

Tzniut

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Shlichah, Montreal (2007-2011)

When I taught a group of tenth grade students at the Hebrew Academy of Montreal, we studied the topic of tzniut (loosely, modesty). I found I have as much to gain from these lessons as the girls themselves do.

Tzniut, which applies to both men and women, does not only mean wearing modest clothing. Rather, tzniut refers to possessing an inner midah (trait) of modesty and humility reflected in one's dress.

Parshat Tzav that is often read in proximity to Pesach alludes to tzniut. The Parasha discusses the kohanim and their avodah (their duties and responsibilities in the Beit Ha-Mikdash) – such as the daily korbanot (sacrificial offerings) and the assorted tasks on the Jewish festivals.

Without a doubt, the highlight of the avodah (sacred service) occurs once a year on Yom Kippur. As Am Yisrael stands humbly in the Azarah (the Beit Ha-Mikdash's courtyard), the Kohen Gadol reverently makes his way into the Kodesh HaKodashim (the Innermost Sanctuary). For one brief moment, he achieves a unique proximity to Hashem.

Everything about this incredible experience is hidden. The Kohen Gadol is not accompanied by an entourage of fellow Kohanim. The event is not broadcast live to the whole world in prime time. Instead, the Kohen Gadol is secluded with the Divine Presence within the small chamber.

The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba) states that a modest woman will merit raising Kohanim Gedolim. After all, only a kohen who grew up in a modest home has the ability to enter the world's most hidden, tzanua (modest) place.

As mentioned previously, Parshat Tzav precedes Pesach and is often read on Shabbat HaGadol. Generally, by this point, much of the house is kosher for Pesach, and we can begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel of dust, breadcrumbs, and Cheerios. Hence, we can turn our attention to the spiritual aspect of removing chametz from our homes.

The Zohar teaches that chametz represents the yetzer hara (the evil inclination) in general and the midah of ga'avah (arrogance) in particular. When dough rises, it resembles an arrogant and boastful person. Matzah, in contrast, retains its original, humble size. Why, then, are we allowed to eat chametz throughout the year? The answer is that chametz also symbolizes a person's inherent talents, and Hashem encourages us to express our individual talents and to develop the world He created, with humility.

There are two types of arrogance. One who thinks concerning fellow persons, that he or she is the smartest, the best, and so on, exemplifies the first. Meanwhile, one who does not acknowledge Hashem's involvement in the world and takes credit for one's own successes and achievements displays the second kind of arrogance.

The latter form of arrogance is particularly problematic on Pesach, when we recall that HaKadosh Baruch Hu took us out of Egypt, gave us the Torah, chose us as a nation, and

brought us to Eretz Yisrael. Thus, on Pesach, we must ensure that there is not a trace of chametz – arrogance, left in our souls.

A person should walk modestly with HaKadosh Baruch Hu. In the words of the navi:

“What does Hashem demand of you, but to do justice, to love lovingkindness, and to walk humbly (hatznei’a lechet) with your G-d?” (Micha 6:8)

We must employ our talents to develop the world. Nevertheless, at the same time we must humbly recall the One Who gave us these talents and commanded us to use them wisely and modestly.

Chag kasher v’same’ach!