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Modesty Comes From The Element Of Earth In Us

There are four elements in Creation: earth, water, wind and fire. These elements also make up the human soul, and they are the source for each of our *middos* (traits).

Earth has in it certain qualities that produce certain *middos* in us, which can each be used for good or bad.

For example, earth is hard. A person can harden himself in an evil way, such as when he hardens himself to be stubborn for evil purposes; or it can be used in a good way, like when a person overcomes challenges and learns how to strengthen and fortify himself more in life.

Another aspect in earth is that it used as a covering. Earth can come and cover something and conceal it. The other elements of fire, wind and water are not able to do this.

The trait of modesty in a person is thus rooted in his element of earth. Modesty serves as a covering; it comes to hide and conceal something, just like the earth which acts as a covering.

The Roots Of Modesty In The Torah

Where can we find the roots of modesty?

There is a well-known *Midrash*[\[1\]](#) that as Hashem was creating Chavah, He created her from a rib, which is a place on the body that is more to the side and more out of sight. "For every part of her body that He created her with He said to her: *Be a modest woman, be a modest woman.*" We know that it didn't end up this way, as Chazal conclude, but the point of Chazal is that the structure of a woman is modesty. "*The entire glory of a daughter of the king is inside.*"

We find modesty epitomized by Rochel Imeinu, who was praised by Chazal for her modesty: "Rochel was supposed to merit giving birth to the first-born...but because Leah prayed fervently and Hashem had mercy on her, she merited this instead; but because of her modesty, Hashem returned this to her[\[2\]](#)." This was fulfilled when the rights to the first-born were taken away from Reuven, Leah's son, and instead given to Yosef, Rochel's son.

Shaul HaMelech, who descended from Rochel (through her other son Binyamin) also epitomized modesty; when Dovid HaMelech was able to kill him when he found him sleeping in a cave, he chose not to kill him because he saw how righteous Shaul was. What did he see in him? He saw that when Shaul had to relieve himself, he did so very discreetly and modestly. Because of his modesty, he merited to be saved from getting killed[\[3\]](#).

Chazal also say that because of Shaul's great modesty, he merited that Queen Esther came from him.

Throughout Chazal we can see that the *middah* of modesty is attributed mainly to women. The Gemara also says that a woman does not consent to be married to any man unless she makes herself into a receptacle for him[\[4\]](#).

This is the introduction to our words here – the roots of modesty in the Jewish people.

One Purpose of Covering: Shame

Earth, the element which serves to cover and conceal, has many ways of how it does this. There is a *halacha* that if one relieves himself, he has to cover the waste[\[5\]](#). Chazal also say that the modesty is mainly exercised when a person relieves himself with modesty in the lavatory[\[6\]](#).

From all this we can see that we cover something which is embarrassing or something bad that we are ashamed of. The fact that something has to be covered shows that there is something embarrassing here which deserves to get covered. This is why modesty mainly manifests itself in the lavatory, because it is then that we want to conceal something that's either bad or embarrassing.

That is one reason why we want to cover something – when it something we are ashamed of.

Another *halacha* that has to do with covering is that a dead person must be covered in dirt when he is buried.

There is a depth to this. Really, death itself is a very great shame to a person. Whenever there is shame, we want to cover it up. There are many *halachos* that apply to honoring the dead, and it is specifically because since a dead person lies before us in shame, we must honor him. The shame gets taken away when we finish burying him – the burial covers him over and hides the shame of his situation.

This is another way how we cover over something which is bad. When a person is alive, he must cover the wastes which come from his body, and when he dies, his whole body has to get covered (because the very fact that he is dead is a situation of shame which needs to get covered).

In addition to this, a person has to cover his body in general. Before Adam and Chavah sinned, there was no shame in the world at being uncovered. The second they sinned, shame began. The sin produced the need to be covered – the need for modesty.

Most of a person's body has to be covered, but the main part of the body which must be covered are the private parts. The first time we see such a concept in the Torah is by Noach's children, who ran to go cover their father's nakedness when he was exposed.

All of these coverings we mentioned until now have to do with covering something bad or shameful. Clothing serves this purpose – it covers our shame, and mainly the private parts, which are the epitome of shame.

Sometimes clothing can be for an altogether different purpose – to give honor. These were the *bigdei kehunah* (the priest's garments), of which it is written, "*For glory and for beauty.*"

From *bigdei kehunah* we can begin to see that not only does clothing come to hide a person's disgrace, but it also comes to give honor.

The Higher Kind Of Modesty

Before, we brought the words of Chazal regarding Shaul's great modesty. The Gemara there states that when he had to relieve himself, he went behind a fence within a fence, and a cave with another cave, and that he was covered over by all directions, like a *sukkah*.

What's the difference between how a fence covers something and how a cave covers something? A fence can cover, but not totally; it's still open on the other side of the fence. It's only enough to protect what you want to hide from an onlooker. But a cave is a total enclosure; it covers all the angles. His modesty in the cave was a whole different kind of modesty than in the fence.

These are two different kinds of modesty: one kind of modesty serves to cover something shameful, while another kind of modesty serves an altogether different purpose – it is for a person to become connected to modesty.

The modesty that one must have in the lavatory is the epitome of the first kind of modesty, which is to hide something shameful. But there is another kind of modesty which is a more inner kind of modesty than this. It is the modesty which we find by Rochel Imeinu and Shaul Hamelech. This higher kind of modesty was precisely the kind of modesty that saved Shaul from death.

The lower kind of modesty, to cover over something shameful, is how we rectify the first sin, which produced shame – and death. The higher kind of modesty doesn't come to cover over shame, but it comes instead to reveal the reason for *chiyus* (life) in something.

We have thus seen that there are two different levels of modesty. One kind of modesty is to conceal something bad; if the bad wouldn't be in the equation, there would be no need for the modesty, because the modesty is only a means to a certain end. This is the modesty one has to have in the lavatory; had Adam not sinned, there would be no need for such modesty.

The second kind of modesty, which is the higher kind of modesty, comes to reveal the life behind something. It is written, "*And the modest ones have wisdom.*" This is a kind of modesty that existed even before Adam's sin – it is the root of the life-sustaining energy in something.

We will try to understand what this deep modesty is.

How Modesty Relates To Our Connection To Hashem

This higher kind of modesty is rooted in a source that is the epitome of being hidden and concealed.

In words that are quite simple: What Hashem does can be seen by all. But His actual existence is not revealed to us – even though we can know with certainty that He does exist. No one is more modest than Hashem, who has never revealed Himself yet -- and never will reveal Himself. He is somewhat revealed to us through the actions He does, but His actual existence is still very concealed from us. *“For no man can see me and live.”*

The *sefer Leshem* writes that Hashem is the “hidden truth.” Hashem is the ultimate reality which there is, but this reality is very hidden from us; this is not by chance – it is on purpose.

In our soul, modesty is exemplified mainly through our connection to the reality of Hashem’s existence. When we are connected to Him, we are connected to what is called modesty.

Modesty is the way to connect to the Creator. If someone doesn’t have it, he does not have the means to be able to connect to Him. He is very hidden from us, and the only tool we can have to reach Him is through modesty. When a person is modest, he\she is connected to a power that exists called modesty, and from that a person can connect himself to the Creator, who is epitome of modesty.

Modesty Is Found On The Inside Of Something

The *possuk* says, *“Walk modestly with Your G-d.”* Chazal say that this is referring to a wedding and a funeral, that these events should be conducted with modesty. Chazal also say that if these things which are normally done openly need to be done modestly, surely things which are modest matters to begin with need to be done with modesty^[7].

The depth of this statement is a deep point. Usually, the beginning and end of something is very revealed for all to see. A wedding, which is the beginning of a home, is watched by everybody. The end of a person’s life, which is a funeral, is also attended by everybody. The beginning and the end is revealed, but the middle of a person’s life is hidden from people. Soon, we will learn the implication of what this means.

The middle is always the hidden part. When you look at something, you only see the edges – where it begins and where it ends. But you don’t see the middle.

For example, when you look at a new book in the store, you flip through the pages quickly from

beginning until end – but you don't read the middle. A person attempts to understand the content of something based on seeing its beginning and end, but the middle is always hidden.

Modesty is associated throughout Chazal with women. A woman was created from the rib, which is a part on the body that is on the side. This was specifically to show that just like Hashem commanded a woman to be modest with a part of her body that is more easily seen, like a rib which is at an end, surely she should be modest with the other parts of her body that are more hidden than her rib.

Corners and ends can be seen, while the middle is not. In terms of our soul, the question is: are we holding onto the corners of something, or are we holding onto what's inside it? What we are really getting at is that usually, people live their lives superficially and only see the "edges" of something, but they never get the content inside it.

Modesty comes from our element of earth, as we said before. Another thing you can notice about earth in relation to the other three elements is that earth is the only thing you can hold with your hands. Fire and wind definitely cannot be held in your hand, and water usually slips out between your fingers.

Earth, which we can hold, is only able to be held by its edges. When you hold a clump of dirt in your hand, you're not holding the inside of it; you're grasping it by its edges.

We are not trying to have a scientific discussion. What we are interested in knowing is that everything we know about the elements can apply to our soul. In terms of our soul, we usually only understand the edges of something, and not the content inside.

What's the difference if you hold something from its edges or if you're holding it from its middle? When you're holding the edges, you're holding its boundaries – its limits. But when you hold something from the middle, you're holding onto a place from which spreads out the rest of what you're holding.

The Torah is "longer than the earth and wider than the sea." When a person learns Torah, he's only holding onto its words and letters; he's not holding onto what's underneath that, which is its real vastness. This is because we are in the world which is after the sin, and our perception is limited.

The point of what we are saying here is that we are trying to describe an inner world that exists, in which we can hold onto the content inside something. The world which we see and recognize today is the world that came after the sin of Adam, in which our grasp and perception is limited; all we can

know of are the “edges” of something.

Modesty In Time, In The World, and In Our Soul

Before we said that there is a lower kind of modesty, which serves a purpose to cover up something bad, and that we fix whatever’s bad through covering it; and that there is a higher kind of modesty, in which we are covering something that is supposed to remain hidden. This inner, hidden point is so modest that we have a hard time understanding what it is, precisely because it is so modest.

Shabbos is called “a gift which I have in My treasury.” This point is very hidden deep within our soul. It exists, but it is hidden. It is hidden from even the person himself; but if a person has reached true modesty, he can know of it – “*And the wise ones have wisdom.*”

Modesty is associated with wisdom. What does this *possuk* mean? Do only modest people have wisdom?! Many people aren’t modest yet they are wise.

But really, only with modesty can a person really have wisdom. This is because someone who isn’t modest only knows of something based on seeing its superficial layer – its edges. One who is modest grasps information from its center and thus truly knows what it is.

There is modesty found in time, in the world and in our own soul.

In time, modesty is found in Shabbos. On Shabbos we mainly stay indoors, and we cannot carry from one private domain to another private domain. We can carry inside our own house, but to carry outside is prohibited. This reflects privacy and modesty; Shabbos is a time of modesty.

The *Kodesh Hakodashim*, the holiest room in the *Beis HaMikdash*, was a place in the world where there is modesty. There, only the *Kohen Gadol* was allowed to enter -- alone, and only once a year. It was ultimately private and modest.

In our soul, the *Nefesh HaChaim* writes that there is also a personal *Kodesh Kodashim* within ourselves. This is in our heart, which knows of things that aren’t always verbalized by our mouth. Our heart serves as the source of modesty in our soul.

Modesty and Being Alone

Many times we find modesty associated with being alone.

The lower kind of modesty, like when a person acts modestly in the lavatory, epitomizes modesty, because the person is all alone.

In the higher modesty, the *Kohen Gadol* in the *Kodshei Kodashim* was all alone. Being “alone” is associated with holiness; Yaakov fought “alone”, and Hashem is also called “alone.” The inner core of everything is really to be “alone”, and being “alone”[\[8\]](#) is really the depth of modesty.

But there seems to be a contradiction. On one hand, being “alone” is the root of modesty, yet in a marriage, a man and a woman come together and they are not alone. “*Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*” Doesn’t this contradict the idea of modesty, which is to be “alone”?

But actually, nothing could be more modest. Modesty is mainly reached during the holy act of marital intimacy, which is supposed to be done with modesty. “*They shall become one flesh.*” If they don’t act modestly, then they aren’t one – they are two separate people. But if they do conduct themselves with modesty, they are “one flesh” – they reveal the “alone” of Hashem there.

It is precisely the marital union which the Torah says that it’s possible to become one, and it is precisely the marital union in which we find a requirement of modesty. This is not by chance; it is during this act that an inner reality can be revealed, a reality of “alone” that brings out the depth of modesty. If they just remain two separate people though, then there is no modesty in the act.

The Depth Behind Covering The Head

Getting back to how this all relates to our soul, so far we have brought many scenarios in which we find modesty: covering waste, covering the dead, and wearing clothing in general.

There is an even higher modesty which we find, and this is the *halacha* to cover one’s head: “You must cover your head so that you will have fear of Heaven[\[9\]](#).”

With this covering, we aren't covering something because of something bad or shameful. Here, we are covering what is above our head – in other words, there is a point that is above our comprehension, and there we can reveal the oneness of Hashem, through covering the head.

Covering the head reflects what is written, *“And the modest ones have wisdom.”* A person's wisdom is nursed from his\her modesty. *“Wisdom is found in ayin (nothingness)”*. When one makes himself into *ayin*, nothing – he nullifies his self, and he reveals the hidden reality within him.

Someone who doesn't nullify himself only looks to give himself honor and reveal himself more to others. By contrast, one who nullifies himself keeps himself more hidden from others. This is really the depth behind why we cover our head.

Modesty In Our Soul

We learned that there are two kinds of modesty: being modest from other people, which is the lower kind of modesty (which we find by the first level of Shaul Hamelech's modesty, who relieved himself behind a fence within a fence), and the higher kind of modesty that is hidden deep inside a person (which is the second level in Shaul's modesty, that he also went behind a cave within a cave).

The point of modesty is not just to be hidden from others. It is to be an essence of modesty – *“In the shadow of His wings, take shelter.”* A *sukkah*, which means “a covering”, is covered by all directions; this is more than just being covered from the sight of people. It is to be covered for a deeper purpose.

The depth behind being covered is not just so that one is hidden from others; that is only the lower kind of modesty, which came as a result of the first sin. For this it would be enough to be covered enough so that others can't see what should be hidden. The depth of modesty comes from a point within us that is entirely void and nullified of our self.

What exactly are we describing?

It is brought from the Baal Shem Tov that a person should picture himself always being surrounded by Hashem's light. In this way, a person is always modest and hidden within something; he is constantly enveloped. It is like a *sukkah*, which completely covers a person for the entire time.

This is also the deep reason why a person is taught the entire Torah inside his mother before he is born. There, a person is in total modesty. It is there that a person draws forth to himself the learning

of the holy Torah.

This is a deep place in a person's soul in which he is constantly covered and hidden. It is precisely there where the holy Torah is revealed to a person. For this reason, one of the Sages did not want to teach Torah to his student out in the open, and only in the *Beis Midrash*, because the Torah thrives only where it can be hidden[\[10\]](#).

When a person lives in an inner part of his soul, his modesty is complete. He is covered by all directions and he stands in the middle point, and it is there that he can really understand things, because the real way to perceive something is when you grasp it from the inside. The middle point, the content behind something, is really endless, unlike the edges which come to an end.

This is the depth behind why one of the Sages said that the world was created from the middle, and not from its edges[\[11\]](#), because the middle spreads out endlessly, while the edges have an end point somewhere.

This is the depth behind modesty in our soul, and from this power in our soul, a person is able to connect totally to the Creator -- who is endless.

[\[1\]](#) *Beraishis Rabbah 18:2*

[\[2\]](#) *Bava Basra 123a*

[\[3\]](#) *Berachos 62b*

[\[4\]](#) *Sanhedrin 22b*

[\[5\]](#) *Devarim 23:14*

[\[6\]](#) *Berachos 62a*

[\[7\]](#) *Sukkah 49b*

[\[8\]](#) *In Getting To Know Your Self, the author explained how to use the power of "Alone" (levad) in the soul.*

[\[9\]](#) *Shabbos 155b*

[10] *Midrash Tanchuma, Bechukosai 4*

[11] *Yuma 55b*

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