**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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Tzeniut

Is *tzeniut* physical or conceptual? Is it inherently social? Does it change?

# What is *Tzeniut*?

The prophet Micha distills our obligations to God into three core ideas:

Micha 6:8

He has told you, human, what is good and what God seeks of you: only doing justice, and love of kindness, and walking modestly with your God.

Justice (*mishpat*) and kindness (*chesed*) appear frequently throughout the Tanach, often in tension with each other because strict justice is not necessarily kind. When we mention one, we expect to see the other, so that they can balance each other out. God exemplifies both qualities, and we are bound to emulate the Divine.

But what is the third element, *hatzne’a lechet*, walking modestly? The Hebrew root *tzadi.nun.ayin*, denoting hiddenness, discretion, or modesty, appears only twice in Tanach,[[1]](#footnote-1) making the expression all the more difficult to interpret. What does it mean to "walk modestly" with God? What do these words add to the qualities of doing justice and loving kindness?

# Physical *Tzeniut*

Let’s begin with the idea that *tzeniut* is oriented toward the physical. *Sefer Mitzvot Katan* (Semak), one of the early codifiers of *mitzvot*, takes this approach. In Mitzva 57, he connects the verse in *Micha* with one from *Devarim*:

.Devarim 23:15

For the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, so your camp shall be holy, that He not see in you any matter of nakedness, and turn away from you.

This verse does not mention the root *tzadi.nun.ayin*, but does convey related ideas. Our sages understand the verse as prohibiting men or women from uttering God’s name in the presence of an *ervat davar*, matter of nakedness. They teach that *erva* here refers to fully exposed genitalia.[[2]](#footnote-2) Rabbinic law extends this prohibition to other body parts or types of exposure.[[3]](#footnote-3) Semak codifies the element of the verse pertaining to exposing nakedness as a distinct mitzva (Mitzva 83).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Beyond the specific application of this verse to covering *erva*, we learn from it that God's immanent presence among us depends on our sanctity, which depends in turn on sometimes separating ourselves from the animalistic. One way to preserve holiness is to draw boundaries, keeping some matters private, or hidden from the eye, much as God, the source of holiness, keeps elements of the Divine concealed from human view.

Micha states specifically that we are to walk modestly **with God**. By creating a real boundary between our spiritual selves and some of our natural behaviors or states, we can set ourselves apart from our physical surroundings, too, and acknowledge that we are more than creatures of nature, and that we stand before God.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Semak elaborates on this idea, calling this type of boundary-drawing a mitzva of being *tzanu'a*.

Sefer Mitzvot Katan, Mitzva 57

Being modest, as it is written (*Devarim* 23:15), "And your camp shall be holy," and it is written (*Micha* 6:8), "And walking modestly with your God." The sages said that no one is modest but he who is modest in the bathroom [*Berachot* 62a]…One must also be modest in marital relations; also in every matter one must act with modesty and not with *peritzut* [breaching standards]. This includes "you shall cover your excrement" (*Devarim* 23:14), which is adjacent to it [in the text]. So too we must perform modesty at the time of Torah and *tefilla*… and one must distance himself from excrement and from urine…

It is at our most physical moments, as when we are occupied with sexual or excretory functions, that we are most at risk of breaching boundaries and losing sight of our own sanctity, of what distinguishes us from the animal. Keeping those moments private, and modest as appropriate even when in private,[[6]](#footnote-6) keeps us oriented to the holy.

When Semak hints here at a wider mandate to be *tzanua* “in every matter,” it is not clear just how broadly he intends it. Since he counts not revealing *erva* as a distinct mitzva, he likely only means here that we must – as a matter of *halacha* – be conscious in every situation of relating to our physical discharges in a way that reflects our sanctity.

# *Tzeniut* as a Principle

Unlike Semak, the other early codifiers of *mitzvot* do not list *tzeniut* as a separate mitzva, though they still make note of strictures he lists. Approaching *tzeniut* in this way indicates that it is less a single halacha concerned with physicality than a general description of the way life should be lived and *mitzvot* should be performed.

This interpretation of *tzeniut* derives from the Talmud's discussion of the verse in *Micha*:

Sukka 59a

For Rabbi Elazar said: What is it that is written, "He has told you, man, what is good and what God seeks of you: only doing justice, and love of kindness, and walking modestly with your God"? "Doing justice" refers to law. "Love of kindness" refers to acts of lovingkindness. "And walking modestly with your God" refers to bringing out the dead and bringing in the bride to the *chuppa*. Are the matters not an argument a fortiori (*kal va-chomer*)? Just as regarding matters that are customarily done in public, the Torah said, "walk modestly," how much more so matters that are customarily done in private!

Rashi explains that Rabbi Elazar applied "*hatzne'a lechet*" to escorting the bride or the deceased because of a verse in *Kohelet* that also contains the word “*lechet*,” with reference to houses of rejoicing and of mourning.

Kohelet 7:2

It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting.

Rashi *Sukka* 49b

Bringing out the dead and bringing in the bride – For "*lechet*" is written regarding them, "It is better to go [*lechet*] to a house of morning than going [*lechet*] to a house of feasting" (*Kohelet* 7:2). Even there one needs modesty [*hatzne'a*], to feast at an appropriate level and to rejoice at an appropriate level, and not to conduct oneself frivolously.

According to this reading of Rabbi Elazar, *tzeniut* is humbly shying away from publicity or excess. The prophet tells us to do even public *mitzvot* in a more private and measured manner.

This passage brings to mind Alice Roosevelt's jibe at her father, Theodore, that he "always wanted to be the corpse at every funeral, the bride at every wedding, and the baby at every christening."A person might act with justice or kindness, but with an excessive relish for center stage that lacks *tzeniut*.

R. Yehoshua ibn Shu'eib (a student of Rashba, 14th century Spain) clarifies this idea:

Derashot of Ri ibn Shu'eib, Parashat Vayikra

For the word "modestly" refers back to lovingkindness and justice and is not an independent mitzva but an explanation. Meaning, a person should do lovingkindness and *mitzvot* modestly, for the sake of Heaven - not to make himself great. For "*hatzene'a*" is written regarding even *mitzvot* that a person cannot do in [total] privacy, like burying the dead and escorting the bride. How much more so other [*mitzvot*]…

We learn from the verse in *Micha* that the quality of *tzeniut* is "not an independent mitzva” but should govern our performance of **all** *mitzvot*, whether they be *mitzvot* that are marked by justice or by lovingkindness.

In modern terms, we might think of *tzeniut* as the inverse of narcissism.[[7]](#footnote-7) Performing *mitzvot* is not about the ego. By keeping even our mitzva acts reasonably private, we help ensure that we act out of concern for God, and not in order to impress others.

A Combination

What difference does it make if we treat *tzeniut* as a mitzva or as a general religious principle? If we focus on the physical or conceptual? Either way, shouldn’t *tzeniut* pervade our actions?

Private modesty standards are not fully identical to those in public. Still, our every act must be informed by a humble awareness of the Divine presence, and reflect that we are first and foremost servants of God.[[8]](#footnote-8)

While *tzeniut* would be significant in either case, a more physical, mitzva-oriented approach to *tzeniut* tends to be more technical or action-oriented, and might lead us to lose sight of its conceptual meaning.

On the other hand, many people struggle to take halachic principles as seriously as formal, clearly-defined *mitzvot*. By counting *tzeniut* as its own mitzva, Semak indicates that no matter how wide-reaching the concept of *tzeniut* is, it is not only an ideal. *Tzanua* behavior can be fully obligatory.

Rabbanit Michal Tikochinsky explains that *tzeniut* is both principle and mitzva, and for that reason too pervasive to be confined to any one legal category.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Rabbanit Dr. Michal Tikochinsky, 'Greater than the Sum of its Parts,' *Akdamot* 29, p. 70

The connection between the two verses, between the ethical call of the prophet and the practical instruction of the Torah, shapes *tzeniut* as a value of broad scope that also finds practical expression in concrete contexts. Just as the experience of the presence of God accompanies a person in all his ways, so too the matter of *tzeniut* expands to a range of areas and to different levels of obligation. For this reason, 'the Laws of *Tzeniut*' are not concentrated under one heading, and one cannot find them organized in a single tractate or chapter of the halachic literature.

Even if *tzeniut* is not a distinct mitzva, many behaviors we may characterize as modest fall within other halachic definitions. Combining different approaches to *tzeniut* into a single, overarching pursuit means viewing *tzeniut* as a guiding principle, while maintaining an awareness that this principle often leads to specific obligations, which tend to be physical in nature.

By drawing contextually-sensitive boundaries around our self-exposure, around our physicality and our expressions of ego, we can build relationships with God and others that reflect our inner sanctity and leave room for theirs.

## How do different aspects of *tzeniut* find expression in rabbinic literature?

*Examples of people who comport themselves with* tzeniut *abound in rabbinic literature, and they are wide-ranging. Some descriptions emphasize humility and avoidance of attention, praise, or glory. Others emphasize physical modesty and sexual restraint, but this is not the only focus of discussion.*

*For example, Kalba Savua's daughter makes note of a young Rabbi Akiva's tzeniut:*

Ketubot 62b

Rabbi Akiva was a shepherd for the son of Kalba Sabua. His daughter saw that [Rabbi Akiva] was modest and excellent.

*The emphasis here seems to be on his overall character and conduct.*

*Another description of less physically-oriented tzeniut is Rachel the matriarch's tzeniut for the sake of her sister Leah, which relates to Shaul's tzeniut when anointed king.*

Megilla 13b

In the merit of Rachel's *tzeniut*, she merited that Shaul came from her [family line], and in the merit of Shaul's *tzeniut*, he merited that Esther came from his [family line]. What *tzeniut* did Rachel have? …Because of the signs that Rachel transmitted to Leah, he [Ya'akov] did not know [that it was Leah] until now [morning]. Therefore, she merited that Shaul came from her [family line]. What *tzeniut* did Shaul have? As it is written, "And he did not tell him the matter of the kingship that Shemuel had said."

*Both Rachel and Shaul keep significant information to themselves, ceding center stage, even at the price of not claiming what is rightfully theirs – in Rachel’s case a husband; in Shaul’s, the monarchy.*

*Rachel's act is particularly interesting, because it highlights the significance of context in our understanding of* tzeniut*. We would not ordinarily think of involvement in another's intimate relationship as tzanua, yet Rachel's act is a paradigm of* tzeniut *because in her specific situation it was a praiseworthy act.*

*At the same time, to be sure, traditional sources sometimes emphasize the physical and sexual aspects of modesty.*

*For instance, Boaz makes note of Ruth's* tzeniut*:*

Ruth Rabba 4:9

Since he [Boaz] saw that she was pleasant and her deeds were beautiful, he began to inquire about her. All the women bend and gather [barley], but this one sits and gathers. All the women lift up their clothes [to ease gathering], but this one lowers her clothes. All the women flirt with the harvesters, but this one keeps herself modest…

*The midrash begins by asserting Boaz’s respect for Ruth’s overall behavior and continues by describing Ruth’s unusual efforts to maintain physical modesty, even when she might have been able to glean more comfortably or efficiently had she compromised. The word “*metzana'at*" (keeps herself modest) appears only at the end of the passage and refers specifically to her restraint in not flirting with the harvesters. This description is not only physical.*

*The verse from Devarim that we cited earlier lets us know that matters concerning nakedness are of particular concern regarding* tzeniut*. This midrash, however, suggests that physical or sexual modesty is only part of the picture, an expression of one aspect of Ruth's general conduct. Although the sexual and the physical play a prominent role in discussions of* tzeniut*, they should not overshadow other elements of discussion.*

# *Tzeniut* and Self-Respect

Just as keeping a mitzva act more private does not suggest that we are ashamed of it, other acts of limiting self-exposure and moving away from impressing others are not signs of shame.

The second mention of *tzeniut* in Tanach contrasts acting in accordance with the principle of *tzeniut* with brazen behaviors that lead to shame:

Mishlei 11:2

Arrogance comes and disgrace will come, but with the modest (*tzenu’im*) is wisdom.

In his explanation of this verse, Maharal takes this idea a step further and associates *tzeniut* with the opposite of shame, honor:

Maharal Netiv Ha-tzeniut I, Netivot Olam

…For modesty is honor itself.

When people conduct themselves with *tzeniut*, they wisely respect their own boundaries and those of others, and thus engender respect. They do not foist their accomplishments or their neediness on others for effect. They expose themselves only as necessary, without needing to take up or dictate the social space.

Rav Norman Lamm expands on the link between self-respect and *tzeniut*, and on the personal and interpersonal nature of each.

Rav Norman Lamm, 'Tzeniut: A Universal Concept,' *Seventy Faces*, 193-5

Concealment is both cause and effect of *kavod*. One who possesses *kavod*, a sense of dignity, will deal with it in a manner compatible with *tzeniut*. Modesty will characterize his conduct and personality as a reflection of that inner sense of worth….A person who has self-respect has no need to wear his virtues like a badge and show them off to the world….*Tzeniut* implies *kavod* both with regard to oneself and to others…*Tzeniut* means respect for the inviolability of the personal privacy of the individual, whether oneself or another, which is another way of saying that *tzeniut* is a respect for the integrity of one's ego, of one's essential self.

*Tzeniut* allows us to focus on the essential. When we cease showing off to or competing with others, we allow for religious ethics— not externals— to define our interactions.

Rabbanit Dina Cohen adds that an interpersonal perspective on *tzeniut*, based on genuine concern and respect for the other, can be an important corrective to materialism or exhibitionism.

Rabbanit Dina Cohen, I Have Set God Before Me Always, *Kotenot Or*, 278-9

The two ethical demands that *tzeni'ut* places before a person—not to live a life on display, and not to be jealous of one’s friend or his accomplishments but to be happy with the lot that God has given one—stand in total contrast to the existing trend in modern society:…to see and to be seen, to demonstrate and to publicize everything that you've bought, that you’ve achieved, that you've learned, in order that all the people in your social circle will know that you have gotten ahead.

If *tzeniut* is defined partly in terms of social interactions, does it change when social norms change?

*Those elements of* tzeniut *that are independent of social conditions are absolute and unchanging. Our obligation to walk modestly with God is eternal and does not depend at all on our society or culture. Today, when freedom and naturalness are venerated almost beyond any other values,* tzeniut *before God can seem counter-cultural. But it still applies.*

*Yet some aspects of* tzeniut *that relate to our interactions with others and our place in society may change along with society. When a society considers a practice not to be* tzanua*, and that practice later becomes a widespread social norm, people can become inured to it to the point that it ceases to stand out as non-*tzanua *behavior.*

*For example, in many Jewish communities, men and women sit together at wedding feasts, while other communities act according to the opinions that forbid mixed seating at such functions out of a concern for* tzeniut*. Rav Mordechai Yafeh, aware that prior generations practiced strict separation at weddings, justifies mixed seating arrangements in his day (the sixteenth century). He cites the change in relationships between men and women in broader society.*

Levush OC, Minhagim 36

We are not careful now about this [which *berachot* may be recited when there is mixed seating at the wedding feast], possibly because now women are accustomed to be among men…and since they have done this often [lit. trodden in this way], they have done it often [until it is standard. See Shabbat 129b.]

*In communities in which people are accustomed to mixed company, the* tzeniut *concern of mixed seating at weddings is reduced.*

*One of the challenges in studying halachot pertaining to* tzeniut *is determining whether a given restriction is considered social and therefore subject to variation by community, or whether it is absolute. Each person must work to determine how to live a life of* tzeniut *that is both responsive to the moment and reaching toward the eternal.*

# *Tzeniut* and Women

As a corollary to the concern that every Jew act with sexual propriety, there often seems to be a great focus specifically on women and *tzeniut*. The midrash even suggests that, at every stage of creation, God restates to woman that she should be *tzenua*:

 Bereishit Rabba 18:2

Over each and every limb He [God] created in her [Chava], He said to her, "Be a modest woman, a modest woman."

This midrash is of particular interest because it describes a point in time that precedes society or eating the forbidden fruit. It points to an inherent concern about women's *tzeniut* before God, irrespective of what other humans might perceive.

Why should this be the case? The focus on women's *tzeniut* seems to derive from the two primary aspects of *tzeniut* we've discussed. Unique concerns about women's physicality and sexuality feed into concerns about women taking center stage or public roles. These concerns also lead to discussion of men's halachic responsibility to view women with respect. (We'll see examples in forthcoming pieces on Deracheha.)

## Can the focus on women's tzeniut change?

*Asymmetry in concerns about men's and women's* tzeniut *does not just reflect a reality of the past. Even today, when sexualized images of both men and women are widespread, those of women remain much more prevalent. Women in public roles, and their looks, are subjected to a unique level of attention and scrutiny.*

*Even if matters have not quite evened out,* tzeniut *concerns in our sexually charged and exposure-seeking society have expanded to require renewed emphasis on sensitivity from men as well with regard to how they present themselves, and from women with regard to sexualizing men.*

*Applying the practical and conceptual principles of* tzeniut *in a balanced way is not easy. Some of the challenges include: identifying which* tzeniut *norms are absolute and which need be adapted to contemporary settings; not treating* tzeniut *only as a women's issue; not reducing* tzeniut *to a set of restrictions on women; not objectifying women; not treating men as helpless captives to their urges; not undermining the positive aspects of sexuality; not relieving ourselves of the responsibility to apply* tzeniut *in all aspects of our lives.*

*As part of a curriculum development project, Israeli scholar Tamar Biala addresses some of these issues:[[10]](#footnote-10)*

Tamar Biala, "To Teach Tsni'ut with Tsni'ut," Meorot 7:2, 2009, p. 13

Sexual tsni'ut is equally binding on men and women. Every person must take responsibility for his or her sexuality and not take advantage of or deprecate the sexuality of another person. Women must take care to avoid exploiting the sexuality of men, and men must take care to avoid exploiting the sexuality of women….

*Her message is particularly resonant in the post-#MeToo era.*

Although some traditions or *halachot* with regard to *tzeniut* relate to men and women differently, and the emphasis on women's *tzeniut* is often stronger, *tzeniut* still applies to everyone. Meiri makes this point:

Meiri *Shabbat* 113b

Even though *tzeniut* is praiseworthy for everyone, for women it is nevertheless especially praiseworthy.

Surprisingly, a verse from *Tehillim* that is often quoted to convey the distinct value of women's *tzeniut* helps support this point as well.

Tehillim 45:14

All the honor of a king’s daughter is within, her clothing is of wrought gold.

The verse teaches that honor is internal. It is also sometimes taken to mean that women are dishonored by certain types of public exposure.[[11]](#footnote-11) This very verse is also applied, in some versions of the midrash, to Moshe Rabbeinu and to Aharon Ha-Kohen.

Tanchuma Bemidbar 3

When the Mishkan was erected, He [God] said: *Tzeniut* is proper, as is said, "And walking modestly with your God." He began to speak with him [Moshe] in the tent of meeting. And similarly, David said: “All the honor of a king’s daughter is within, her clothing is of wrought gold.” The king’s daughter refers to Moshe, as it is written, "And she brought him [Moshe] to the daughter of Par'oh and he became as a son for her”.… “From wrought gold are her clothes” refers to Aharon, as it is written [about the priestly garments], “and you shall make wrought gold.”

God confines his communication with Moshe to the tent of meeting out of concern for *tzeniut*! *Tzeniut* is a priority even for Moshe Rabbeinu, even when interacting directly with God.

While “*kol kevudah bat melech penima*” has special resonance for women, and classic discussions of *tzeniut* accordingly exhort women to take on more private than public roles,[[12]](#footnote-12) the verse and its meaning, like *tzeniut* as a whole, is not at all limited to women.[[13]](#footnote-13)

1. We discuss the second occurrence, in *Mishlei* 11:2, below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shabbat 150a

It is written “That He not see in you any matter of nakedness.” This [verse] is necessary in accordance with the view of Rav Yehuda, for Rav Yehuda said: If an idolater is naked, it is prohibited to recite Shema in his presence. Why specify an idolater? Even a Jew also [is included in the prohibition].

Sefer Yere’im 392

The meaning of *erva* is that place [a euphemism for genitalia] of a man or woman, as it is written, “you shall not reveal the *erva* of your sister.”

Shulchan Aruch OC 70:4

It is prohibited to recite [*Shema*] facing *erva.*

*Mishna Berura* OC 70 s.k. 19

Facing *erva* – as it is written, “For the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, so your camp shall be holy, that He not see in you any matter of nakedness”… From here the Sages learned that wherever God walks with us, that is, when we are occupied with reciting *Shema* and *tefilla* or with words of Torah, it is necessary to be careful that God will not see in us any matter of nakedness, that is, that nakedness should not be in front of a person who is reciting [Shema] or praying, within his sight… and similarly that he should not be naked then, for through this one sees that his own nakedness is also included in this verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Berachot* 24a. We'll discuss this further in an upcoming installment on *tzeniut* of clothing. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sefer Mitzvot Katan, Mitzva 83

That He not see in you any matter of nakedness, as it is written (*Devarim* 23) “that He not see in you any matter of nakedness.” And the Sages said that one should bathe in murky waters so that his nakedness is not visible… and similarly a *tefach* in a woman is nakedness if it is exposed… [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. According to Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, part of our humanity is developing the consciousness that we are more than just extensions of the natural order. In many respects, we are able to shape nature and bend it to our will. In others, we are frustrated by the limitations of our power and knowledge, by our inability to seize control of some of the most basic elements of our lives. Rav Soloveitchik calls this type of awareness a confrontation (available here: <https://traditiononline.org/confrontation/>).

We conceal our most animalistic functions as an act of confrontation and a statement that we are more than they would suggest. More than that, we act in this way in fealty to God's Will, and as an invitation to and acknowledgement of God's presence. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alshich *Vayikra* 1

"And walking modestly with your God." That you observe “walking modestly” in a place in which you are only with your God, and there are no others with you and no one sees you other than He, may He be blessed. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Deena Garber suggested this formulation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It is with this idea that Rema begins his comments on the *Shulchan Aruch*.

Rema, *Shulchan Aruch* OC 1:1

“I have set God before me always” (*Tehillim* 16:8). This is a major principle of the Torah and of the virtues of the righteous who walk before God. For a person’s sitting and movements and dealings when he is alone at home are unlike his sitting and movements and dealings when he is before a great king, and his speech and his free and expansive talk when he is with his household members and his intimates is unlike his speech in the presence of the king. How much more so when a person realizes that the great King, God, Whose glory fills the whole earth, stands over him and sees his actions, as it is written, "Can a person hide himself in hidden places and I not see him, declares God" (*Yirmiyahu* 23:24). Immediately awe and submission from fear of God will reach him, and his shame before Him always (*Guide of the Perplexed* III:52), and he will not be embarrassed before people who taunt him for his service of God. Even in walking modestly [i.e., in private] and when lying upon his bed, he will know before Whom he lies down… [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Available here: <https://www.bmj.org.il/userfiles/akdamot/29/.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Available here: <https://library.yctorah.org/files/2016/07/Biala-Tsniut-Ed-sept-14-2009.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1yFTjGeqK1Q7WDGhjdiTpRmTIIHPrBandLVRCQVHPVSr7Oy2LlllFyM6Y> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Shavuot 30a

It is not the manner of a woman [to appear in court], because of “all the honor of a king’s daughter is within.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Ishut 13:11

For it is appropriate for a woman only to sit in the corner of her home, as it is written, “All the honor of a king’s daughter is within.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In his first comments in the *Shulchan Aruch*, Rema references *tzeniut*.

Rema, Shulchan Aruch OC 1:1

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