4:00      Messages We Send Out**

We are sent messages, but we also send some of our own through our external selves. In this activity, we will try to make ourselves aware of the messages our external appearances or actions can send. Facilitators should choose from these movie clips based upon their availability and the ages of the daughters.

*Clip #1: Hairspray* (New Line Cinema, 2007)

This movie is a story of Tracy, a high school student who makes her way onto a TV show and fights for integration. Tracy and her mother are not petite women, and in this scene Tracy encourages her mother to come out of the house and out of her shell. [Cue the movie to scene 9 on the DVD, 37:30-45:30, in which Tracy and her mother go to “Mr. Pinky’s Hefty Hideaway.”]

- What does Edna, Tracy’s mother, not want to leave the house? What is Tracy’s response to her?
- What effect did the new look have on Edna? Do you think clothes and a new hairstyle can influence a person’s attitude and personality?

- When Mrs. Von Tussel (Michelle Pfeiffer) says about Tracy, “Well, she has redefined our standards,” what does she mean? Do you think that attitude is still around in our society today?

*Clip #2: Little Miss Sunshine (Fox Searchlight, 2006)*

This movie is a story of a family’s journey as the youngest, Olive (played by Abigail Breslin), competes in a beauty pageant. They drive from Albuquerque to Redondo Beach, California, and this is their first stop along the way. [Cue the movie to scene 6 of the DVD (25:30-29:00) where the family is having breakfast in the diner and Olive orders ice cream. Her father warns her that ice cream could make her fat and beauty queens are never overweight.]

- What is Olive’s father (Greg Kinnear’s character) trying to say? Do you agree with his point of view? Do you think society agrees with his point of view?
- What does Olive’s mother say? She says, “It’s okay to be skinny, its okay to be fat...whatever you want to be is okay.” Do you agree with that? Do you think society would take the same point of view when looking at people’s external appearance?

*Clip #3: Little Miss Sunshine*

Now that they have arrived at the beauty pageant, Olive and her mother go back to get ready. [There are two options. One is to start at the beginning of scene 18 (1:16:45) and after Olive and her mother see the other contestants preparing, skip ahead to scene 19 (1:19:20 to 1:21:40), the bathing suit competition and Olive looking at herself afterwards. Or let it run the entire time from scene 18 to 19 and ignore the unrelated parts.]

- What were your impressions of the various contestants?

- Based upon what you saw at the beginning of the scene, are these contestants' showing their natural appearances?
- What are the messages these contestants are sending through their appearance and behavior? (Think also about the music playing during the swimsuit competition)
- How does Olive compare to the other contestants? If you were a judge, what would you say? What might her father say?
- When Olive looks at herself in the mirror afterwards, what might she be thinking?

*Clip #4: Legally Blonde* (MGM Studios, 2001)

This movie is about a blonde college student who, after her boyfriend breaks up with her (instead of the expected marriage proposal), follows her boyfriend to Harvard Law School. [Cue to the opening montage and Elle's preparing for her "big date" (0:00-0:11)].

- What were some of the stereotypes in the opening scenes?
- What is your impression of Elle (played by Reese Witherspoon)? Why?
- What messages is she trying to send through her appearance? How can you tell?
- The movie is about Elle's journey through Harvard Law School. Does the idea of Elle as a law student seem compatible with her outward appearance in these scenes?

*Clip #5: Pretty Woman* (Buena Vista, 1990)<sup>11</sup>

This movie is a "Cinderella"-type story of a prostitute (Julia Roberts) and a wealthy businessman (Richard Gere) who meet during his business trip to Los Angeles.

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<sup>11</sup> This is included as a possible clip because it is a good example for the topic of modesty. However, the basic plot, involving a prostitute, may not be appropriate for the participants. Facilitators should use their judgment in including this clip.

They are together for one night and he invites her to stay the week to accompany him to fancy restaurants and business functions. She is given money to go buy a dress for dinner on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, and this is what happens. [Cue the movie to the scene of her walking down Rodeo Drive, entering a store, and being refused service. If time allows, fast forward to the scene where she is waiting in the hotel bar, dressed for dinner.]

- Why do you think the women at the store refused to serve Vivian (Julia Roberts' character)?
- What impression would you have if you encountered Vivian on the street? Why?
- When Vivian is dressed for dinner, what impression do you have of her? Why?
- What effect does Vivian's clothing and manner have on your perception of her?

After viewing and discussing the movie clips, facilitators should lead the group in the following wrap-up questions:

- Thinking about the movie clips you saw, what gave you an idea of the messages that characters were sending or being sent? What were some of the clues? [*Suggested answers: clothing; the way they talked; the words that were used; makeup; body size*]
- Could the characters control the messages they were sending? Do you think some were unintentional?
- Did you like any of the messages being sent through the characters? Were there any that made you uncomfortable? Any that you disagreed with?

Wrap up by explaining that our external selves send certain messages to others. These movie clips showed some extremes as well as some realistic situations. Sometimes we choose to have a certain external appearance and send the related messages about us to



others. Other times, there are circumstances (like the beauty pageant) that try to force us into sending a certain message. We have to determine if it is compatible with our inner selves and then if we want to go along with it.

## **Part V: Communication**

*The next segment of the program centers on the theme of communication.*

*Adolescence can be a challenging time for parents and children to communicate openly and honestly. Some families may have open relationships; other families may feel they do not know what is going on. Earlier in the retreat, there was an activity in which mothers and daughters spoke one-on-one about their internal and external self-portraits. The following activities focus on communicating collectively—mothers and daughters in groups rather than one-on-one—to introduce issues and discuss strategies for communicating effectively. At the end, mothers and daughters will have time to informally discuss what they have learned thus far. The final section of the program will have directed one-on-one activities that will allow mothers and daughters to employ some of these communication skills and discuss some of the issues that have been raised.*

### **Materials:**

2 pieces of butcher paper; markers; role-play scenarios for mothers, folded and in a container; role-play scenarios for daughters, folded and in a container; role-play scenarios for the whole group, folded and in a container (role-play scenarios can be copied and cut from Handout 4)

#### 4:00-4:45      **What We Would Like You to Know**

Mothers and daughters should be separated, preferably in different rooms. Each room will have a piece of paper and pen. Both groups should list 10 things they want the other group to know and 5 questions they want the other group to answer. While they can pick any topic, both groups should keep in mind the discussions from this morning and the idea of *tzniut*. [*Possible items on the lists could be: What are ways we as mothers can be more supportive to you?; What do you think is the biggest area of peer pressure for you right now?; We want you to know that we love you, even if we sometimes get angry; etc*] If necessary, facilitators should have the group vote on their lists to ensure they stay within the limits. Ideally this will lead to some discussion within each group.<sup>12</sup>

After 20 minutes (or however long it takes) the facilitators will exchange lists. Each group should read the list and answer the 5 questions that were asked. Facilitators should encourage discussion about the list of 10 things—is there anything surprising or especially meaningful?

After 15 minutes (or however long it takes) the facilitators should exchange the lists. Each group reads the other group's answers and discusses. Again, facilitators should encourage discussion about the answers. Is there anything that the group is surprised to hear? Do they feel comfortable discussing any of these answers with their mothers/daughters?

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<sup>12</sup> Thank you to Rabbi Sharyn Henry for sharing this activity.

#### **4:45-5:15      Communication Strategies and Role-Plays**

Facilitators should introduce this activity as an opportunity to have fun while thinking about how we communicate during stressful situations. For the first 15 minutes, mothers and daughters should go to separate rooms with facilitators in each room. Both groups will be given a container with slips of paper containing various scenarios that are intentionally left vague. Volunteers will draw a scenario and act it out for the group, and then the facilitator will lead the group in discussing the following questions. Both mothers and daughters should be reminded that they should not do or say anything that would violate the other's privacy.

- What were ways the participants communicated clearly in this scenario? Why?
- What were ways the participants did not communicate clearly? Were there any missed opportunities to communicate? How might this be handled differently?
- What are the stressful parts of this scenario for you as a mother/daughter? What makes this is a difficult scenario/conversation?

For the second 15 minutes, mothers and daughters should come together.

Facilitators should ask for a volunteer mother and daughter (though not related) to act out two of the scenarios, one that the mothers already discussed and one that the daughters already discussed. The group should discuss using the same questions as above and facilitators should draw the group's attention to differences between the mothers' and daughters' perceptions. If time allows, ask for new volunteers to act out another scenario or two.



### Mothers' Scenarios

#1: Sarah sees her daughter, Rebecca, wearing her coat tightly buttoned and trying to leave for school unnoticed. Sarah suspects Rebecca is wearing something of which she disapproves.

#2: Naomi gets a phone call from her friend Ruth. Ruth tells her that their daughters both were at a party with both boys and girls. There was minimal parental supervision and Ruth's daughter told her that there were couples 'hooking up.'

#3: Dana notices that her daughter, Leah, has been wearing a lot of makeup recently. Dana is worried that Leah is just doing what her friends do, even if she does not like it.

#4: Rachel comes home and tells her mother that her friends said that she needs to start wearing a thong so she does not have underwear lines under her pants.

### Daughters' Scenarios

#1: Danielle is at the mall with two of her friends. They are buying strapless tops to wear to a party, but Danielle isn't sure she is comfortable wearing one. They all are encouraging her to get one so she looks good for the party.

#2: Maya is at a school dance with her friend Samantha. Maya finds herself dancing with Jared, a boy she really likes, and he invites her and Samantha to an after-party at a house with no parents home. Maya is nervous and Samantha thinks it is a great idea. They discuss.

#3: Abby has a friend whose parents just allowed her to have plastic surgery (a nose job). Now that the friend is back at school with her new nose, she is encouraging Abby to talk to her parents about getting plastic surgery as well.

#4: Carrie has been wearing a lot of makeup and some revealing clothing. Allison has tried to do the same thing, but always seems to get caught by her parents before she can get out of the house. Allison is asking Carrie for ways to sneak out of the house without her parents noticing her makeup or clothes.

### **Part VI: Making Choices and Judgments**

*This is the last major idea to be explored in this program. Up until now, several components of a Reform Jewish understanding of modesty have been discussed: a sense of self, an understanding of the messages our external selves send, the messages peers and the media send to focus on the external. Having learned this, daughters are ready to start thinking about how modesty relates to them personally, how they decide what external messages to send. This section is about listening to our internal voices and choosing external behaviors and appearances and actions that are right for us.*

*Modesty is a value judgment to a large extent. Mothers and daughters will each have an opinion about what is modest and immodest for external appearances. The key is to figure out what reasons daughters may have for revealing certain parts of their external selves and help them with the internal decision-making process.*

#### **Materials:**

Body-size pieces of butcher paper (one for every group of 4-6 participants); black, yellow, green, and red markers (enough for one of each color for each group); copies of Handout 5 (one for each group); 12 clear containers; labels or signs for the containers; bags containing 30 jelly beans each in one color (one for each mother); bags containing 30 jelly beans each in a different color (one for each daughter); copies of Handout 6 (one

per participant); pens or pencils; copies of Handout 7 (one per pair); small cloth or plastic bags (one per pair); slips of blank paper.

### **5:15-6:15      *Ervah* and Modesty: Some Things Should Remain Private?**

One concept of *tzniut* as it relates to clothing is *ervah*, which means nakedness (that which is stimulating). The rabbis felt that certain areas should be covered up because they are *ervah*, sexually stimulating to others. This includes below the collarbone, upper arms, the midriff, and above the knee. In Orthodox Jewish practice, any female covers these areas and when she is married, she covers her hair as well.

In Reform Judaism, we believe that each person chooses what he or she wears but should still show respect for his or her body and self. While we do not speak in terms of *ervah*, or covering up parts so others are not stimulated, we still believe that some parts of ourselves should be kept sacred and private. This comes out of self-respect and from the idea of *b'tzelem Elohim*, that we are all made in the image of God and should treat ourselves as such.

Mothers and daughters should separate and then divide into small groups of 4-6. Each group receives a piece of butcher paper or posterboard and several markers, as well as a copy of Handout 5. In these groups, they should follow the prompts to determine what they believe should be kept private and not be casually displayed. Facilitators should make it clear that these will be anonymously exchanged between mothers' and daughters' groups, so they should not write any names.

1. Draw the outline of a female body on the paper using the black marker.
2. As a group, decide what parts of the body go into the following categories and color accordingly. If there are disagreements, color the areas with multiple shades or make notes along the side of the paper:
  - a. Parts of the body that I can **always** expose in public--yellow
  - b. Parts of the body that I can **sometimes** expose in public (what are those circumstances? Write them next to the colored areas.)--green
  - c. Parts of the body that **should only** be seen by others when I decide—  
red
3. List at the bottom of the paper what factors helped you decide what parts of the body went into each category.

When the groups are finished, the facilitators should collect their papers. The papers from the daughters' groups should be given (anonymously) to the mothers' groups and vice versa. Groups should discuss the following questions:

1. Look at how the areas of the body have been categorized. What immediately do you notice? Is anything surprising?
2. Do you disagree with any categorization on this paper? Why or why not?
3. Read the bottom of the paper, where each group wrote the factors in their decision-making. Do you agree with this list? Is there anything you wish were not on the list? Anything you wish had been added?

Everyone should then come together and hang the papers up, mothers' papers on one side and daughters' on the other. Ask the group for their general reactions, then ask any of these guiding questions:

1. First you did this activity in your peer group and then saw the results from a different age group. Do you think age/generations matter in this activity?
  - a. Do you think your grandmothers would answer differently (or for mothers, would your mothers answer differently)?
2. As we look at the drawings, where did most everyone agree?
3. What category was the hardest to decide? Why?
4. What factors were a part of your decision making? Mothers, are there any you disagree with or wish had been included? Daughters, are there any you disagree with or wish had been included?

Facilitators should wrap up the activity by explaining that this activity focused on the body, a large part of our external selves. Part of modesty is using our inner selves to determine what we display in our outer selves. Determining what is public and private in our external self is an important decision and one we will talk about in the next activity.

#### **6:15-6:45 Influences on our Decision-Making: A Jelly-Bean Poll**

Facilitators should put several jars or glass bowls on the table with these labels: inner self, parents, children, siblings, grandparents, friends, teachers, coaches, classmates or coworkers, youth advisor/cantor/rabbi, magazines or television, guessing/other. Each daughter will be given a bag with jelly beans or marbles of one color; each mother will receive a bag with jelly beans or marbles of a different color. Each bag should have 30 pieces in them.

Explain that each of us faces hundreds of choices every day. One scientist found we make 200 decisions just on food each day,<sup>13</sup> so imagine how many choices we make overall—from whether or not to hit the snooze button to what time to go to bed. Invite everyone to brainstorm what decisions they make every day and write them on a piece of easel paper/butcher paper. The list will likely begin with the mundane—whether to get out of bed; what to have for breakfast—and then progress to decisions related to modesty (the connection between internal and external): what to wear, whether to go along with friends, when to say I am uncomfortable with something, when to speak out against what I believe is wrong. Encourage participants to think more about these big decisions (when to speak up, when to start dating someone, when to say no to unwanted advances) by saying something like, “Okay, beyond the everyday stuff, what are some of the really difficult decisions that you face, perhaps in connection with relationships, your work or school, or your body.” Open it up to decisions they have faced in the last month/six months/year to get participants thinking.

Facilitators can introduce the jelly bean poll as follows: “Each person has 30 jelly beans to distribute over these 12 jars. Think about how you make the decisions you face each day and what influences you the most. When you are ready, put your jelly beans in these jars according to how much influence those people or things have on your choices (more jelly beans go into the jars representing the things that have the most influence on you).”

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<sup>13</sup> According to a study done by Dr. Brian Wansink of Cornell University, as reported in “‘Mindless’ Autopilot Drives People to Underestimate Food Decisions,” [www.sciencedaily.com](http://www.sciencedaily.com), December 26, 2006.

When the activity is done, look at the various jars. Remind everyone which color represents mothers and which represents daughters. Ask participants to comment on the distribution.

- What had the most jelly beans?
- Which had the most equal distribution of mothers and daughters?
- Are there jars that you feel are more negative influences or more positive influences than others?
- Do you feel some jars should have had more responses?
- For those who put jelly beans in the “guessing/other” jar, could you give examples of specific influences in this category? [*Possible answers: Judaism; things I learned at school; how-to books; society*]
- Were there jars you felt were missing?

Also ask the participants if they believe the jelly bean poll would look the same if we were speaking about issues such as: do I stand up/speak out for something I believe is right even if no one else does? Should I go along with a behavior I am uncomfortable with because everyone else is? What limits should I set in a dating relationship?

- How would the poll change? Why do you think that is?

### **6:45-7:15      What Are the Tough Decisions I Face?**

This reflective activity begins individually. Each person should have a copy of Handout 6, a pen/pencil, and something to write on. Participants should spread out and write according to these prompts (and their answers will remain private):

- What are some major decisions I have made in the past year? Would I decide differently if I faced them again?
- What are some decisions I believe I will face in the next 1-3 years? How do I think I would decide?
- As I think about my inner self and my outer self, do I feel they are connected? How have I been listening to my inner self? How have I ignored it?

After 20 minutes, bring the group back together. Explain that everyone faces difficult decisions in their lives. In adolescence and early adulthood, there are many decisions and the answers are not always easy to figure out. Young women face pressures in our society that previous generations may not have faced. Continue along the lines of: “Modesty is about connecting our internal self to our external self—our actions, our appearance, our behavior, our speech, etc. Modest women understand themselves and use their inner selves as a guide for their external selves. They try not to separate their outsides from who they really are. As you look at these decisions that you have made and the decisions you think you will face, how can modesty help you? Do you feel that you can listen to your inner self as a guide, or does your external self feel separate? These are questions for each of us to think about. All of the pieces of this program ultimately are ways to help you to think about ways to make decisions that are right for you and are connected to who you are inside, not what others believe you should be on the outside.”

### **7:15-7:45      A Mother-Daughter Covenant**

Most would agree that the bond between a mother and daughter is unique and strong. To some extent, mothers relive their experiences through their daughters and try



to pass on traditions, values, and wisdom throughout their lives. While daughters may not appreciate this wisdom at this particular point in their lives, as daughters move through life, the wisdom and experience of their mothers may become more important. As daughters grow up, the relationship between mother and daughter can become a partnership or friendship as well as a parent-child relationship.

This retreat has focused on *tzniut*, the idea that internal and external selves should be related and that women should think about their internal self and needs to determine their external appearance. Throughout the program, there have been opportunities for mothers and daughters to disagree and discuss that disagreement and for the wisdom of both mothers and daughters to be shared and discussed as well. This final activity is designed to give each mother-daughter pair an opportunity to honor their unique bond within the framework of *brit* (covenant), an important Jewish idea. The relationships between teenagers and parents sometimes get a little strained, so this is a time when mothers and daughters can renew their covenant with one another and talk about ways to help one another in facing challenges.

Just as marriage is a sacred relationship between two people who love each other, the mother-daughter bond is a sacred connection that should be honored. To honor this covenant, we will rely on a new way to look at the traditional marriage ceremony as created by Dr. Rachel Adler, a feminist theologian. In a traditional understanding, a wedding is actually an acquisition of a woman by a man, like a business transaction in which women are treated like property, not like partners. One of the changes Dr. Adler suggests is using *hilkhot shutafut*, or laws about creating partnerships, in place of laws of

acquisition to create a covenant.<sup>14</sup> While no one here is getting married yet, we will use some pieces of this partnership law to renew the covenant between mothers and daughters. The two pieces we will use are a statement of personal undertaking (the Mother-Daughter Covenant), which explains how the two partners will commit themselves to the partnership and help one another, and a symbol of joint acquisition, in which we “pool our resources” into one bag.

Each mother-daughter pair should receive a sheet of paper to write their covenant (Handout 7), some slips of paper, and a bag (preferably cloth so it can be decorated, or plastic if cost is an issue). They should take time to write their covenant of how mothers can help daughters and daughters can help mothers in making decisions and developing inner strength. Aspects of this covenant could include: mothers promising to help their daughters fight against peer pressure; daughters promising to be honest with their mothers; setting aside time to talk or be together; acknowledging that the daughters’ lives are different from their mothers. This covenant can be abstract or very concrete depending upon the mother-daughter pair. After they have finished the covenant, they should take several slips of paper and each write things they bring to the partnership, for example: listening, honesty, respect privacy, love, laughter, family recipes, history, traditions. They share these ideas with one another, then fold up the papers and put them into the bag.

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<sup>14</sup> Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 192-193. The restructured wedding ceremony is called a *brit ahuvim*, a covenant between lovers. The piece that I am adopting here is just one of the many wonderful suggestions that Dr. Adler makes for ways of creating partnership and equality in the marriage ceremony.

When every pair is finished, the facilitator should ask mothers and daughters to together hold up their bag, showing they both have ownership over this partnership and covenant.

The facilitator can lead everyone in a blessing:

“As God has blessed our ancestors Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel, may God bless us as we renew the sacred bond of mother-daughter love. May we always show our love to one another, giving honor to the covenant between us, within our families, and between God and the Jewish people. *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, shehechyanu v'kiyamnu v'higianu lazman hazeh.* Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who gives us life and sustains us and allows us to reach this time.” Encourage mothers and daughters to hang the bag somewhere where they will both see it and be reminded of the covenant they have made.

## Handout 1

### Text Study of Micah 6:8

Read the following text and answer the questions below:

Micah 6:8

הַגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מָה טוֹב וּמָה-יְהוָה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ כִּי אִם-עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט  
וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצָּנֶע לִכְתּוֹת עִם-אֱלֹהֶיךָ :

"He has told you, O man, what is good, And what God requires of you: Only to do justice And to love goodness, And to walk modestly (*v'hatznea*) with your God."

- What are the three things the prophet Micah says that God requires of us?
  
- What does it mean to "walk modestly" with God?
  
- Does walking modestly relate to doing justice and loving goodness? How?

## Handout 2

### Internal-External Self Text Study

Read and discuss these two texts using the questions below:

#### From Psalm 45:14

*"All of the glory of the king's daughter is within..."*

כָּל-כְּבוֹדָהּ בֵּת-מֶלֶךְ  
פְּנִימָה

#### Questions:

1. What do you think this verse means?
  - a. If "the king" refers to God, then what might this verse mean?
  - b. If we read it as "All of the glory/beauty of the king's daughter is directed inward," how does the meaning change?
2. This verse, with different interpretations, appears in many Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jewish texts that advocate traditional observance of *tzniut* (modesty). One such passage reads, "Tzniut, as the Jewish way of life, requires that we cover our bodies, which are holy, but we do not cover those parts of us which enable us to reveal our *neshamah* (soul). This is the message in "The glory of a king's daughter is her inner real self."<sup>15</sup> What do you think of this idea?
3. What are ways that you could envision glory or beauty in yourself or others? What are ways that glory is outside? What are ways that glory is inside?

#### From Proverbs 31:25

*"She dresses in clothes of strength and glory"*

עוֹז-וְהֶדָּר לְבוּשָׁהּ

#### Questions:

1. What do you think this verse means?
2. This verse is part of a poem called *Eshet Chayil* ("A Woman of Valor"). It is traditionally read by a husband to a wife on Shabbat and speaks to all the

<sup>15</sup> Malka Touger, *Just My Style*, 50.

different responsibilities of running a home and caring for a family. For mothers: what are some things about which this verse speaks?

3. This verse has also been interpreted as applying to young women who are trying to live modest lives. For daughters: what are some ways in which you might need strength and glory to live a life of *tzniut*, or modesty?

From Berachot 28a

*"Rabban Gamliel used to say, 'Any student whose inside is not like his outside should not enter the house of study.'"*

*Commentary: On the day that Rabban Gamliel was overthrown as the head of the house of study at Yavneh, they added hundreds of seats to accommodate all the new students who wanted to enter."*

Questions:

1. What is the basic assumption that Rabban Gamliel made?
2. What does the commentary tell us about Rabban Gamliel's idea?
3. Do you think it is possible for a person's outside and inside to be the same?
4. Should a person's outside and inside be the same?

## Handout 3

### Magazine Activity

#### Mothers:

1. Have you read any of these magazines in the last year? Do your daughters read them?
2. Look through the table of contents and read the article titles out loud. What are some of the themes?
3. Look at one or two articles that caught your eye. What seem to be the major messages of the articles?
4. Flip through the magazine and look at some of the advertisements. What messages are they sending?
5. Thinking about the messages of some of the articles and advertisements—do you feel they are good messages for your daughters? Why or why not?
6. What do you think your daughters would think of this magazine? Why?

#### Daughters:

1. Have you read any of these magazines in the last year? How did you get access to them?
2. Look through the table of contents and read the article titles out loud. Are there any that surprise you? What seem to be the major topics?
3. Look at one or two articles that caught your eye. What are the major messages of the article?
4. Flip through the magazine and look at some of the advertisements. What messages do you think they are sending?
5. Thinking about your answers to the previous questions...do you like the messages this magazine is sending (through advertisements and articles)? What are some positive ideas and what are some negative ideas?
6. What do you think your mothers would think of this magazine? Why?

## Handout 4: Communication Role-Play Scenarios

Facilitators can copy these scenarios and cut them into strips (one for each).

### Mothers' Scenarios

#1: Sarah sees her daughter, Rebecca, wearing her coat tightly buttoned and trying to leave for school unnoticed. Sarah suspects Rebecca is wearing something of which she disapproves.

#2: Naomi gets a phone call from her friend Ruth. Ruth tells her that their daughters both were at a party with both boys and girls. There was minimal parental supervision and Ruth's daughter told her that there were couples 'hooking up.'

#3: Dana notices that her daughter, Leah, has been wearing a lot of makeup recently. Dana is worried that Leah is just doing what her friends do, even if she does not like it.

#4: Rachel comes home and tells her mother that her friends said that she needs to start wearing a thong so she does not have underwear lines under her pants.

### Daughters' Scenarios

#1: Danielle is at the mall with two of her friends. They are buying strapless tops to wear to a party, but Danielle isn't sure she is comfortable wearing one. They all are encouraging her to get one so she looks good for the party.

#2: Maya is at a school dance with her friend Samantha. Maya finds herself dancing with Jared, a boy she really likes, and he invites her and Samantha to an after-party at a house with no parents home. Maya is nervous and Samantha thinks it is a great idea. They discuss.

#3: Abby has a friend whose parents just allowed her to have plastic surgery (a nose job). Now that the friend is back at school with her new nose, she is encouraging Abby to talk to her parents about getting plastic surgery as well.

#4: Carrie has been wearing a lot of makeup and some revealing clothing. Allison has tried to do the same thing, but always seems to get caught by her parents before she can get out of the house. Allison is asking Carrie for ways to sneak out of the house without her parents noticing her makeup or clothes.



## Handout 5

### Ervah and Modesty: Some Things Should Remain Private?

#### Directions:

1. Draw the outline of a female body on the paper using the black marker.
2. As a group, decide what parts of the body go into the following categories and color accordingly. If there are disagreements, color the areas with multiple shades or make notes along the side of the paper:
  - a. Parts of the body that I can **always expose in public**--yellow
  - b. Parts of the body that I can **sometimes expose in public** (what are those circumstances? Write them next to the colored areas.)--green
  - c. Parts of the body that **should only be seen by others when I decide**—red
3. List at the bottom of the paper what factors helped you decide what parts of the body went into each category.

#### After the drawings are exchanged:

1. Look at how the areas of the body have been categorized. What immediately do you notice? Is anything surprising?
2. Do you disagree with any categorization on this paper? Why or why not?
3. Read the bottom of the paper, where each group wrote the factors in their decision-making. Do you agree with this list? Is there anything you wish were not on the list? Anything you wish had been added?

## Handout 6

### What Are the Tough Decisions I Face?

Spend some time reflecting on the following questions:

What are some major decisions I have made in the past year? Would I decide differently if I faced them again?

What are some decisions I believe I will face in the next 1-3 years? How do I think I would decide what to do?

As I think about my inner self and my outer self, do I feel they are connected? How have I been listening to my inner self? How have I ignored it?

Handout 7  
A Mother-Daughter Covenant

Here are some challenges we think we will face:

Here are some goals for us to work on together:

Here are ways that \_\_\_\_\_ (mother) can help \_\_\_\_\_ (daughter):

Here are ways that \_\_\_\_\_ (daughter) can help \_\_\_\_\_ (mother):

## Afterword

In December 2007, “Dr. Phil” had show entitled “Mild vs. Wild.” Daughters and mothers who disagreed on appropriate dress and modesty were brought on the show to discuss their issues. Wendy Shalit, in an editorial in *The Wall Street Journal*, explained how she was invited on the show and made suggestions for teenagers who could speak about modesty, yet was eventually uninvited from the show. Instead of interviewing teenagers who believed in modesty, the show featured daughters who thought their mothers were “old” and frumpy, making modesty solely a generational issue. Dr. Phil even encouraged some of the mothers to “lighten up” about their daughters’ clothes since they were still getting good grades.<sup>1</sup>

In the February 17, 2007, edition of *The New York Times Magazine*, an article detailed how young girls use a website called stardoll.com to dress up any number of famous celebrities in designer clothes. The website also allows girls to order a “MeDoll,” a likeness of themselves dressed in designer apparel. Over 1200 brands have been requested by users thus far, showing the importance of current fashions to many young girls.<sup>2</sup> This raises the issue (again) of how important outer appearances are to young women. A “MeDoll” allows them to have a doll that represents what they wish they looked like, but not necessarily how they actually appear.

In the same issue, a photo spread of spring fashions were described as moving away from the ‘lingerie’ dressing of previous seasons. “It doesn’t even have much to do with actual nudity; it merely offers it up as a suggestion.” Under a picture of a model wearing a camisole and underwear, the following comment by fashion critic Cathy Horyn

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Shalit, “Too Modest for TV,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 21, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Rob Walker, “Dress-Up for Dollars,” *The New York Times Magazine*, February 17, 2007, 22.

appeared: “There is more beauty and modesty in the way Mr. [Marc] Jacobs exposes a bra strap than you see most days on the subway.”<sup>3</sup> Apparently displaying one’s underwear could be modest if the intention was to display cutting-edge fashion designs.

These are three of several examples of modesty in current media that arose during the research and writing of this thesis. Every week, there are articles in newspapers, magazines, and internet blogs (such as Wendy Shalit’s “modestyzone.net”), that speak to the issues of modesty discussed in this thesis and in many of its sources. Modesty—whether in regards to clothing and makeup, body image, or sexual activity—is directly or indirectly a hot topic of conversation. *Tzniut* is also being discussed in the Reform Jewish context as the high-school module of *Sacred Choices* is released by the URJ this spring.

Modesty is a topic that I believe will continue to be discussed in secular society, as well as in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim circles. Concern for young women’s well-being, both internal and external, leads us to consider the role that modesty can have in a woman’s life as understood religiously or secularly. Whether we are discussing females or males of any age, we can see ways in which modesty or *tzniut* can be applied as a value and as a guide if understood in a positive way. The challenge is for us to continue to be aware of modesty and immodesty as expressed in current media and to try to find ways to understand modesty as it is discussed in this thesis: a way to make decisions and connect our internal and external selves, instead of speaking of modesty in a narrow, and negative, way.

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<sup>3</sup> Alix Browne, “Under Things: Getting to the bottom of spring’s modest proposal,” *The New York Times Magazine*, February 17, 2007, 54-59.

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