# A Modesty Proposal: Thoughts for Shabbat April 24, 2010

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(Parts of this column are excerpted from my book, "Losing the Rat Race, Winning at Life", Urim Publications, Jerusalem, 2005--the book is available through the online store at www.jewishideas.org.)

People may treat themselves as objects, even though in the depths of their hearts they wish to be treated as subjects. Manifestations of this tendency are ubiquitous. People who dress in a sexually provocative way are presenting themselves as objects. What they are communicating is: notice me, I crave your attention, please don't ignore me. Underlying this non-vocalized plea is the feeling that one will not be noticed unless he/she is prepared to become an object of attention or unless he/she conforms to prevailing fashions, even if those fashions violate one's own sense of decency and propriety.

Human beings all have feelings of insecurity. We need to be needed, appreciated, loved. People may come to think that an I-It relationship gives them more immediate success than an I-Thou relationship. They can see themselves as being popular, powerful, unusual, attractive, daring. But underneath the veneer of "success" is the layer of essential insecurity, loneliness and dissatisfaction with self. Exhibitionism may gain the attention of others, but it does not gain their respect and love.

It is a matter of simple courtesy and common sense to dress in a nice, respectful and appropriate way. It takes self-respect--and respect for others--to dress as a dignified human being who does not wish to be an object of attention. Dr. Norman Lamm has written: "The lack of inner dignity leads to exhibitionism, the opposite of modesty, whereas a sense of inner dignity will normally result in the practice of modesty."

Modesty is a very high value in Judaism. Indeed, it is a vital aspect of the concept of holiness, kedushah, that we read about in this week's Torah reading. An essential goal of modesty and holiness is to value ourselves and others as human beings, not as objects.

Modesty is important in all contexts of life, and certainly in the synagogue. People come to synagogue to pray, to stand before God. How strange it is, then, when we meet people in a synagogue who are dressed in an immodest way--women who wear low-cut dresses or blouses, mini-skirts, tightly fitting garments; men who wear their shirts open, or wear clothing that is not appropriate for a serious occasion. The clothes a person wears reflect a person's inner life. Jewish law prescribes that we come to synagogue dressed as nicely as possible, as though we were coming to stand before a king. This is a sign of respect for God, the synagogue, and fellow congregants. More than that, it is a sign of self-respect and inner dignity.

In a world of increasing dehumanization, it is all the more important for us to insist on our humanity. We do not want to be seen or treated as objects. Modesty--in dress, speech and manner-- is a vital ingredient in maintaining our humanity.

Human beings are placed on earth to attain transcendent treasures--wisdom, love, spiritual insight, moral courage. If we can keep ourselves focused on these goals, then we "win" at life. But if we come to ascribe greater value to mundane attainments--to artificial gains and relationships--then we may find that we have accumulated things that are ultimately of little worth.

Winning at life means staying focused on what is truly important and not getting sidetracked by external glitz, by not allowing ourselves to become objects in the eyes of ourselves and others. Winning is not a one time event, but an ongoing way of life.

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Angel for Shabbat