Modesty in the Age of Abuse

by

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 Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav (Bereishit 32:12). *Mi’yad* – from the hand. Why does Yaakov repeat *mi’yad* that second time? A literary reading might suggest that it is merely a poetic nicety, another example of Biblical parallelism. But as incredible a literary piece as it is, the Torah is not merely that. Such repetition is not dictated by meter or rhyme. There is a message here. There is a reason Yaakov did not simply say, “Rescue me from my brother, from Esav.”

Ramban notes that the Sages identify this *parasha* as the guide for all generations on how to engage with Esav and all his descendants. This is a roadmap for us and, as such, each *pasuk*, eachword, each letter is vital as we make our way. Indeed, the Midrash teaches that before Rav Yannai engaged with local authorities, he would study and relearn this *parasha*, this “chapter of exile”, so that he might best conduct himself in the *golus*.

Which brings us back to the repetition of *mi’yad*. The Bais Halevi  explains that Esav poses two distinct dangers to Yaakov and thus protection is needed from each. Certainly there was the obvious and imminent *physical* danger Esav posed. Esav’s military threat could hardly be overestimated. However, Yaakov knew that even if Esav was appeased, his danger was hardly lessened. For Esav represented the genuine *golus* and in the genuine *golus* the danger is not just physical annihilation but spiritual annihilation as well. Ironically, it is when Esav comes to us with arms outstretched in peace, love and “good will” that we are at greatest risk! Assimilation has taken more Jews than pogroms!

Yaakov recognizes this fullness of danger and so beseeches Hashem to protect him from both the physical threat and the spiritual threat. Thank God, both prayers were answered. Esav *did* come to attack but God caused him to be appeased and then, when Esav approached Yaakov with a brotherly touch, a “let’s live happily together…” and offering to accompany Yaakov on his journey, God once again interceded, prompting Yaakov to say, “that won’t be necessary.”

Bais Halevi teaches that Esav’s two “hands” represent the totality of Jewish history in the world. One hand reaches out to destroy us with bayonets, fire or ovens and, when we are delivered from the murderous ways of the *galus*, the other is waiting to smother our unique spiritual identity.

The more welcoming the culture, the greater the seduction and the danger. Has there been any country in the *galus* more welcoming to us than America in the late twentieth century? In America we can be free. In America we can hold our identity and yet, it is here that we go from “Jews in America” to “Jewish-Americans” to “American Jews” to “Americans who were born Jewish to families” with multiple mixed marriages and Christmas trees in our living rooms. And nothing but a loving, caring, welcoming hand laid upon us!

Spare us! Spare us from yad Esav, from the hand of Esav, and also from yad achi, from the hand of my brother. Spare our existence and spare our souls!

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Like Esav, the *yetzer hara* is capable of destroying our bodies and souls, but of the two it is the seductive lure of peace and friendship, of union, which carries the potential for greatest harm. *Chovos HaLevavos* teaches, “A person must realize that his biggest enemy in this world is his *yetzer hara*, which is well connected to his character and is mixed into his personality.” *Yetzer hara*’s great danger is subterfuge; it is the spy in our midst, the voice whispering in our ear, the illusion of brotherhood, of comfort and rest.

Rav Moshe of Kobrin was blunt when he taught that Yaakov’s prayers were for God to save him from the *yetzer hara*, who is called Esav and always appears so brotherly, “Lest he come and strike me down, mother and children; lest, he destroy both my thoughts and deeds.”  Says the *Sforno*, “…even if I can escape, but surely my wife and children will be wiped out…”

We Jews, living in the safety and affluence of twenty-first century America can surely shake our lethargy to understand the power and danger of the threat. It is written out for us in banner headlines across each and every newspaper across the land!

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Perhaps no terrain, no area, no aspect of life is more fraught, more uncertain or has greater potential for moral error than our sexual behavior. Correspondingly, no other area of our lives has such affinity with the *yetzer hara*. Sexual behavior is a basic, fundamental human drive like hunger and thirst but it is associated with profound moral and spiritual pitfalls as to make it uniquely dangerous in human experience. This uniqueness has, over time, given rise to equally powerful and profound *safeguards* so that sexual behavior can be conducted in a way that does not diminish us physically or spiritually, that does not rob us of our essential *kedoshim*.

Which brings us to this unique moment in history.

We have politicians who transgress into abusive relationships. We have the most powerful men in Hollywood, in business, in media, even in religion behaving in ways that make righteous people cringe.

And we have an increasingly polarized population “looking past” accusations so long as there are benefits for them, blaming the victims, calling out the accused in ever more strident voices.

Esav has indeed grasped us tightly with that second *yad*!

Rescue us!

Is there any way to distance ourselves, to separate ourselves (tellingly, the Hebrew word for “holy” – *kadosh* – is derived from the words meaning “to separate”) from this coarseness, from this evil? There is. While the pervasiveness of this evil is staggering, sexual impropriety is hardly new to human experience. God has recognized our vulnerability to the whisperings of the evil inclination from Eden; our Sages, knowing the danger, have devised rules and mechanisms to try and protect us from damaging behavior. Of course, to be protected we first must *want* to be protected; we first must want to be saved not just from the first hand of Esav but from the second as well.

Traditional Judaism has long maintained that the onus of protection from inappropriate and damaging relations between men and women was on women; that the laws of *tzniut* landed heavier on them. I have always taught that such an understanding is misleading, shortsighted and wrong. *Tzniut* – modesty – is not a topic for women alone to study, understand and practice. Men are no less responsible – perhaps more so! – for all that *tzniut* is. We often associate it with women more because its practice is more obvious with women, more “counter cultural”. But the goal of *tzniut* must be shared by all. Its goal, to desexualize everyday encounters, must be embraced by both men and women. Addressing one side of the sexual equation without the other increases power imbalances and invites rather than diminishes abuse.

While our society and culture has honed our tendency to objectify each other to a frightening degree, *tzniut* seeks to “subjectify”. While we have become, indeed, the “sum of our parts” we need to recognize the ineffable aspect that inspires, inflames, and animates our being. Too often, we look at a young woman on the street and we see only her eyes, her hair, her physical attributes, the clothes she is wearing. We look at a young man and we see how tall he is, how muscular, whether or not he has a mustache. We fail to see the souls animating those bodies.

In doing so, we fall short of Jewish teaching and understanding. As is the case in all things, everyone and everything is much, much more than the sum of its, or their, parts. There are infinite aspects to everything and every person. *Tzniut* challenges us to see more than simply the surface.

*Tzniut* means looking more deeply. Although its simplistic translation, “modesty,” fails to fully capture the fullness of what *tzniut* means, the exercise of looking more deeply is a good start. By looking deeper than your most superficial, corporeal self and seeing who you are at your deepest level you are able to see the person you are capable of being. And that person is the one that God wants you to be, the one who does not do to others what he wouldn’t want done to him.

The Talmud says it best, “In your town, it is your name that counts. In another, it is your clothes.” Those who know you, who know your deeds, judge you on your inside. But those who do not know you have only the external, the outside, to measure you by.

What is “inside” has the potential for the greatest value. What is “outside” should accurately reflect that value. One’s physical presence in the world should call attention to something more than the physical; it should call attention to inner worth and nobility, to one’s good soul.

That said, it would be naïve to suggest that modesty alone can or does “protect” anyone from sexual predation. As Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt wrote in Forward.com on October 17th, “The assumption that modestly dressed, bespectacled women are safe from sexual abuse is laughable. Abuse, assault and harassment happen to everyone — women in miniskirts, pleated skirts and burqas, as well as to men. You can be confident and you can be smart, you can have a doctorate and come from a great family, and yes, you can be ordinary-looking, and you might still have a creep breathing down your neck.”

The necessary implication here goes to the heart of “victim shaming”. It is *not* the fault of the person who is assaulted when she is assaulted, no matter what she is wearing. One need only ask the girls and women abused in *frum* homes or in girls’ religious schools to know this to be true. Likewise, *yichud*, separating men from women in every possible encounter falls short in and of itself. The real problem with using the religious concept of *yichud* as a means of protecting ourselves from sexual predation is that *yichud* was created by men on the assumption that women are a temptation to sin — not that they are vulnerable to attack. In other words, it is a practice entrenched in religious authority, making it an unrealistic candidate for progress toward empowering women – which *is* an important component of protecting them.

So where does this leave us?

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Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav.

First, we must recognize the danger. The power of the #Metoo movement makes clear that the transgressions are plentiful; that too many women have been harassed, abused and assaulted. The trespassers encompass everyone from the most powerful corporate head to the last man on the assembly line. The sum total of these transgressions cry out that we have failed our sisters and our daughters; failed at honoring them, failed at protecting them.

Have there been instances when accusations have unfairly tarnished a good name or compromised a good man? Of course. This too is an affront and is unacceptable.

We need to find the correct balance between friendliness, innocent flirting and even boorish behavior and criminality. But, the greatest danger is in not finding a way to protect and empower victims. We can never rely on the “good graces” of Esav.

Ms. Chizhik-Goldschmidt’s wrote of her high school teacher’s cringe-inducing parsing of *yichud and* how, as a young woman in his class, she didn’t understand his relentless focus on the topic. It was only as she got older and she discovered his motivation as a man who counseled victims of sexual predation and also in her own experience as a woman that she appreciated what he was trying to convey to his students. Still, she rejects that *yichud* alone is the answer. Practiced fully, it would deny women the ability to reach their potential.

Until we all, men and woman, embrace and practice *tzniut* and heed God’s call to holiness, rules and regulations – and misreads and misunderstandings – will define relationships between men and women and the hand of Esav will continue to diminish us.