

What is so Important About Modesty?

Contributed by Rabbi Eliezer Melamed
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Question:

I am beginning to return to Judaism and to keep Shabbat and kashrut, but being an attractive woman, and having dressed in the fashions of the day for so many years, I find it hard to cover myself up according to all the laws of modesty. Maybe if I understood the reasoning behind it, I would be more receptive. Can you enlighten me?

Answer:

Modesty is, without a doubt, one of the foundations of Judaism and the Jewish People.

In his book "P'ninai Halachah," Rabbi Eliezer Melamed explains that the concepts of modesty stem from the Torah commandment, "Be holy, for I the L-rd your G-d am holy." The Torah commentator, Rashi, explains that being holy is to separate oneself from forbidden sexual transgressions by establishing fences that distance a person from sin. The Torah also warns, "Do not make yourselves impure through these things, for in all of these matters the gentiles polluted themselves."

There is a clear connection between the way the Nation of Israel safeguarded the laws of modesty throughout its generations, and its being spiritually distinguished from amongst the other nations. Even when we were in bondage in Egypt, a country steeped in immorality and sexual transgression, we didn't succumb to their perverse culture, but rather guarded our modest traditions. Because of this, we merited to stand at Mount Sinai and receive the Divine Torah.

Immodesty and immorality emphasize the physical sides of man, while modesty highlights the inner spiritual aspect. While at first glance, it may seem like physical freedom reveals the full force of life, a deeper, more patient look reveals the very opposite — that it is the inner, more spiritual values that preserve the wellsprings of life and its holiness, and that, through this, the physical sides of life are elevated and blessed as well.

Judaism does not at all reject the material side of life. Everything has its purpose and place. However, the spiritual must guide the physical side of life to adopt its proper place and measure, and this is where modesty plays a vital role, for the individual, for the family, and for the community as a whole. Without modesty, the passions of the body and the powerful physical forces of life surge to the forefront, overshadowing the more discreet and inner spiritual side of man. In order to insure the supremacy of man's Divine soul, the body has to be held in check, in its rightful place, and not be made into the principle thing. Only when the spiritual side of life occupies its true and central place, can the physical side of life be harnessed in the most productive fashion, without causing harm to the soul.

One of the basic rules of modesty is that a woman should dress or behave in a manner that draws excessive attention to her. There is absolutely no prohibition against a woman appearing attractive. On the contrary, it is important that every young unmarried woman and every wife should take care to present an attractive appearance, but it should be done in a subtle, somewhat underplayed fashion that projects beauty and pleasantness, faithfulness and good taste, and not beauty that projects provocativeness, arrogance, and sexual temptation.

The attribute of modesty, stamped in the character of the Jewish Nation throughout its history, is the factor that has led the Jewish People to all of its profound spiritual achievements, and therefore, Judaism stresses the value of modesty and

a holy lifestyle.

Therefore, modesty has great value not only to the individual, but also to the family, and the Jewish Nation as a whole. On the individual level, immodesty is a transgression that emphasizes man's external, physical side over his inner, spiritual nature. Every damaging act to man's spiritual nature reduces the vitality of his being, weakening his spiritual powers, and therefore weakening his ability to love his fellow deeply. Take for example the world of movie stars who are constantly changing partners, being unable to develop a deep and lasting spiritual love because of their preoccupation with externalities.

On another level, breaches of modesty impair the wholeness of family life, and can destroy it completely. Even seemingly minor immodest behavior damages the foundations of family love and trust. Love must be directed toward one's mate, and any loss of intimacy between husband and wife, when the powers of attraction and connection are directly outwardly through immodest dress and behavior, comes at the expense of the home, something which adversely affects, not only the husband and wife, but the children as well. When a woman tries to attract the attention of men outside of the house, it is certain that her love for her husband is not reaching its full potential. In contrast, by guarding the ways of modesty, a wife can direct the depth of her love to its natural and proper place.

When it comes to the Jewish Nation, it is modesty that preserves our unique spiritual character. The Torah commandment not to walk in the manners of the nations comes to safeguard us from following after the immoral customs of the gentiles. It is our adherence to the laws of modesty which has distinguished us from nations who lauded physical prowess, then disappeared from the stage of world history. Breaches of modesty on our part cloud the uniqueness of our nation and heritage, and break down the boundaries of holiness that the Torah wants us to keep.

Rabbi Melamed points out that the laws of modesty don't come to reject physical beauty and natural love. On the contrary, the goal of modesty is to transform physical beauty and natural love to profound and lasting matters. In order that love does not focus only on its external aspects, the halachah comes to set boundaries of modesty that force us to place the emphasis on the deeper, inner, spiritual side of love, and thus, through this, to enhance the beauty of natural, physical love.

And while every woman has to guard the principles of modesty, married women all the more so, because love isn't a physical matter that depends on the moment's sensation. Love is a many-sided phenomenon, so that the more a person develops his and her spiritual aspects, he can reach a deeper and more soulful love. Love between people who are not modest in their ways usually is a fleeting thing based on external attraction and lust, which can't stand the test of time, because lust and external beauty don't last, and there is always someone more attractive than one's partner. Once physical love reaches a climax, it naturally wanes, as we can see from the lives of celebrities, who are constantly changing partners.

However, people who guide their lives according to the rules of modesty, approach the physical aspects of beauty and love with a holy respect, because they express endless deep expressions of holy connection. And because the physical gives expression to profound and holy emotions, it is not proper for a married woman to display her physical charms before the eyes of the world.

Marriage is not the end of love's attraction, but rather its beginning. Therefore a married woman has to be especially careful to guard her modesty in order to deepen the connection between herself and her husband, and to focus her, and his, attention on the deeper, more eternal aspects of love.

(Based on the book, "P'ninai Halachah," Vol. 2, by Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, Chapter on Modesty).

