

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:

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 (Mikvah 6): "הצנע לכת עם אלהיך" "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 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, *כל כבודה בת מלך פנימה ממשבצות לבושה*, After an initial interpretation in which the *בת מלך* = daughter of the king is Mosheh, and the *משבצות זהב לבושה* = 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 matzania 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."

There is a parallel between the *tzeniut* of G-d and praiseworthy *tzeniut* for women. Does *tzeniut* for women become primary only as 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) sees *Shemot* 31:18 similarly: "ויתן אל ממשא 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 matzania 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 tzanua as this bride and publicly known for his good deeds like this bride who publicizes herself.

This line of interpretation doesn't merely see G-d's *tzeniut* as a model for women to emulate. It sees Mosheh as groom and G-d as 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 to

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demonstrate to all present that they have never seen Her face. Sinai is not an arranged marriage, but *k'b'yakbol* follows dates at the shrub and in Mitzrayim. Even Mosheh never sees G-d's **face**. That gap is important, because it is tempting to read Resh Lakish as setting up requirements of physical *tzeniut* but Resh Lakish must be read as establishing a standard relative to general and specific social circumstances of the bride.

The *midrash* taken as a whole radically desexualizes *tzeniut*. There is no fear of eroticism behind Resh Lakish's requirement for scholars to avoid publicizing their specific good deeds and no need to eroticize G-d's preference for *tzeniut* in Revelation. The *midrash* assumes and demands a conceptualization capable of encompassing *tzeniut* in 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? 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 *matzania* 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 *Vayikera 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 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 would seem to valorize extreme *tzeniut*. Kimchit kept her hair covered at all times—even in her own house, when it was braided, and 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"=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..." 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 remains a controversy and the text can be read as saying this is a praiseworthy path only an elite can properly take. One might understand Kimchit's extreme *tzeniut* similarly.

However, I think a better parallel is found on *Niddah* 69b-71a, where the people of Alexandria ask Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya three questions related to *derekh erez*: How does one become wise? Become rich? 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 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 because of my *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: "ישא"=He must marry a woman who is appropriate for him, and sanctify himself during sex." Rashi comments: "sanctify himself – to have sex with *tzeniut*."

With this text in mind, it seems to me likely that Kimchit's answer was *tzannua*: she meant that she did not uncover her hair even during sex. It turns out that men and women go to the same extremes of *tzeniut* in hopes of reward. As a result, it is clear that the extremes of *tzeniut* discussed have nothing to do with a hypothetical male gaze, or 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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