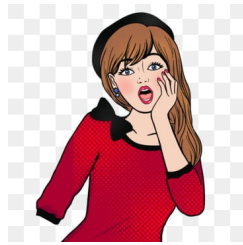


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## Stories with a Twist [277]

### **Rather, say: How Modest Was This Man That He Did Not Recognize This in His Wife!**

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 54a)



#### **Background to Our Story**

##### **Modesty (Tzniut)**

Modesty is the foundation of Jewish values and is one of the fundamental underpinnings of the Jewish family. It is popularly thought to apply primarily to women, but it is a desirable quality in men as well. Although the term is generally used for relations between men and women, it is meant to apply to people in all situations.

*Tzniut* means modesty, simplicity, a touch of bashfulness, and reserve. But perhaps above these, it signifies privacy. It is the hallmark of Jewish marriage, and the rabbis refer to it as the specific quality to look for in the ideal mate.

The classical symbol of *tzniut* is the veil. It bespeaks privacy, a person apart; Isaiah 3:18 calls it *tiferet* ("glory"). The Assyrians ruled that a harlot may *not* wear a veil, to imply that she is on *public* exhibit (Code of Hammurabi). The veil was instinctively donned by Rebecca as soon as she observed her future husband in the distance (Genesis 24:65). That is one reason why the ceremony immediately prior to the wedding celebration is the *bedeken*, or the veiling of the bride by the groom, who blesses the bride with the ancient words spoken to Rebecca.

The principle of *tzniut* rejects all nudity, not only in public, but also before family members at home. (Thus one must not pray or recite the *Shema* prayer while one is naked or standing in the presence of a naked person.) The rejection of nudity recalls Adam and Eve who, after committing the first sin, realized they were naked and instinctively felt ashamed and hid (Genesis 2:25). The same attitude reappears when Noah curses Ham, who saw his father exposed (Genesis 9:21-27).

*Tzniut* also implies modesty in dress. Traditionally covered parts of the body should not be exposed, although one can dress stylishly. This attitude issues from a very highly refined sense of shame, an emotion often denigrated today in the name of

freedom. Not only did the Bible prohibit removing all clothing, it did not permit wearing any garments belonging to the opposite sex (Deuteronomy 22:54) as this might lead to unnatural lusts, lascivious thoughts, and a freer intermingling between the sexes.

### Modesty is About More than What One Wears

Tzniut means discreet habits, quiet speech, and affections privately expressed, and infers the avoidance of grossness, boisterous laughter, raucous behavior, even "loud" ornaments. This is not merely a series of behavioral niceties, a sort of Bible's guide to etiquette, but a philosophy of life.

This concept of modesty does not imply a rejection of the body. On the contrary, the Jewish people are taught to respect the body. [Hillel](#) [an early rabbinic sage] did not bathe solely for hygienic reasons, but to care for the body—the most magnificent creation of God (Leviticus Rabba 34:3). Rabban Gamaliel [a second century sage], on seeing a beautiful person, praised God (Jerusalem Talmud, Berakhot 9:1). One consequence of this concept is the emphasis on the need for marriage and on healthy sexual relations between husband and wife.

Tzniut was intended to preserve the sanctity of the inner human being from assault by the coarseness of daily life. The Bible (Psalms 45:14) says *kol k'vudah bat melekh p'nimah* ("the whole glory of the daughter of the king is within"—some translate it playfully as "the whole glory of the daughter is the royalty within"). Dignity comes not from exposure and indecent exhibition, but from discretion and the assurance that the human being will be considered a private, sensitive being, not merely a body.

### Modesty's Opposite

The antonym of tzniut is *hefkerut*, abandon, looseness, the absence of restraint and inhibition. In its extreme, it is gross immorality, *gilui arayot* (the uncovering of nakedness). Tzniut is covering, vulgarity is uncovering. Vulgarity that is repeated ceases to astonish us or to shock our moral sensibilities. Thus the canons of taste have degenerated as immorality has increased. Those who would rather be clothed than exposed are considered square and puritanical, victims of the centuries-old repression of healthy instincts.

Privacy, in contemporary parlance, refers primarily to property. Sarah Handelman observed that "privacy refers to 'property,' not to 'person.' Our homes are our inviolate castles: 'Private Property-No Trespassing.' Our gems, stocks and bonds are hidden away in vaults. But our bodies, and the precious inner jewels of our personalities, are open to all comers. Nothing is inviolable there. God forbid that someone should know your bank balance, but a casual meeting with a stranger at a bar is warrant for immediate sexual intimacy" (Sheina Sarah Handelman, "The Paradoxes of Privacy," *Sh'ma*, November 10, 1978).

The [Babylonian] Talmud (Bava Batra 57b) has an interesting comment on privacy as it relates to persons and property: Privacy was required for women who did their laundering in a brook, because they had to uncover their legs. The Talmud ruled that private property rights had to be violated to protect the privacy of persons, "because Jewish women cannot be expected to humiliate themselves at the laundering brook." Because of such legal decisions, moral principles are still relevant to Jews. It is said (in Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 107a) that *ein b'not yisrael hefker*, (the daughters of Israel are not in a state of abandonment, available for every public use). The vulgarities of society can be symbolized by the biblical phrase *nezem zahav b'af hazir* ("a gold ring in the swine's snout"). That which is pure gold, the God-given ability to reproduce, is so often used for wading through the public mud.

"A man should always be watchful of the possibility of moral abandonment ... for it will cause all he owns to go to waste ... as a worm in a sesame plant who eats everything within, without anyone noticing it, and all that is left is the shell" (Babylonian Talmud Sotah 3b). The gradual abandonment of tzniut has proceeded virtually unobstructed and undetected, until all that remains is only an outer shell of morality.

By Rabbi Maurice Lamm. In: [The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage](#).

## Context to Our Story



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Shabbat Part 1. Koren publishers Jerusalem

The connection to the previous story seems to be that in both cases there are two different assessments of the same reality.

## The Text: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 54a

תנו רבנן: מעשה באדם אחד שנישא אשה גידמת ולא הפיר בה עד יום מותה. אמר רב: בא וראה כמה צנועה אשה זו, שלא הפיר בה בעלה! אמר לו רבי תייא: זו דרקה בכך, אלא: כמה צנוע אדם זה שלא הפיר באשתו.

There was **an incident involving one man who married a one-armed woman, and he did not realize** that she was one-armed **until the day that she died.**

**Rav said: Come and see how modest this woman was that her husband did not realize** this **about her.**

**Rabbi Hiyya said to him: That is** typical **conduct** for **her**, as a woman typically covers herself. All the more so a one-armed woman makes sure to cover her defect.

**Rather**, say: **How modest was this man that he did not recognize** this **in his wife.**



**Explaining the Story** - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

## Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**Bonus** Why did the man in our story marry a one-armed woman?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** How is the woman of our story modest, according to Rav?

**?** Why, according to Rabbi Hiyya, was the woman's behavior expected?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** Why, according to Rabbi Hiyya, was the man's behavior exceptional?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** What do you think would be the recipe for a happy marriage according to Rav? According to Rabbi Hiyya?

### **"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts**

**!** When "love is blind" is not a statement, but a conscious choice.



This strange story in the Babylonian Talmud presents us with two different assessments of reality. The reality is that a man married a one-armed woman, a fact he didn't realize until she passed away. In our story, Rav praises the woman, who was so modest that she never gave her husband the opportunity to realize her defect. Rabbi Hiyya, in a different assessment of reality, praises the husband's modesty, for not noticing his wife's flaw.

Rav's approach to modesty -and a happy marriage- is somehow expected: hide your flaws and look always your best.

Rabbi Hiyya's approach to a happy marriage, while less obvious and more taxing, is not less important: teach yourself to turn a blind eye to the unchangeable flaws of the people you love.