

Exposing *Tzniut*: Reflections Towards a Redefinition of Modesty
Jofa Journal, Fall, 2009

A number of years ago, I had occasion to travel to Japan with a few friends. It was a wonderful opportunity and gave us a chance to experience first-hand a strikingly different culture from our own, encountering the combination of ultra-high modernity and old-world heritage for which the Japanese are famous. One of the highlights of that trip was visiting a Japanese hot spring. It was both relaxing and rejuvenating; a much needed respite from the hectic pace of the trip. Amidst the cherry blossoms that filled the landscape of the idyllic spa set at the foot of Mt Fuji, I also had the opportunity to reflect on my own upbringing and cultural conceptions. As I sat in the spa, surrounded by naked Japanese women of all ages, the thoughts that most prominently featured were on the meaning of *tzniut*. These graceful women, who appeared to be so at ease with themselves and so comfortable with their bodies, seemed (in almost a paradoxical way) to epitomize the concept of *tzniut*. No one gazed at another, no one hid their blemishes; each respectfully nodded as another woman passed by, acknowledging her presence (or essence) but respecting the atmosphere which allowed each to privately commune in the context of this public setting. The Japanese women's grace and ease contrasted sharply with that of one of my travel companions, Bracha.¹ Though adopting a more "modern" orientation in her own lifestyle, Bracha had attended Bais Yaakov throughout her school years. She studied special education in college after learning for a year in Israel, and has worked in both the yeshiva and public school systems. I remember during that period that she often commented about the restrictiveness of the dress code she was forced to follow when teaching in a yeshiva school (long sleeves and long skirts with hair tied back). While Bracha said that she felt confined by these regulations, it was interesting to watch her in the context of the hot spring. Bracha stood in a corner to change. She waited until the shower stalls were almost empty before she cleaned herself in preparation for going into the spring - a requirement in the hot springs that itself was strikingly reminiscent of our *mikvah* preparations. She bent down, attempting to shield most of her body from the sight of others, and promptly wrapped herself in a robe when finished. As opposed to the Japanese women, who held up a small towel to cover their private areas or else walked naked, Bracha remained wrapped tightly in her robe until half her body was in the water. In fact, so conspicuous was the contrast between her entry and that of all the other women, that almost all the eyes in the pool turned to watch as she

¹ All names cited are pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of those mentioned.

removed her partially soaked robe. Watching this scene I asked myself, What is it in the education of Japanese women that leaves them so reserved in public but so comfortable in this context? And what are the messages that our education and (religious) cultural milieu impart about our bodies, or the attitude and relationship that we should take toward our bodies?

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

Negative body and self images seem to be reinforced by the *mikvah* experience itself. "I feel so exposed when I'm in the *mikvah*," Shifra commented, "I have a bad image of my body, so having to inspect it, and then having another woman do so, makes me feel fat and accentuates the discomfort." Indeed, these sentiments were repeated by a good number of the interviewees. Shuli, a woman in her thirties and the mother of four, spoke openly about the anxiety she has about her body, how that impacts upon her experience of *mikvah* and how these issues effect her intimate relationship with her husband:

I hate going to the *mikvah*. I don't know what it is. Some people see *mikvah* as such a beautiful thing and you're cleansing your soul and blah, blah, blah. And to me, you're getting naked in front of this woman, who has to

² This research was conducted with an Ashkenazi population. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the same issues apply to Sephardi women today (at least in Israel) because of the joint educational system. One area in which we can see the expression of the shared feelings is that fewer and fewer *kallot* agree to share with family and friends the traditionally communal pre-wedding *mikvah* celebrations, preferring to keep the *mikvah* a private, individual ceremony.

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

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

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

I had such a bad image of my body, and negative associations with what my body could do [to men]. Those messages had been drilled in by the endless repetition in [my high school] of the need to wear sleeves and long skirts all the time; to never use my body in a way that would allure men, of a million and one things that were not "*tzniusdik*" ... It took a long time until I felt comfortable enough with myself to feel anything positive about having a physical relationship. In fact, when Meir (my husband) and I were dating seriously I went for

therapy because I knew that I could never have sex, let alone enjoy it, if I didn't... I think that my decision not to cover my hair and to wear pants was part of taking back my body, gaining comfort with myself, and the need of my feminist side to free myself of the *tznius* shackles.

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

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

In addition to the educational setting instilling fear of physical intimacy, Zara suggested that in her social circles the laws of modesty were understood to demand the complete negation of women as sexual beings. Sadly, a number of the interviewees expanded upon how this created great difficulty for them in their marital and sexual lives. This was particularly apparent when they described the transition into marriage, a time when the cultural expectations shift from encouraging a girl to be chaste and uninterested in sexuality, to becoming an active marital partner who is alluring and available for her husband – a shift that some found to be extremely jarring. So deeply engrained were the psychological effects of these messages that a few interviewees still suffered from them each month, even years into their marriage, each time they transitioned back to sexual permissibility at the end of a *niddah* cycle. The findings lead me to suggest that we need to seriously re-examine the messages of *tzniut* as it is currently taught, and rethink the content and methods by which this subject matter is transmitted. We must challenge ourselves to find a way to teach modesty while instilling a healthy body image and sense of self. And we must ask ourselves, is there

a way to teach modesty as part of a greater context of הצנע לכת עם אלוֹקִיךָ without an excessive focus on clothing?

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

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