

# Jewish Modesty: Not Just a Matter of Skirt Length

December 6, 2016 | By [Emily Rivka Canning](#)



Rabbi David Silber.

*Courtesy of Drisha Institute*

*This article originally appeared in Yiddish in the Forverts.*

What do we mean when we use the Hebrew term for modesty, *tznius* (also known as *tzeniut*)? A quick search on Google indicates that the concept most associated with it is how women dress.

Countless materials teach Jewish girls exactly how to appear in public; others discuss the ideal length of a girl's or woman's skirt, whether her blouse needs to cover her collarbone, or if she's married – how a woman should cover her hair.

Yet when seeking the source of the word *tznius* in the Torah, it becomes apparent that the topic didn't originally address women or even clothing. So what does it really mean to be a "modest" person?

The Drisha Institute for Jewish Education aimed to expand our understanding of *tznius* by offering a three-part lecture series on the subject earlier this fall. The invited scholars explored the textual sources of the term and challenged its current application in the Jewish community.

What I found most fascinating was the last talk of the series, given by the dean of Drisha, Rabbi David Silber. In his lecture, "*Tzeniut* in our Personal and Communal Spheres", he stressed that *tznius* is actually not meant to be defined so narrowly, but refers more to the concept of encouraging all Jews to act humbly in their daily lives.

Silber traced the textual sources of the term "*tznius*," and found that it's mentioned only twice in the Bible, and in neither quote does it have any connection with women or with covering one's body. The Book of Michah contains the phrase, "*v'hatznei'a lekhet im eloheikha*": "go in *tznius* with your G-d." This places the priority on how we behave towards others rather than how we dress. To "go" is likewise an active process, indicating that we need to demonstrate modesty through our actions.

AdChoices 

# FREE\* 72-HOUR SURVIVAL KIT



[CLICK HERE](#)

Food4Patriots.com

That's not to say that we can't express modesty through our clothing, but Silber suggests, "*tznius* is not really about the length of dress." The ideal should be "not to call attention to oneself" and to achieve a sense of "simplicity." He asked the audience instead to consider the implications of spending thousands of dollars for a single article of clothing. "I think it's far more problematic when our highest aspiration is materialism. When we talk only about clothing that holds to a standard of *tznius*, we're not asking the right questions. Instead of how long someone's sleeves are, maybe we should think about the height of our heels.

"If it were up to me, I would ban high heels" Silber added. "They're bad for your health."

Silber finds the instructional materials designed to teach proper "*tznius*" to women largely "unnecessary" since the style of clothing that people wear changes with the time, climate and culture. Did Jews wear *shtreimels* [the fur hat worn by Hasidic men on special occasions] when wandering in the desert? he asked. "There are certain contexts for instance where it would be completely appropriate for a man to wear a dress," Silber said.

One woman in the crowd who identified herself as living in a Chassidic community seemed a bit upset by the implications of Rabbi Silber's talk. "But don't you think Jews should dress differently, that we should be identifiably separate from others?" Rabbi Silber tried to address her concern, "That's not what I meant. When I go outside, I wear a yarmulke because I'm a Jew. I mean that we shouldn't limit our understanding of *tznius* to the length of a girl's skirt."

Rabbi Silber also encouraged the listeners in the audience to expand their understanding of *tznius* to encompass modern technology. "Everything that we post on Facebook is available for all to see. The root of the word *tznius* is the word for 'hidden', yet it seems contrary to hide oneself in a public sphere like social media, adding with a chuckle: "Maybe that's why I'm probably one of few people in this room not on Facebook!"

I've actually had my own personal experience with the expectations of "*tznius*." A couple of months ago, while I was going through the process of converting to Judaism, I was asked a series of questions by the Manhattan Orthodox Beis Din, or Jewish court, to determine whether or not I was ready to complete the process of

conversion. The head rabbi calmly said: “It’s been quite hot this August... how did you manage with *tznius*?”

I felt the heat of August return in my brief moment of hesitation. What exactly did “*tznius*” mean for the Beis Din? Could my wardrobe changes be part of a gradual process? Would I be barred from Yiddishkeit if I admitted to wearing pants? Fortunately, my hastily muttered half-answer was afforded another opportunity. At the end of the meeting, a second rabbi asked: “So what’s the most difficult of all the *mitzvot* [commandments] for you to follow?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, I replied: “*tznius*.”



## Modest Styles on the Catwalk

Marjorie Ingall August 7, 2008

## U.S. Warns Tourists To Dress Modestly in Israel

JTA February 7, 2012

*Emily Rivka Canning is a linguistic anthropologist who writes for the Yiddish Forverts. Having learned local languages in Spain, China, and Kyrgyzstan, she currently resides in Crown Heights, where she speaks mostly Yiddish.*

The Forward’s independent journalism depends on donations from readers like you.