

## CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## SINAI AND TZENIUT

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Sefer Bamidbar opens by describing G-d as speaking to Moshe "in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Appointment". Why "in the Tent of Appointment"? Bamidbar Rabbah answers as follows:

Because G-d spoke to Moshe  
at Sinai through the shrub, in Midian, in Egypt, and at Sinai,  
but once the Tent of Appointment was stood up,

He said:

"יפה הוא הצניעות"

"tzeniut is beautiful",

as Scripture says (Mikha 6):

והצנע לכת עם א-להיך

"and walking in tzeniut with your Divinity",

so He spoke with him (only) from within the Tent of  
Appointment.

Why does G-d only realize that tzeniut is beautiful now?

Furthermore, there is a vast difference between Moshe's private experiences in the Wilderness and the very public Revelation at Sinai. Does G-d *k'b'yakhol* regret that Revelation, and decide in retrospect that He would have been better off speaking only to Mosheh?

The answers to these questions have immediate implications for human behavior, because the Rabbis clearly situate this Divine *tzeniut* as a model for human *tzeniut*. First, they likely read the proof-text as "and walking in *tzeniut* **together with** your Divinity". Second, the midrash continues by citing Tehillim 41:11, בת כבודה, מלך פנימה ממשבצות לבושה. After an initial interpretation in which the מלך בת = daughter of the king is Mosheh, and the ממשבצות זהב = the one wearing the gold settings = Aharon the High Priest, we read:

מיכן אמרו:

אשה שהיא מצנעת עצמה,

אפי' היא ישראלית,

ראויה היא שתנשא לכהן

ותעמיד כהנים גדולים,

שנא'

"ממשבצות זהב לבושה"

On this basis they said:

A woman who is *matzniu* herself,  
even if she does not descend from kohanim,  
she is worthy to marry a Kohen  
and to raise High Priests

as Scripture writes:

"her garments will be from those with golden settings".

So there is a parallel between the *tzeniut* of G-d and the *tzeniut* that is praiseworthy in human women. Does *tzeniut* for women become a primary value only once they enter their appointed tents, whereas until then the goal is to attract their *bashert*, as G-d needed to attract Moshe at the Smoldering Shrub? Was Sinai a *chuppah*?

Resh Lakish (Shemot Rabbah 41:5) uses Shemot 31:18 to make a similar connection.

"ויתן אל ממששה ככלתו לדבר אתו בהר סיני" -

אמר רשב"ל

מה כלה זו

כל ימים שהיא בבית אביה מצנעת עצמה ואין אדם מכירה

וכשבאת ליכנס לחופתה היא מגלה פניה

כלומר כל מי שהוא יודע לי עדות יבא ויעיד עלי,

כך תלמיד חכם

צריך להיות צנוע ככלה הזו

ומפורסם במעשים טובים

ככלה הזו שהיא מפרסמת עצמה

"He gave to Mosheh *kekallato* speaking with him at Mount Sinai" -

Said Resh Lakish:

Just as a *kallah*=bride -

all the days in her father's house she is *matzniu* herself, and no one  
can recognize her,

but when she comes to enter the bridal canopy she reveals her face,  
as if to say "Let anyone who knows testimony against me (that I

have been *untzanna*)",

So too a Torah scholar

must be *tzanna* as this bride

and publicly known for his good deeds

like this bride who publicizes herself.

This line of interpretation does not merely see G-d's *tzeniut* as a model for women to emulate. It sees Mosheh as the groom and G-d as the bride. The Rabbis had no difficulty imagining G-d as feminine.

To make the analogy between G-d and bride account for G-d's pre-Sinai conversations with Mosheh, we must say that the Bride **does** reveal Her face to one man (Mosheh) before the *chuppah*, where She unveils herself publicly to demonstrate to all present that they have never seen Her face. Sinai is not an arranged marriage, but rather *k'b'yakhol* follows dates at the shrub, in Midyan, and in Mitzrayim.

The truth is that even Mosheh never sees G-d's **face**. That gap is important, because it is tempting to read Resh Lakish as setting up objective requirements of physical *tzeniut*. With the gap acknowledged, Resh Lakish must be read instead as establishing a standard relative to the general and specific social circumstances of the bride.

Moreover, the midrash taken as a whole radically desexualizes the concept of *tzeniut*. There is no fear of eroticism behind Resh Lakish's requirement for scholars to avoid publicizing their specific good deeds, and given Resh Lakish, no need to eroticize G-d's preference for *tzeniut* in Revelation. The midrash instead assumes and demands a conceptualization capable of encompassing *tzeniut* all three contexts: physical, deeds, and Divine.

One might still ask: Why does the analogy generate physical *tzeniut* for women, and deed *tzeniut* for men? In the end, don't the Rabbis imagine G-d as female only to protect their eyes and souls from the sight of actual women?

My reply is that both premises of the question are incorrect. Resh Lakish's requirement for deed *tzeniut* applies to female scholars – why should it not? And I will now seek to demonstrate that the requirements of physical *tzeniut* derived from G-d's choices apply to both men and women.

We saw above that a woman who is *matzunia* herself merits raising High Priests; because she emulates G-d's *tzeniut* in Revelation, she merits having her children be the intimates of that Revelation. What does this meritorious *tzeniut* entail?

The generic woman of our midrash is an abstraction drawn of the case of Kimchit. In Vayikra Rabbah (Acharei Mot 20), we read:

שבעה בנים היו לה לקמחית, וכולן שמשו בכהונה גדולה.  
אמרו לה חכמים: מה עשית שזכית לכך?  
אמרה להם: מימי לא ראו קורות ביתי קלעי שערי.  
אמרו לה: הרבה עשו כן, ולא הועילו.

A beraita:

Kimchit had seven sons, and all of them served as High Priest.

The Sages said to her: "What have you done to merit this?"

She replied: "In all my days the walls of my house never saw the braids of my hair."

They said to her: "Kimchit, all the *kemach*=flour you have made is finely sifted".

They applied to her the verse "כל כבודה בת מלך פנימה ממשבצות לבושה".

This seems to be a valorization of extreme *tzeniut*. Kimchit apparently kept her hair covered at all times, even in her own house, even when it was braided, and even when there was no one to see it but the walls.

On Yoma 47a, the same story is told with at least a hint of ambivalence. In this version, the Rabbis respond not with praise but with skepticism:

הרבה עשו כן ולא הועילו

*The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Diurei Torah and our website, [www.torahleadership.org](http://www.torahleadership.org), which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.*

"Many have done what you did, without achieving the same result",  
and they make no mention of our verse.

The phrase "many have done ... but ..." most famously appears on Berakhot 35b as Abbayay's verdict on the position of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai that Jews should do nothing but study Torah, and trust that G-d will arrange for their fields to be harvested by others. This nonetheless remains a live controversy to our own day, and the text certainly can be read as saying that this is a fundamentally praiseworthy path that only an elite can properly take. One might therefore understand Kimchit's extreme *tzeniut* in the same vein.

However, I think that a better parallel is found on Niddah 69b-71a, where the people of Alexandria ask Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya three questions related to *derekh eretz*: How does one become wise? How does one become rich? How does one have male children? Rabbi Yehoshua's answers are likely playful – for example, his answers make wisdom and wealth mutually exclusive. Regardless, the Alexandrians respond that "Many have done what you suggest, without achieving the desired result". Rabbi Yehoshua responds that ultimately one must pray, but that – at least according to the Talmud – prayer will be more effective if accompanied by his recommended actions.

Kimchit likely gave the same answer to the Sages – I prayed for my sons to become High Priests, but my prayers were answered only because of my supreme *tzeniut*. Perhaps she was correct, and her path was praiseworthy, even if most women would not do well trying to follow it.

But Rabbi Yehoshua's answer to the last question asked by the Alexandrians - How does one have *male* children? - is

He must marry a woman who is appropriate for him, and sanctify himself during sex.

Rashi comments:

"sanctify himself" – to have sex with *tzeniut*.  
(see also Masekhet Derekh Eretz 6:2)

With this text in mind, it seems to me likely that Kimchit's answer itself was *tzanna* – she meant that she did not uncover her hair even during sex.

So it turns out that both men and women go to the same extremes of *tzeniut* in hopes of reward. And as a result, it is clear that the extremes of *tzeniut* discussed here have nothing to do with a hypothetical male gaze, or for that matter any real or hypothetical human gaze. The concern is rather for the Divine gaze, that sexuality per se is inherently embarrassing.

Practitioners of extreme *tzeniut* are constantly sewing fig leaves lest G-d come walking through their garden. I submit that their actions may be profound expressions of fear of G-d, but that they are not engaged in *imitatio dei*. *Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach!*

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