

B”H

Welcome to another run of tznius inspiration posts. These will be excerpts from “Outside Inside, A Fresh Look at Tzniut” by Gila Manolson, Targum Press Inc, © 2005.

Covering yourself is... the most fundamental way of saying, “I’m more than a body.” The Hebrew word for clothing is levush, related to the word busha, shame. The body isn’t shameful, but being seen as no more than a body is. Clothing removes that shame by directing attention past the outside to the inside. It’s the first step in asserting our personhood. And the more of our bodies we cover, the less they eclipse who we are.

--From “Outside Inside, A Fresh Look at Tzniut” by Gila Manolson

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Society has trained us that “if you’ve got it, flaunt it.” The message is: “Look how I look!” But if you move toward concealing rather than revealing, you can make a more powerful statement: “I’m much more than meets the eye. If you want to see the real me, you’ll have to look inside.”

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The Torah (Genesis 39:7-12) narrates the story of Joseph’s encounter with the wife of the Egyptian officer Potiphar. According to Kabbalistic tradition (Zohar, “VaYeshev” 238), she knew that to seduce Joseph, he would first have to dress – and therefore feel – like an immoral Egyptian. But Joseph, too, understood the power of clothing, and resisted her by retaining his Hebrew garb.

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When you put on clothes, you put on a self-image. And every time you look in the mirror and adjust your outfit, that self-image is strengthened. Even in the privacy of your bedroom, therefore, there are styles you would probably never wear, simply because “they’re not you.”

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The impact of dress upon your self-image is only the beginning. The minute you hit the street, people respond to the image you're projecting – and you pick up on their response. Sociologists call this "symbolic interactionism": How you dress, how others react to you, and how you see yourself affect each other, shaping who you become.

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Playing with physical attraction is a temporary ego-booster. And everyone seems to be doing it. But if we would step back and clarify what we want in a relationship, we'd probably present ourselves very differently. ...We're neither stupid nor shallow. We're confused – about what makes us valuable, who we are, and why we deserve love. Your body is a beautiful gift from G-d – but you're so much more.

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Once you move past identifying yourself by your body, it may seem more "real" to define yourself by what you do: "I'm a Rhodes scholar," or "I'm a successful lawyer." Talents, intelligence, and achievements are certainly legitimate and valuable parts of you – but they're still not your truest identity.

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Career, money, academics, sports, travel, politics, the arts, the social scene – the arenas for "proving oneself" are endless. Yet they all share a common denominator: The status they grant you doesn't do justice to your true self.

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The world is full of worthy causes: helping the poor, assisting the handicapped, protecting the environment, defending the abused, and more. All can provide tremendous satisfaction and contribute significantly to your personal growth and sense of self. As someone once wrote, "Service to others is one of the cornerstones of building a good life here on earth." Still, no cause, or even group of causes, can serve as your identity.

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Your soul comprises your deepest thoughts and feelings, those centering on drawing closer to G-d by becoming a better human being. The true measure of your worth is not how attractive, accomplished, or even devoted to causes you are, but how *good* you are.

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Spirituality is deep and personal. The less you advertise it, the stronger and more visible it becomes. If you climb a podium and shout into a loudspeaker "Hey, everyone – listen to how spiritual I am!" you obviously aren't. When you put your spirituality on display, you lose it – but there is a way to gain it back.

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Judaism encourages you to look good – but without flaunting yourself. It urges you to downplay your body in order to reveal your soul. This doesn't mean wearing shapeless, drab clothing. It means being attractive in a way that draws attention past your physicality to your personhood. As a friend put it, does the way you look scream, "Look what a gorgeous thing I am!"? Or does it whisper, "Now here is an interesting person"?

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