

## Modesty or Second Class?

### *Shabbat Chayei Sarah 5786*

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In 2022, weeks before the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision, which empowered states like Arkansas to end abortion rights within their borders, I was among the speakers at a reproductive freedom rally on the steps of our state's capitol. The most powerful presenter, as was so often the case, was Senator Joyce Elliott. One thing she said that day surprised me, though, and I was not entirely sure she was right to say it. Senator Elliott called on us, especially the women present, to stop participating in religious traditions that put women second. Continuing to do so, Joyce insisted, makes those participants complicit in limiting their own rights or the rights of women they love.

The senator was right. Religious groups that do not accord equal roles to women—Catholics, fundamentalist evangelical Christians, and some Orthodox Jews, for example—are at the forefront of a principled battle to end abortion rights; and, in for many of them, also to limit access to contraception. Yes, I know that position is based on a religious conviction that human personhood begins at conception, but Joyce was not wrong to say that any teaching that prioritizes the fetus above the pregnant person puts women second.

Still, I wondered: Was Senator Elliott really saying: Women and others who support equal rights need to leave the Catholic church, must walk out on their evangelical churches, and should abandon Orthodox Judaism? Yes, she was, albeit at a moment of anger and frustration over the loss of a fundamental right. Still, I worried that such a blanket condemnation of those traditions, to the point of telling women to leave, denied the comfort and meaning that many people find in those houses of worship, even if Senator Elliott and I would not.

This week's Torah portion includes the elaborate narrative in which Avraham sends a servant to Haran, Avraham and Sarah's hometown, to find a wife for Yitzchak. Rabbi Naamah Kelman writes, "In this narrative, we learn about the Torah's first arranged marriage. In the ancient world, a woman went from her father's household to her husband's, with or without her consent. What is striking here, however, is that Rebekah *is* asked for her consent,<sup>i</sup> although the arrangement is already signed and sealed.<sup>ii</sup> Not only is she asked for, and gives, her consent, she 'falls off her camel' at the sight of Isaac,<sup>iii</sup> as if smitten by 'love at first sight.' More importantly, we learn that Isaac brings her into his tent, where he loves her and is comforted by her.<sup>iv</sup> ... Rebekah and Isaac have agency by the end of the story, [even if] not at the outset."<sup>v</sup>

Rabbi Kelman is correct, but our rabbinic sages took at least part of the story in a different direction. Why does Rivka fall off her camel when first seeing Yitzchak? “She saw his lordly appearance and gazed at him in astonishment.”<sup>vi</sup> Instead of seeing “love at first sight” as Rabbi Kelman does, Rashi sees Rivka taking an appropriately subservient stance.<sup>vii</sup>

As she sees Yitzchak, Rivka also “took her veil and covered herself.” The medieval commentator Sforno explains that “She was afraid to look more closely, similar to Moses being afraid to look more closely at the burning bush.”<sup>viii</sup> Rivka is portrayed as being in awe of Yitzchak, his Godlike maleness making him so much greater than she. Even *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* notes, “Rebekah’s action may signal modesty. Is it because of her status as a married woman? Not enough is known about the role of veils in ancient Israel.”<sup>ix</sup>

The *Women’s Commentary* is alluding to traditional Jewish standards for what is called modest dress—in Hebrew, צניעות—primarily for women. These regulations include a woman wearing a veil over her face at her wedding but are mostly standards of dress that require women to be attired such that they are covered from neck to ankle and wrist whenever in public. Married women go a step further, wearing wigs or scarves that completely cover their hair. The authors of *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* are pointing out that we cannot know whether that was the custom in ancient Israel. These regulations of modest dress are not laid out in the Torah itself but are developed and implemented by our rabbinic sages.

Chaya Sarah Silberberg, writing on *Chabad.org*, explains women’s modest dress in a way that is worthy of being taken seriously: “*Tzniut*—modesty—has always been the hallmark of the Jewish woman. *Tzniut* in its greater sense is dignity and self-respect, an understanding of one’s intrinsic self-worth. When a woman acts and dresses in a *tzniut* way, she effectively tells the world that she expects to be judged as a human being with skills and capabilities, intellect and emotions, and not as a ‘piece of meat’ that is being displayed to attract the attention of the buyer.”<sup>x</sup> A number of our female and nonbinary congregants have adopted at least some of those standards, particularly covering their hair completely. They are not conveying a second-class status. Instead, as Silberberg suggests, they may implicitly be asking to be judged for the content of their minds, souls, and character, not the appearance of their bodies. That’s certainly worthy!

Sometimes, though, the modesty standards that Silberberg extols are imposed coercively on women who do not find them meaningful or practical. Orly Erez-Likhovski, Executive Director of the Israel Religious Action Center, IRAC, wrote this week about the 2023 case of a group of teenagers, seven girls and three

boys, who boarded a public bus, heading to a summer outing to the Sea of Galilee, for which they were dressed as one might expect for the beach. “When the driver saw them boarding the bus in socially acceptable summer clothing, both boys and girls wearing shorts, he stepped off the bus and **demanded that the girls, and only the girls, ‘cover themselves.’** ... Then he instructed them to **sit at the back**, separate from their male friends, who were told to sit with the men in the front.”

Erez-Likhovski continues: “One of the girls replied: ‘I will show respect—until it comes at the expense of my own dignity. I have never felt so humiliated. This is my country, and I don’t want to walk around it feeling ashamed.’”

Thankfully, Erez-Likhovski is now able to report: “Her words reached the heart of the nation.” Through IRAC’s diligence, the victims were compensated, the subcontractor for the public bus company was dismissed, and even “extremist government ministers condemned the incident, saying there is no room for the exclusion of women on Israeli buses...No one can dictate where you sit or what you wear.”<sup>xi</sup>

On Selichot eve, a couple of years ago, many of us had the opportunity to watch *The Clergy Monologues* with Rabbi Mary Zamore of the Women’s Rabbinic Network. We saw appalling examples of inappropriate comments made to women rabbis and cantors—and, occasionally, to male clergy about our female colleagues. Many of these comments are about clothing.

I have learned from women rabbis that commenting on other people’s attire is almost never a good idea. “I like your tie” or “those are cute shoes” are innocuous enough, but we have to be sure that we are offering a compliment that the other person welcomes. Otherwise, we risk objectifying them, inadvertently suggesting that their jacket or head-wrap is what is most important about them—that they are second class, not worthy of praise for their character, talents, hard work, or ideas.

Joyce Elliott was right, as usual. Religious traditions that put women second can lead to and even inspire the diminution of women’s rights. At the same time, when some women embrace rituals that others regard as diminishing women, we do well to hear their voices, understanding that what seems demeaning to one person may be empowering to another. If we trust women, as the reproductive rights movement rightly implores us, then that trust must be all-encompassing, even when the choice she is making would not be our own.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 24:57-58.

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<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 24:50-51.

<sup>iii</sup> Genesis 24:64.

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 24:67.

<sup>v</sup> Rabbi Naamah Kelman, “Marriage Justice in our Biblical Stories,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, pp. 29-30. Italics are Rabbi Kelman’s.

<sup>vi</sup> Rashi on Genesis 24:64, based on Genesis Rabbah 60:15.

<sup>vii</sup> Genesis 24:65.

<sup>viii</sup> Sforno on Genesis 24:65.

<sup>ix</sup> *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, Genesis 24:65.

<sup>x</sup> Chaya Sarah Silberberg, “Why is it important for a woman to dress modestly,” *Chabad.org*, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/626355/jewish/Why-is-it-important-to-dress-modestly.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/626355/jewish/Why-is-it-important-to-dress-modestly.htm).

<sup>xi</sup> Orly Erez-Likhovski, “Justice on the Bus,” *The Pluralist*, November 11, 2025, <https://mailchi.mp/irac.org/justice-on-the-bus-from-humiliation-to-empowerment>. Emphasis is Erez-Likhovski’s.