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Modesty Revisited

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Wendy Shalit was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and received her B.A. in philosophy from Williams College. Her essays have appeared in The Wall Street Journal, Commentary, City Journal, and other publications. Her book, A Return to Modesty, was published by The Free Press in 1999, and last year was reissued in paperback by Touchstone Books in an edition that includes questions for classroom use.



Miss Shalit spoke at Hillsdale College on November 15, 2000. The following is an excerpt of her presentation, which she delivered in Phillips Auditorium at a seminar sponsored by the College's Center for Constructive Alternatives.

This afternoon I was reading a magazine for brides in which a woman had submitted the following question: "My fiancé wants us to move in together, but I want to wait until we're married. Am I doing our marriage an injustice?" The editor responded: "Your fiancé should understand why you want to wait to share a home. Maybe you're concerned about losing your identity as an individual. Or maybe you're concerned about space issues."

Space issues? Losing her identity? If this woman cared about those things she wouldn't want to get married in the first place. Her question was a moral one. She wanted to know what would be best for her marriage. And on this--however unbeknownst to the magazine's new-agey editor--the evidence is in: Couples who live together before marriage are much less likely to get married; and if they do marry, they're more likely to get divorced. Yet the vocabulary of modesty has largely dropped from our cultural consciousness; when a woman asks a question that necessarily implicates it, we can only mumble about "space issues."

I first became interested in the subject of modesty for a rather mundane reason--because I didn't like the bathrooms at Williams College. Like many enlightened colleges and universities these days, Williams houses boys next to girls in its dormitories and then has the students vote by floor on whether their common bathrooms should be coed. It's all very democratic, but the votes always seem to go in the coed direction because no one wants to be thought a prude. When I objected, I was told by my fellow students that I "must not be comfortable with [my] body." Frankly, I didn't get that, because I was fine with my body; it was their bodies in such close proximity to mine that I wasn't thrilled about.

I ended up writing about this experience in Commentary as a kind of therapeutic exercise. But when my article was reprinted in Reader's Digest, a weird thing happened: I got piles of letters from kids who said, "I thought I was the only one who couldn't stand these bathrooms." How could

so many people feel they were the "only ones" who believed in privacy and modesty? It was troubling that they were afraid to speak up. When and why, I wondered, did modesty become such a taboo?

At Yale in 1997, a few years after my own coed bathroom protest, five Orthodox Jewish students petitioned the administration for permission to live off-campus instead of in coed dorms. In denying them, a dean with the Dickensian name of Brodhead explained that "Yale has its own rules and requirements, which we insist on because they embody our values and beliefs." Yale has no core curriculum, of course, but these coed bathrooms, according to Dean Brodhead, embody its beliefs. I would submit that as a result of this kind of "liberationist" ideology, we today have less, not more freedom, than in the pre-1960s era when modesty was upheld as a virtue. In this regard it's important to recall that when colleges had separate dorms for men and women, and all the visitation rules that went with them, it was also possible for kids to circumvent those rules. It was possible, for instance--now, I'm not advocating this--for students to sneak into each others' dorms and act immodestly. But in the new culture of "liberation," a student can't sneak into the dorms and be modest, or, more accurately, she can't sneak out. There is no "right of exit" in today's immodest society. If you don't participate, you're a weirdo. Hence students are not really free to develop their best selves, to act in accordance with their hopes.

Modesty's Loss, Social Pathology's Gain

Many of the problems we hear about today? sexual harassment, date rape, young women who suffer from eating disorders and report feeling a lack of control over their bodies--are all connected, I believe, to our culture's attack on modesty. Listen, first, to the words we use to describe intimacy: what once was called "making love," and then "having sex," is now "hooking up"--like airplanes refueling in flight. In this context I was interested to learn, while researching for my book, that the early feminists actually praised modesty as ennobling to society. Here I'm not just talking about the temperance-movement feminists, who said, "Lips that touch liquor shall never touch mine." I'm talking about more recent feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, who warned in her book, *The Second Sex*, that if society trivializes modesty, violence against women would result. And she was right. Since the 1960s, when our cultural arbiters deemed this age-old virtue a "hang-up," men have grown to expect women to be casual about sex, and women for their part don't feel they have the right to say "no." This has brought us all more misery than joy. On MTV I have seen a 27-year-old woman say she was "sort of glad" that she had herpes, because now she has "an excuse to say 'no' to sex." For her, disease had replaced modesty as the justification for exercising free choice.

In 1948 there was a song called "Baby It's Cold Outside" by Frank Loesser, in which a boyfriend wants his girlfriend to sleep over. His argument is simple but compelling: Baby it's cold outside, and if she doesn't sleep over, she could catch pneumonia and die, and that would cause him "lifelong sorrow." In response, the girl offers several counter-arguments: "My father will be waiting at the door, there's bound to be talk tomorrow," etc. It's a very cute song. And while post-modern intellectuals at progressive institutions like Yale would no doubt say this song proves how oppressed women were in 1948, I would argue that today's culture--in which fathers can't be counted on to be waiting at the door--is far creepier.

The counterpoint to "Baby It's Cold Outside" is a story I read in a women's magazine, written by an ex-boyfriend of an 18-year-old girl whose father had decided that she was too old to be a virgin. After commiserating with the boyfriend, this father drove the pair to a hotel (he didn't trust the boyfriend with his car), where the girl became hysterical and the scheme fell apart. This article was called "My Ex-Girlfriend's Father: What a Man!" And although the story isn't typical, it is quite common these days for parents to rent hotel rooms for their kids on prom nights, which is essentially the same principle. So the father in "Baby It's Cold Outside" waiting at the door, and the older culture that supported modesty, actually made women stronger. It gave them the right to say 'no' until they met someone they wanted to marry. Today's culture of "liberation" gives women

no ground on which to stand. And an immodest culture weakens men, too? we are all at the mercy of other people's judgment of us as sexual objects (witness the revolution in plastic surgery for men), which is not only tiring but also dishonest because we can't be ourselves.

When I talk to college students, invariably one will say, "Well, if you want to be modest, be modest. If you want to be promiscuous, be promiscuous. We all have a choice, and that's the wonderful thing about this society." But the culture, I tell them, can't be neutral. Nor is it subtle in its influence on behavior. In fact, culture works more like a Sherman tank. In the end, if it's not going to value modesty, it will value promiscuity and adultery, and all our lives and marriages will suffer as a result.

Four Myths Exposed

A First step toward reviving respect for modesty in our culture is to strike at the myths that undermine it. Let me touch on four of these.

The first myth is that modesty is Victorian. But what about the story of Rebecca and Isaac? When Rebecca sees Isaac and covers herself, it is not because she is trying to be Victorian. Her modesty was the key to what would bring them together and develop a profound intimacy. When we cover up what is external or superficial--what we all share in common--we send a message that what is most important are our singular hearts and minds. This separates us from the animals, and always did, long before the Victorian era.

The second myth about modesty is that it's synonymous with prudery. This was the point of the dreadful movie *Pleasantville*, the premise of which was that nobody in the 1950s had fun or experienced love. It begins in black and white and turns to color only when the kids enlighten their parents about sex. This of course makes no sense on its face: if the parents didn't know how to do it, then how did all these kids get there in the first place? But it reflects a common conceit of baby boomers that passion, love and happiness were non-existent until modesty was overcome in the 1960s. In truth, modesty is nearly the opposite of prudery. Paradoxically, prudish people have more in common with the promiscuous. The prudish and the promiscuous share a disposition against allowing themselves to be moved by others, or to fall in love. Modesty, on the other hand, invites and protects the evocation of real love. It is erotic, not neurotic.

To illustrate this point, I like to compare photographs taken at Coney Island almost a century ago with photographs from nude beaches in the 1970s. At Coney Island, the beach-goers are completely covered up, but the men and women are stealing glances at one another and seem to be having a great time. On the nude beaches, in contrast, men and women hardly look at each other--rather, they look at the sky. They appear completely bored. That's what those who came after the '60s discovered about this string of dreary hookups: without anything left to the imagination, sex becomes boring.

The third myth is that modesty isn't natural. This myth has a long intellectual history, going back at least to David Hume, who argued that society invented modesty so that men could be sure that children were their own. As Rousseau pointed out, this argument that modesty is a social construct suggests that it is possible to get rid of modesty altogether. Today we try to do just that, and it is widely assumed that we are succeeding. But are we?

In arguing that Hume was wrong and that modesty is rooted in nature, a recently discovered hormone called oxytocin comes to mind. This hormone creates a bonding response when a mother is nursing her child, but is also released during intimacy. Here is physical evidence that women become emotionally bonded to their sexual partners even if they only intend a more casual encounter. Modesty protected this natural emotional vulnerability; it made women strong. But we don't really need to resort to physiology to see the naturalness of modesty. We can observe it on

any windy day when women wearing slit skirts hobble about comically to avoid showing their legs--the very legs those fashionable skirts are designed to reveal. Despite trying to keep up with the fashions, these women have a natural instinct for modesty.

The fourth and final myth I want to touch on is that modesty is solely a concern for women. We are where we are today only in part because the feminine ideal has changed. The masculine ideal has followed suit. It was once looked on as manly to be faithful to one woman for life, and to be protective toward all women. Sadly, this is no longer the case, even among many men to whom modest women might otherwise look as kindred spirits. Modern feminists are wrong to expect men to be gentlemen when they themselves are not ladies, but men who value "scoring" and then lament that there are no modest women around anymore--well, they are just as bad. And of course, a woman can be modestly dressed and still be harassed on the street. So the reality is that a lot depends on male respect for modesty. It is characteristic of modern society that everyone wants the other guy to be nice to him without having to change his own behavior, whether it's the feminists blaming the men, the men blaming the feminists, or young people blaming their role models. But that is an infantile posture.

Restoring a Modest Society

JEWES READ a portion of the Torah each week, and in this week's portion there is a story that shows us beautifully, I think, how what we value in women and men are inextricably linked. Abraham is visited by three men, really three angels, and he is providing them with his usual hospitality, when they ask him suddenly, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he replies, famously, "Behold! In the tent!" Commentators ask, why in the world are the angels asking where Sarah is? They know she is in the tent. They are, after all, angels. And one answer is, to remind Abraham of where she is, in order to increase his love for her. This is very interesting, because in Judaism the most important work takes place, so to speak, "in the tent"--keeping kosher, keeping the Sabbath, keeping the laws of marital purity. Torah is only passed on to the next generation because of what the woman is doing in the home. Yet it is not enough for there to be a Sarah who is in the tent; it is also necessary that there be an Abraham who appreciates her. So I think the lesson is clear if we want to reconstruct a more modest, humane society, we have to start with ourselves.

I don't think it's an accident that the most meaningful explication of modesty comes from the Bible. I was fascinated in my research to discover how many secular women are returning to modesty because they found, simply as a practical matter, that immodesty wasn't working for them. In short, they weren't successful finding the right men. For me this prompts an essentially religious question: Why were we created in this way? Why can't we become happy by imitating the animals? In the sixth chapter of Isaiah we read that the fiery angels surrounding the throne of God have six wings. One set is for covering the face, another for covering the legs, and only the third is for flying. Four of the six wings, then, are for modesty's sake. This beautiful image suggests that the more precious something is, the more it must conceal and protect itself. The message of our dominant culture today, I'm afraid, is that we're not precious, that we weren't created in the divine image. I'm saying to the contrary that we were, and that as such we deserve modesty.