**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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**Dress II: The Details**

What are the halachic parameters for women's clothing?

# Dress Parameters

The halachic category of *dat Yehudit*, introduced [here](https://www.deracheha.org/dress-1-the-basics), entails conduct and dress in line with the modest practice of Jewish women.

*Mishneh Torah Ishut* 24:11

What is *dat Yehudit*? The modest behavior that the daughters of Israel practiced.

Jews should dress in a modest, dignified fashion. For a woman, *communal* norms for dress among Jewish women set that standard.

Given that this is the case, little more should need to be written about the *halachot* of clothing. In an ideal world, each woman would look around at what observant, modest Jewish women in her community wear, and simply take her cues from that.

Still, specific standards that halachic sources do discuss demand attention. Even within the religious community, clothing trends are sometimes in tension with Halacha.

Should our discussion of clothing end right here?

It would be tempting to stop our discussion of clothing here, especially since classic halachic sources do not discuss women's dress in great detail.

Rather, they seem to take for granted that Jewish women should dress to a certain standard, in accordance with tzeniut and dat Yehudit, so that no further explanations should be necessary.

Why, then, do we discuss the what and how of clothing here— especially when a focus on measurements can divert our attention from the broader ideals of tzeniut?

A few reasons:

Norms of modest dress, even in secular society, have changed radically over the past decades, making it more difficult to have a clear sense of what is acceptable and what is not.

A community does not always have a single, unified standard of clothing, so that a woman might feel unsure about the halachic validity of specific styles she sees around her. Or she might have a pressing, practical reason to adopt a style that diverges from what is typical in her community. Perhaps she wonders what the guidelines are for adapting a new look to halachic standards. Or she might seek halachic context for the formal and informal dress codes she encounters.

By clarifying what Halacha requires and where it leaves room for interpretation, we can enable women to make educated halachic decisions about clothing.

Historically, Jewish women’s clothing usually covered much of the body, at least in public. Rashba specifies certain typically **uncovered** areas, about which Halacha voices no concern:[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rashba *Berachot* 24a

…Her face, her hands/arms [Heb. ambiguous], and her feet/legs [Heb. ambiguous]….we are not concerned about them.

While we can infer from Rashba that the rest of a woman's body was typically covered, he does not provide us with precise definitions of where the coverage would begin whether below the face, on the arm, or on the leg. We look more closely at the first two here.

General Coverage

Some *halachot* imply that a woman's torso should be covered. For example, a male mourner whose parent has died tears his clothing from the neckline down to the area of the heart. A female mourner, however, wears two layers, so that she can first tear the inner layer, then turn it around so the tear is in the back, and finally tear the top layer. This allows her to fulfill the obligation of tearing while keeping her torso covered.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*Mo'ed Katan* 22b

Over all the dead [other than parents], a mourner tears a *tefach* [handsbreadth of clothing]. Over his father and his mother, [he tears] until he reveals his heart...Both a man and a woman [tear their clothing]. Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: A woman tears the inner [garment], and turns it around, and goes back and tears the upper [garment].

Where does the face end and the torso begin? Classic sources do not present detailed guidelines,[[3]](#footnote-3) but some later authorities provide some guidance. Kaf Ha-chayyim (19th-20th century), for instance, decries women showing cleavage:[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Kaf Ha-chayyim* 75:3

For the neckline to be open until close to the breasts is a bad practice…

More recent authorities, including Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, rule that a woman's torso should be covered from the collarbone and down.

Minchat Shelomo 3:103:15

Regarding the neckline, one can be lenient until the collarbone if this is the local practice.

Since we don’t find this sort of discussion in earlier texts, reference to the collarbone is best understood as an attempt to demarcate an objective border between the uncovered face and the covered torso.

This leaves some room for leeway. In many communities, modest women wear clothes with necklines that are close to the collarbone, without fully covering it. Drawing on the Talmud's discussion of *erva* (which includes typically-covered parts of the body), Rav Yehuda Henkin suggests a formal leniency to leave up to a *tefach*, or handsbreadth (8-10.4 cm), below the collarbone exposed.[[5]](#footnote-5) Accepted practice in a given religious community is critically important here.

Is a focus on centimeters *tzanu'a*?

Not always. Part of the idea of tzeniut clothing is to respect the body and the person by removing the body from scrutiny.

The root tzadi.nun.ayin refers to the concealed. In Judaism, concealing something can be a sign of respect for it. The kodesh kodashim is both the most private and the most sacred area of Beit Ha-mikdash. The Sefer Torah is both clothed and kept in a secure place.

The Talmud teaches that blessings come upon that which is concealed from sight, and that concealment is in tension with overt measurement.

Ta'anit 8b

For a *beracha* is not found in a thing that is weighed and not in a thing that is measured and not in a thing that is counted, but in a thing that is concealed from the eye.

Even when measures have practical importance, we need to take care not to let them overtake our discussion, lest we dishonor that which tzeniut encourages us to respect.

Zero'a

Classical sources provide more detailed guidance about covering the arms. Two items on the mishna's list of specific violations of *dat Yehudit* relate directly to women's clothing, and the second of these has to do with the arms.

Mishna *Ketubot* 7:6

What is *dat Yehudit*? She goes out with her head uncovered and she spins in the marketplace.

[Elsewhere](https://www.deracheha.org/head-covering-1-halachic-basis), we discuss head-covering, which entails a Torah obligation in addition to being a matter of *dat Yehudit*. Here, we look at the Talmud's explanation of spinning in public:

*Ketubot* 72a

She spins in the marketplace. Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shemuel: When she displays her *zero'ot* [arms] to people.

When a woman raises the spindle, her garments could open or slip down to reveal her arms. Risking such exposure in public violates *dat Yehudit*.

In modern times, bare arms can seem innocuous. However, a second Talmudic source about spinning in the marketplace suggests that coverage of the arms, such as while spinning, can also prevent the sides of the torso from becoming visible.[[6]](#footnote-6) Furthermore, there is Talmudic precedent for seeing the arms themselves as particularly beautiful when they catch the light.[[7]](#footnote-7) Covering the *zero'a* also proves important for men, when they lead prayer:

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 53:13

A *poche'ach*, i.e. one whose garment is torn and his arms revealed, should not lead prayer.

The idea that shirts with sleeves present a more respectable and dignified mode of attire than sleeveless ones holds true for men as well as women.

Defining Zero'a

What part of the body is the *zero'a*? In the Torah, *zero'a* refers to the whole arm:

*Devarim* 26:8

And God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm [*zero’a*] and with great awe and with signs and with wonders.

A mishna that discusses human anatomy, however, indicates that the *zero'a* is the upper arm, not including the elbow:[[8]](#footnote-8)

Mishna *Oholot* 1:8

There are 248 limbs in a human being…Two in the lower arm, two in the elbow, one in the *zero’a* [upper arm], and four in the shoulder.

In line with this mishna, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach stipulates that only the upper arm need be covered. He includes the elbow as well, perhaps as a precaution against more of the arm or body becoming uncovered when in motion if sleeves are shorter, or perhaps to ensure that not even a sliver of the upper arm is ever uncovered:

*Minchat Shelomo* 103:15

"*Zero’a*" regarding *tzeniut* includes the elbow and one should not rely on those who are lenient…It is also good and fitting to cover a little more of the arm.

Others, Rav Yehuda Henkin and Rav Nahum Rabinovitch among them, maintain that less coverage would be technically permissible. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein shared this view, according to his daughter Rabbanit Esti Rosenberg.

Again drawing from Talmudic discussion of *erva*, Rav Henkin writes that up to a *tefach* of the arm above the elbow may be uncovered:

Rav Yehuda Henkin, *Understanding Tzniut: Modern Controversies in the Jewish Community* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2008), p. 24

A typology can be established…Sleeves within a *tefach* of the elbow – minimum permitted.

Rav Rabinovitch says it is sufficient to cover the majority of the upper arm, where that is accepted as common custom:

Responsa *Si'ach Nachum* 107

The basic halacha is to cover the *zero’a* (the portion between the shoulder and the elbow), but the Sages did not establish a defined measure for this coverage. In any case, the way of modesty is to cover most of the *zero’a*. However, in matters of modesty in clothing, it is appropriate to consider the customs of the society of Torah-observant Jews with which we wish to affiliate, and if women in that society are accustomed to cover more, it is appropriate to adopt that custom.

In light of the different halachic approaches to how much of the *zero’a* needs to be covered, religious community norms again play a decisive role.

In our next installment, we will discuss more details, including extending the definition of the term *erva*, the leg, and skirts vs. pants.

What does it mean to follow community norms?

In cases in which the practice of dat Yehudit should determine details of clothing, it can be difficult to know how to define one's religious community. Beyond the absolute minimums, there isn't a single standard that all communities follow. Members of many religious communities, to the right and the left, reject the practices of other communities. Further complicating matters, modern communities are fluid. A person can pass through several communities in the course of a day.

At Deracheha, we seek to help members of different communities respect each other's practices by understanding their sources. In general, Halacha urges us to respect local customs, certainly in public. When spending time in a public area of another community, there is a value to dressing in a way that shows respect for local practice. At the same time, wherever we are, we should keep our own halachic and communal affiliations in mind, and dress in a way that respects them, as well.

By limiting absolute standards to a few key points, early halachic sources express trust in the Jewish people and its intuitions for applying tzeniut appropriately in different contexts.

1. He writes this in the name of Ra'avad. Though this line is embedded in his commentary on Berachot 24a, which discusses *erva*, the Talmud there gives no indication of what parts of the body were not typically considered a "makom *tzanu'a*." This list is presumably an independent reflection of Jewish women's practice. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also *Shulchan Aruch* YD 340.

   We might also infer from the Mishna's mandating at least some coverage for a woman being led to execution, or undergoing the *sota* ordeal, that we prioritize covering women's bodies even in less routine situations.

   Mishna *Sanhedrin* 6:3

   The sages say: the man is stoned [for execution] while naked, but a woman is not stoned while naked.

   Mishna *Sota* 1:5

   A *Kohen* holds her garments. If they get torn, they get torn, if they get ripped, they get ripped, until he reveals her heart. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Talmud teaches that a *sota* (a woman accused of adultery) undergoes an ordeal in which her hair is uncovered and her garments torn. Nevertheless, there are limits to the violation of her modesty. A rope would be tied above her breasts so that her clothes would not fall down. Rambam writes that such slippage would leave her naked, which may imply that clothing covering the breasts and down is obligatory.

   *Sota* 8b

   He [the Kohen] ties it [a rope] above her breasts, so that her clothes not fall off her.

   Rambam *Hilchot Sota* 3:11

   He ties [a rope] above her breasts so that her clothes not fall and she be naked. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Available here: <http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14418&st=&pgnum=257> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Understanding Tzniut*, 17, 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Gittin* 90a-90b

   She spins in the marketplace and [her clothes are] split open at her two sides…This [woman], it is a mitzva from the Torah to divorce. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In a heartbreaking encounter at Rabbi Elazar's sickbed, he and Rabbi Yochanan cry over physical beauty and its demise, representative of our fleeting earthly existence. The trigger for that discussion is the sight of Rabbi Yochanan's luminous *zero'a*. We see a similar phenomenon in the Talmud with the *zero'a* of a woman named Chuma.

   *Berachot* 5b

   Rabbi Elazar became sick. Rabbi Yochanan came in to [see] him. He saw that he was lying down in a dark house. He [Rabbi Yochanan] revealed his *zero’a* and light shone. He saw that Rabbi Elazar was crying. He said to him: Why are you crying? He [Rabbi Elazar] said to him [Rabbi Yochanan]: For this beauty that will be consumed by the dust I cry.

   *Ketubot* 65a

   Her *zero’a* was revealed and light fell upon the *beit din*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See too Tosafot, in the name of Rabbeinu Tam:

   Tosafot *Menachot* 37a

   Rabbeinu Tam says that it [the place for the *shel yad* of *tefillin*] is the bulge of the *zero’a* which is between the armpit and the elbow. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)