Between Prudery and Promiscuity: The Case for Modesty (Tseniut)

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In her landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan asserted that "American women no longer know who they are. They are sorely in need of a new image to help them find their identity." Originally published in 1963, her book became a rallying cry for the feminist movement. Friedan lamented the fact that women were expected (and expected themselves) to model themselves after the stereotypical image of mother and home-maker; that their self-image was vastly influenced by images of women in glossy magazines and the movies.

Friedan argued that woman needed to become equal partners in society—socially, politically and economically. "There is only one way for women to reach full human potential—by participating in the mainstream of society, by exercising their own voice in all the decisions shaping that society. For women to have full identity and freedom, they must have economic independence….Equality and human dignity are not possible for women if they are not able to earn."

The Feminine Mystique played an important role in triggering a re-evaluation of the role of women in society. The feminist movement has achieved monumental changes since 1963. When the book was reprinted in the 1990s, Friedan wrote an epilogue in which she rejoiced over past progress, and foresaw an era of true equality. "We may now begin to glimpse the new human possibilities when women and men are finally free to be themselves, know each other for who they really are, and define the terms and measures of success, failure, joy, triumph, power, and the common good, together" (from her epilogue, written April 1997).

Friedan's hopes are reminiscent of Martin Buber's philosophy of "I and Thou." Ideally, people should relate to each other as full, dignified human beings. Relationships between an I and a Thou are characterized by respect, sympathy, sensitivity. When relationships operate on an I-It level, the "It" is reduced to an object, someone whose full humanity is not encountered.

When it comes to relationships between men and women, things can become complicated. Regardless of the ideals of human equality and mutual respect, we also have to deal with the reality of sexuality. Human beings are not pure spiritual beings; physical appearance and sexual drives must be taken into account.

Some communities/societies attempt to curtail male/female relationships so as to avoid sexual improprieties and abuses. The most extreme example of this is in Muslim societies where women are expected to stay out of the public domain to the extent possible, and only to appear in public while totally covered from head to toe, including the face (except for the eyes). Less extreme examples can be found in other communities—including the so-called ultra-Orthodox Jewish community—where women are restricted to wearing clothing deemed to be modest by their rabbinic leaders and are limited in their social interactions with men. The goal is not to foster equal and dignified relationships between men and women, but to keep the genders as separated as possible for fear of falling into temptation and sin.

On the other extreme are societies that foster sexual promiscuity, where women and men interact according to their own feelings rather than by norms of religious modesty. While such societies ostensibly foster equality between men and women, the ubiquitous sexual component can tend to foster relationships of the I-It mode, rather than the I-Thou ideal. Since the bars of religious or cultural morality have been dropped, men and women may see each other as potential objects of sexual pleasure rather than as dignified human beings.

Betty Friedan believed that our society was beginning "to glimpse the new human possibilities when women and men are finally free to be themselves, know each other for who they really are." But is this really so? With all the permissiveness and freedom in our society, have relationships between men and women actually become I-Thou?

Although it is argued (correctly) that women should be viewed as human beings rather than as objects, in fact much of our popular culture promotes women as objects of sexual attraction. Female models, movie stars, and television personalities often are dressed in highly provocative clothing. Even women

reporters on local television news programs wear sleeveless, or low-neckline, or overly tight clothing. Whether they are required to dress in this fashion, or whether they do so on their own, the fact is that women present themselves in immodest dress (or undress!). The goal—stated or unstated—seems to be: I need to be sexually attractive.

Popular women's fashions promote the view of women as objects. Women's clothing is often too revealing or too tightly fit to be classified as modest. Why do women wear such clothes? Why do designers keep designing such clothes, unless there is a market for them?

For men and women to operate on an I-Thou basis rather than an I-It basis, we need to avoid the extremes of prudery and promiscuity. We need to focus on the nature of modesty--*tseniut*.

Tseniut is not simply a system of prevention from sin. Rather, it encompasses a positive philosophy relating to the nature of human beings. While acknowledging the power of human sexuality*, tseniut* teaches that human beings are more than mere sexual beings. By insisting on modest dress and behavior, *tseniut* promotes a framework for human relationships that transcends the physical/sexual aspects.

Non-*tseniut* behavior signals a person's desire to be seen as an object of sexual attraction. When people dress provocatively, 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 prepared to become an object of attention or unless one conforms to the prevailing fashions, even if those fashions violate one's sense of decency and propriety.

It is normal and natural for people to want to appear pleasing to others. That is why they spend so much time and money on clothing and grooming. Dressing nicely, neatly, and modestly is a sign of self-respect as well as respect for others. If, though, one specifically dresses or behaves in a manner that is aimed at arousing sexual attention, this crosses into the non-*tseniut* mode. One has chosen to be an It rather than a Thou.

Human beings all have feelings of insecurity; we need to be needed, appreciated, and loved. Although these tendencies are often exacerbated in teenagers, they continue to exist throughout adult life. Exhibitionism is a short-cut to gaining the attention—and hopefully the affection—of others. Yet, underneath the veneer of showiness is a 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.

Tseniut should be understood as a framework for maintaining our human dignity. It teaches us to treat ourselves and others as valuable human beings, not as objects. Non-*tseniut* behavior and dress serve to diminish our full humanity, reducing us to the level of objects of sexuality. *Tseniut* is a manifestation of holiness. Exhibitionism is a manifestation of crudeness and feelings of insecurity.

Genuine modesty avoids the extremes of prudery or promiscuity. It fosters self-respect and respect for others. In a real sense, *tseniut* is not "old fashioned;" it is the *avant garde* of those who wish to live as dignified human beings.

(For a fuller discussion of *tseniut*, please see my article, "A Modesty Proposal: Rethinking *Tseniut*," on the website of jewishideas.org The direct link is: https://www.jewishideas.org/article/modesty-proposal-rethinking-tseniut)