

Walk Humbly with the Divine: The Meaning and Centrality of Jewish Modesty and Humility and their Potential Impacts on Mental Health, Leadership, and Success

Akiva Turner*

College of Health Care Sciences, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA

***Corresponding Author:** Akiva Turner, College of Health Care Sciences, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA.

Received: July 18, 2017; **Published:** August 12, 2017

Abstract

This article discusses the importance of modesty and humility in Judaism and explores Jewish-based and psychological research definitions of both. These definitions are much more expansive than narrow gendered definitions that focus solely upon clothing and sexuality. The article then explores the potential impact of modesty and humility on behavior, success, leadership, and mental/physical health described in contemporary Jewish writings, the written Torah, the Talmud, Chassidus, and in scholarly research.

Keywords: Modesty; Humility; Judaism; Success; Leadership; Mental Health

Introduction

Ben Zoma says: Who is wise? The one who learns from every person...Who is strong? The one who subdues his negative inclination, as it is stated (Proverbs 16:32): He who is slow to anger is better than a strong man, and he who masters his passions is better than one who conquers a city. Who is rich? One who is happy with his lot...Who is honored? The one who gives honor to others... [1].

With the advent of the internet and social media sites, it has become very easy for individuals to display much about themselves through words and pictures and to have those words and pictures viewed around the world in moments, and possibly to linger in perpetuity. Though the internet is a relatively new venue historically speaking, the desire of individuals to self-disclose, boast, connect, display, be publicly intimate, and expose themselves is not new. Technological advances have simply provided new forums for casual expression of these desires, bolstered by cultural norms.

Inherent in these desires is an underlying devaluation of modesty and humility. For example, in a study of middle aged adults solicited via the internet, researchers found that a large number of these adults did not endorse modesty and humility as important to life satisfaction. Of course, given study limitations, the authors did not make a claim as to which came first, the adults' use of the internet or the lack of endorsement of modesty and humility [2].

However, the focus of this article is not limited to lack of modesty and humility on the internet. The internet is simply a tool, method, and perhaps a motivator for immodest individual and cultural expression. Instead, I will discuss how Judaism values modesty and humility and delve into varied definitions of modesty and humility as well as their intersection. In this discussion, I will move away from narrow gendered discussions of clothing and sexuality and move toward a more gender inclusive and expansive realm represented in Jewish thought. Then I will explore the potential benefits of modesty and humility expressed in, or influenced by, Jewish writings and compare these with the impacts of modesty and humility found within scholarly research. By doing so, I am not claiming one should be modest or

humble solely to reap potential benefits. From a religious perspective these potential benefits are not a goal in and of themselves. These benefits may be evidence that modesty and humility are good for the individual and society, but the source, meaning, and purpose of modesty and humility in Judaism remain Divine.

Modesty in Judaism: More than a Feminine Dress Code

Notions of modesty and humility are core to some religious traditions, particularly Judaism. The book of *Bamidbar* (one of the five books of Moses or written Torah), describes the story of the non-Jewish prophet Bilam. Bilam was hired by Balak, the King of Moab, to curse the Jewish people. Bilam, however, was unable to do so. After some unsuccessful tries, Balak took Bilam to a high place where Bilam could look down upon the Jewish encampment and where Balak thought it would be easier for Bilam to complete the curse. From his perch, Bilam could see how the Jewish people were camped; their tents were arranged in such a way that no one could see, even by accident, into another's tent. Instead of cursing the Jewish people, Bilam blessed them. He said, "How good are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments O Israel" [3].

The Talmud clarifies for us the problem with Bilam and the virtue of the encamped Jews. "Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the disciples of our father Abraham; and whoever possesses the opposite three traits is of the disciples of the wicked Bilam. The disciples of our father Abraham have a good eye, a meek spirit and a humble soul. The disciples of the wicked Bilam have an evil eye, a haughty spirit and a gross soul" [4].

There are many examples of modesty and a deep respect for privacy in Jewish law. For example, based upon the above teaching, one should not build a home in a way that one can see into another's home. Gossiping, even if true, is prohibited, and there are acceptable ways for how both men and women dress, display affection, and behave generally in both private and public domains.

Granted, these notions may seem quaint or even suppressive or oppressive to those more influenced by modern secular norms. The modern world, by providing outlets to "escape" local religious norms and by emphasizing public displays of private emotions and details, as well as symbols of wealth, has certainly shifted adherence away from religious based tenets of modesty. As Shaina Sara Handelman [5] states, "In the past decade, we have seen entirely new definitions of the meaning of 'private' and 'public' emerge in the secular culture at large. There has been an intense search for more 'self-expression' 'openness' 'naturalness'...It is though the way to true intimacy with others is through exposure, radical disclosure of soul, psyche, and body".

Stemming from this "intense search", modesty and humility have been critiqued as belonging to part of a patriarchal system that intends to subdue or control feminine sexuality, but these critiques represent a very superficial secular gendered understanding of modesty and humility [6]. Such critiques, usually limited to and focused on female sexuality and modesty--while sometimes debating the negative side of commercial displays of the female body--may very well be related to an economic and political nudging of the private into the public, biased by secular gendered perceptions that public is more important than private. Hence, the 1960s slogan, "the personal is political", meaning there is no personal or private sense of self but only a public, albeit political and economic, self to be displayed. The ability to display the self is thought to be necessary for justice and equality.

In Judaism, the belief is the opposite. As Handelman [5] points out, "in the value system of Torah, that which is most precious, most sensitive, most potentially holy is that which is most private--in the spiritual as well as the physical realms. The holiest objects, such as the scrolls of the Torah are kept covered. In Torah, 'modesty', inwardness, is a prime spiritual value in contrast to prevailing norms of contemporary culture, where self-advertisement and public recognition are emphasized". Furthermore, modesty defends the border between private and public, the very stability of the self. As Rabbi Manis Friedman [7] writes, "(t)here is one border that makes who we are more than any other: modesty. Modesty is the framework that gives a sense of self and blueprint for stability".

Given these broader implications, this discussion will now move beyond a gendered lens and underline the importance of viewing modesty and its closely related construct, humility, as being gender inclusive. This does not in any way undermine different gender specific meanings and applications of modesty and humility or argue that men and women should always think, act and behave the same, as to do so would in and of itself be immodest. Nor is this to deny or deemphasize the importance of feminine modesty in Judaism. Handelman [5] writes regarding modesty and the Jewish woman, "(w)oman's body, furthermore, reflects, in a sense, more of G-d's essence than does man's. For woman has the ability to create within herself new life, a new creature, a 'something from nothing' and this parallels and derives from the essence of G-d to create ex-nihilo, something from nothing. This is one of the ways that woman holds a more sensitive spiritual position than man...Modesty of dress is a matter of spiritual modesty, not shame".

Defining Modesty

Though Handelman's [5] work is appropriately more, though not exclusively, focused on feminine modesty, in Judaism, modesty, of which dress codes are part, is not exclusive to women but is more encompassing. In Judaism, there is a concept of *tznius* (sometimes spelled *tzeni'ut*) which is often translated as modesty or privacy, but it comes from the Hebrew verb *tzana* which means to be humble or walk humbly. It is usually discussed when emphasizing how Orthodox Jewish women and girls dress, but it also includes criteria for the modest attire of men as well. In fact, though, it is not limited to dress. As Rochelle Millen [8] explains "*Tzeni'ut* is often invoked in particular as criterion for reevaluating the attire of girls and women, but it is actually a much broader, gender-inclusive conceptual category". Millen [8] goes on to describe modesty by negating its opposites. She describes true modesty as "unpretentiousness, a lack of self-centeredness, a curtailing of unwarranted pride or arrogance".

In his book, *Why Doesn't Anyone Blush Anymore?*, Rabbi Manis Friedman [7] describes three levels of modesty. The first level, external modesty is how one dresses, speaks, and behaves or acts. The second level, internal modesty is how one contains ones inner thoughts and feelings. Lastly, he describes an essential modesty which never changes, but is eternal, and is part of the Divine. True modesty is harmony between all three levels.

Rabbi Friedman's [7] description is based upon Chassidic teachings found in the *Tanya*. The *Tanya* was written by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi [9], known as the Alter Rebbe, who lived from 1745 - 1812. The *Tanya* is a book in which Jewish intellect, spirituality, and psychology are grounded [10]. Friedman's [7] internal and external modesty are described by the Alter Rebbe [10] as garments and essential modesty is the Divine soul clothed in these garments.

"In addition [to its ten faculties...], every divine soul (*nefesh elokit*) possesses three garments. The soul possesses three auxiliary powers, which are its instruments of expression. Like garments, they can be donned or shed at will. When the soul utilizes any of these three powers it is "clothed" in them; when it does not use them, it is "divested" of them. Also, just as garments give expression to their wearer's beauty and importance, so, too, when the soul dons and utilizes these "garments", its intellect and emotion find expression. They (the garments) are: thought, speech and action as they find expression in the 613 commandments of the Torah" (Chapter 4).

As Friedman [7] explains:

"To nurture your external being, which corresponds to the garments of the soul, you need to be externally modest...in your manner of dress and in how you speak and act. Internal modesty means keeping your inner being within, allowing how you think and feel to remain private. Essential modesty means recognizing your innocence, the part of you that never changes, that is not created but is eternal, that doesn't change because it cannot change".

Scheinberg Andrews [11] completed a study of a small group of American Jewish women who self-identified as Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative, considered the three major American Jewish "movements". In her study, the women seemed to describe nicely the "garments" clothing essential modesty. She concluded from this study that for these women, modesty includes dress, actions, one's interac-

tions with others, one's rearing, and beliefs in the value of modesty. Though there were differing perspectives between the groups about modesty, with the Orthodox women more closely identifying with religious modesty, all identified at some level with modesty. There have been no similar studies among men.

Divine Source

Shalit [6], though not explicitly writing from a religious perspective, argues that modesty is instinctual and natural, and that it is culture that teaches us that it is a problem. She comes to this partially by examining contemporary American culture which can be counter to expressions, particularly religious expressions, of modesty.

For Rabbi Friedman [7], instinctual or natural is Divine, as everything comes from one Divine source, a key belief in Judaism. He writes, "G-d is modest in that he limited how much energy he put into the world and thus wants modesty". The Talmud acknowledges the Divine source of everything and teaches that modesty is so "natural" that "(i)f He (the Divine) had not given the Torah, we would have learned modesty from the cat" [12]. Millen [8] finds the source of modesty to be the Divine's image inside of all of us. She explains, "(t)rue modesty may be understood as a vehicle for developing and making visible the dignity of each person, the image of G-d, within us all".

Modesty and Humility: A Connection

Modesty and humility are sometimes discussed separately but simultaneously, and at other times, just one or the other is emphasized. Perhaps modesty may be the more expansive construct with humility being one of its components and a way to externally describe a person's behavior, or perhaps humility is an internal value that intersects with, leads to, or even drives modesty. In reality, however, it may be more of a semantic discussion and both are actually unified or one in the same. Nevertheless, writers have parsed.

Shalit [6] considers humility, or being humble, to be a type of modesty along with sexual modesty. Though her focus is on female modesty, she does connect it with male modesty which she believes to be based upon honor and obligation.

Millen [8] writing from a Jewish perspective also describes being humble as part of modesty, but not necessarily a type. While describing modesty she writes, "(w)e read in Micah 6:8 ...and what does G-d require of you? To do justly, love mercy (*chesed*) and walk humbly (*hatznea lekhet*) with G-d". But what does it mean to be humble? She continues, "such behavior is driven by the palpable presence of an inner direction, a strong sense of self, the confidence to develop one's gifts as well as reach out to others".

For Rabbi Freidman [7] humility is a feeling. He says that being humble is what you feel when you are in the presence of someone superior to you. In other words, it is not a trait or category but a feeling one would have in the presence of the Divine. Thus presumably it would drive modest thoughts and behaviors. At a minimum, humility is related to modesty. For example, one purpose of the *kippah* (yarmukle), worn by Jewish men, is to remind one, should one need to be reminded, that there is something bigger and more important than oneself, that is the Divine. In other words, the *kippah* is meant to remind one "to walk humbly with G-d" meaning to be modest in ones thoughts, speech and actions.

While humility is an ideal characteristic central to Judaism, some religious scholars, as well as other religions influenced by Judaism, have to some degree or another adopted the idea of humility being about something bigger and more important than oneself. Cottingham [13] generally states that "humility is a lack of anxious concern to insist on matters of status, a recognition that one is but one among many others, and that one's gifts...are not ultimate of one's own making". Tangney [14], summarizing the theological, philosophical and psychological literature, explains that humility is not seeing oneself as the most important, but instead as part of something bigger. Tangney [14] concludes with some key components of humility including an accurate assessment of one's abilities and achievements (not low self-esteem or self-deprecation), an ability to acknowledge ones mistakes, imperfections and limitations in relation to a higher power, and seeing oneself as one person in a larger order.

Apply Modesty and Humility: Comparing Religious Views with Secular Research

Rabbi Freidman [7] believes that modesty can make one more true, more trustworthy, more reliable, and more at peace, freeing one to pursue goodness. He suggests that modesty gives a sense of self and a “blueprint for stability”. Rabbi Friedman [7] also makes a compelling case that a lack of humility is related to anger. He writes, “When we become angry we have too high an opinion of ourselves, when we take ourselves too seriously.....We speak about our ‘right’ to be angry (when offended, hurt or bothered), which justifies whatever we say or do”. Shalit [6] argues that “(m)odesty teaches that more empowering choices can be made”. She brings an example of a young girl not giving into peer pressure to text a nude picture of herself as a powerful choice. She concludes that modesty gives one freedom to think about things other than appearance.

Both Rabbi Friedman’s [7] and Shalit’s [6] views find support in research. Low modesty may be connected, indeed one of the predictors of some not so positive traits and values. David Watson (2015) in a study on materialism completed a facet level analysis. He distinguished between trait materialism--defined as a personality composed of envy, non-generosity, possessiveness-- and value based materialism--defined as a belief that it is important to acquire money and material possessions. Watson [15] concluded that trait based materialism was predicted by a grouping of angry hostility, low actions, low modesty, self-consciousness. Value based materialism was predicted by low-modesty, self-consciousness, low aesthetics, low straightforwardness and excitement seeking. Low modesty was a predictor for both trait and value based materialism.

Moreover, materialism, connected with low modesty and self-consciousness, has been associated with a multitude of negative behaviors and psychological impacts. For example, those who hold materialistic values and practice materialistic purchasing behaviors tend to have lower social and personal well-being, compulsive and impulsive spending habits, increased debt, decreased savings, depression, social anxiety, less psychological need satisfaction, and other adverse outcomes [16,17]. As it is brought in the Talmud, apparently “increasing possessions, increases worries” [18].

On the other hand, in the management literature, researchers have found some positive impacts of modesty in the workplace. In a study on impression management, Diekmann., *et al.* [19] describe what they call “trait” modesty. People with high level “trait” modesty are “unassuming and self-effacing; they see themselves as ordinary people and do not expect to be treated preferentially. People with low level trait modesty feel superior to other people and feel entitled to high status, privileges, and special treatment”. Diekmann., *et al.* [19] found that modesty among those with high trait modesty demonstrated significant positive effects on supervisor ratings of employee likeability and competence, which was associated with higher job performance ratings.

Modest individuals are also more attentive to long-term objectives, are more cautious risk takers, are less likely to overestimate how much control they have over their environment, and are more skillful at avoiding poor decisions [20]. Further, within groups, modesty influences positive group functioning, interpersonal evaluations and stimulates added support from others [20].

In addition, though it may seem counterintuitive to some, successful leaders tend to also be more humble and modest. According to Ou., *et al.* [21] humble CEO leadership behaviors empower others, promoting management team integration and a positive work performance. Ridge and Ingram [20] in a study of executives and financial analysts found that modesty led to more positive firm performance.

That humility and modesty are aspects of leadership is not new to Judaism. Rabbi Simon Jacobson [22] cites the Talmud in describing leadership not as power or dominance but as servitude. He writes “(A) true leader should not be judged by what he is not, ego, arrogance, and self-interest...This does not mean that a leader is weak; he derives great strength from his dedication to a purpose greater than himself”.

Of course, in Judaism a leader does more than make sure there are successful returns on business. Nevertheless, humility and modesty also define leadership in Judaism. Indeed, in Judaism, Moses, the greatest of all prophets and leader of the Jewish people, is considered to

be the most humble, “more humble than any man on the face of the earth” [23]. A Midrash describes why the Divine chose Moses to be the leader of the Jewish people. Moses was a shepherd, and one day while watching his large flock of sheep, he noticed that one of the sheep had wandered away. He found this one small sheep at a stream drinking water. Moses waited patiently until the sheep finished drinking and then put it on his shoulders and carried it back to the flock [24]. This story emphasizes the leadership qualities of Moses and exemplifies Moses as being a humble servant, showing concern for and patience with one small sheep and less concern with his own needs.

In the Talmud, Moses has an exchange with the Divine following the Jewish people’s sin of worshipping a golden calf, just 40 days following the Divine revelation of receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai. After this sin, Moses was pleading the case of the Jewish people and asking that they be forgiven. While explaining why he was advocating for the Jewish people, even telling the Divine to erase his name from the Torah if the Divine would not forgive them, Moses hypothesizes a bad leader, “He (that leader) sought greatness for himself as the founder of a new nation and did not beseech G-d for mercy on their behalf” [25].

As Rabbi Simon Jacobson [22] so eloquently writes “A true leader does not seek followers; he wants to teach others how to be leaders. He does not want control; he wants the truth. He does not impose his leadership on others, nor does he take away anyone’s autonomy. He inspires by love, not by coercion. When it comes time to take credit, he makes himself invisible...”. In other words, he is humble and modest.

In addition to successful workplace relationships and leadership, there has been some research on health and its relationship with modesty and humility. The main focus of this research and scholarly work seems to be mostly upon women from different cultures and how modesty influences access to care and the nature of medical encounters, with the goal being for healthcare providers to be more culturally sensitive to improve the encounters. For example, Lee and Vang [26] found that more modest views among Hmong American women was the greatest barrier to ever having a clinical breast exam. Chinese women have reported problems with being examined by and removing clothes for a provider of the opposite gender, and Islamic women have reported problems with opposite gender providers [11]. However, Sheinberg Andrews [11] found that Orthodox Jewish women did not have issues with having a health-care provider of the opposite gender or removing certain clothes necessary for an exam but were concerned about being alone in the room with a person of the opposite gender. Though her focus was on women, I should note that many Orthodox Jewish men would share similar concerns with being alone in a closed room with a person of the opposite gender.

Though the above studies have concentrated on gender and problems encountered while being a modest woman in an immodest medical encounter, there are a few studies that look at how lack of modesty and humility impact health lifestyles and choices. For example, some researchers have explored the consequences of a self-focus, the opposite of modesty and humility, and have found that a self-focus increases the risk of depression as well as coronary heart disease [27,28]. And as noted earlier those with a focus on materialism, related with low modesty, also suffer more from depression, social anxiety, decreased subjective well-being, and less psychological need satisfaction [16,17].

Empirical studies specifically related to the impact of Jewish beliefs about modesty and humility on health are scarce, but some researchers have published extensive findings mostly on Christians and religious beliefs, including humility, and self-reported aspects of health. This research suggests that people who hold stronger doubts about religion are more likely to experience greater psychological distress and rate their health less favorably [28]. Krause [28] also found that older Christians who reported being more humble rated their health more favorably over time. Lastly, this body of research also demonstrates that there could be a connection between humility and more positive responses to trauma. Krause and Hayward [29] in a study of both older white and African American Christians found that the deleterious effects of exposure to life time trauma was buffered for individuals who were more humble.

Conclusion

Modesty and humility are core to Judaism and are believed to emanate from a Divine source. Modesty and humility in Judaism are also more broad and overreaching than portrayed in narrowed secular gendered perspectives. Though very little research has been published on the benefits of modesty and humility specifically among religious Jews, research among non-religious specific groups and other religious groups in management, psychology, and health do demonstrate potential benefits of modesty and humility, as well as some negative consequences of low modesty and materialism. This research is consistent with claims made by some religious Jewish thinkers, as well as Jewish religious texts.

Bibliography

1. Talmud, Avot, Shottstein Edition 4:1.
2. Harvey JH and Pauwels BG. "Modesty, humility, character strength, and positive psychology". *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 23.5 (2004): 620-623.
3. Bamidmar, The Gutnick Edition 25:4.
4. Talmud, Avot, Shottstein Edition 5:19.
5. Handelman SS. "The concept of 'modesty': A Torah perspective". In, Weiner M (ed.), *Glory of the king's daughter: The laws of modesty in women's dress*. New York: Rabbi Moshe Wiener (2015): 1-12.
6. Shalit W. "A return to modesty: Discovering the lost virtue". New York: Free Press (1999).
7. Friedman, M. "Doesn't anyone blush anymore?" Minneapolis: First Bais Chana Press (1996).
8. Millen RL. "Understanding tzniut: Modern controversies in the Jewish community". *NASHIM: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 18 (2009): 234-242.
9. Zalman S. "The Tanya". New York: Kehot Publication Society (1797/1982).
10. Turner A. "Chassidic teachings and modern psychology: Toward a more unified approach". *Journal of Religion and Health* 55.3 (2016): 973-985.
11. Scheinberg Andrews C. "Defining and exploring modesty in Jewish American women". *Journal of Religion and Health* 50.4 (2011): 818-834.
12. Talmud, Eruvin, Shottstein Edition 100b.
13. Cottingham J. "Why believe?" New York, Continuum (2009).
14. Tangney JP. "Humility: Theoretical perspectives, Empirical findings and directions for future research". *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 19.1 (2000): 70-82.
15. Watson DC. "Materialism and the five-factor model of personality: A facet-level analysis". *North American Journal of Psychology* 17.1 (2015): 133-150.
16. Donnelly G., et al. "Sadness, identity, and plastic in over-shopping: The interplay of materialism, poor credit management, and emotional buying motives in predicting compulsive buying". *Journal of Economic Psychology* 39 (2013): 113-125.
17. Howell RT. "What causes materialism in America?: The geography of consumption". *Psychology Today* (2014).

18. Talmud, Avot, Shottstein Edition 2:7.
19. Diekmann C., *et al.* "Trick or trait?: The combined effect of employee impression management modesty and trait modesty on supervisor evaluations". *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 89 (2015): 120-129.
20. Ridge JW and Ingram A. "Modesty in top management team: Investor reaction and performance implications". *Journal of Management* 43.4 (2014).
21. Ou AY, *et al.* "Humble Chief Executive Officers' connections top management team integration and middle managers' responses". *Administrative Science Quarterly* 59.1 (2014): 34-72.
22. Jacobson S. "Toward a Meaningful Life: The Wisdom of the Rebbe Menachem Mendel Scheerson". New York: Harper (2004).
23. Bamidmar, The Gutnick Edition 12:3.
24. Midrash Rabbah, Shemot, Kleinman Edition 2:2.
25. Talmud, Berachos, Shottstein Edition 32a.
26. Lee HY and Vang S. "Cultural beliefs and clinical breast examination in Hmong American women: The crucial role of modesty". *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 17.3 (2015): 746-755.
27. Watkins E. "Adaptive and maladaptive ruminative self-focus during emotional processing". *Behavior Research and Therapy* 42.9 (2004): 1037-1052.
28. Krause N. "Religious involvement, humility, and change in self-rated health over time". *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 40.3 (2012): 199-210.
29. Krause N and Hayward RD. "Humility, lifetime, trauma, and change in religious doubt among older adults". *Journal of Religion and Health* 51.4 (2012): 1002-1016.

Volume 4 Issue 6 August 2017

©All rights reserved by Akiva Turner.