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IN PLAIN SIGHT: JEWISH MASQUERADE FROM *CLUELESS* TO THE RABBIS

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One of the most theologically sophisticated movies made in the 1990s is a romantic comedy called *Clueless* whose heroine devotes the bulk of her time to shopping at the mall. When this girl's ex-stepbrother moves into her family mansion and various aspects of her social life unravel, the girl, Cher Horowitz, learns that true love may not be where she expects to find it. Part of what makes this movieso endearing is the absurdity of Cher's expectations regarding where she might find love. After a desperate pursuit of a wealthy (and gay) classmate, Christian, Cher falls in love with her ex-stepbrother Josh, who teaches Cher that the most meaningful acquisitions are not in the houses of Gucci or Dior, but in the halls of true love. Cher does not reject materialism by the end of the movie. But she does accept that her romantic destiny lies right in front of her, waiting for her at home.

On the face of it, *Clueless* has nothing to say about Jews or Judaism. Cher is a vapid adolescent who lives a materialistic life that does not intersect with religious observance. Visual clues in the movie, however, tell a different story. Pivotal scenes take place near the entrance to Cher's mansion, where a *mezuzah* is nailed onto the doorpost, properly tilted at a slight angle. In these scenes, Cher exchanges banter with her father, whose facial features mark him as a stereotypical Ashkenazi Jew. Cher's father is a take-no-prisoners attorney who shouts his lines in a New York accent, and whose addiction to work (and, presumably, money) is eclipsed only by a sense of protectiveness for his daughter. Cher's Jewish identity is reflected onto everyone who lives in her orbit. Her best friend, Dionne Davenport, uses yiddishisms like "I'm *kvelling*" as a way of friendly "bageling," the practice of using identifiably Jewish language in conversations that single out Cher as a Jew. While Cher's friends treat her as a member of a privileged elite, Cher focuses on Christian, whom she perceives as an insider whose love could secure her social legitimacy. Christian, however, turns out to be just like Cher. He, too, sacrifices his true

identity to maintain the façade of legitimacy.

Subconsciously aware that she does not truly inhabit the society that she worships, Cher engages in a determined crusade to fit in. Cher's motivation to transform her friend Tai, a new student who shows up at school in grunge and flannel, derives from her desire to have the power to transform anyone, beginning with herself. By making Tai over, moreover, Cher has a chance to authenticate her own credentials as an insider. Perhaps the biggest joke of all in *Clueless* is its name: the movie is full of hints, wordplay, and double meanings which gesture to the fact that Cher—unlike the audience—simply doesn't know who she is.

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The dissonance between the visual clues in *Clueless* and its dialogue taps into questions about cultural integration that have been the Jewish inheritance for two thousand years. Since ancient times, Jews have responded to these questions by masquerading as insiders to gain entry into their broader society. Jewish masquerading has nothing to do with internal transformation. Instead, it is the exact opposite of it. Masquerading is artificial. It is motivated not by an attempt to transform, but by an attempt to protect one's internal identity when faced with dangerous circumstances. Masquerade produces a chasm between how a person moves through the world and how they experience the world internally. This masquerade involves one's manner of dress, and often the adoption of dialect used by the majority population that the outsider wants to inhabit. Jewish writers have long treated the adoption of these mannerisms as a necessary component to their survival in an alien world.

The Hebrew Bible preserves many stories of Israelites and Judahites wearing disguises. In some of these stories, heroes don disguises to deceive their enemies, obtain crucial information, or advance their purposes. The kind of disguises that parallels the sort of masquerade we find in *Clueless*, however, in which one wears the clothes of a person who has no other goal than to fit in, is rare. In biblical stories, people disguise themselves to accomplish a specific goal. In a few cases the masquerader is a man, such as when Jacob disguises himself as his twin brother Esau to obtain Esau's birthright, and in 1 Kings 22, when King Ahab disguises himself to go into battle. The biblical authors who wrote about these misrepresentations did not necessarily view them as worthy of praise. Jacob's dishonesty comes full circle when his own sons deceive him about the fate of his favorite son Joseph through clothing. And King Ahab's disguise, meant to prevent his attracting the attention of his enemies, leads to his death on the battlefield.

More often than not, biblical masquerade is executed by women. In Genesis 12, Sarai masquerades as the sister of Abram in order to save Abram from being executed by Pharaoh. In Genesis 38, Tamar dresses up as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law Judah. In 1 Kings 14, the Judean king Jeroboam instructs his wife to disguise herself and approach the prophet Ahijah to determine the future of Jeroboam's reign. And in the book of Ruth, Ruth conceals herself and dresses up as a stranger. Women in the biblical period were perceived to be good masqueraders, perhaps because their dress was closely linked to their social position, and thus their change of dress designated the change of their position.

Women also masquerade in Jewish documents produced in the late Second Temple period. Some of these women don dresses in order to identify with a particular social group. In doing so, they convey an internal conviviality that conceals their anxieties

and fears. In the Book of Judith, for instance, the eponymous heroine removes the mourning clothes she has been wearing in the wake of her husband's death amidst a military siege of her town Bethulia. She dons beautiful clothes, leaves town, and presents herself to enemy guards. Judith then convinces the guards to let her pass through the siege by insisting that she wants to defect from her people.[1] Smitten by her charm and beauty, enemy soldiersfall for the ruse, and welcome Judith into their camp. Three days later, Judith seduces and assassinates their general, Holofernes. Judith's beautiful clothes, which set her apart from her fellow Judeans,arean integral part of her plan to save her people.

Another Judean novella produced around the same time as Judith, or a few decades later, is the Greek version of the Hebrew book of Esther. This story also features the eponymous heroine dressing in festive clothes during a time of crisis for the Jewish people. Esther dons royal attire when approaching the king,which helps to convey signs of her romantic desire for him. [2] Both Judith and Esther feature a brave and righteous woman who saves her Jewish community by dressing up in a way which suggests that she is a disloyal outsider to her own people.

Such masquerade is symbolically apposite to the physical transformation that some Jewish men at this time underwent in order to assimilate into Hellenistic life. These men were so desperate to shed the signs of their Jewish identity that they engaged in a dangerous and painful surgical procedure that reversed the sign of male circumcision by reattaching a flap of skin. The late second century BCE Judean work, 1 Maccabees, critiques such Jews, who "built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant." These Jews, the author insists, "joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil."[3] This procedure, known as epispasm, marks an attempt to produce an internal transformation. It is not masquerade, and it is often doomed. As we will see, the author of 1 Maccabees was one of many Jewish writers who believed that such transformation was impossible for Jews, regardless of the lengths they went to.

Another second century BCE Jewish account of the Hasmonean rebellion, 2 Maccabees, also critiques such Jews. In this diasporan work, Jews who masquerade as Hellenizers by changing their clothes, dress, and language are critiqued as disloyal to their ancestral traditions, and are held responsible for the dangers that the Jews faced when Antiochus IV Epiphanes prohibited the observance of ancestral law. The hero of 2 Maccabees is an unnamed Jewish woman who encourages her seven sons to sacrifice themselves when she and her sons are commanded by Antiochus to violate Jewish dietary laws on pain of death. This woman resists the temptations of inculturation so strongly that she speaks to her sons in the "language of their

[1] One of the humorous ironies of Judith's story takes place when the elders of Bethulia, suffering under the Assyrian siege, rejoice upon seeing Judith dressed up. The author tells us that "When they saw her transformed in appearance and dressed differently, they were very greatly astounded at her beauty and said to her, 'May the God of our ancestors grant you favor and fulfill your plans, so that the people of Israel may glory and Jerusalem may be exalted.'" Judith 10:7–8. These elders have no idea what Judith is about to do, but they recognize that she is about to approach the Assyrian camp in disguise in order to save the Jewish people.

[2] Judith was likely written in Hebrew, but shares stylistic features with the Greek version of Esther. Judith 10:1–4; Greek Esther Addition D.

[3] 1 Macc. 1:14–15.

ancestors," which prevents the king from understanding her, but which also stands as a symbolic act of resistance to forced assimilation.[4]

Like their biblical and Second Temple predecessors, the rabbis critique internal assimilation but praise Jewish masquerade as an occasionally necessary strategy. One rabbinic tradition praises the first generation of Israelites who resisted both internal assimilation and external masquerading while living in the land of Egypt.[5] On the other hand, the rabbis also preserved stories of exceptions to the rule, where such disguises were deemed essential to save Jewish lives or to safeguard Jewish practice. Rather than being shunned as betrayers of their traditions, the individuals who dress in disguise at personal risk are praised as righteous heroes. In many of these traditions, men disguise themselves in ways that subvert readers' expectations of how a Jewish man can and should behave.[6]

The Babylonian Talmud preserves a few such stories. One recalls an incident concerning a rabbi named Reuven the son of Isterobeli, who styled his hair in Roman fashion to sit among Romans and convince them to permit Jews to observe the Sabbath (*Me'ilah* 17a):

> Rabbi Reuven ben Isterobeli went and cut his hair in a *komei* hairstyle, which was common only among the gentiles, and he went and sat with the gentiles when they were discussing these three decrees. He said to them: One who has an enemy, does he want his enemy to become poor or to become rich? They said to him: He wants his enemy to become poor. Rabbi Reuven ben Isterobeli said to them: If so, with regard to the Jewish people as well, isn't it better that they will not perform labor on Shabbat in order that they will become poor? The gentiles said: That is a good claim that he said; let us nullify our decree. And they indeed nullified it.

The non-Hebrew family name of this story's protagonist, Reuven ben Isterobeli, indicates that this rabbi may have some kind of connection with the gentiles who live outside of the rabbinic community. Sure enough, the rabbi seems familiar with the styles and mores of this community, and is capable of styling his hair according to their customs so he may sit among them without arousing their suspicion. The Romans whose meal he joins assume that he is a member of their community, or that he comes from a Roman family. When the rabbi engages in conversation with his Roman companions, he opens with a question that suggests a familiarity with the Socratic mode of discourse that was common at symposiums. He thus disguises

[4] 2 Macc. 7:21; cf. 2 Macc. 7:8, 27. I have often wondered why this story does not mention the woman's husband. My assumption is that the writer expects his readers to understand that the woman's husband has assimilated into Hellenism, and that she has been left to care for her sons. One man has fallen prey to Hellenism, and has undergone a total internal transformation. One woman has resisted it, and resists masquerades of all kinds.

[5] *Lev. Rabbah* 32; *Pesikta Zutrata Deut.* 41a.

[6] According to Sara Ronis, rabbinic costuming does not succeed because the rabbis cannot conceal their true identities. Ronis uses the metaphor of superhero costumes, but I prefer the image of masquerade since it speaks to the superficial nature of these disguises. Sara Ronis, "It's A Roman...It's a Persian...It's Rabbi Meir! Secret Identities and the Rabbinic Self in the Babylonian Talmud," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 14.1 (2021): 83–110.

himself by using external modes of expression that were known to distinguish Jews from their non-Jewish host culture: language, clothing, and perhaps name as well. Reuven ben Isterobeli's masquerade is temporary, superficial, and only meant to advance the interests of the Jewish community.

In another talmudic tradition, *Ta'anit* 22a, a rabbi named Beroka Hoza'a encounters Elijah in a marketplace. Elijah surprises Beroka by informing him that one of the men at the market is worthy of the World to Come:

> Rabbi Beroka Ḥoza'a was often found in the market of Bei Lefet, and Elijah the Prophet would often appear to him. Once Rabbi Beroka said to Elijah: Of all the people who come here, is there anyone in this market worthy of the World-to-Come? He said to him: No. In the meantime, Rabbi Beroka saw a man who was wearing black shoes, contrary to Jewish custom, and who did not place the sky-blue, dyed thread of ritual fringes on his garment. Elijah said to Rabbi Beroka: That man is worthy of the World-to-Come.
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> Rabbi Beroka ran after the man and said to him: What is your occupation? The man said to him: Go away now, as I have no time, but come back tomorrow and we will talk. The next day, Rabbi Beroka arrived and again said to him: What is your occupation? The man said to him: I am a prison guard [*zandukana*], and I imprison the men separately and the women separately, and I place my bed between them so that they will not come to transgression. When I see a Jewish woman upon whom gentiles have set their eyes, I risk my life to save her. One day, there was a betrothed young woman among us, upon whom the gentiles had set their eyes. I took dregs [*durdayya*] of red wine and threw them on the lower part of her dress, and I said: She is menstruating [*dastana*], so that they would leave her alone.

The opening lines of this story pique the reader's curiosity. Is the man that Rabbi Beroka approaches a righteous gentile whose manner of dress reflects his true identity, or is he a Jew dressed in disguise? And what, exactly, has he done to merit the World to Come? After repeated attempts to obtain answers to these questions, Rabbi Beroka discovers the nature of this man's virtuosity: he stains the clothes of captive Jewish women with wine to repel them from gentile men who desire to sexually assault them. Upon seeing stains on the women's garments, gentile men were led to believe that the women were menstruating, and dismissed them as undesirable.

Hearing about these valiant acts, Rabbi Beroka remains unsatisfied. If this person is indeed a Jew, why is he not dressing as one? The man's answer confirms his identity as an insider to the rabbinic community:

> Rabbi Beroka said to him: What is the reason that you do not have threads of ritual fringes, and why do you wear black shoes? The man said to him: Since I come and go among gentiles, I dress this way so that they

will not know that I am a Jew. When they issue a decree, I inform the Sages, and they pray for mercy and annul the decree. Rabbi Beroka further inquired: And what is the reason that when I said to you: What is your occupation, you said to me: Go away now but come tomorrow? The man said to him: At that moment, they had just issued a decree, and I said to myself: First I must go and inform the Sages, so that they will pray for mercy over this matter.

In the meantime, two brothers came to the marketplace. Elijah said to Rabbi Beroka: These two also have a share in the World-to-Come. Rabbi Beroka went over to the men and said to them: What is your occupation? They said to him: We are jesters, and we cheer up the depressed. Alternatively, when we see two people who have a quarrel between them, we strive to make peace. It is said that for this behavior one enjoys the profits of his actions in this world, and yet his reward is not diminished in the World-to-Come.

Ultimately, the man in disguise is proven to be more pious than most Jews who dress identifiably as Jews. He masquerades as a Roman in order to move between Jewish and Roman spaces and save the sexual purity of Jewish women in captivity. Such masquerading, we find out, can occur within the Jewish community as well. Elijah informs Beroka that two other men in the market also have a place reserved for them in the World to Come. These men are jesters who make peace between people who are quarreling. While the story does not specify whether these men dress differently than others, we can assume that based on their occupation as entertainers, their dress was distinctive. The story thus praises masquerade as a tool that can be used to preserve Jewish integrity and maintain internal peace.

Another talmudic story, found in *Avodah Zarah* 18a-b, opens with the scholar Beruriah asking her husband Rabbi Meir to save her sister, who is living in a Roman brothel:

> The Gemara relates: Beruriah, the wife of Rabbi Meir, was a daughter of Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon. She said to Rabbi Meir: It is a disrespectful matter for me that my sister is sitting in a brothel; you must do something to save her. Rabbi Meir took a vessel [*tarkeva*] full of dinars and went. He said to himself: If no transgression was committed with her, a miracle will be performed for her; if she committed a transgression, no miracle will be performed for her.

Rabbi Meir disguises himself as a Roman knight to gain access to the brothel. He then tries to seduce Beruriah's sister, who demurs:

> Rabbi Meir went and dressed as a Roman knight, and said to her: Accede to my wishes, i.e., engage in intercourse with me. She said to him: I am menstruating [*dashtana*] and cannot. He said to her: I will wait. She said to him: There are many women in the

> brothel, and there are many women here who are more beautiful than I. He said to himself: I can conclude from her responses that she did not commit a transgression, as she presumably said this to all who come.

The dialogue between Rabbi Meir and his sister-in-law is one of mutual concealment. He plays the part of a Roman, while she plays the part of a menstruating woman. Rabbi Meir is aware of both disguises, but she is only aware of her own. After Rabbi Meir determines that his sister-in-law is lying to visitors in order to avoid sexual intimacy, he tries to obtain her release. Rabbi Meir chooses his words carefully as he convinces the guards to release his sister-in-law:

> Rabbi Meir went over to her guard, and said to him: Give her to me. The guard said to him: I fear that if I do so, I will be punished by the government. Rabbi Meir said to him: Take this vessel full of dinars; give half to the government as a bribe, and half will be for you. The guard said to him: But when the money is finished, what shall I do? Rabbi Meir said to him: Say: God of Meir answer me! And you will be saved. The guard said to him: And who can say that this is the case, that I will be saved by this utterance? Rabbi Meir said to him: You will now see. There were these carnivorous dogs that would devour people; Rabbi Meir took a clod of earth, threw it at them, and when they came to devour him, he said: God of Meir answer me! The dogs then left him alone, and after seeing this the guard gave the daughter of Rabbi Ḥanina ben Teradyon to Rabbi Meir. Ultimately the matter was heard in the king's court, and the guard, who was brought and taken to be hanged, said: God of Meir answer me! They then lowered him down, as they were unable to hang him. They said to him: What is this? He said to them: This was the incident that occurred, and he proceeded to relate the entire story to them.

Rabbi Meir convinces the Roman guard to release his sister-in-law by assuring him that, if he is apprehended and held accountable by his Roman overseers, he should cry out to the "God of Meir." When speaking about himself, Meir is careful to conceal his Jewish identity. He identifies himself as Meir rather than as Rabbi Meir, and does not clarify the identity of his god. He simply guarantees that, upon releasing the woman in question, the guard will not suffer harm. When the guard later cries out Meir's name, rather than the name of Meir's God, he unknowingly maintains the ruse by not revealing the identity of Meir's God. At the same time, by publicly appealing to Meir for salvation, he turns Meir into a wanted man. The Talmud then describes the events that occurr as the Romans seek to apprehend Meir and prosecute him:

> They then went and engraved the image of Rabbi Meir at the entrance of Rome where it would be seen by everyone, and they said: Anyone who sees a man with this face should bring him here. One

> day, Romans saw Rabbi Meir and ran after him, and he ran away from them and entered a brothel to hide. Some say he then escaped capture because he saw food cooked by gentiles and dipped [*temash*] this finger in the food and tasted it with that other finger, and thereby fooled them into thinking that he was eating their food, which they knew Rabbi Meir would not do. And some say that he escaped detection because Elijah came, appeared to them as a prostitute and embraced Rabbi Meir. The Romans who were chasing him said: Heaven forbid, if this were Rabbi Meir, he would not act in that manner.
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> Rabbi Meir arose, fled, and arrived in Babylonia. There are those who say that he fled because of this incident, and there are those who say that he fled due to embarrassment from the incident involving his wife Beruriah.

Once Rabbi Meir is recognized as the man who aided the woman's escape, he is forced to disguise himself once again. This time, he does not don Roman clothes. He does, however, wind up once again in a brothel. What happens next is debated by the rabbis. Perhaps Rabbi Meir shared a meal with Romans, but only pretended to eat non-kosher food to pass himself off as a Roman. Alternatively, perhaps he began to sexually embrace a woman – although this woman was none other than Elijah the prophet, and thus Rabbi Meir's sexual piety was not compromised. Whatever happened next, the Romans were properly fooled. They knew that Rabbi Meir would never consider violating Jewish ancestral laws by eating defiling foods or engaging in sex with a prostitute. The rabbinic writer of this story, likewise, believed that Rabbi Meir would never willingly violate Jewish laws. His survival, therefore, depended on deceiving the Romans by acting like them.

Like the other legends I have mentioned, the disguises in this story appear in connection with female sexuality. Perhaps this is because men were known to wear disguises when entering brothels so as not to be recognized by friends and family members. But these stories also presume a cultural connection between sexuality and assimilation into Roman society. Bruriah wants her sister released from a brothel not only because of the sexual shame she may be enduring, but because her position symbolizes subjugation to Roman control. Meir, meanwhile, shows signs of inculturation to Roman society by linking himself with the practices of other Roman men. Rabbi Meir's disguises and masquerades are considered acceptable because they are temporary, artificial, and end when the goal is achieved. The possibility that Bruriah's sister might be sexually violated and ultimately never redeemed from a life of subjugation to Roman men, however, risks irreversible transformation that cannot be tolerated. This story closes with Rabbi Meir fleeing to Babylonia to escape the Roman discovery of his ruse.[7]

The rabbis who masqueraded as Romans knew that

[7] It then offers another possibility for why Rabbi Meir fled: perhaps it was due to the "incident" involving his wife Beruriah. This is a likely allusion to the tradition preserved by Rashi (ad loc.) that Beruriah was seduced by one of R. Meir's students at R. Meir's behest, as a kind of purity test, and after Beruriah succumbed to his seductions, she committed suicide. The story thus becomes a retroactive explanation for how Rabbi Meir ended up in Babylonia.

there is something specifically feminine about dressing up. Women in all eras dressed up to identify themselves as members of a particular social caste or community. They also masqueraded as other people to achieve a noble cause related to the salvation of their people. The rabbis may have been aware that the act of disguise was regarded as a feminine activity. For this reason, stories about rabbinic masquerade pertain to themes of gender and sexuality, and feature men wearing unusual disguise. .

While the texts discussed thus far depict its characters as masquerading, sometimes it is the text itself that masquerades. Rather than preserving stories about Jews dressing up as outsiders, this kind of literature passes itself off as the product of a Greek or Roman writer. One popular example, called the *Letter of Aristeas*, was written by an Alexandrian Jew during the second century BCE. This document recalls the circumstances in which the Hebrew Bible was translated into the Greek version of the Jewish scriptures known as the Septuagint. It presents itself as a letter composed by a non-Jewish Greek official of Ptolemy's court to his brother. Masquerading as a Greek, the Jewish writer has the first-person protagonist extol the Jews' Hebrew scriptures by legitimizing Jewish wisdom and practice as rational, admirable, and correlative with Greek values. The author devotes only a few verses to the actual translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. His main desire is to amplify the good relations between Greeks and Jews, and between diasporan Jews and Judean Jews. He therefore speaks on behalf of those outside his own diasporan Jewish community, and has these individuals praise the diasporan Jewish community as legitimate. Had the writer of Aristeas presented himself as a Jewish man writing to his brother about the translation of the Hebrew Bible, the story would have no element of surprise or tension. The novella's power derives from the fact that a Greek person tells the story.

Conclusion: Remember When We Were Talking About *Clueless*?

Like the *Letter of Aristeas*, *Clueless* is a story that masquerades. Whereas Aristeas and other pseudepigraphic texts identify themselves as the work of outsiders, but invite their readers to easily see past the veneer, *Clueless* passes itself off as an innocent and charming story. It is only upon closer inspection thatthe movie reveals itself to be an incisive representation of the Jewish encounter with American modernity. Like the women of ancient Jewish texts, the women in *Clueless* are models of masquerade. Of course, Cher's aims are more provincial than the aims of heroines in the Second Temple period. Judith and Esther disguise themselves to save their people from catastrophe, while Cher masquerades in order to be accepted. And yet, Cher's story is as Jewish as the stories of Judith and Esther—and the masquerading rabbis. Jewish survival and dignity may not be at the foreground of Cher's mind, but there is nothing more Jewish than the raw desire for survival and acceptance.

By the end of *Clueless*, Cher gives up her masquerade. She settles into her recognizably Jewish home, reconciles with her father, and romantically connects with her ex-stepbrother (the movie abandons the farce of over-the-top materialism, but never gives up on the absurdity of teenage love). No matter how hard Cher – and her Jewish viewers – try to forget it, Jewish identity runs deep in the veins. Masquerade is always possible, but true transformation never is. The rabbis told us this truth nearly two thousand years ago.

Reclaiming Dignity Revealed

Emmanuel Bloch received his PhD in Jewish philosophy from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem with a dissertation titled "Modesty: Halakhah, Meta-Halakhah, and Historical Development in the Twentieth Century."

Ed. Note: We previously ran a review of Reclaiming Dignity, which you can find here. The present essay uses the book as a launching pad to consider broader trends in contemporary Orthodox discourse and sociological norms.

Introduction

The contemporary emphasis on *tzeniut* in Orthodox Judaism is utterly unprecedented.

For most of Jewish history, modesty was not a significant medium of Jewish religious expression. Before the 1960s, female clothing was not conceived as a topic of legal discussion.[1] Compare that with today, when *tzeniut* is understood, in many Orthodox circles, as a pivotal religious duty, a form of feminine achievement, and a path toward self-fulfillment. This constitutes a fundamental revolution of values within a society that sanctifies conservatism.

My forthcoming book examines how a vague socioreligious norm ascended to the top of the pyramid of Jewish observance. I contend that the issues at stake in *tzeniut* are foundational for understanding the soul of contemporary Jewish Orthodoxy—a point I will illustrate here by examining the most recent publication in the field.

Reclaiming Dignity: Anatomy of a Success

A new book is taking the Orthodox world by storm: *Reclaiming Dignity: A Guide to Tzniut for Men and Women*. The book, edited by Mrs. Bracha Poliakoff, includes over 20 essays by overwhelmingly female educators and a halakhic exposition of the laws of *tzeniut* by Rabbi Anthony Manning.

In the short time since it has been available for purchase, the volume has been acclaimed by readers as a watershed moment. The 1,800 copies of the first edition quickly sold out. Commenting on the *Cross-Currents* blog, R. Yitzchok Adlerstein emphatically declared *Reclaiming Dignity* to be a game changer—nothing less than "The Book You Have Been Waiting For." He is hardly alone to find in the new publication occasion to celebrate. But what accounts for such verbal hyperbole from usually sober rabbinic figures?

Having read and analyzed several dozen rabbinic works on *tzeniut*, I can venture some explanations to account for the rhapsodic response to the book launch. In my view, *Reclaiming Dignity* captures a

[1] The concept of *ervah* (nakedness), as introduced in *Berakhot* 24a and later codified in the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Orah Hayyim* chapter 75), was always understood as a prohibition for men to recite the *Shema* or a blessing. It never anchored an obligation for women to cover their bodies. The first rabbinic authority who transformed the millennium-old "prohibition for males to pray" into a newfound "obligation for females to cover" was Hafetz Hayyim in his booklet *Geder Olam* (1892), an early precursor to the mid-twentieth-century legalization of *tzeniut*.

There exists a halakhic obligation for married Jewish women to cover their hair. This practice is already documented in the Mishnah (*Ketubot* 72a) and other tannaitic sources. However, as Dov Frimer has demonstrated in his doctoral dissertation, the practice was not originally understood as an expression of female *tzeniut* but rather as an obligation toward the husband and an expression of personal status. It is only in the Middle Ages that *dat yehudit* became an expression of female modesty. Until the revolution of *tzeniut* in the 1960s, Jewish law never regulated how observant Jewish women are expected to dress.

special moment in the social and religious trajectory of the English-speaking Orthodox world. Here is a book that (1) offers a radically new synthesis of the concept of *tzeniut*, now fused with twenty-first-century ethics; (2) instantiates a new "Orthodox alliance" that rejects religious extremism, internalizes key feminist values, and is more inclusivist; and (3), above all, seeks to relegate to oblivion the previous standard-bearer of traditional Jewish modesty.

Dignity: Not Your Grandparents' *Hashkafah*

One concept is so central to the book's approach that it provides the title of the book: *tzeniut* as an expression of human dignity. "Dignity" is certainly highly relatable, and R. Manning is hardly the first author to identify it as a core Jewish value—even in the context of modesty.[2] But does "dignity" hark back to the Torah, the Midrash, or the Talmud?

Not really. This concept is modern and secular. According to Charles Taylor,[3] the contemporary notion of dignity must be distinguished from the premodern value of honor. "Honor" is possessed by only the elite; for instance, one is honored with the *Légion d'honneur* in France or recognized as a duke in the United Kingdom. If everyone is distinguished, it is no longer an honor.

"Dignity," however, is used in a universalist, egalitarian sense. In this spirit, the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) asserts the "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family." The idea here is that this dignity is shared by everyone.

Another critical point made by Taylor is that the universality of dignity was intensified, toward the end of the eighteenth century, by the development of an understanding of identity that emphasized authenticity. "Authenticity" implies connecting with something that is not God (per the Torah) or the Good (Plato) but rather our own selves that lie deep within (Rousseau, Herder).

Thus, the contemporary idea of universal dignity implies that recognition is to be accorded to everyone irrespective of wealth, birth, position, achievements, etc. This is given credence by an ideal of authenticity that insists on the moral worth of every person insofar as they are their own selves, irrespective of external factors.

Classical Jewish sources ignore such a resolutely modern understanding of "dignity." However, Judaism does know of "*kavod*," a concept that comes very close to the premodern idea of "honor." *Kavod* belongs first and foremost to God—it would be absurd to suggest that the divinity is invested with dignity.

Special individuals also possess a degree of *kavod* on account of their personal achievements, social positions, or births.[4] Consider: the rabbinic dictum "*kol kevudah bat melekh penimah*," a central tenet in modesty education, can be translated as "the honor of a [Jewish woman, who is a] princess, is to

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[2] Some of the themes of "*tzeniut* as dignity" were anticipated by Rabbi Norman Lamm. See his article "Tzeniut: A Universal Concept," in *Seventy Faces: Articles of Faith*, vol. 1 (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 2002), 190-199.

[3] A preeminent Canadian philosopher (born November 5, 1931). See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25–75.

[4] See *Kiddushin* 32b for a classical discussion about whether a rabbi, prince, and/or king can forgo their *kavod*.

remain inside." Jewish women are designated as *nobility*. Dignity has nothing to do with it, and, indeed, the implication is that lesser women can be outside. When the sages want to universalize the concept of *kavod*, they do not resort to *tzeniut*. Instead, they create an expression that is subversively oxymoronic—*kevod ha-beriyyot*, the "honor of all creatures."[5]

The idea of *tzelem Elokim* was never understood (at least, until recently) as a form of universal dignity. It may be shocking that one medieval commentator (Abravanel) advanced the thesis that only men, and not women, were created in the image of God. He was, to the best of my knowledge, a lone voice in this respect. But the other classical *mefarshim* also gave explanations that have little to do with the concept of dignity.[6]

Hence, to equate *tzeniut* with dignity is to achieve a modernist reinterpretation.

Internality and Authenticity

Beyond dignity, certain concepts return with striking regularity in the essays included in *Reclaiming Dignity*. These include, among others, the ideas of internality and authenticity. For instance:

Internality: "…We are, at our core, deep, spiritual beings. The *middah* of *tznius* brings us back to our true depth. When we focus on who we are as a person… we develop our inner world."[7]

Authenticity: "Let's recalibrate our moral compasses. Let's repair and renew the feeling in our spiritual nerve endings. Let's reinstate the very trait

[5] See, for instance, *Berakhot* 19b.

Kevod ha-beriyyot is a halakhic concept used to override rabbinic restrictions when their application would lead to embarrassing situations or otherwise unacceptable results (according to some opinions, this also applies to certain Torah prohibitions). For example, while carrying across a private property line is prohibited by a rabbinic restriction, the Talmud records that the rabbis created an exception, based on *kevod ha-beriyyot*, for carrying up to three small stones if needed for wiping oneself in a latrine (see *Shabbat* 81b, 94b).

These exceptions are strictly limited, both in their number and scope. The literature dedicated to this topic is vast. At any rate, *kevod ha-beriyyot* is clearly not the modern notion of dignity; as an illustration, see R. Yosef Karo's ruling that any clothing made of Torah-forbidden *kilayim* must be removed immediately, even though the other person was his rabbi and would end up entirely naked in the marketplace (*Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 303).

[6] Yair Lorberbaum has written an entire book on this very question: *In God's Image: Myth, Theology, and Law in Classical Judaism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). Per Lorberbaum, early rabbinic sources held anthropomorphic views of the human body as created in the physical likeness of God. In this approach, *tzelem Elokim* implies that humans are "living icons to the living God." This conception had far-reaching implications for the formulation of the modes of execution, the biblical command to be fruitful and multiply, etc.

The concept of *tzelem Elokim* was then successfully reinterpreted by philosophers, kabbalists, etc. As Lorberbaum insightfully notes, all explanations of the phrase "the image of God" focus upon what the exegete regards as essential or unique in the human being (3). In other words, *tzelem Elokim* is mostly indicative of the exegete's own anthropological conceptions. It is only in modern times that the expression became associated with the concept of human dignity.

[7] The quote is from Bracha Poliakoff, *Reclaiming Dignity*, 7. Similar (often identical) ideas are found in many other essays: see 11-15 (Rivka Simonsson), 16-17 (Miriam Kosman), 23-24 (R. Shaya Karlinsky), 44 (Rivkah Slonim), 46 (R. Chaya Chava Pavlov), 74-78 (Shevi Samet), 175 (Rifka Wein Harris), and so forth.

that makes us proud descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov."[8] To quote a contemporary thinker, "the idea that some things are in some real sense really you, or express what you are, and others aren't" is the essence of the modern concept of authenticity.[9]

Rabbi Manning sums up the argument eloquently: "*Tzniut* is therefore presented as a global vision for authenticity, an appreciation of the holiness of privacy, a clarion call against materialism, and a guide to personal wisdom, consideration, and awareness."[10]

Again, the value of authenticity, the ethics of self-expression and self-empowerment, and the emphasis on interpersonal relations are hardly timeless Jewish values. These are modern, Western values that speak to us because we inhabit a modern, westernized universe—not because they perpetuate a pristine moral message handed down to us from the distant past.

The Demise of the Next World

On the flipside, certain classical Jewish concepts are largely absent, such as the soul, sin, and divine retribution. In *Reclaiming Dignity*, as in real life, one waits in vain for the messiah to appear.

Perhaps more surprising, to an extent, even God has gone AWOL. As Mrs. Elisheva Kaminetsky correctly diagnoses in her essay, "We are not always comfortable speaking about Hashem."[11] This is of course ironic. While Kaminetsky seeks to reconnect *tzeniut* with "God Talk," the overall thrust of the book reflects precisely that which she deplores. While some of the erstwhile fundamentals of Jewish life are occasionally mentioned in passing, the heart of the action lies elsewhere. Mrs. Ilana Cowland tellingly observes in her essay that "God has nothing to gain from our mitzvah observance… It is legitimate to begin by asking, 'How does this particular directive benefit *me*?"[12] This interrogation makes good sense in a world where *tzeniut* is a way for people to connect to their true inner selves.

To borrow Max Weber's terminology in *Economy and Society*, Orthodox Judaism has largely become an inner-worldly religion. The focus of religious behavior is on activities that lead to results in the context of the everyday world. The next world (*olam ha-ba*), and its constellation of related extra-worldly ideas has not entirely disappeared, but it certainly has receded in the background.[13]

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[8] The quote is from R. Efrem Golberg in *Reclaiming Dignity* (91). Here too, similar or identical ideas appear in many other places. See 6, 20, 67 (Michal Horowitz), 93 (Jaclyn Sova), 103 (Yael Kaisman), 163-165 (Faigie Zelcer), 168-170 (Elisheva Kaminetsky), etc.

[9] As captured by Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic: Thinking In Action* (London: Routledge, 2004), viii.

[10] *Reclaiming Dignity*, 216.

[11] *Reclaiming Dignity*, 167-168.

[12] *Reclaiming Dignity*, 132. The emphasis on the word "me" is mine.

[13] To be fair, R. Manning's third chapter discusses *tzeniut* as a way to live "*lifnei Hashem*" (233-254). But the point remains: in R. Manning's view, the divinity is not the ultimate sovereign that commands absolute obedience but rather a spiritual presence that elevates human life. Readers are enjoined "to focus on our mental and spiritual awareness of the reality of God in our lives" (237). This is an anthropo-centered vision of God, not a theo-centered vision of man.

Dynamics of Continuity and Change

Modernity and tradition are tightly interwoven in *Reclaiming Dignity*. On the one hand, the book asserts implicitly that Torah values are eternal and radically ahead of their time; on the other hand, it often expresses ideas that are influenced by, if not directly borrowed from, modern secular culture.

Such large-scale reinterpretations function a bit like a Procrustean bed. Some sources are extended almost beyond recognition, like the idea of *dat yehudit*. For 18 centuries, halakhic sources have confined it to divorce law and applied it exclusively to women.[14] In the long history of Jewish law, R. Manning is, to the best of my knowledge, the first to expand *dat yehudit* to also encompass men and the first to apply it to many areas of human activity (cycling, possibly driving a car, etc.). This helps him justify the legitimacy of a wide range of communal practices.[15]

Unpopular sources, on the other hand, fall entirely by the wayside. Think, for instance, of the Talmudic passage that affirms that hair-covering is one the "ten curses" inflicted upon all of Eve's female descendants and presents the married woman as "wrapped like a mourner" and "incarcerated within the prison" of her home.[16] Other texts also get the silent treatment. A full analysis of *Reclaiming Dignity*'s hermeneutics would necessitate a separate essay.

One useful concept is "coalescence," an expression coined by sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman to describe the harmonization of tradition and modernity. According to Fishman, many American Jews, even among the very Orthodox, have lost all awareness of differences between Jewish and American values:

> During the process of coalescence… the "texts" of two cultures, American and Jewish, are accessed simultaneously… These values coalesce or merge, and the resulting merged messages or texts are perceived not as being American and Jewish values side by side, but as being a unified text, which is identified as authoritative Judaism… Many American Jews—including some who are very knowledgeable and actively involved in Jewish life—no longer separate or are even conscious of the separation between the origins of these two texts.[17]

Thus, the power of *Reclaiming Dignity*'s ideas does not lie in its wholesale rereading of traditional concepts through a contemporary conceptual matrix. That is not what the book seeks to do. Instead, it offers a more complex melding of traditional ideas with new ones, creating a new conceptual synthesis that speaks to many contemporary readers.

Reclaiming Dignity, then, advances a philosophy of *tzeniut* that is historically contingent. It coalesces traditional sources and attitudes about Jewish modesty, a modern understanding of universal dignity, and even more recent values such as self-actualization. The book's success is due, in part at

[14] See *Shulhan Arukh, Even ha-Ezer* 115.

[15] See *Reclaiming Dignity*, 297-347 and especially 310-312 and 341-343.

[16] *Eruvin* 100b.

[17] Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 10.

least, to its ability to capture the views of a religious community (Anglo-Orthodox Jewry) that is much more acculturated than its religious leaders care to admit.

A Veiled Enemy

This makeover of *tzeniut* is not taking place in an ideological vacuum. Undercover, *Reclaiming Dignity* is engaged in a fierce battle. Its hidden archenemy is the famous (or infamous) volume authored by R. Pesach Eliyahu Falk, *Oz ve-Hadar Levushah*. That book was also distributed by Feldheim, but 25 years earlier—in a different era on the modesty timeline.

R. Falk (1944-2020) was a well known *posek* (halakhic decisor) in Gateshead (UK). It is no exaggeration to state that his work represented, at the time of its publication in 1998, a watershed event in the English-speaking Haredi world. It became an instant classic about the newly invented laws of *tzeniut*. Further publications—in 2010, of a summary booklet embellished with educational "diagrams"; in 2011, of a two-volume edition for daily learning;[18] and the mushrooming of home-study groups[19]—all attest to its continuing impact and popularity over the years. In an obituary published in 2020, *Ami Magazine* reported that some 65,000 copies sold during Falk's lifetime. For nearly three decades, R. Falk's vision of *tzeniut* has reigned nearly uncontested in the Anglo-Haredi camp.

For R. Falk, *tzeniut* is more important than any other mitzvah traditionally associated with women. Moreover, modesty is the female equivalent of learning Torah for males: a commandment that is almost infinite in the demands placed on its practitioners, is applicable at all times, and represents a religious woman's own way of connecting to the divine.

> Torah learning and *tznius* are both the central axis upon which one's life turns. Their presence gives forth life, whilst their absence spells destruction.[20]

Oz ve-Hadar Levushah is an extremely comprehensive book that is literally obsessed with details. It has been a major catalyst for strong and complicated feelings, sometimes even significant trauma, experienced by many young women who were inculcated the "laws of *tzeniut*" in Orthodox institutional settings. Critics have denounced its tendency to standardize *tzeniut* and dismiss local customs, its excessive stringency and fanaticism, and its mingling of ideological consideration in legal matters.

Oz ve-Hadar Levushah is the elephant in the room. When R. Manning completely omits the most popular book from the list of recommended resources about *tzeniut*, it is no oversight;[21] when he mentions *Oz ve-Hadar Levushah* in the footnotes *exclusively* only to *always* reject its positions, it cannot be a coincidence.[22] The only possible

[18] "Daily learning is easy, in just 5 minutes a day!" See https://www.feldheim.com/modesty-an-adornment-for-life-day-by-day-2-vol.html.

[19] http://www.techeiles.org.il/ozvhadur/tests/test1.pdf.

[20] Pesach Eliyahu Falk, *Oz ve-Hadar Levushah* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1998), 41 (the double-page 40-41 is a lengthy elaboration of this idea).

[21] *Reclaiming Dignity*, 317n53.

[22] See 248-249, 440, and 489.

explanation is that R. Manning is trying to cancel Falk's extreme vision with a more moderate approach. Stated differently, *Reclaiming Dignity* is changing the conversation on *tzeniut* by attempting to render *Oz ve-Hadar Levushah* irrelevant. So far, it is succeeding remarkably well at this task.

Anglo-Orthodoxy: Between Israel and America

For a volume targeting an English-speaking audience, a surprising number of *Reclaiming Dignity*'s writers (roughly half) currently live in Israel.[23] In comparison, it is estimated that less than 200,000 American Jewish citizens live in the Holy Land.[24] Ergo, English-speaking residents in Israel are disproportionately represented in the book.

There is an archetypal demographic pattern at play here: certain highly idealistic Anglo Jews, looking for a more spiritual and less materialistic lifestyle, make *aliyah*. They populate settlements in the Gush Etzion (Efrat, Neve Daniel, Alon Shvut, Elazar, etc.) and specific neighborhoods in Jerusalem (Har Nof, Rehavia, Baka, etc.). They study Torah, sincerely and devoutly, in institutions of higher education that cater specifically to the spiritual needs of *olim hadashim* (new immigrants). Time passes. A few years down the road, some of them reintroduce themselves as teachers and mentors to their home communities in the diaspora.

There is much to admire in this story. But regardless of the number of decades spent learning in Israel, an Anglo immigrant rarely sees the world in the same way as a "sabra."

Tzeniut is the perfect inkblot test. My research shows that modesty is conceptualized differently in various religious communities. Since the 1960s, several visions of *tzeniut* have emerged, each encoding a different conversation on the place of law, sexuality and the body, relationships between men and women, and Jewish exceptionalism.

Israeli discourses of *tzeniut* revolve around the idea of collectivity. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, for instance, perceives *tzeniut* as a prerequisite for Jewish peoplehood.[25] For Rabbis David Stav and Avraham Stav, modesty establishes healthy boundaries that are necessary for any community to flourish.[26]

Diasporic discourses, on the other hand, tend to center on the *individual*. Thus, for R. Yitzhak Eizik Rosenbaum, *tzeniut* preserves the individual Orthodox man from impure thoughts,[27] and for R.

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[23] As far as I can tell, this is true of Miriam Kosman, Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky, Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller-Gottlieb, Rebbetzin Chaya Chava Pavlov, Sivan Rahav-Meir, Rabbanit Oriya Mevorach, Beatie Deutsch, Ilana Cowland, Rabbi Yitzchak Shurin, and Dr. Yocheved Debow. Ditto for Rabbi Anthony Manning, originally from London, who currently resides in Alon Shvut. And his teacher, the American-born rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, serves (among other prestigious positions) as the *mara d'atra* of Jerusalem's Sanhedria Murhevet neighborhood, where he lives.

[24] These numbers, of course, must be taken with a grain of salt. Moreover, I do not have dependable statistics regarding the number of British, Canadian, or Australian citizens living in Israel. And the comparison between Israel and the diaspora, if we want it to make sense in the context of *Reclaiming Dignity*, should only consider those who identify as Orthodox.

[25] R. Shlomo Aviner, *Gan Na'ul*: *Pirkei Tzeniut* (Jerusalem: Chava Books, 1980).

[26] R. David Stav and R. Avraham Stav, *Avo Veitekha* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2020).

[27] R. Yitzhak Eizik Rosenbaum, *Sefer ha-Tzeniut ve-Hayeshuah* (Jerusalem: 1980).

Pesach Eliyahu Falk, modesty expresses the inner nobility of the individual Orthodox woman.[28]

This divide is easy enough to explain. In Israel, questions of religion and state (*dat u-medinah*) are burning public affairs, while in the diaspora this public dimension is absent (France) or much more subdued (USA, UK). From this standpoint, *Reclaiming Dignity*, with its emphasis on personal authenticity and self-actualization, represents a vision of *tzeniut* that is situated—"made in Israel," but clearly not Israeli. *Reclaiming Dignity* is a book written by Anglos overseas for Anglos in their homeland.

Builders of Internal Bridges: The New *Kiruv*

Another demographic is overrepresented in *Reclaiming Dignity*: *kiruv* (outreach) professionals. Again, as far as I can ascertain, this is true of many authors published in the first part of the book[29] and of R. Anthony Manning himself. As to R. Yitzchak Berkovits, not only is he *Rosh Yeshivah* at Aish HaTorah, but he is also considered to be the unofficial *posek* of the *kiruv* world.

The *kiruv* world has been in severe crisis for a decade and a half. Recognized superstars, like R. Akiva Tatz and R. Dovid Gottlieb, are not growing any younger, and one would be hard-pressed to find comparable heavyweights in the younger generation. Testimonies of returnees, like R. Mayer Schiller's *The Road Back: A Discovery of Judaism*, are almost unheard of in this epoch. My own religious alma mater, Ohr Somayach Monsey, closed shop several years ago, and other institutions survive by seeking to attract (horror!) "Frum From Birth" students (FFBs). A few years ago, *Mishpacha Magazine* signaled that the writing is on the wall: the door is closing on Jewish outreach.

The underlying reasons matter little for our purposes. But what is a trained *kiruv* professional, who spent years training to render the ideas of Judaism palatable to estranged brothers and sisters, to do with his or her skills?

The answer, I believe, lies in the invention of a paradoxical new vocation: *kiruv kerovim*. At a time when the general Orthodox community proves to be quite permeable to outside influences, outreach professionals have the rhetorical tools to explain the truth of Judaism in terms that are understandable to an acculturated audience.

Kiruv people, in other words, are builders of bridges between worlds. They are translators trained to explain the timeless in terms of the contemporary. They are uniquely positioned to "reclaim" *tzeniut* (or, for that matter, anything else) by retrojecting popular modern conceptions onto millennia-old Torah sources.

Reshuffling Ideological Camps

Other contemporary Western values emphasized throughout *Reclaiming Dignity* include the concepts of pluralism, tolerance, and inclusivity.[30] Beyond the porosity of values already observed, the insistence on a "diverse" mainstream Orthodoxy serves, fascinatingly, to redefine its outer limits.

Only a generation ago, the religious philosophy of *Torah u-Madda* was a wedge issue separating

[28] Falk, *Oz ve-Hadar Levushah*.

[29] Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky, Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller-Gottlieb, Rivkah Slonim, Rebbetzin Chaya Chava Pavlov, Yael Kaisman, Ilana Cowland, Rabbi Yitzchak Shurin, and Shalvie Friedman.

[30] For examples, see *Reclaiming Dignity*, 8, 208, 343, 357-359, 491-492, etc.

Centrist Orthodoxy from the Yeshiva world. No longer. As noted by Samuel Heilman,[31] Adam Ferziger,[32] and other scholars,[33] traditional divisions have become blurred in recent decades, as Modern Orthodoxy has undergone a so-called slide to the right and ultra-Orthodoxy more confidently engages with broader society. Each group, however, still struggles to define itself and to maintain age-old traditions in the midst of modernity, secularization, and technological advances.

This reshuffling of the cards is clearly visible in the target audience of *Reclaiming Dignity*, which comprises a wide range covering both "the Chareidi camp" and "the entire spectrum of Modern Orthodoxy."[34] This assertion is to be taken utterly seriously: after all, the book boasts the imprimaturs of R. Zev Leff and R. Hershel Schachter. It quotes approvingly, a few lines apart, the words of R. Aharon Lichtenstein and those of Hazon Ish.[35] It draws from the ideas of R. Soloveitchik and R. Sacks but is distributed by Feldheim Publishers. The gulf that once separated Haredim from Centrist Orthodox people has simply evaporated. A new mainstream is taking shape in front of our very eyes.

This redefined "moderate mainstream" is bounded, on the right, by Hasidic communities, Israeli-Lithuanian communities, and Lakewood-type diaspora communities. These are not presumed to constitute the readership of the book, but their customs are to be respected.[36] On the left are communities whose halakhic observance is found wanting, but any criticism of them should be voiced respectfully.

Finally, one topic has recently become omnipresent in the Orthodox world: mental health. In *Reclaiming Dignity*, one finds everywhere the realization that extreme modesty practices are detrimental from a psychological standpoint.[37] This is certainly an effective argument for moderation, but it also raises grave questions: why should one respect extreme right-wing notions of *tzeniut* if these are mentally detrimental?

Shifting Limits of Gender Discrimination

Academic scholars and feminist activists have frequently denounced the patriarchal structure deeply ingrained in the norms of Jewish female modesty.[38] Research has yielded important insights pertaining to the objectification of women's bodies,

[31] See Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Samuel Heilman, *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[32] Adam Ferziger, *Beyond Sectarianism: The Realignment of American Orthodox Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015).

[33] Haym Soloveitchik's classical article is now a full-length monograph: *Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Modern Orthodoxy* (London: Liverpool University Press, 2021).

[34] *Reclaiming Dignity*, xxxi-xxxii.

[35] *Reclaiming Dignity*, 203-204.

[36] *Reclaiming Dignity*, 342-343.

[37] See the neologism "*tzniut* PTSD" (3, 111), the discussion of "*hashkafah* anxiety" (357-359), and more.

[38] There is a vast literature that cannot be exhaustively listed here; see in particular Tova Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 45-61. And Tanya Regev's unpublished doctoral dissertation, "'Men Act and Women Appear' (John Berger): The Formation of Feminine Identity in Writing about the Ethos of Modesty in Religious Zionism" [Hebrew], (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2021).

male anxiety over female power, and the gendered power dynamics of male rabbis regulating the bodies of their female constituents. *Tzeniut* is often perceived to be a cudgel against women and a tool for silencing their voices.

Interestingly, one of the essential messages conveyed by Bracha Poliakoff and Anthony Manning is that *tzeniut* is not just a woman's mitzvah but rather a universal mitzvah that equally obligates males and females. This insight is reinforced in several ways throughout the book: the explicit subtitle of the book ("A Guide to Tzniut for Men and Women"); the large number of female essayists in the first part of the book; the inclusion of one halakhic chapter on "Tzniut for Men";[39] and more. All of this strengthens the key idea that modesty is equally relevant for all human beings.[40]

The very notion that *tzeniut* applies irrespective of gender is, of course, yet another modern Western conception. Still, while the tone set by *Reclaiming Dignity* is completely sincere, the book sometimes falls short of its purported objective. Thus, the chapter on *tzeniut* for men is only 12 pages long, whereas its female counterpart (*tzeniut* for women) is discussed for hundreds of pages. And while women are invited to express themselves on "soft topics," hard-core Halakhah clearly remains a male province.

Is the glass half full or half empty? Should the book be considered a step in the right direction, or a mere veneer of egalitarianism superimposed on a deeply patriarchal legal edifice? Readers will need to judge for themselves.

Conclusion

Reclaiming Dignity refreshes the message of *tzeniut* for one specific Jewish community: English-speaking, twenty-first-century Orthodoxy.

It is undeniably a thoughtful, sophisticated, and important book. Yet it remains an apologetic reinterpretation. In centuries past, Jewish communities did not think of *tzeniut* in these terms at all. Even today, French Sephardic Jews, Yemenite Jews, Old Yishuv Jews, and many others will only relate to some of *Reclaiming Dignity*'s messages, or to none at all.

"Apologetics" is not another word for "hypocrisy": a good apology facilitates the transition from an older mindset to a more contemporary one. It makes it possible to incorporate modern moral insights while remaining loyal to tradition. From this perspective, *Reclaiming Dignity* is remarkably successful. *Tzeniut*-as-dignity is BOTH new AND traditional, and therefore, insofar as a religious tradition reinvents itself constantly, it is authentically Jewish.

Ideologically, we are witnesses to a fascinating new amalgamation of Jewish and Western values that is transpiring before our very eyes. Sociologically, *Reclaiming Dignity* reflects, or perhaps even crystallizes, a new alliance between previously warring factions of Anglo-Orthodoxy. It catalyzes powerful yet previously less visible social trends (an endorsement of mental health consciousness, limited concessions to gender egalitarianism, and a rejection of extremism and sectarianism).

[39] Ibid., 503-515.

[40] This plays into the themes examined above: unless modesty is extended to men and reconceptualized as universal, it cannot be explained as an expression of fundamental human values such as internality, dignity, authenticity, etc.

Reclaiming Dignity celebrates the birth of a new Anglo-Orthodoxy and helps it find its own voice. Little wonder that such a rare book is greeted with unbridled enthusiasm.

Haym Soloveitchik has argued that important religious texts and concepts sometimes function as a mirror. People metaphorically "peer in" the Torah only to find their own likeness in its verses. As he puts it: "If this equivocality, this multivalence, is deep and complex enough, as it is in a few masterpieces, what are called 'supreme works of art', people then find themselves reflected in it. The work becomes, so to speak, all things to all men."[41]

In my view, *tzeniut* possesses the same reflective capacity. Since the 1960s, rabbis and communities have repeatedly engaged in an exercise of self-projection. One can only speculate as to the shape that the next iteration will take, in 20 or 30 years from now: *tzeniut* for LGBTQ people? The laws of *tzeniut* by a female author? Or something else entirely?

The story of *tzeniut*, as it will be written in future decades, will be fascinating to observe—closely bound, as it is, with the story of Jewish Orthodoxy itself.[42]

[41] Haym Soloveitchik, *Collected Essays II* (London: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 388.

[42] I would like to thank my wife Dr. Sarah Bloch-Elkouby, Dr. Leslie Ginsparg Klein, R. Dr. Tzvi Sinensky, R. Dr. Moshe Miller, Prof. Chaim Saiman, and Ashley Stern Mintz for making very useful remarks to earlier versions of this essay.