

# A Responsum of the Holy Lud Rebbe

translated by Joseph G. Rosenstein

about 1980

One of the women of the \*kehilla\* of Lud asked whether she was obligated to take off \*all\* her clothes when she goes to the \*mikveh\*. Normally I would answer such a question privately, but since the question came to me in a plain brown envelope, I am presenting my response to the entire community.

Now I must assume that you, like every other member of our community, are aware of our tradition that nothing come between our bodies and the cleansing water, so at first I was quite puzzled by your question. Upon reflection, however, I realized that your question was stimulated by my recent sermon in which I emphasized that the \*Ribbono shel olam\* observes all of our deeds very closely. And so I understand, my dear, that your question was asked out of modesty -- "How can I take off all my clothes when Someone is watching?"

The question of whether or not God is actually watching was dealt with in some depth by the great 14th century commentator, the \*Gilui Ervah\*. (He was called that, by the way, not only because that was the title of his book, but also because he exemplified that principle in his daily life.) To state his conclusion briefly, it is a consequence of our fundamental beliefs -- in the Holy One's detailed supervision of the world and in the special concern that God shows for Israel -- that God continually watches over His people, particularly when they are most exposed. Thus, for example, he translates Genesis 18:1 as "And God watched (\*voyeureh\* in Hebrew) him (i.e. Abraham) by the terebinths of Mamre as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day [presumably unclothed]."

Your concern, arising out of modesty, is therefore a sensible one.

Know, moreover, that God takes a particular interest in such matters, and many sources speak of God's various proclivities. The Kabbalah abounds with stories about what God does with Israel on the Shabbat, and the Song of Songs describes the relationship in graphic detail. Not to mention the incident with Mary in the Christian Bible. Even the Torah relates that when Moshe asked God to show him His glory, God responds by flashing a momentary glimpse of His rear. This is puzzling in light of the statement later in Deuteronomy that God "knew" Moses face-to-face; the language clearly indicates a sexual encounter, although the position described raises many questions. He who understands will understand. [Translator's note: The Holy Lud Rebbe was evidently reluctant to say explicitly that this episode, and the incident with Abraham cited by the Gilui Ervah, confirm either that God is female as well as male, or, if God is exclusively male, then He has occasional homosexual tendencies.]

God's particular interest in things which are normally concealed is indicated in the Biblical phrase \*ha'nistarot la'shem elo'kaynu\* (Deut. 29:28) -- "those things which are hidden are God's exclusive interest." Rashi points out that whenever the root \*SeTeR\* is used, there is a hidden reference to sexuality. Thus, for example, \*mi'nistarot nakayni\* (Psalm 19:13) is to be understood as "keep my hidden parts clean", and \*ve'eyn nistar may'chamato\* (Psalm 19:7) means that "there is no place to hide when He is in heat."

The solution to your question, and the explanation of how our ancestors could immerse themselves with complete modesty, is to be found in a Midrash on the verse "ve'anochi ha'stair asteer panai" -- "And I am hiding, yes I will hide, my face!" -- where God speaks in Deuteronomy 31:18.

"Why was Hadassah's name changed to Esther?" asks the Midrash. Hadassah was the most beautiful woman in all the 127 provinces ruled by Ahasuerus. As she prepared herself to meet Ahasuerus, as she anointed herself with arousing oils, she sensed a Presence, and she realized that God was really watching her. She rightly became embarrassed, covered herself, and refused to continue her preparations for her rendezvous with Ahasuerus. God insisted that she continue -- because it was to be her role to save the Jewish people from Haman -- but out of modesty she refused. God agreed to cover His face while she continued: "I am hiding my face," He said. But Esther insisted that God make this a promise for all time -- and God reluctantly agreed. Therefore, the Midrash tells us, her name became Esther -- that is \*asteer\*, -- I will hide -- because God agreed to hide His face in the future as well as in the present.

So in answer to your question, you may take off all your clothes at the \*mikveh\* without any worry whatsoever -- God will not be watching. But don't dare to take advantage of Him while His face is hidden!

**Copyright 1997 -- Joseph G. Rosenstein**

Permission is granted to copy and recirculate this article, but only in its entirety, including the title and copyright portions.

Send your email comments on this article to [joer@dimacs.rutgers.edu](mailto:joer@dimacs.rutgers.edu).

This article has been rejected for publication on grounds of being too "risque" and also on grounds of being too "lomdish" -- a unique combination.