

The Corner of Hollywood and Sinai

Julia and Julie:

A Must-See Public Recipe for Privacy

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I must, I feel, for the sake of my own integrity, highlight – right here, in the very first paragraph – the potential disingenuousness that some readers may actualize in their minds upon reading this piece. Upon seeing *Julia and Julie* it became, quickly and transparently, clear to me the very real danger of blogs, either as one debilitating effect of a rapidly-spreading disease oozing amongst the souls of modern society, or as one primary cause of said illness. As such, one may read the following and conclude that I am nothing more than a self-hating blogger, one who exploits the communicative potency of the internet only to rage against its potent communicativeness. To such an accusation I can only say: I am not a blogger. To which I humbly add a beseechment that my kind audience keep reading and allow me the chance to explain.

Tzniut has many English translations. The most common one to date is ‘modesty,’ a term that lacks the proper emphasis to do the Hebrew word justice. Modesty conjures up the image of a woman covering herself in cloak upon cloak so as to hide even the least bit of skin or shape that might inform upon her feminine form. Modesty is the intellectualization of bashfulness. It is a state derived from the reddening of one’s cheek. It is the not-so-distant cousin of shame. *Tzniut* is none of these things. *Tzniut* involves an intelligent decision wrought from the facts of a situation and the propriety called for by Divine revelation and rabbinic interpretation. It is the eternalized etiquette, not of a prudish Emily Post, but of a dignified royalty. Rabbi Hecht translates *tzniut* as ‘grace,’ evoking a more pleasing picture of a woman at one with her physicality – poised, yet proud; neither a shrinking violet nor an exhibitionist.¹ Combined with this notion of grace, it is very

¹ “Gracefulness” Nishma Introspection 5754: 1.

helpful to consider the in-depth research and findings of Chai and Tikva Hecht, which focuses on the private/public dichotomy invoked by *tzniut*.² Thus, while modesty is the intellectualization of bashfulness, *tzniut* is the intellectualization of self-respect. Modesty evokes the depths of Satan's flesh while *tzniut* lifts one up to the image of Gd.

In other words, *Tzniut* is not about collarbones and knees; it is about self-knowledge and self-consciousness, and, above all, awareness of one's surroundings. To show parts of one's self – both physical and psychological – that are meant to be private, either absolutely or in the given scenario, is to act in a manner antithetical to the precepts of *tzniut*. In essence, then, *tzniut* is grace and dignity tempered by a strong sense of propriety and privacy. And so, to be blunt, it is not just about clothing and it is not just for women. *Tzniut* infiltrates all aspects of daily life from, yes, what we wear to how we eat to where we go to the bathroom to how we communicate with each other. Thus, as a writer, *tzniut* is as much a guiding set of principles as is Strunk and White.

The allure of the blog is not unique to the internet. The desire to be known, to have one's words listened to, has been with humanity since first we learned to speak. It, however, manifests in different manners. There is a level of communication that compels us to verbalize our thoughts to our friends and family – to speak our mind to the select few who stand with us in our inner circle. Then there is the level of communication for those who stand beyond that border, who are not privy to our more intimate thoughts, not out of a desire for secrecy but because not all words need be, or should be, spoken to all. Conversely, there is, too, a limit to even what we share with our precious confidantes – the whispered songs of our souls that we lock within and only share with Gd. Finally, though, there are our thoughts that we wish to share with everyone, not in an individualistic sense, but in a grand sense. It is this drive that compelled Homer to climb upon a rock, Shakespeare to dip quill in ink, Dickens to serialize struggle, and any Pulitzer prizewinner to get it in before the presses start rolling.

² Much of the research is, as yet, unpublished. However, for a pertinent first foray, see Chai Hecht's "Walk with God: An Introduction to the Search for Tzniut" Nishma Introspection 5754: 1.

Similarly, the drive to communicate to an audience compelled the fascinating Julia Child to co-author a cookbook. And, one might argue, it was this drive that led Julie Powell to document, on a blog, her year's attempt to cook her way through Julia Child's masterpiece. It is only through the lens of *tzniut* that we can hope to determine the essential difference, the determinative factor that leads me to state, with confident certainty, that Julia Child's work was to be lauded while Julie Powell's work should be spurned.

The key to *tzniut* is the recognition of every presence. There is, of course, Gd. But beyond Him, one must remember the presence of everyone else before whom one stands, or sits, or orates, or writes. Finally, though, one must never forget one's own presence. It is the juxtaposition of these three components that creates the nexus from which one can extrapolate how *tzniut* should play out. Let me explain practically: if one writes for oneself, in a diary perhaps, one's thoughts play out in a unique way. When I was a child and kept a journal, its purpose was twofold: I used it to record phrases that would jog my memory and help me recall particular events that I was afraid might be otherwise lost to the sands of time but I also used it as a mode of self-expression when there were things that I needed to say to someone but which I knew to be inappropriate to share with any audience besides myself (and Gd). In contrast, when I write these reviews, I am powerfully aware that I write for an audience. This reality does not function merely to keep me from sharing embarrassing stories (although it does) but to emphasize the purpose to my writing. I write for you, the reader. I have already seen these movies and have gleaned from them the lessons that I share here. I write to benefit an audience. As such, to be a writer in conformity with the fundamentals of *tzniut*, I must be a writer who serves my readers. To do otherwise would be inappropriate, would lack grace. To be a published writer and forget this is equatable to one leaving the house having forgotten to don pants. The public realm of words is just that: public.

Julia Child recognized this. Her experiences were her own, to be shared with her husband, perhaps, her friends, perhaps, herself, most definitely. But Julia Child did not exploit the readers of her cookbook by using them to air out her private thoughts. As shown in the movie, she wrote with her audience always in mind; she wrote for them. Julie Powell, in direct contrast, wrote most blatantly and admittedly for herself. Her year's challenge was for her own benefit and her public recount of it was for her own benefit. Julie Powell wrote with herself in mind; and her readers existed for her. Thus, Julia Child put into the public sphere a work that made her a

teacher, in the most beautiful sense, and made her readers active students; Julie Powell put into the public sphere a work that stripped her of her private humanity and made her readers nothing more than voyeurs.

Julie Powell is not alone. The danger of a blog is inherent in the word itself. The word 'blog' is the abbreviation of 'weblog' – but, by using the former term instead of the latter, I think our own vernacular has helped to cover up the problem. A log, a journal, a diary – those are private and we write them for ourselves. A diary entry is not an article. The internet has changed the way we consider our private lives. Now, that which was once private is easily shared. We can record our thoughts on blogs; we can record our lives on YouTube. And so we do. I admire much of Julie Powell's choice – she wanted to create a mission for herself that taught her self-discipline and helped her regain her center after drifting for too long in the confusion of youth. It was a similar sense of yearning that sent Julia Child to Le Cordon Bleu. But Julia Child did not tape the experience before a live studio audience; she simply lived it.

I think this film is a profound and horrid statement on our time. We live to be watched and we watch others live. The strong sense of privacy that *tzniut* instills is fast dissipating. I recently watched a short interview with the Jonas Brothers, musicians who, by way of silver bands on their left ring fingers, advertise to the world that, in keeping with their Christian ideals, they refuse to engage in pre-marital sex. At first I was uncertain how to react to such a practice. Orthodox Judaism also preaches abstinence before marriage but I and my unmarried brethren do not wear purity rings. I wondered whether or not these boys would wear those rings if they were not famous. In the interview, the brothers implied that the rings were worn to remind them of their promise to themselves and Gd. Despite my uncertainty, I was impressed with that answer, especially given how the Jonas brothers said it – their tone was one of resignation – the tone of individuals aware that fame compelled them, against their will, to share a glimpse of their private world with the public. Either that was some really good acting or I was witness to *tzniut* under pressure. Personally, I wish the interviewer had never asked the question. Would the Jonas Brothers have wished the same – that their private religious promise stay private? Or would they have blogged about it on MySpace? I know Julia Child would not have. And that Julie Powell would.

And I know that, sometimes, what is private simply cannot remain private. That is the unfortunate limitation imposed by the fact that we are social creatures.

However, that limitation is expanding at the rate of cyberspace and I am realizing, with a growing sense of alarm and fear, that the more Julies there are in the world the more we begin to feel entitled to make public that which should be private, i.e. the less choice we offer to the Jonases of the world, and, even, the Julias of the world. The press likes to argue that Kennedy might not have had an affair with Marilyn Monroe if he had been subjected to the media spotlight Clinton endured but this argument is a little like saying no one would be overweight if we all walked around naked. If a mirror makes no difference then why are we turning, more and more, to the stage?

If we keep going the way of the blog we are doomed to become a generation of graceless performers. And, worst of all, everyone will see.

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