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Dressing Right
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Parshat Ki Tetze

There shall not be any male's article upon a woman, and no male shall wear a woman's garment. (Deuteronomy 22:5)

This injunction has always been rather problematic for the modern (or post-modern) consciousness. The literal meaning is troublesome, the traditional interpretation even more so. But the Hassidic master Rebbe Nahman of Breslov (1772-1810, the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov), certainly no liberal, offers a spiritual and emotive interpretation.

The verse, Rebbe Nahman suggests, refers to traditionally "masculine" and traditionally "feminine" characteristics and modes of behavior. While we no longer characterize these traits as "masculine" and "feminine," we do understand that they were so characterized in ages past, and we may learn from that past consciousness.

The "masculine" traits include aggressiveness, self-aggrandizement, assertiveness; the "feminine" traits include submissiveness and a willingness to admit weakness. Each individual – and, while this assertion is a hallmark of modern psychology, the Hassidic masters were well aware of it over two centuries ago – is a microcosm; we carry within ourselves both "masculine" and "feminine" traits (although we understand them in a different way from that of our ancestors), and we understand their integration as essential to mental health. Yet there are times, as Rebbe Nahman says, when each of these sets of character traits is essential by itself! The essence of the verse, he teaches, is to know when each set of behaviors is appropriate.

Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov, Rebbe Nahman's chief disciple, says, as an example, that one who stands before G*d in prayer must adopt the traits of powerlessness and dependence traditionally characterized as "feminine." (Please do not shoot the messenger. I report; I do not advocate.) One must not claim in one's prayers – no matter how strong one may be – to deserve the good things for which one asks; one places oneself consciously in a state of dependence upon G*d's Grace.

On the other hand, there are times when one must be what the tradition characterizes as "a man," eschewing the so-called "feminine" traits. When the *yetzer ha'ra*

(the inclination to do good only for oneself) rises up within us, we must stand tall and firm and strong – the traditionally “masculine” behavior – to combat it, or, at least, to turn it and control it so that the good we do for ourselves will benefit others as well.

Furthermore, as several of the Hassidic masters teach, there are even times when we must so exalt ourselves as to act as if there were no G*d!

Rebbe Moshe Leib of Sassov once said to his followers, “We are told that a holy spark exists in all things, even in what we perceive as evil. Even in disbelief!”

“What holiness can we ascribe to disbelief?” one of Rebbe Moshe Leib’s Hassidim asked.

“Imagine,” replied the rebbe. “Imagine a beggar encountering a wealthy man and asking for a contribution.

*“I wish I could meet all your expectations,” the wealthy man says to him, ‘but I cannot, and I shall tell you why. You are, after all, entitled to an explanation. I cannot help you because I believe in G*d and in G*d’s justice. If G*d had wanted you to have my money, G*d would have given it to you, not to me. Shall I, then, oppose G*d’s will?’*

*“When it comes to charity,” Rebbe Moshe Leib concluded, “be an atheist. Do not use G*d as an excuse; help those who need help. If you can do nothing else, pray with them; dance for them. There is always a way to help. And, if there is none, invent one. If you accept the challenge, you will succeed.”*

The verse goes on to say that one who transgresses the Commandment becomes “vile” before G*d. (The Hebrew word is *to’evah*, which we have explained in other contexts as a total violation of one’s spiritual integrity.) Rashi says it may lead to “lewdness,” which the Talmudic sages (*Sanhedrin* 93a) say is anathema to G*d. Based on Rebbe Nahman’s and Rabbi Nathan’s explanations, we may say that failure to “dress” appropriately – submissively when standing before G*d, assertively when confronting one’s *yetzer ha’ra* – may lead to adopting the inappropriate mode at other times.

The conceit and arrogance which lead one to be assertive before G*d may lead one to try to exert power over other people. If one fails to stand up to one’s *yetzer ha’ra*, on the other hand, then the drives and desires which make up the *yetzer ha’ra* may well gain control over all one’s actions.

May G*d grant us the discernment to know when we need to be submissive and when we need to be assertive. May we “dress right” for every circumstance.

Shabbat Shalom.