

תנא דבי אליהו, כל השונה הלכות בכל יום מובטח לו שהוא בן העולם הבא

IT WAS TAUGHT IN THE ACADEMY OF ELIYAHU, WHOEVER STUDIES TORAH LAWS  
EVERY DAY IS ASSURED THAT HE WILL BE PRESENT IN THE 'WORLD TO COME'

## Chapter 2, Question 1

*How modest does one have to be when getting dressed or undressed?*

The importance of being *tzenua* (modest) is a trait very much characteristic of all respectable members of Klal Yisrael. We all know that it is improper to **publicly** expose parts of the body that are normally covered. The topic we will be discussing in this essay is whether this halacha also applies when one is in **private**. Could we assume that there is no necessity to conduct ourselves in a modest manner when we are in the privacy of our own homes? Furthermore, does one have to be *tzenua* in an environment where it is normal to have covered parts of the body exposed, for example in the bathroom or mikveh? And is there a difference between men and women in this halacha?

Before analysing the halachic aspects of this fundamental subject, it would be useful to look into the source of the concept of *tzniut* (modesty) and the notion of 'clothing' itself.

It is fascinating to see that despite all the evils present in the world today, all civilised societies across the globe have nevertheless embraced the concept of clothing, regardless of their religion and even in the warmest of climates. Where did the idea of clothing originate from?

Ironically, we find part of the answer to this question in none other than the Hebrew word for clothing itself. If we look at the word **לבוש** 'clothing', it can also be read as **לא בוש** meaning 'no shame'.<sup>1</sup> The connection between these two meanings is an obvious one. There is an inherent feeling of shame in one's state of nakedness and clothing seems to take away this feeling by giving a person a sense of dignity.<sup>2</sup>

1. גמ' שבת ע"ז: בשם רב יהודה.

2. בנוסף למה שפירש רש"י שם.

This idea is portrayed in the words of the great Sage, Rabbi Yohanan (in the Talmud tractate Shabbat<sup>3</sup>) who would refer to his clothing as 'מכבודתי' meaning '*that which gives me honour*'! Rabbi Yohanan was putting an emphasis on the main purpose of clothing, which is to dignify a person.<sup>4</sup> But if we looked even further back, we would find that the original source of our awareness of the necessity for clothing is actually rooted in the very beginning of the creation of mankind! When Hava and Adam sinned in Gan Eden and ate the forbidden fruit from the *Eitz Hada'at* (the Tree of Knowledge), the verse says that their eyes were 'opened' and the very first thing they experienced was the shame inherent in the perception of their nakedness<sup>5</sup>.

**ותפקחנה עיני שניהם וידעו כי עירומים הם ויתפרו עלה תאנה ויעשו להם חגרת.**

*And the eyes of both of them were opened and they realised that they were naked, and they sewed together a fig leaf and made for themselves clothing.*

Even though Adam and Hava were the only people in the world, they nevertheless felt a great sense of embarrassment in their nakedness and immediately made basic clothing from plant material in order to cover themselves. There is an obvious question here... why did they not feel this shame before the sin? What happened after eating of the fruit which made them uncomfortable with nakedness?

There is a deep explanation for this question which we can answer as follows...

Before the sin, man was created as a cosmic being - free from any **internal** evil inclination. Having no internal evil inclination meant that Adam and Hava were able to perceive the spiritual and physical world with extreme clarity. The Gemara in tractate Hagiga<sup>6</sup> reveals that a special primordial 'light' that was created on the first day of creation enabled Adam to experience all the spiritual and physical wonders of the universe from one end of the cosmos to the other. [Sceptics often ask... if the world was really created for mankind then why is our planet such a miniscule spec in the immense expanse of the universe? Based on the Gemara in Hagiga<sup>7</sup> the answer is that originally man *did* in fact reach into all the dimensions of the universe, but after the sin he became a more limited being and 'shrunk' into the form of man we are today].

3. דף קיג:

4. וכפרש"י שם

5. בראשית ג, ז

6. דף יב

7. שם

Such things are difficult to put into words, but it is remarkable to also note that before the sin Adam stood in a place (or his soul reached into a dimension) **that we pray to** today! Which is why at the initial moment of Adam's creation the *Malachim* (celestial beings) did not know who to sing praise to, i.e. to Adam or to Hashem.<sup>8</sup> This explains why there was no issue with Adam and Hava's state of nakedness. Their spiritual status was far more superior to ours and beyond our comprehension. Their perception of the physical world was therefore automatically coupled with the clarity of its spiritual essence.

After the sin, however, the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) 'entered' man and became a constant **internal** spiritual struggle. The world was now seen through different eyes - it became an unclear and distorted environment where **physicality became confused as end in itself**, rather than a means to an end. This is the source of their embarrassment, they could no longer immediately perceive each other's spiritual essence, and their bodies had now become tools with which one could either; merit to achieve the highest levels of spiritual sanctity, or perform the greatest of evils (Heaven forbid!).

This whole incident in Bereishis is the root of the concept of *tzniut*. However, even though the story of Adam and Hava does teach us the importance of covering parts of the body in public, it does not show the necessity for modesty in private environments. Is there a real halachic requirement to be extra careful not to reveal parts of the body that are normally covered when getting dressed in the privacy of our own bedrooms? Indeed we find that the Shulhan Aruch rules that conducting oneself in a modest manner is just as important in private! Echoing the words of the Tur, the Shulhan Aruch writes the following halacha regarding how one should get dressed in the morning:<sup>9</sup>

לא ילבש חלוקו מיושב, אלא יקח חלוקו ויכניס בו ראשו וזרועותיו בעודנו שוכב,

ונמצא כשיקום שהוא מכוסה.

*One should not wear his garment in a sitting position, rather one should take his garment and place it over his head and arms whilst lying down (in bed), and the result would be that when he stands he will be covered.*

8. בראשית רבה, ח'.

9. סימן ב', סע' א'.

The above piece of Shulhan Aruch needs some clarification. Without any background knowledge it would seem bizarre to say one is not allowed to put on their clothing whilst sitting. What does this mean? Surprisingly, the Shulhan Aruch is actually referring to a case where one slept with no clothing at all! Thankfully, today we are accustomed to sleeping in a more modest fashion, but in the times of the Shulhan Aruch it was more common for people to sleep with no pyjamas. The Mishna Berura<sup>10</sup> therefore explains that this is the reason why the Shulhan Aruch is concerned that one should not dress in a sitting position - **דאז בהכרח יתגלה גופו** - *because he would then unavoidably reveal his body*, i.e. when he sits up from his bed the upper body would get uncovered by the blanket falling.

So we learn here that according to the Shulhan Aruch one must be extra careful not to reveal parts of their body (which are normally covered) when getting dressed or undressed. The source of this Shulhan Aruch is elaborated on in the Beit Yosef, which is his commentary on the Tur. The Beit Yosef<sup>11</sup> quotes a Gemara in tractate Shabbat<sup>12</sup> where Rabbi Yossi declares the following statement about himself:

**ואמר רבי יוסי, מימי לא ראו קורות ביתי אימרי חלוקי.**

*And Rabbi Yossi said: In all my days the beams of my house  
never saw the [inner] stitches of my tunic.*

Rashi explains that what Rabbi Yossi meant was that he never took off his garment by pulling the bottom edge up and over his head, which would turn the tunic inside out and thus make the inner stitches visible to the beams of the house. This is because by doing so he would have been left naked for a mere moment before covering himself again. Instead Rabbi Yossi would get dressed in a sitting position with the lower half of his body still covered, and he would then take off the garment. In this way he would be able to dress or undress himself without having to expose himself unnecessarily. What is puzzling is that there are many statements that Rabbi Yossi made about himself in this piece of Gemara, but the Shulhan Aruch chose only to bring the above statement and made it a halachic ruling, i.e. of the modest manner in which every Jew **should** dress. Why was this so?

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10. שם, סע"ק א'.

11. שם אות א'.

12. דק קיח:.

For example, Rebbi Yossi also declared<sup>13</sup> that he **never once** looked at his 'brit milah'! Instead of bringing this teaching as halacha, the Shulhan Aruch simply makes a statement in **אבן העזר** *Evan HaEzer*<sup>14</sup> that our 'righteous ancestors' and the 'greatest of sages' would also conduct themselves in such a fashion. The Shulhan does not however make this a halachic ruling that all Jews should abide by. Instead he seems to imply that conducting oneself in such a way would be considered a 'pious' thing to do. So there is a strong question on the Shulhan Aruch - why did he feel that the matter of *tzniut* in private is of such importance? So much so that he established it as a halachic principle?

The **לבוש** Levush (Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe 1530-1612), who was a famous Talmudic scholar in Prague and then Venice, gives the following beautiful explanation behind the Shulhan Aruch's ruling above:<sup>15</sup>

ומפני שמחוייב האדם להיות תמיד אימת בוראו עליו, יהיה צנוע בכל מעשיו, שהצניעות והבושת מביאין האדם לידי הכנעה לפניו יתברך... ואל יאמר הריני בחדרי חדרים מי יודעני ומי רואני שאני ערום, כי הקב"ה מלא כל הארץ כבודו...

*And because a person is obligated to have upon him the fear of his Creator, he should be modest in all his actions, because modesty and bashfulness bring a person to humility before [Hashem] yisbarach... And one should not say; "Behold I am in inner [private] chambers, who would know and who would see that I am naked?"*

*For the glory of HaKadosh Baruch Hu fills the entire world!*

As discussed in essay 1.4, one of the most fundamental axioms of our faith is the principle of **שויתי ה' כנגדי תמיד**, the awareness of Hashem's constant presence in all places and at all times. The Levush (excuse the pun!) clarifies that the level of a person's fear of Heaven is determined by his acknowledgement of this principle and his subsequent sensitivity towards always dressing in a modest manner.

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13. בגמ' שם.

14. סימן כג סעי'ז'.

15. שם אות א' ואות ב'.

The Hessed LeAlafim (Rabbi Eliezer Papo from Bulgaria, 1785-1826) adds another fundamental aspect to the importance of *tzniut* when undressing in private. He writes that the reason why the Shulhan Aruch made such an emphasis on this topic was **כדי שלא יעבור עבירה בסתר** *in order that one should not commit a sin in private*. It seems that there is a greater chance for a person to come to sin when physically exposed in a private environment. Unfortunately, in today's world which is so steeped in immorality and promiscuity, one can easily understand the Hessed LeAlafim's reasoning.

The Ben Ish Hai<sup>16</sup> gives his own views on this important halacha. He also rules that due to the principle of שויתי ה' כנגדי תמיד (mentioned above), one is **obligated** to conduct himself in a modest manner - even when one is in a room alone with the door closed;

**שלא יעמד ערם לגמרי אלא בעת הצרך, במרחץ וכיוצא.**

**אבל כשמחליף שמלותיו - לא יפשט המכנסים אלא עד שילבש החלוק,**

**או יחליף המכנסים בעוד שחלוק הישן עליו ואחר-כך יחליף החלוק...**

*One should not stand completely naked unless one must do so, like in a bath-house, etc. But when one changes clothes - he should only take off his trousers after he's worn his upper cloak, or he should change into his trousers whilst still wearing his old upper cloak and only afterwards change into the fresh upper cloak.*

The Ben Ish Hai has clearly defined the manner in which one should get dressed in privacy and he has also addressed our next question; does the concept of *tzniut* apply even in places where it is normal to uncover the body, for example in a bath-house or mikveh? According to the Ben Ish Hai above there is not an issue in revealing parts of the body which are normally covered whilst bathing. However, we could conclude from his words that one should try and get dressed as quickly as possible in order to avoid being left uncovered unnecessarily.

HaRav Moshe Feinstein zt'l discusses this topic<sup>17</sup> and rules similarly to the Ben Ish Hai that one can be fully undressed in the bathroom, but only when it is **necessary** to be so.

16. וישלח, אות טו.

17. אג"מ, יר"ד, ח"ג, סי' מז, אות ג.

He bases his ruling on a Gemara in tractate Kiddushin,<sup>18</sup> which states that whilst one is in a bath-house he does not need to rise in front of a *Talmid Hacham* (a wise Torah scholar) because a bath-house is not a place where the halachic obligations to 'honour' or 'respect' are applicable. So too he reasons that the general requirement to respect the presence Hashem's *shechinah* (divine presence) is also not so applicable in a bath-house and one can therefore get undressed comfortably in a bathroom or mikveh.<sup>19</sup>

The Ben Ish Hai<sup>20</sup> then discusses the topic of *tzniut* in the toilet. He strongly warns that one must always ensure that the door is kept closed whilst one is using the toilet. The reason being that the **ק"ס סמ"ק** *Semak* (Rabbi Yitzchok Corbeil, 1280) and other early halachic authorities count the obligation of *tzniut* as part of the 613 mitzvot from the Torah! The **ק"ס סמ"ק**'s words are as follows:<sup>21</sup>

להיות צנוע, דכתיב (דברים כ"ג) 'והיה מחניך קדוש', וכתיב (מיכה ו') הצנע לכת עם אלקיך'  
 [Mitzvah no. 55]: *To be modest, as it is written 'And your encampment should be holy',  
 and as it is written 'To walk modestly with your G-d.*

The Ben Ish Hai also cautions that according to the Kabbalistic teachings of the Ari z'l<sup>22</sup> there are deeper mystical reasons why one should try to be as *tzenua* as possible whilst in the toilet. It would be difficult to elaborate much further in the context of this essay but on a simple level the Ben Ish Hai explains that there are certain negative spiritual forces that are specifically nurtured and sustained by human waste. These forces are the cause of the **רוח רעה** 'impure spirit' that rests upon a person's hands after simply entering a toilet, and these forces are also the source of the grave idolatrous practice of **פעור** *pe'or*, which plagued Klal Yisrael when they encountered the Midianite women in the desert<sup>23</sup>, and again at the time of the evil King Ahav who ruled the northern Kingdom of Israel in Eliyahu HaNavi's days<sup>24</sup>.

18. דף לב.

19. ומש"כ שם דכ"ז הוא מידת חסידות אה"נ דכך משמע מהגמ' שר' יוסי התפאר בזה ומשמע דשאר בני"א לא הקפידו, אולם מדברי הש"ע לא משמע כן אלא זו מידה שכל אחד ראוי לנהוג בזה. עי' לשון הש"ע אה"ע ס"סי כג' ואכמ"ל.

20. ויצא אות ד'.

21. חלק א', מצוה נ"ה.

22. בשער מאמרי רשב"י, פרשת תצוה.

23. פרשת בלק כה'.

24. מלכים א, טז:לא.

In summary... It is indeed the Shulhan Aruch's ruling that one should conduct themselves in a modest manner even when getting dressed in private, in order to acknowledge the reality of Hashem's constant presence. According to the Shulhan Aruch and the Ben Ish Hai one should ensure that, whilst getting dressed, one does not openly reveal parts of the body **that would normally be covered in public**. By this we mean to say that one should not expose parts of the body that one would be embarrassed to reveal in the presence of respectable people. The best advice is to either wear a long robe whilst getting dressed, or alternatively one can change their clothes in the bathroom where it is permitted to expose such parts of the body (when necessary!). However, when one does dress in the bathroom or mikveh he should try to do so as quickly as possible. With regards to our last question of whether there is a difference between the obligations of men and women in this regard, none of the authorities discussed in this essay make a distinction.

### **Rabbi Yosef Haim David**

This document contains divrei Torah. Please treat it with the necessary respect.