

# INSIDE/OUTSIDE PART I

*by Gila Manolson*

By Mrs. Gila Manolson Transcribed and edited from her lecture at the Third International Jewish Women's Conference on May 21, 2000 in New York City.

"Inside/Outside" explores the relationship between how we view ourselves internally and how we convey that image through the way we dress. "Inside/Outside" author, Mrs. Gila Manolson is internationally renowned for her ability to articulate how the Jewish practices of modesty ("tsniut") and family purity ("taharat ha mishpacha") make sense for today's Jewish woman. Mrs. Manolson's anecdotal and often humorous approach to her topics makes for a lively and accessible presentation of complex material. The following text has been edited with her unique style in mind. As such, it reads in a somewhat stream of conscious, real life manner, rather than as a formal essay. Mrs. Manolson's books, *The Magic Touch* and *Inside/Outside* are widely available at Jewish bookstores.

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There is a "Readers' Digest" story which I think illustrates how easily people get carried away by who we are on the outside: Apparently a woman in an office wanted to set up one of her colleagues with a guy she knew, and she warned this guy, "you know, my colleague is a very intellectual woman, she's very academic, she's probably going to dress very prudishly, very conservatively on a date." (I guess men have to be warned about these things these days!) So the man was very surprised, probably pleasantly so, when this woman shows up on the date wearing a very low-cut dress with a thigh-high split. And before he knows it, he blurts out, "Wow, your brains don't show at all." True story.

Another story...about my friend Judy. Judy was in Toronto and decided to look up her friend Laura. Laura was a very bright type - very intellectual - she had just passed the Bar exam and had an important interview with a prestigious law firm the next morning. So the two of them are rifling through the clothes in Laura's closet, trying to figure out what Laura should wear, because you want to make a good impression, right? So Judy pulls a miniskirt and a matching tank top off the hanger and says to her, "Why don't you wear this? This is really nice." And Laura looks at her like she's out of her mind and says, "Are you crazy? No woman lawyer dresses like that. What do you think I want to be looked at like in there, someone you want to chase around the desk? I want to be taken seriously. I want to be appreciated for who I am." So Judy says to her, "Very interesting. But when you go out on a Saturday night to some singles event, hoping to meet a guy who will take you seriously, who

will appreciate you for who you are, this is what you wear?" Okay?

Many of us today, thank God, have great gifts - looks, talent, skills, etc. We need to learn to use them to enhance and not eclipse who we are. When it comes to getting ourselves dressed we need to ask ourselves, "How can I dress in a way that doesn't draw attention to my fancy clothes, or to my body, but makes a statement about how I have used my innate gifts bring out the best in myself? How can the way I dress express my inner sense of self-worth? How can what I wear reflect the fact that my focus is not on my body - that, while I know I deserve to look good, I have not chosen a wardrobe that will draw attention to my body outside, but rather to my inside?"

The Jewish concept of "tsniut" addresses this dialogue between how we look and who we are. "Tsniut" is translated loosely as modesty. The limitations of that translation become apparent when we consider how tsniut has come to be associated with an increasingly exaggerated list of do's and don'ts in dress. The underlying misconception is that the more of myself I cover, the more modest I am. That's really kind of missing the point.

There seem to be three very common misconceptions about tzniut. The first one is that tzniut is a dress code. The second is that it's only for women. And the third is the supposed rationale about why we have this dress code that is only for women, and it goes like this: Men, you see, for some inexplicable reason, were created with these raging animal hormones, and they can't be expected to walk down the street and keep their head in some kind of a spiritual place, without being distracted by provocatively dressed women. In other words, the bottom line message is, "ladies, do the men a favor, be nice, self-sacrifice, cover yourselves up."

Now, what does this risk sounding like? "I'm expected to repress my freedom of expression, repress my sexuality and be hot in the summer, all for the sake of men. Why are you dumping their problem on my doorstep?"

While there is some truth to these misconceptions, I want to give you a metaphor for tzniut, and I think you'll get an idea very quickly about why we're not talking merely about a dress code that must be followed by women, in order to help men keep their heads in the right place.

What tzniut means is simply this: Imagine you're an art photographer holding your camera. You take the camera, turn it around and focus it back on yourself. Now you're looking at yourself with the eyes of a professional who is always in pursuit of what deeper statements can be made from appearances. You ask yourself questions like, "What do I want people to read me as? What do I want them to think when they see me? What self-statement am I making? And now, how can I bring that out, what are the actual practical steps I can take in order to successfully make that statement?" The answer lies has a lot to do with what kind of clothing you put on, since clothing is something of a universal language of self-expression. That really is what tzniut embodies.

So tsniut is a consciousness translated into an action, and the consciousness is one of self-definition. Tsniut wants us communicate rather than obscure the deepest level of who I am. In other words,

tsniut says that even though I am viewed from the outside, I am doing my best to bring out my core essential self through an image that I project to other people. My means of projection is external, through the way I dress, and it speaks for who I am on the inside. Given that I live in a world full of beautiful material things - including clothing - I am not going to deny myself the pleasure of looking good. But I am going to insist that what I put on my outside is connected to my inner beauty.

Our next class will explore on why tsniut is a distinctly Jewish concept, and how tsniut can be traced to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Stay tuned!

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