



Working on the **QUALITY OF TZNIUT**

Learning to tune out distractions and focus on others

BY LEONARD CARR

THE QUALITY OF CHARACTER THAT FORMS THE implicit backdrop to the Purim story, hinted at in Queen Esther's name, is that of tzniut (modesty). It is this attribute that is the single most important quality for cultivating spiritual and emotional maturity and refinement. Therefore, it's also the most important quality necessary to foster healthy relationships and Shalom. Tzniut implies privacy and secrecy which are attributes that depend on restraint, reserve, containment, discretion, tact, and discernment.

People who are tzanua (modest) are often mistakenly perceived as lacking in emotional awareness, sensitivity, or depth. The opposite is true. People who are able to contain their inner-life and remain connected to it experience deeply the subtleties and nuances of their emotional life. When you are fully present and listen deeply both to your inner voice and to others you have time to process all the information available to you and to give due consideration to your response. Wisdom tends to percolate through your mind as the obvious, as well as subtle, impressions and details coalesce in a slow organic way rather than spark in flashes of sharpness. If you allow time for your feelings and intuitions to become clearer and more defined before you offer a response you will be able to use them to more accurately navigate the landscape of a relationship. Because they experience the profound richness of their inner experience, people who are tzanua are highly sensitive and naturally want to protect their inner life. Their experience feels to them to be so personal and unique that it becomes sacred to them.



Experiencing themselves in this way makes them naturally prefer to keep their inner life private. When they feel unprotected they feel vulnerable to unwanted intrusions or exposures that inevitably cause feelings of shame, embarrassment, or the contamination that a person feels when he has heard something that he believes that he should not have heard. They are also highly sensitive to context in terms of understanding the character, motives, and intentions of others. This leads to an awareness of the potential strategic options and possible ramifications of each choice of words and action.

Consider how Mordechai and Esther triumphed through the deft handling of a hostile and treacherous political landscape. With self-awareness of who you are, what you stand for, and your mission, combined with being attuned to others and the environment, you are able to both

adapt to the environment and shift the circumstances where necessary to your greatest advantage. Another theme of the Megilla that grows out of this quality of tzniut is invitation and timing. Their refined awareness gave them a perfect sense of timing without which their strategy would have failed. Mordechai tells Esther explicitly that her historic moment has arrived and that if she did not seize it the redemption would happen through someone else. There was a time when Esther needed to follow her natural bent and to be modest and self-effacing. There was also a time to be assertive and commanding. Because of her tzniut, she was not constrained by a fixed image of who she needed to be to impress or win the favour of others. Rather, she was able to discern and embody the approach that was most appropriate to accomplish her mission. Esther perfectly sensed the context be-

cause she was able to step aside from her personal agenda. Mordechai knew what to do because he attentively listened to plot. By contrast, Haman was consistently too self-absorbed and self-important to read a context beyond his own aspirations. Achashverosh, the King, ended up being merely a pawn in the game because of his self-serving approach.

Mordechai and Esther survived because of the fit that they established between themselves and their environment. They managed to prevail without either compromising or losing their identities. They knew exactly when to be yielding and when to stand firm. Any confusion would have led to their deaths. Oftentimes, people get caught in the trance of anger, fear, or jealousy and respond impulsively, fuelled by the heat of the moment. Such actions inevitably betray or even destroy what is truly meaningful and important to you in life. Had they been self-referenced like King Shaul, who trusted his own sense of compassion more than the voice of Hashem, they and the Jewish people would have died for their misplaced and misguided righteousness. It was their ability to be attentive to their inner experience, understand their higher purpose, and read the context in which they were operating that allowed them to, in a sense, repair the mistake made by King Shaul which was the original source of the evil that they were facing.

People who are tzanua only privilege a select few, who have proved themselves worthy, with access into the inner sanctum of their inner world. They carry an air of mystery that creates trust. People are far more attracted to mystery and held longer in its spell. In contrast, people who shamelessly expose themselves through tactless or vulgar speech or behaviour render themselves ordinary and mundane. The more you show the more you reveal aspects of yourself that are unlikable or off-putting. Tzniut inspires trust because a tzanua person is someone who has mastery over himself in the sense of implicitly embodying a disciplined way of being. The opposite would be a person who, for example, is impetuous, knows-it-all, or sim-

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ply speaks too soon, showing a lack of thoughtfulness or consideration.

Tzniut is the quality through which you can deepen your awareness and sensitivity to others. It is through this profoundly great quality that you are able to cultivate the depth of empathy that allows you to be profoundly moved by other people’s struggles, as opposed to being caught up in your own self-centred reactions. When you are able to contain your own reactions effectively and consistently enough to process and understand them, then you become able to discern where your inner-world ends and where the world of the other begins. It is only through an appreciation of the unique experience and distinctiveness of the other that you can grasp their intrinsic value, separate and independent from your needs or expectations. It is this appreciation that renders the relationship sacred. It is only through this awareness of the other as a discrete unique individual that you are able to experience real compassion and to truly support and validate another person. The opposite of this would be the infantile narcissistic view of the other as an object to be played with, used, neglected, replaced, or modified at will.

Relationships deepen to the extent that people feel safe enough to both hear and authentically express themselves to each other. Safety and trust in relationships is determined by the quality of communication in the sense of people’s willingness and ability to be candid, open, and receptive, both to their own inner experience and to the world of the other. The key to healthy and fulfilling relationships, both with others and with yourself, and the single most important skill to develop in life is the ability to truly listen. Sadly, it is the skill most lacking from the world.

We live in an increasingly distracted world. There are at any one time a myriad of media demands and technological devices competing for our attention. As people become more distracted, their ability to be present for themselves and others becomes diminished. This paucity of attention leads to impoverished relationships. The superficiality, and lack of holding and soothing in relationships, leads to an impaired ability to contain one’s own inner experience and to tolerate discomfort long enough to process and respond appropriately to feelings and sensations. This leads to clumsy, compulsive, and impulsive behaviour, which people prefer to medicate rather than effectively address through treating the root cause.

Good listening depends on the quality of tzniut. The ability to listen is impaired by people’s inability to shift attention away from the noise inside their own heads or avoid the distraction of the noise outside. Listening to one’s own inner voice is the key to self-awareness. Listening to others is the key to understanding who the other person is and what they need in order to feel valued and respected in a relationship. The balance between hearing your own inner voice and the voice of the other is the basis of healthy relationships. Unhealthy relationships occur when you hear only yourself and not the other, or vice versa. Through listening, you simultaneously deepen your appreciation and relationship with yourself and with the person to whom you are listening. You will only be able to achieve this ideal, however, if you maintain a genuine desire to become, through the quality of your witnessing, a catalyst for helping the other person get to where he needs to be. ■