

[Intro with Al Het ... gilui arayot -- immoral sexual acts. Plural language of vidui implies communal responsibility for behavior and sin.]

Today, I'm going to ask you to take a stand on the issue of our communal standards of modesty and sexuality that I believe will surely earn you a place in the world to come. In our martyrology service, we make reference to Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon, who was executed by the Romans for teaching Torah. He was wrapped in the Torah scroll, and branches were piled up around him and lit. Wet wool was placed over his heart so he would die more slowly. The executioner, feeling pity for the suffering of Rabbi Hanina, removed the tufts of wool from around his heart and built up the flame so he would die more quickly with less suffering, and then jumped into the flames himself. A Bat Kol, a heavenly voice, announced that both Rabbi Hanina and the executioner gained immediate entrance in the World to Come. Rabbi Yehudah responded, "Yesh she-koneh olamo be-sha'ah achat," there are those who obtain eternal life in a single instant. Those who make the difficult decisions, even if they are hard, may gain eternity in a single instant.

I believe that among those who will win eternal life are parents who stand up to their children and tell them that they must behave and dress with reasonable standards of modesty, and other adults who set a good example of modesty in dress and behavior. I am asking you, with respect to your teenage children, to talk about the need for more modest standards of dress and behavior, which do not include, for example, being allowed to dress like Britney Spears. Commercials urge you talk to your kids about drugs, because the consequences can be tragic if you don't. The topic of modesty is very closely related to the topic of sexuality -- again, the consequences can be tragic if you don't talk about it, but it has become more and more apparent to me that many parents are unwilling to address it. Here are the results:

A 13 year old girl in the Detroit area twice took off her shirt during gym to protest the fact that boys were allowed to play shirtless. Her mother supported her daughter's action, because she always taught her to stand up for what she believes. The Detroit News compared her cause to the struggle for abolition of slavery or women's suffrage, and wrote, "Nobody said life is fair, but you've got to cheer for the 13-year-old who wants to make it so."

In the Olympic world, some women have been posing for nude and semi-nude pictures, claiming that as women athletes, they should be proud of their well developed bodies. One athlete was quoted saying, "We're healthy. We're fit. And we're not just cute; we do good things with our bodies. Why not show them off?" The swimsuits that some of the female divers were wearing, were all but transparent. Many of NBC's brief biographies of both the male and female athletes presented them in sexualized poses, which is especially disturbing given that some of the athletes were only 14 years old. This reminds me of a story about how when Amy Eilberg was ordained as the first female Conservative rabbi, People magazine interviewed her. They wanted to photograph her in her dorm room wearing a bathrobe, to emphasize her femininity. She refused, to preserve her dignity as a rabbi.

Visible bra straps and underwear are in fashion. Victoria's Secret has taken underwear out of the bedroom and closet and presented it on prime time television. Fashion runway models are barely clothed, and one can count on at least one of the stars appearing at the Emmy, Grammy, and Oscars to be wearing something which must defy the law of gravity in order to maintain some strategic coverage. Frederiks of Hollywood, the formerly risqué mail order catalog company, is on the verge of bankruptcy because there is nothing they sell that isn't visible in the

display windows of your local mall. A Mainstream “family” publication like The Grand Rapids Press published one of the pictures of a topless Olympic athlete originally published in Maxim, a men’s magazine. Even Outlook, the magazine published by Women’s League for Conservative Judaism, published a picture of a topless woman lying face down receiving a massage from a pair of male-looking hands, an advertisement for an Israeli skin care product.

Rabbi Michael Gold, author of “Does God Belong in the Bedroom,” writes that while Adam and Eve lost their innocence when they ate the fruit and recognized their nakedness, in exchange they gained the ability to achieve holiness. The path to kedusha in sexual matters is through the laws of tzniyut, modesty. The laws of tzniyut direct us not to dress or act in sexually suggestive ways. By dressing and acting modestly, we focus attention on who we are on the inside, our character and values and intelligence and sense of humor, rather than merely on our physical appearance.

In addition, the most successful marriages are created when each partner has the capacity to experience true and honest intimacy. The height of intimacy is achieved by being naked, with all our imperfections revealed, in front of our spouse, who who loves us unconditionally. Physical nakedness goes hand in hand with spiritual nakedness, total honesty about ourselves. By treating nakedness casually, we lose the ability to appreciate the full depth of sexual intimacy with our spouse.

In the ancient, pagan, world, the New Year was a time of wild parties and licentious behavior. Imagine that -- wild parties, drinking, and irresponsible sexual behavior at a new year celebration. I guess times haven’t changed all that much, if you look at the secular new year! In our Torah reading this afternoon, we will read a series of laws regulating sexual behavior. It was chosen for a Yom Kippur Torah reading as a pointed reminder that OUR new year is a religious celebration different than that of the surrounding pagan population.

The only thing that separates human behavior from other animal behavior is that we are able to analyze our behavior in terms of holiness. We know that some behavior is holy, and some is not. But our young people are being told in so many ways that public nudity is proper that it is no longer obvious to them that it is not holy. Sports figures, for better or worse are role models for many young people. What do you think the message is when the woman that Mattel chose to endorse a new “Swimming Champion Barbie,” poses topless for Sports Illustrated. The athlete says that she wanted to display her muscular, athletic form to young girls. Mary Jo Kane, director of the Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sports at the University of Minnesota, responds, “It’s not clear to me which muscle group naked breasts belong to.”

When one can casually reveal one’s body to strangers or opposite sex friends without a second thought, then nakedness becomes meaningless. It is no longer an act of intimacy, and thus erodes one’s ability to experience true intimacy later in life.

As beings created in the image of God, I think we have an obligation to take pride in our bodies. Proper exercise, nutrition and general fitness is in keeping with Jewish notions of the mitzvah to take care of the property God loaned us. There is no shame in the human body, but there is a time and a place to put it on display. Naked Olympic athletes are not a celebration of women’s power and athletic prowess, but rather a subtle way to reduce them to sexual objects. Our sexuality is an important part of who we are, but we, unlike animals, are able to control our sexual impulses, sanctify them, and become more than slaves to our desires.

Animals express their sexual drive whenever and wherever their genetic code tells them to. Human beings, and only human beings, have the power to express their sexual drive or to control it; human beings, and only human beings, have the ability to decide whether to use their libido for love or for lust, whether to express it in the context of love or whether to express it promiscuously, as the animals do.

I speak today to each one of you. In your own way, through the clothes you buy for yourself, your children, nieces, nephews, or grandchildren; through the way you react when someone asks your opinion on their manner of dress; and through the magazines you choose to buy; you have the power and the responsibility as consumers to influence through your dollars.

I warned you when I began that I was going to ask you to take a stand that would be very unpopular. It goes against the message that surrounds us in secular culture. But I believe that we have a Jewish mandate to act in the spirit of our prophetic forbearers, and proclaim a message that is right, even if it goes against popular sentiment. Recall the words of the prophet Zachariah, “These are the things you are to do: Dabru emet, speak the truth to one another.” Recall also the words of the Prophet Hoshea: “One who is wise will consider these words, one who is prudent will take note of them. For the paths of Adonai are smooth; the righteous can walk on them, while sinners stumble on them.” Finally, recall the words of the Prophet Micah, “God has told you, mortals, what is good, and what Adonai requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God; Then will your name achieve wisdom.”