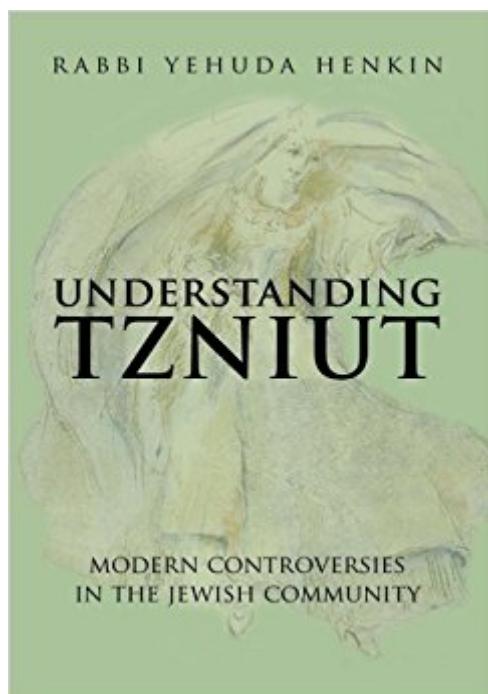


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Understanding Tzniut: Modern Controversies In The Jewish Community



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Customer Reviews

The topic of modest dress in Jewish law is one that is very dependent on local custom. While there are some issues that are universal, most of the details are location specific. This became glaringly obvious a few years ago when R. Pesach Eliyahu Falk published a book titled Modesty: An Adornment for Life, which consistently presented practices that represent the norm in certain Charedi/Chassidic circles as the unequivocal standard. R. Yehuda Henkin has published a detailed and devastating critique of many of R. Falk's fundamental positions. This long essay originally appeared in the journal Tradition and has now been updated and published in a book appropriately titled Understanding Tzniut: Modern Controversies in the Jewish Community. The essay is published alongside another two related essays and a second section of interesting essays on unrelated topic (e.g. whether one must show respect to a disrespectful Torah scholar and the proper attitude towards the state of Israel post-Disengagement). R. Henkin's essay on modest dress analyzes a number of relevant topics (e.g. women's haircovering, necklines) and shows that R. Falk's positions are extreme. In reaching his conclusions, R. Henkin displays a mastery of both halakhic views on this subject and sound reasoning. --Rabbi Gil Student, Hirhurim blog

It's too technical for me, but if someone was raised Orthodox, and wanted to study the laws of tzniut in more detail, then this might be for you.

Rabbi Yehuda Henkin's (b. 1945) "Understanding Tzniut" is a well-researched thin volume on the

laws relating to modesty in women's dress and related issues, including the degree to which interaction between the genders is regulated by halakhah (Jewish law). Several of the essays are reprints--with minor modifications--of articles that originally appeared in the journal TRADITION. The lead essay tackles most of the laws relating to how Jewish women should dress to abide by norms of modesty and it contains a persuasive critique of the views advanced in the work "Oz ve-Hadar Levushah" by R. Pesach Falk (English version: "Modesty: An Adornment for Life"). R. Henkin is an outstanding halakhic authority (and author of the 4-volume responsa collection "B'nei Banim") and his refutation of certain key points in R. Falk's work is very compelling. In R. Henkin's view, the primary flaw of R. Falk's work is in presenting as basic requirements of modest dress standards that are actually representative only of certain communal practices and not of the texts that are the source for Jewish law on this matter. While any individual family or community is at liberty to adopt very stringent standards of modesty, these standards should not be codified in a popular work aimed at a general Jewish audience and presented as though they were basic halakhic requirements. So, for example, R. Falk's harsh words for those women who expose a minute amount of skin below the collarbone are unwarranted because there is actually no precise definition in halakhic sources of exactly how high shirts must reach and a minute amount would be less than the requisite shiur (length) for forbidden exposure anyway. Further, R. Falk omits the position of the outstanding authority R. Moshe Feinstein regarding exposure of a portion of a married woman's hair in order to present a stricter view, which R. Henkin takes him to task for. (Although R. Henkin suggests a possible leniency regarding allowing more than a tefah of a married woman's hair outside of her hairline to be exposed [p. 42], which is difficult to defend.) R. Henkin also discusses the issue of covering the woman's "shok," which had been defined in earlier sources as the area from the knees and above (but not below the knees), which is the view that has become widely accepted in Jewish communities. Recently, this view has become the subject of controversy among several contemporary Israeli poskim (halakhic decisors) which in turn has led certain late-twentieth century popularizers of modesty laws (such as R. Falk) to state that the lower leg must always be covered, at least by opaque stockings. This is contrary to the ruling of R. Moshe Feinstein (and the Mishna Berurah before him) but the author of "Oz ve-Hadar Levushah" would have us believe that this "requirement" is consistent with R. Feinstein's views. R. Henkin demonstrates that the proof-text cited by the Talmud for the law that the "shok" must be covered clearly indicates that this term referred to the area above (and including) the knees, but not below them, which would mean that covering the area below the knees is subject to local custom but is not required by halakhah. R. Henkin also develops a more liberal view regarding the covering of a woman's upper arm ("ze'roah")

according to which the elbow itself and possibly the skin immediately above it need not be covered (pp. 24-25). R. Henkin admits that the major aharonim (early modern halakhic authorities) have ruled more stringently and thus his view on this seem like lenient revisionism that parallels the stringent revisionism prevalent in some circles regarding the covering of the lower leg. In this sense, the best work on the topic of tznius remains R. Getsel Ellinson's "The Modest Way," which is neither excessively stringent nor unduly lenient. Overall, R. Henkin's essays merit close study. (It would have been helpful had the author written an introduction and conclusion, but the book has neither of these.) What is unjustified is his three page (pp. 120-122) gratuitous attack on the Satmar Rebbe, R. Yoel Teitelbaum (who is unnamed but is obviously the subject of the essay). He cites his grandfather, R. Yosef Eliyahu Henkin's private statement about R. Teitelbaum as a basis to discourage readers from according honor to the latter when his name is mentioned. But this is preposterous because all Torah sages who were contemporaries of R. Teitelbaum accorded him the utmost respect, including those whose views on Zionism he attacked. R. Henkin is simply mistaken in claiming that R. Teitelbaum believed that all the rabbis associated with Agudath Israel--and certainly the Mizrachi--"were heretics and doomed to hell for not sharing his implacable opposition to any ties whatever to the State of Israel" (p. 120). A mere glance at R. Teitelbaum's biography, including the recent article by R. Hertz Frankel in Hamodia Magazine (Vol. XI, Issue 522, August 20, 2008) makes it abundantly clear that R. Teitelbaum had great respect for those gedolim (Torah leaders) with whom he disagreed. This unwarranted attack on R. Teitelbaum also includes a misrepresentation of R. Henkin's grandfather's views on the State of Israel (p. 121) so as to align them more closely with his own views, a fact that any reader can verify by simply examining the essay written by the elder R. Henkin which his grandson cites (note 2) to support his own view. This attack on the Satmar Rebbe did not have to be included in this book. Otherwise, this thoughtful book should serve as a useful corrective to some of the tendencies toward extremism as well as laxity (in modesty standards) in Orthodox circles even while preserving the reverence for halakhah that is at the heart of Jewish modesty norms.

This book by Henkin is great. I needed something to prove all tzniut leniencies, and this book is a handy guide to direct anyone how they can dress with the utmost leniencies in this area.

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