

Counting Other People's Money

By: Rochel Holzkenner

"Modesty is one of my more outstanding qualities"—Anonymous.

Growing up, there was a song I'd enjoy from an album called "Journeys." It was a parody about wedding extravagance. In the song a man tells his friend about the wedding he's planning for his daughter. Flowers would be imported from overseas, a hundred-person band would entertain the guests with their symphony, and an outlandish Viennese table would culminate the meal. Finally, each guest would receive a token gift before leaving: an entire set of the Talmud.

"But what about modesty?" asks his friend after hearing of the lavish plans.

"But of course!" the father of the bride responds. "On the invitation I will write that all guests should come to the wedding in modest attire."

Apparently, there are many facets to this trait we call modesty. While the way you dress may be the most obvious, modesty is certainly not limited to appearance.

In biblical times, modesty played a pivotal role in thwarting Balaam's evil intent. Balaam was a non-Jewish prophet employed by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the Jewish people. Now Balaam knew that a military attack would be futile; the Jews had a track record of supernatural and forceful victories in war. So Balaam tried to weaken them at their source, by mitigating their spiritual connectivity. As a spiritual guru, he felt he had the skills needed to undermine their connection to G-d.

Ironically, whenever Balaam opened his mouth to curse the Jewish people, out flowed the most magnificent blessings. Finally, after his second fruitless attempt to lash out words of destruction, he said something very telling; telling since it exposed the reason for his inability to curse them.

"How goodly are your tents, O Jacob; your dwelling places, O Israel!" (Numbers 24:5)

The Midrash explains that Balaam was noting the modest way in which the tents of Israel were aligned. They were staggered so the windows of one tent had no visual access to the windows of its neighboring tent. At each of their stops over their forty-year trek, the people made sure to erect their tents in this modest

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arrangement. Apparently it was this exceptionally sensitive quality amongst them that made it impossible for Balaam to harm them.

Modesty means having healthy boundaries. Today modesty is underrated. As Americans, we're hooked on TV shows that dig into the most personal parts of peoples' lives and display them to millions of viewers.

Conversely, many teens (and adults) are misled to believe that if they don't expose what is meant to be sacred and private they are prudish.

People who are careful not to speak *lashon hara*, gossip, are merely expressing their appreciation for healthy boundaries. Who gave you permission to analyze another's life? You shouldn't be looking in their window. And if you are exposed to a private bit of information about your friend, be sensitive. Gossiping is violating the sacred space of another person.

The Jews were in transit, and yet they still made sure to uphold this subtle expression of modesty as they assembled their tents. Preserving strong and healthy boundaries was high on their priority list. Mirroring their efforts G-d shielded them from harm with a protective barrier, and Balaam was just unable to mitigate their prowess.

"How goodly are your tents, O Jacob!"

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