

To Teach Tsni'ut with Tsni'ut: On Educating for Tsni'ut in National-Religious Schools

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Abstract: In recent years religious Israeli society has seen an explosion of interest in sexuality, with a plethora of 'ask the rabbi' websites, guidebooks and similar phenomena. Much of the guidance given is highly problematic. High school sex and family education curricula for girls are patriarchal and boys receive none at all. A curriculum developed by the author and several colleagues addresses these issues, laying out a learned feminist religious perspective, and re-envisioning *ts'niut* as a positive ethical and spiritual value.

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To Teach *Tsni'ut* with *Tsni'ut*⁺: On Educating for *Tsni'ut* in National-Religious Schools*

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Introduction

Sexuality education is almost entirely non-existent within the national-religious educational system in Israel (and scarcely more than that in the secular schools). What does exist, in full force, is education for *tsni'ut* and, for twelfth-grade girls, education for “family life.” During the past twenty years, education for *tsni'ut* itself has been carried on not only within the schools’ walls but also—indeed, primarily—in the “satellite” educational loci that are widespread within religious-Zionist education: *midrashot* (that is, enrichment seminars in Jewish belief to which students are sent at least once during the course of their high school careers); youth movements (Ezra, Bnei Akiva, Ariel etc.) guidebooks on *tsni'ut*; and, in recent years, internet sites offering responsa on the subject.¹

If you direct a question on any troubling subject to the “ask the Rabbi” link on one of these very popular internet sites, you will receive an authoritative religious answer, most often from a rabbi-teacher at one of the *yeshivot besder* (religious-Zionist yeshivas whose students combine military service with their studies) or *midrashot* (women’s seminaries). On rare occasions, it will be a woman who responds; the spirit of the response will be the same. These responsa usually are unaccompanied by

citations of any sort, making it impossible for the questioner, or any reader, to understand the scholarly or reflective process that led to the halakhic decision.²

Another characteristic of these responsa is that many involve questions not of *halakhab* as such, but of appropriate conduct in various life situations. In principle, the questioners could have discussed these issues with friends or partners, but in choosing this communication medium, they are conveying their desire for a religiously authoritative “responsum,” and that is what they get.

A sizable segment of the questions pertain to sexuality, *tsni'ut*, intimacy, and family, and reading them is an unpleasant experience for religious feminists, or indeed anyone who values autonomy.

In this article, I will consider *tsni'ut* education within the religious-Zionist community from two perspectives. In the first part of the article, I offer a religious-feminist critique of education for *tsni'ut* as embodied in the guidebooks and various “religious” internet services. In the second part, I present the key features of the chapter entitled “*Tsni'ut*” that appears in the textbook *Migdar u-mishpaha ba-yabadut* (“Gender and Family in Judaism”) that I and a number of colleagues wrote several

⁺ *Tsni'ut* is often translated as “modesty,” but it connotes more than that English word might suggest, encompassing a range of *halakhot* and customs related to conduct, attire, and interaction between men and women. Accordingly, the transliterated Hebrew word will be used here and the sense will emerge from the text.—*translator*.

* Translated from the Hebrew by Joel Linsider.

¹ www.moreshet.co.il; www.rosh-yehudi.co.il; www.moriya.org.il; www.kipa.co.il; and others. Some of the sites report on the volume of responsa in their archives; they number upwards of 50,000 (!) per site.

² The websites differ in that regard from the *tsni'ut* guidebooks that have been popular in Israel for the past twenty years and continue to be published; the latter include citations and extended quotations from sources. (See below, n. 5.)

years ago for “Kolech,” Israel’s leading organization of religious feminists.³ The textbook is directed toward twelfth-grade students and proposes a new educational approach to the subject.

A Critical Perspective on *Tsni`ut* Education in Guidebooks and Internet Responsa

The guidebooks and internet responsa on *tsni`ut* reflect both the problems that trouble religious-Zionist youth in these areas today and the approach to them taken by senior educators in the field. The guidebooks and responsa deal with a wide and varied array of issues: situations arising in mixed gatherings and activities; questions related to *tsni`ut* in dress; the issue of *kol isha*, or women’s singing in public; attraction to internet pornography sites; masturbation; homosexuality, and others. Some of the questions raised by young people grow out of intellectual interest or curiosity, but most manifest considerable distress on the part of the questioner.

In reading the online responsa and the guidebooks, I identified a number of characteristics that the respondents (and, perhaps, the questioners) take for granted as accepted principles but that for me, as a religious feminist, are highly problematic. They are (1) understanding *tsni`ut* as a limitation on the presence of women; (2) objectification of adolescent boys; and (3) excessive authoritativeness claimed by rabbis who presume to express God’s will.

In what follows, I will explain these characteristics, provide examples from the responsa, and suggest alternative educational directions.

1. *Tsni`ut* as a Limitation on the Presence of Women

One of the responsa I came upon left me stunned. The question was sent to the “*kippa*”

website by a religious young woman and was answered by a woman; the question and answer follow.⁴

A Friend Who Conducts Herself With a Lack of *Tsni`ut*

Our Bnei Akiva group (comprising boys and girls) meets every evening and on Fridays. I have a friend who tries hard to act in accord with *halakhab* and everything, but she is a fairly hyper-active girl who jumps around, sings, and acts in an unruly way all day (around boys as well) and draws other girls after her. I’ve commented to her about this several times already, and she replied that it’s no big deal and that I need to liberate myself and not be quiet all day. I haven’t been able to explain to her that this is not proper halakhically, and my group leader has commented on it to her as well. She doesn’t understand this; she’s a very good friend of mine, and it’s not pleasant for me to be out in public with her when she’s acting that way, but what can I do?

The response was provided by “Mor” [evidently a rabbi’s wife or an educator—T. B.]:

...You are telling me about a girl who is very dominant within your group and is considered as well to be someone who is very careful to observe *halakhab*; on the other hand, her external behavior does not broadcast that message because she acts with a lack of *tsni`ut* with the boys in your group.

You are certainly right that your friend’s conduct as you describe it is problematic, and I really understand your difficulty in going around with

³ The full name of the organization is Kolech-Forum Nashim Dativot ‘Your Voice’- The Religious Women’s Forum and its website is www.kolech.org.

⁴ www.kipa.co.il/ask/show.asp?id=85711.

her in public. I also very much understand that you don't want to hurt her, and I certainly don't think it's necessary to lead her to think you don't want her friendship.

...It seems your friend does not deeply understand the concept of *tsni`ut* and takes it to be a more superficial halakhic obligation than it really is. It is worth suggesting to the group leader that she conduct some activities dealing with the inner essence of the concept of *tsni`ut*, and, perhaps, that the girls within the group study it together.

This responsum hit me in my gut. Like other religious women, and against my will, I still regard my own presence in many situations as uncalled for and problematic. The right we claim to join in masculine religious discourse, to make our voices heard in classes and conferences, to publish and to be involved, still leaves me with a taste of what we have internalized as being “vulgar” or “nervy.” We have been trained to think that “a nice religious girl doesn't act that way.”

The questioner describes what to me seems, overall, to be her friend's normal, healthy, even refreshing conduct, but she sees it as sinful, as posing a “halakhic” problem. More surprisingly, so does the respondent. The latter even upgrades the problem: it is not merely a departure from the norms of *tsni`ut* solely on the halakhic level; it is a failure to understand and identify with the ideal of *tsni`ut* in its deepest sense! A problem of this sort should be dealt with through study of one of the modern guidebooks, published by the educators in this “sector,” that offer help in understanding and identifying with this ideal.⁵

Identifying the feminine presence, as a matter of principle, with a lack of *tsni`ut*, and consequently guiding toward narrowing and blurring that presence on their own, has been for many years a leading theme in how *tsni`ut* is understood in the writings of educators and rabbis. This idea is conveyed implicitly in various contexts and, on at times, is set forth explicitly as well. For example, in his book *Gan na`ul: pirquei tsni`ut* [A locked garden: topics in *tsni`ut*], Rabbi Aviner explains why it is forbidden to dress immodestly:

⁵ In recent years, dozens of guidebooks on matters of *tsni`ut* have been published in Israel, directed primarily to young men and young women (with different emphases for each sex). The books attempt to deal with the encounter, which the writers regard as particularly threatening, between, on the one hand, the feminist and sexual revolutions and their associated culture and values and, on the other, the Jewish world with its culture and values. Rabbi Aviner, *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivat Beit-El has himself written numerous such book, including some of the earliest ones; among them: Shlomo Hayyim Aviner, *Tsni`ut levush bat yisra`el* [*Tsni`ut* in Jewish women's attire] (Beit-El: Sifriyat Havvah, 1978); id., *Bein ish le-ishbo* [Between man and wife] (Jerusalem: S. Aviner, 1983); id., *Gan na`ul: pirquei tsni`ut* [A locked garden: topics in *tsni`ut*] (Jerusalem: n.p., 1985); id., *Taborat ha-berit: le-ne`arim be-gil tikhon* [Purity of the covenant (that is, of circumcision--*translator*): for boys of high-school age] (Beit-El: n. p., 1994); id., *Tebor einayim: hatunah u-tsni`ut* [Pure of eyes: wedding and *tsni`ut*] (Beit-El: Sifriyat Havvah, 1999); *Tsenif tabor: tsni`ut bigdei nashim* [A pure turban: *tsni`ut* in women's attire] (Jerusalem: n.p., 2000); id., *Etsem mei-atsamai: inyenei libbur bein ish le-ishab* [Flesh of my flesh: bonding between husband and wife] (Beit-El, Sifriyat Havvah, 2001); and many, many more. More recently, they have been joined by the writings of several other beloved and popular rabbis, including Yuval Cherlo (*rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivat Petah-Tiqvah), *Reshut ba-yahid: Tesbuvot she-nittenu ba-internet be-inyanei tsni`ut, zugiyyut, u-mishpahah* [The private domain: internet responsa on matters of *tsni`ut*, intimacy and family; the title contains a play on “*shut*,” the acronym for “responsa”] (Yeshivat Hesder Petah-Tiqvah, 2003); Joshua Shapira (head of Yeshivat Ramat-Gan for boys), *Ashiv mi-metsulot—al naftulei ha-nefesh ve-no`am ha-tesbuvah be-inyanei qedushat ha-berit* [I respond from the depths—on the struggles of the soul and the pleasantness of return in matters of sanctity of the covenant (literally, of circumcision, a euphemism for non-masturbation)] (Ramat-Gan: Yeshivat Ramat-Gan – Re`ut, 2004) and the complementary volume written by Rabbi Shapira together with his wife, Naomi Shapira, *Tashuv tehayeini: al naftulei ha-nefesh ve-no`am ha-tesbuvah be-inyanei qedushat u-tsni`ut* [Return and revive me: on the struggles of the soul and the pleasantness of return in matters of sanctity and *tsni`ut*] (Ramat-Gan: Yeshivat Ramat-Gan – Re`ut, 2004); and Elyashiv Knohl, *Ish ve-ishab—zakbu shekbinah beineihem: pirquei hadrakhbah le-hatan ve-kallah* [Man and wife—if they merit it, God's presence is with them: guidance for a bride and groom] (Ein-Tsurim: Makhon Shiluvim, Yeshivat Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Dati, 2003). These books sold widely as soon as they were published.

It is a bad thing to try to impress others through externalities and to attempt to highlight one's beauty [citing sources]... On the contrary, a woman must be filled with humility and *tsni`ut* and pray as she walks in public: "if only people would not look at me."⁶

As a feminist and as a religious woman, it is clear to me that teaching girls to confine and blur their "physical" presence is highly destructive. Physical presence is existential presence, and the message with respect to *tsni`ut*, as I understand it, must be much more complex.

The first message conveyed to girls should be one that invites and encourages them to be present in this world, body and soul, in full force. *Tsni`ut* is certainly linked to limiting the self for the sake of the other; but that limitation is a second-order step that builds on the first-order step of recognizing God's will that I exist in this world, with all the layers of my existence, and that there is a need for me to exist in this world. My self-limitation for the sake of the other is an act of consideration for others: I should not presume, not generate a degrading competitive atmosphere, not take up "all the space."

Accordingly, a suitable approach to sexual *tsni`ut* should be based on acceptance of the body and of sexuality as desirable and blessed, together with a call to take account of the other and to avoid objectifying him or oneself as an exclusively sexual object. Precisely because people, especially in today's culture, sometimes tend to see primarily the sexual aspect of the other, and to emphasize their own sexual aspect, *tsni`ut* with regard to sexuality means bringing one's full personality and entire self to every encounter with another and seeking them out in the other. Sexual *tsni`ut* entails choosing to limit the sexual

dimension in an encounter with another and to broaden the other dimensions in which further aspects of one's personality are expressed.

My claim is that education toward *tsni`ut* in sexual matters is relevant only after self-confidence, so lacking in girls, is firmly established; that is, only after they come to recognize their self-worth and develop a certain degree of comfort and acceptance with respect to their bodies.

A complex message of this sort can be successfully instilled only if the educational staff itself lives according to it. However, in most of the religious educational institutions for high-school girls in which I presented our program on "*tsni`ut* from a religious feminist perspective," I met educators who had internalized oppressive messages of the sort described earlier and were now restating them uncritically. The educators are mostly the products of the religious educational system, and without continuing educational programs for them, it will be difficult to introduce new messages into the system.

2. The Objectification of Adolescent Boys

Feminists regularly protest the transformation within our society of women into sexual objects, a process that leads to sexual harassment and abuse. That girls undergo a similar process of objectification in the context of education for *tsni`ut* is obvious, for most education for *tsni`ut* is focused on teaching girls to cover their dangerous and threatening bodies. The term *ervah* ("nakedness") is extended to more and more parts of the body, and some of the guidebooks offer precise details on what parts of the body must be concealed, what garments and accessories may be worn, what materials and clothing patterns may be used, and so forth.⁷

⁶ Aviner, *Gan na`ul* (above, n. 5), p. 103.

⁷ *Id.*

What is allowed to pass without criticism, however, is the degree to which adolescent boys are treated as sexual objects and educated to regard themselves as such. Many guidebooks and internet responsa providing boys with guidance on matters of *tsni`ut* treat their sex drive as the central feature of their personalities, as something mighty, terrible, and nearly unbearable; they consider the “battle against the impulse” as the most important and sacred battle of a boy’s religious life.

The “defeats” in this battle (primarily masturbation, termed “the sin of wasteful emission of seed,” but also visiting pornographic websites, thinking sinful thoughts, or failing to abide by the prohibition on touching a woman), about which many boys complain in great distress, are considered by the rabbinic respondents to their questions to be catastrophes.

In his article “*Tsni`ut bein mitos le-etos*” (“*Tsni`ut* between Myth and Ethic”) Yosef (Yoske) Aḥituv considers the nature of *tsni`ut* discourse in national-religious society today and suggests an explanation for the steadily increasing severity. In his view, the stringencies result from regarding *tsni`ut* as the central component of the Jewish people’s distinctiveness and uniqueness—an idea developed by Rav Kook and his successors. Aḥituv writes:

The Merkaz Harav school [of thought] introduced a new component into the array of halakhic considerations, built on the mythic-metaphysical concept of Jewish nationalism and on its associated concepts, such as “the sanctity of Israel,” “the congregation of Israel,” “the purity of the nation of Israel,” “the originality of the nation of Israel,” and, conversely, “the impurity of the

gentiles.” From that point on, consideration of the observance of *tsni`ut* by each individual became inseparable from national-religious or religious-Zionist ideology. The concept of national-religious redemption and the experience of its historical and political realization demand meticulousness and strictness regarding the laws of *tsni`ut*, especially nowadays....The individual who fails to act with the proper *tsni`ut* impairs the sanctity of Israel.⁸

Among other things, Aḥituv considers the increasing meticulousness with respect to masculine *tsni`ut*, particularly the prohibition of wasteful emission of seed. That transgression, to which the Qabbalah assigned vast mythic importance, is so widespread that there is almost no man who has not succumbed to it. Various qabbalistic systems, and Hasidic doctrines in their wake, have offered “*tiqqunim*” (remedial measures) for those who stumble in this regard. Those measures have led to the dependency of the man suffering in this way on a qabbalist, a Hasidic *zaddiq*, or a rabbi; at the same time, this attitude has inspired an ethos of a segregated society and has legitimated separation from women and their removal from the public sphere.

On the ever-growing place of “the sin of wasteful emission of seed” in our society, Aḥituv writes:

It is worth adding that in no contemporary, authoritative circles have I found any express statements meant to diminish the severity of the consequences of this sin, or to “bring it into balance” and return the idea of wasteful emission of seed to its “normal” dimensions, even though we

⁸ Yosef (Yoske) Aḥituv, “*Tsni`ut bein mitos le-etos*” [*Tsni`ut* between myth and ethic], in *Ayin le-tovah: du-siah ve-pulmus be tarbut yisra`el* [*Ayin le-tovah: conversation and polemic in Israeli culture: Festschrift for Tova Ilan’s seventieth birthday*], ed., Nahem Ilan (Tel-Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me’uhad and Ne’manei Torah Va-avodah, 1999), p. 248.

can find in the past authoritative writers who expressed themselves in such terms.⁹

The Zohar declared that the world could not be redeemed as long as the sin of wasteful emission of seed continued to exist, and the prohibition on that act has come more and more to be seen in some national-religious circles as a basic commandment essential to the establishment of male religious identity. (Some rabbis have found the effects of its violation in various events, such as the attacks of September 11 and even the withdrawal from Gush Katif.) The sin causes some who succumb to it to feel so guilty that they consider leaving the fold and giving up religious life altogether.

It is clear to anyone who reads the “guidance” material in the responsa directed to boys that we are not talking here about cruel or willful efforts to cause them pain or make them miserable. The severe and demanding tone characteristic of these responsa is tempered by considerable empathy and identification with the struggle and pain. I have no doubt that the popularity of these responsa attests to the responsiveness the boys find among these rabbis, which is unavailable to them elsewhere.

We likewise must be aware of the halakhic thicket in which the rabbis find themselves: they do not want to waive the various prohibitions nor do they believe they can, but neither do they want to refer their questioners to psychological therapy, which often belittles the values of the halakhic world.

But what is missing from these deliberations, I believe, is simply—and importantly—a sense of proportion. In discussions of *tsni`ut* for

boys, there is no recognition of a “middle ground,” what adults might refer to as “normality,” in relations between the sexes. There is no effort to legitimate—and, a fortiori, no effort to promote—personal ties between men and women. Although most of the respondents, I believe, live in mixed societies, they make no attempt to strengthen the boys’ confidence in their capacity to maintain basic, moral, and proper ties with people qua people, ties that enable one to live by the values of equality, human dignity, and a degree of rationality—values that should mark religious Zionist society.

A noteworthy exception to the foregoing are the comments of Rabbi Moti Fromer of the *besder yeshivah* in Ma’alot, responding to a questioner who describes his difficulties in refraining from masturbation and, in light of that, even wonders whether he ought to seek a relationship with a girl who does not observe *tsni`ut* rather than with one who does.

First of all, relax; for you are, thank God, a healthy fellow. It is very important to be aware that you are able, with God’s help, to establish a household and take a wife; there are some who cannot do that. Beyond that, relax; for the problem is not exclusively yours. The large majority of bachelors, including religious ones, feel compelled to masturbate; it happens to numerous men, until you meet a modest and good young woman with whom you will maintain full relations, in family life. You will then neither need nor want to masturbate, and will want to preserve the seed for its true purpose.... Though almost all succumb to masturbation in their youth, our

⁹ *Id.*, p. 241. *Ah*ituv goes on to cite some examples of such decisors.

sages of blessed memory viewed it negatively, primarily so that a man would seek a wife and marry and so as not to make it possible for a man to satisfy his urge with free masturbation, in which case he would have less of a desire to marry and raise a family. And so, to energize yourself to take the initiative and marry, you should try to avoid masturbation to the extent possible, reducing its frequency gradually, for it is impossible to overcome it suddenly, in one day. Once you've diminished the frequency, if it again happens that you masturbate, don't be too upset. Allow life to go on, remain normal and happy, maintain your optimism, study Torah, read psalms and pray, immerse occasionally in a *miqveh*, and don't go crazy....And God will send you, if you seek, a proper match. And it is clear that you should seek and find a modest, virtuous, and God-fearing young woman.¹⁰

Our educational task as religious adults living in a mixed society (even with varying degrees of exposure to the opposite sex) is to give youth an accurate view of reality in all its complexity. We must enable young people to uncover the difficulties and give voice to the questions that trouble them, and we must examine, together with them, the ways in which one can live one's life in a mixed society, recognizing that the sexual impulse will have a legitimate place in one's personality, but that controlling it is not the central concern of our lives, the essence of divine service, or our existential justification.

3. Rabbis Who Know God's Will

One who directs a question to a rabbi does so in recognition of the rabbi's authority. But is

that authority the result of the rabbi's greater knowledge? His superior personal qualities? His status as a representative of the Torah? Or his greater "closeness" to God, as a result of which he knows the supernal mysteries?

National religious youth, raised in environments ostensibly valuing a degree of autonomy and freedom of thought, are increasingly turning to rabbis on responsa websites with questions that are not necessarily halakhic. The formulation of the question often suggests the questioner is seeking spiritual support, encouragement and explanations of life. The rabbis respond sincerely, on the basis of their life experiences and the "spirit" of the ideology of faith to which they adhere. These responsa, which sometimes incline to stringency, suppress critical judgment and independent thought.

As one who personally knows some of these rabbis, most of whom grew up within religious Zionism, I find that this phenomenon—in which some of the respondents make themselves into *admorim*** of some sort for the community in general and its youth in particular—borders on the pretentious and even insolent. At times, their responsa approach the absurd.

One of the responsa under the heading "*Tsni'ut*" on the *Kipa* site involves the following question, posed by a girl named Shirel:¹¹

Greetings, honored rabbi; my name is Shirel.

It often happens that we discuss the question of a second piercing [of the ear—T.B.]. The question is whether it is forbidden as a matter of *halakhab* or only as a matter of the spirit of *halakhab*.

¹⁰ <http://www.moreshet.co.il/web/shut/shut2.asp?id=21815>.

** *Admor* (pl., *admorim*) is an acronym for the Hebrew honorific "our lord, teacher, and rabbi." It is usually used to refer to a Hasidic *rebbe* whose disciples look to him not only for halakhic answers but for authoritative guidance in all areas of life.—*translator*.

¹¹ <http://www.kipa.co.il/ask/show.asp?id=82780>.

Hayyim, a member of the staff of Yeshivat Har Etzion, replies:

In the book of Leviticus, the Torah commands us “You shall be holy,” and Nahmanides, in one of his most famous Torah interpretations, says the meaning of that is “sanctify yourself through what is permitted to you.” What does that mean? We know that there are two levels to our lives as people who observe Torah and commandments: the level of “dry” *halakhab*, which says clearly what is permitted and what is forbidden, and the level customarily called “the spirit of *halakhab*,” which tells us, in essence, to imagine that the Holy One blessed be He Himself is standing directly before you and watching what you are doing. Would He be pleased with you? Would He be indifferent? Or would He genuinely have no problem with it? “Sanctify yourself through what is permitted to you” tells you [to consider the issue in these terms]: Sure, it is nowhere written that one may not place a second earring in one’s ear; indeed, nowhere is it written that it is forbidden to place a third or a fourth; but then what? Does that mean it is permitted? Think honestly, is the Holy One blessed be He pleased with that? Everyone must answer that question honestly, even though it is a bit difficult....

The respondent speaks casually, making no use of halakhic terminology. Nor does he explain the effects of fashion on the culture that is worthy of adoption within religious society. He enlists the Holy One blessed be He Himself, in all His glory, and transmits the “official message” that He “is not pleased with that,” a response that seems to me to demean both the questioner and God.

A similarly authoritative approach with respect to *tsni`ut* can be found in Rabbi Aviner’s book *Am ke-lavi*. Published many years ago, the book does not typify a new spirit, but it laid the foundation for a view of things that has become central. It deals with numerous responsa, some pertaining to matters of *tsni`ut*, and Rabbi Aviner speaks of the divine source of the norms of *tsni`ut*. Although he takes a contrary view in another responsum, as we shall see, the one I am about to cite says something about his approach.

In responsum 329, in which he considers “depth of décolletage,” he writes: “all these are not matters that depend on social conventions; rather, they pertain to direct divine ordering of reality.”¹² In the ensuing responsum, however, dealing with “*tsni`ut* as related to sleeves,” he argues: “In contrast to the view of many that the laws of *tsni`ut* are fixed and absolute, the truth is that they change in accord with the times and social reality.”¹³

I do not mean to argue with Rabbi Aviner; rather, I want to consider the spiritual and intellectual message conveyed by these sorts of directives.

It seems to me that the modern responsa genre, as used by rabbis and questioners, adheres to a pattern that makes it seem to be simply a sort of conversation between the parties. As a practical matter, however, the pattern allows each of the parties to reiterate its positions without reassessing them and without the connection between questioner and respondent bringing the respondent to the point of having to revisit his wording and ideas. Because the questioners are ostensibly treated personally, even warmly, they are apt not to recognize that their problems are inherent in the modern halakhic and political-religious system and that they are denied a methodical response that would require the rabbis to self-critically reassess the issue of running a modern, mixed, religious society.

¹² Aviner, *Am ke-lavi* (above, n. 5), p. 287.

¹³ *Id.*, p. 288. Additional contradictions of this sort appear in other ensuing response in the book.

The sense I have tried to convey here is that the subject of *tsni`ut* has not been considered with true *tsni`ut*, whose primary meaning is self-limitation and consideration of the other. I am not referring to the almost pornographic aspects of the *tsni`ut* directives that go into great detail about which of a woman's limbs, garments, and actions may be sexually arousing to men. That critique has been heard for some time now in certain national-religious educational circles, and we also have heard criticism of the phenomenon that most education for *tsni`ut* or, at least, for family life, is provided in educational institutions solely to girls, and by rabbis.

As I have argued, the tone with which guidance is provided and questions are answered is often marked by certainty and authoritativeness even where, in my judgment, they are not warranted; and the substance of the responsa is unduly inclined to stringency. There is genuine concern about the distress felt by these young people, but they are still regarded as childish and dependent, and no effort is made to enhance their critical thinking or independent decision making. These attitudes are evident both in the responsa's lack of citations (something that follows as well from the nature of internet responsa) and in their patronizing language and style. The questioners, to be sure, are shown love and a certain sort of support, but these emanate from a place in which the rabbis reserve to themselves total power and control over the conversation and its outcomes.

4. A Different Approach—A Look at an Alternative Program of Studies

I will now try to present the principles that guided us in writing the chapter on "*Tsni`ut* in

the textbook we wrote in Kolech for twelfth-graders, both male and female, in religious high schools. The textbook was entitled "Gender and Family in Judaism," and the chapter offers a different educational conversation on the subject. I do not mean to present it as a complete alternative to education for *tsni`ut*; rather, I want to use it to offer some additional perspectives and attitudes that may become a platform for the new conversation we must develop.

For at least the past twenty years, the large majority of twelfth-grade girls in all religious high schools and *ulpanot* in Israel have been tested on a unit of study called "marriage and family," included in the Oral Torah curriculum.¹⁴ As graduates of religious-Zionist educational institutions, my fellow members of Kolech and I have found that we all still bear the wounds of *tsni`ut* education even though many years have passed. We decided to deal with the issue and have developed two programs for religious high schools, *yeshivot*, and *ulpanot* that treat these issues from a religious feminist perspective

The current curricular unit, whose purpose is to prepare the girls for their imminent entry into Jewish family life, is highly problematic, a fact that which the Education Ministry knows. The unit is grounded on patriarchal premises and focused on transmitting limited halakhic information in a number of areas. Studying the unit left a very bitter taste in the mouths of most of those I spoke with. In the course of the lectures I deliver on this subject, I find again and again that women who are strangers to me turn to me in tears, telling me how depressing they found their study of this unit in their youth. They may have been pained not only by the unit itself but by the absence of any

¹⁴ Israel's educational system is highly centralized. The various educational streams are run directly by the Ministry of Education, which dictates the curriculums to be studied and the matriculation exams to be taken by the end of 12th grade. Any curriculum – including curricula in Talmud, Jewish philosophy and other religious subjects—must be approved by the relevant authorities in the Ministry. The textbook we were writing aimed to constitute the basis for one matriculation exam in Oral Law.

mature, intelligent, and lucid conversation on the subject—an absence that, as a practical matter, affected their attitude toward it. It is worth noting that adolescent boys of the same age receive no formal preparation of any sort with respect to marriage and family or related subjects such as sexuality, love, or procreation.

The first principle we set for ourselves in Kolech as we set out to develop the unit on “Gender and Family in Judaism” was that it would be directed to twelfth-grade boys and girls alike.¹⁵ It was clear to us that whatever girls needed to know about the subject was something boys needed to know as well. We assumed that the very exposure to the materials would convey to boys the need for responsibility and maturity in connection with these subjects, and that boys should be taught that they can and must bear equal responsibility in these areas.

In the course of dealing with the halakhic aspects of relations between the sexes (*tsni`ut*, betrothal, menstrual impurity, etc.), we tried to offer an egalitarian Jewish perspective on gender-related questions, firmly believing that Judaism had to make such a perspective possible and that it could foster it.

The first part of the curriculum considers feminine and masculine constructs in general and in Jewish sources in particular. It also points to the implications of those constructs for the standing of women in society in general and religious society in particular.

The second part expands on the subject of women’s standing in the religious world and examines, on the one hand, examples of the spiritual possibilities open to women discussed at length in the classical sources (Nazirite vows, prophecy, prayer, etc.) and, on the other hand, the problematic status of women with respect to time-bound positive commandments, Torah study, and standing to appear as witnesses and assume leadership positions.

After looking in depth at the way *halakhab* has confronted the status of women in Judaism in general, we turn to the standing of man and woman in the world of the family. We examine the sources dealing with intimacy, love, marriage, divorce, and parenthood from a perspective that simultaneously tries to advance the tendency toward equality while reading the texts honestly and with principled deference to the Jewish tradition.

Only in the final part of the program do we deal with sexual relations, *tsni`ut*, sexual violence, and menstrual impurity. In treating the various subjects, we raise gender-related problems and suggest ways of dealing with them on the basis of Jewish sources (rabbinic texts, responsa, and others).

Various principles guided us in writing the chapter on “*Tsni`ut*.” First was the need to present consideration of *tsni`ut* as a superstructure that builds upon a basic recognition of the legitimacy of sexuality. In the textbook’s preceding chapter, on “Sexuality,” we emphasized Judaism’s anti-asceticism. In the chapter on “*Tsni`ut*,” we tried to consider sexual desire as natural and legitimate and, as such, as something that exists in women as well as men and as having a destructive potential in both.

In the first part of the chapter, we presented the phenomenon of making the other into a sexual object and sought to convey the message that all people, men and women alike, have sexual urges and all therefore bear the responsibility to strive to avoid sexual objectification of others or of themselves. Using stories from the Talmud, we taught that attempting to use another as a sexual object is forbidden in all circumstances (BT *Berakhot* 61a; BT *Sanhedrin* 75a) and we emphasized the message that every person is responsible for his or her own *tsni`ut* (BT *Ta`anit* 23b-24a). We aimed to establish the ethical recognition that the desired relationship between people is to see every person as a complete world,

¹⁵ The unit was written by Rabbi Barukh Kehat, Rabbi Dr. Ariel Pickar, Dr. Hannah Kehat, and me; it was made possible by an initial grant from the Jewish Agency.

possessed of body and emotions, sensations and thoughts, and to convey the importance of honoring the freedom and existence of every person as one created in the image of God.

The conduct of “normal” activity in which men and women share the same physical spaces requires a degree of *tsni`ut*, and we tried to clarify that the *tsni`ut* is the responsibility of the one who is “looking” and not of his or her object. In doing so, we made use of *halakhot* and talmudic stories and of the responsum by R. Ben-Zion Me’ir Hai Uziel, dealing with the participation of women in elections for public office (Resp. *Mishpetei uzzi`el*, vol. 4, *Hoshen mishpat* sec. 6).

We also presented the historical perspective that describes changes in the status of women and their influence on halakhic decisions regarding relations between the sexes (R. Ovadia Yosef, Resp. *Yabi`a omer*, part 4, *Orah hayyim*, sec. 13).

The goals we set for ourselves in writing the unit were to offer a conversation on the subject and not to fix rules. The usual method in religious educational institutions, both more enlightened and less enlightened, is to deal with these matters by setting rules or studying the halakhic rules; more liberal institutions allow for a degree of back and forth discussion with the students about the rules. In contrast to that approach, we sought to go beyond the reduction of *tsni`ut* to rules and to allow concepts, emotions, and additional perspectives to come to the surface.

Again, instead of confining the conversation to strategies for confronting the sexual impulse (regarded as threatening and uncontrollable), we sought to focus on strengthening the sense that one is capable of maintaining human relationships with another person to whom one is not married. In contrast to seeing the other primarily as a sexual object, we tried to emphasize the concepts of personality, soul, and self-control.

Conclusion: An Alternative Conception of *Tsni`ut*

I would like to quote the conclusion of our curriculum on *Ts`niut*:

Tsni`ut is a way of acting that should characterize every Jewish man or woman. It means that each one of us must adopt a certain degree of humility and of concern for the other, in light of our recognition of God’s presence in the world and of the existence of people other than me. Recognizing the differences in other people, their needs, and their desires requires that we not always occupy “center stage” and not measure the other exclusively with reference to ourselves and our needs and desires. We must make it possible for the other, for others, to be themselves, and we must encourage them in that.

Conduct marked by *tsni`ut* will never demean or undermine the self-image of the other. Those who act with *tsni`ut* will not arouse the jealousy of others through ostentatiousness, and they will avoid weakening or frightening others through arrogance or rudeness. For example, in a conversation or in a class, meticulousness about *tsni`ut* will be expressed by allowing the other to express himself and assume a position of equal value.

Observance of sexual *tsni`ut* is part of the demand that one conduct oneself with *tsni`ut* in all aspects of one’s life in this world. As we have seen in the various sources, there exists in every one of us an impulse to see the man or woman standing before us as a sexual object; and there sometimes exists an impulse to present ourselves to the man or woman before us as entirely or primarily a sexual object.

The sexual component of our selves is important and blessed, but we must take care not to place it alone at center stage in

the connections we form with others. Connections of that sort constitute “objectification” (that is, they involve seeing the other or presenting ourselves exclusively as a sexual object) and disregard the full range of the personality of one created in the image of God. Sexual *tsni`ut*, accordingly, does not mean nullifying or even weakening the sexual impulse; rather, it means assigning it its balanced place within the full scope of our existence as human beings.

Western society, which during the past century has undergone a “sexual revolution,” has eliminated taboos against interest in sexuality. It instituted a process of “sexual liberation” that made possible discussion and analysis of various topics related to human sexuality, and it permitted sexual activity that had been forbidden or considered indecent throughout pre-twentieth-century history.

On the one hand, that revolution brought considerable blessing with it: it raised the awareness of women’s sexuality, needs, and desires; it made it possible to recognize and deal with harassment and sexual abuse; and it eliminated false, even painful, stereotypes regarding the sexual conduct of human beings. On the other hand, sexual liberation took place during the course of a century in which many fundamental social and family values were undermined, and it brought about profound ethical confusion.

During the twentieth century, science came to offer an array of simple and accessible birth control measures that severed the necessary connection between sex and procreation that had existed until then and allowed for a new attitude toward sex. Another factor influencing our attitude toward sex in a dramatic way is western economic policy, which promotes aggressive sales and marketing of various products, including those that promote the body and sexuality. All these strengthened the attitude of sexual objectification between men and women and led to the well-built body becoming and

important and central “entry pass” into society. Simply put, social pressures to appear sexy (and thin) are too strong to bear and have penetrated every sub-culture within western society.

Tsni`ut is a mechanism and category that allows us to examine these phenomena critically, from a bit of a distance, and ask ourselves how we can control the destructive and negative tendencies of this revolution and how we can take from it what is appropriate.

Sexual *tsni`ut* is equally binding on men and women. Every person must take responsibility for his or her sexuality and not take advantage of or deprecate the sexuality of another person. Women must take care to avoid exploiting the sexuality of men, and men must take care to avoid exploiting the sexuality of women. In contrast to the concept that requires the other to limit himself or herself in order to avoid causing me difficulty or complicating my struggle with my impulse, *tsni`ut* is an action I take toward myself, an act of self-restraint, sensitivity, and concern taken as a result of maturity and health.

As a human being, each of us is a single being combining body and soul, and it is as such that we are invited to serve God. Through body and soul together, we can express our religiosity and our spirit.

A Postscript on Practice

The *Tsni`ut* curriculum I have described at length here was completed several years ago. It met with positive responses, at times very—and surprisingly—positive, among Religious Zionist educators and within the Education Ministry itself. More work remains to be done, both to secure the approval of the Ministry, and to print and promote the curriculum among educators. Sadly, once the initial start-up grant for the project was finished, exhaustive fund-raising efforts in both Israel and the U.S. came to naught and the project was shelved just when it was poised to take off.