What is Nakedness?

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Sources for article:

Interlinear Bible
Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon
English Hebrew Tanakh by JPS
New Englishman’s Hebrew Concordance

Each of us is striving to understand what is written in the Tanakh. We look to the law to understand what is required of us by Yehovah. In striving to understand we must look at the Tanakh through its language, which is Hebrew. We also must put aside our Victorian or Puritan concepts of how we look at the Tanakh and look at it from the point of view of what the people of that time would look at the text. In the study of Nakedness we must look at what was the customs of that time in the regards of what flesh could be exposed and what flesh should not be exposed. We will also look up how this word is used throughout the Tanakh.

The first word translated as nakedness is ervah (ayin-resh-vav-hey) which is found in the BDB on page 788. It is a feminine noun and is reference number 6172. It is first used in…

Bereshit (genesis) 9:22-2

22Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father’s **nakedness(ervah)** and told his two brothers outside.

23But Shem and Japheth took a cloth, placed it against both their backs and, walking backward, they covered their father’s **nakedness(ervah)**; their faces were turned the other way, so that they did not see their father’s **nakedness(ervah)**.

24When Noah woke up from his wine and learned what his youngest son had done to him,

25he said, “Cursed be Canaan; The lowest of slaves Shall he be to his brothers.”

26And he said, “Blessed be the **LORD**, The God of Shem; Let Canaan be a slave to them.

27May God enlarge Japheth, And let him dwell in the tents of Shem; And let Canaan be a slave to them.”

Clearly from the text something was done to Noach this nakedness that is exposed is something that was done to him. Since Ham was the middle child of the three then the youngest child could not be him also, the curse is on Canaan who is the youngest child of Ham.
The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth—Ham being the father of Canaan.

The descendants of Ham: Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan. Clearly the curse was upon not Ham but Canaan.

Next place were nakedness (ervah) is exposed is shown in Shemot (Exodus) 20:23.

Do not ascend My altar by steps, that your nakedness (ervah) may not be exposed upon it.

Clearly the part of the body exposed here is the lower part of the body. Since in that day they wore robes and four corner garments the moving up steps could expose the lower part of the body.

In Devarim (Deuteronomy) 23:15, it is used to show indecency or improper behavior.

Since the LORD your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you, let your camp be holy; let Him not find anything unseemly (ervah) among you and turn away from you.

In Devarim (Deuteronomy) 24:1, it is used to something wrong with her and it seems to be at the time he possesses her (comes and lies with her) so that the husband can write her a bill of divorce.

A man takes a wife and possesses her. She fails to please him because he finds something obnoxious (ervah) about her, and he writes her a bill of divorcement, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house;

The place were this word is used literally and found most often in the Vayikra (Leviticus) 18 and 20. These chapters deal with improper sexual relations and used with another word which is geleh (gal-lah) which is found on page 162 in the BDB. It is most used as uncovered, shown or exposed.

None of you shall come near anyone of his own flesh to uncover (geleh) nakedness (ervah): I am the LORD.

This is a command for both men and women. The next verses deal with having sexual relations with family members, which is a misuse of their nakedness. Thus, the word nakedness used in these are referring copulation the uncovering is the act of that
copulation or form of cohabitation, which we see in other areas like when Yitzak takes his wife.

Vayikra (Leviticus) 18:7-17

7 Your father’s **nakedness (ervah)**, that is, the **nakedness (ervah)** of your mother, you shall not **uncover (geleh)**; she is your mother—you shall not uncover her **nakedness (ervah)**.

8Do not **uncover (geleh)** the **nakedness (ervah)** of your father’s wife; it is the **nakedness (ervah)** of your father.

9The **nakedness (ervah)** of your sister—your father’s daughter or your mother’s, whether born into the household or outside—do not **uncover (geleh)** their **nakedness (ervah)**.

10The **nakedness (ervah)** of your son’s daughter, or of your daughter’s daughter—do not **uncover (geleh)** their **nakedness (ervah)**; for their **nakedness (ervah)** is yours.

11The **nakedness (ervah)** of your father’s wife’s daughter, who has born into your father’s household—she is your sister; do not **uncover (geleh)** her **nakedness (ervah)**.

12Do not **uncover (geleh)** the **nakedness (ervah)** of your father’s sister; she is your father’s flesh.

13Do not **uncover (geleh)** the **nakedness (ervah)** of your mother’s sister; for she is your mother’s flesh.

14Do not **uncover (geleh)** the **nakedness (ervah)** of your father’s brother: do not approach his wife; she is your aunt.

15Do not **uncover (geleh)** the **nakedness (ervah)** of your daughter-in-law: she is your son’s wife; you shall not **uncover (geleh)** her **nakedness (ervah)**.

16Do not **uncover (geleh)** the **nakedness (ervah)** of your brother’s wife; it is the **nakedness (ervah)** of your brother.

17Do not **uncover (geleh)** the **nakedness (ervah)** of a woman and her daughter; nor shall you marry her son’s daughter or her daughter’s daughter and **uncover (geleh)** her **nakedness (ervah)**: they are kindred; it is depravity.

We are directed not to marry sisters in their lifetime of each other if they are rivals. This should point out that after one sister would die you could marry the other.

Vayikra (Leviticus) 18:18
Do not marry a woman as a rival to her sister and uncover (geleh) her nakedness (ervah) in the other’s lifetime.

Lastly in Vayikra 18, a man should not approach a woman during her menstruation.

Vayikra (Leviticus) 18:19

Do not come near a woman during her period of uncleanness to uncover (geleh) her nakedness (ervah).

Now continuing in Vayikra 20.

Vayikra (Leviticus) 20:10-11

If a man lies with his father’s wife, it is the nakedness (ervah) of his father that he has uncovered (geleh); the two shall be put to death—their bloodguilt is upon them.

Clearly here we see that the act of having copulation is the way one exposes the nakedness.

Vayikra (Leviticus) 20:17

If a man marries his sister, the nakedness (ervah) of either his father or his mother, so that he sees her nakedness (ervah) and she sees his nakedness (ervah), it is a disgrace; they shall be excommunicated in the sight of their kinsfolk. He has uncovered (geleh) the nakedness (ervah) of his sister, he shall bear his guilt.

If a man lies with a woman in her infirmity and uncovers (geleh) her nakedness (ervah), he has laid bare her flow and she has exposed her blood flow; both of them shall be cut off from among their people.

You shall not uncover (geleh) the nakedness (ervah) of your mother’s sister or of your father’s sister, for that is laying bare one’s own flesh; they shall bear their guilt.

If a man lies with his uncle’s wife, it is his uncle’s nakedness (ervah) that he has uncovered (geleh). They shall bear their guilt: they shall die childless.

If a man marries the wife of his brother, it is indecency. It is the nakedness (ervah) of his brother that he has uncovered (geleh); they shall remain childless.

All of these also refer to the act of cohabitation or consummation of marriage to act as man and wife.

Then we have covering the nakedness. Which in addition to the sons of Noach covering him are shown here.
Shemot (exodus) 28:40-43

40 And for Aaron’s sons also you shall make tunics, and make sashes for them, and make turbans for them, for dignity and adornment.

41 Put these on your brother Aaron and on his sons as well; anoint them, and ordain them and consecrate them to serve Me as priests.

42 You shall also make for them linen breeches to cover their nakedness (ervah); they shall extend from the hips to the thighs.

43 They shall be worn by Aaron and his sons when they enter the Tent of Meeting or when they approach the altar to officiate in the sanctuary, so that they do not incur punishment and die.

We see that the area to be covered was the area of the hips to the thighs. Again it is the area that encompass the gentials and surrounding areas. To show their nakedness was to show uncleanness.

In a literal and prophetic sense in the same area nakedness is used.

Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 20:2-4

2 Previously, the LORD had spoken to Isaiah son of Amoz, saying, “Go, untie the sackcloth from your loins and take your sandals off your feet,” which he had done, going naked and barefoot.

3 And now the LORD said, “It is a sign and a portent for Egypt and Nubia. Just as My servant Isaiah has gone naked and barefoot for three years,

4 so shall the king of Assyria drive off the captives of Egypt and the exiles of Nubia, young and old, naked and barefoot and with bared buttocks—to the shame of Egypt!

Isaiah (Yeshayahu) was naked for three years thus showing his nakedness but was it in a sexual sense. No it was to be a sign to the people there. Both him going naked literally and prophetically to show how the people of the land would depart. So is nakedness for non-sexual purposes permitted?

Figuratively used:

Bereshit (genesis) 42:9,12

9 Recalling the dreams that he had dreamed about them, Joseph said to them, “You are spies, you have come to see the land in its nakedness.”

12 And he said to them, “No, you have come to see the land in its nakedness!”
Ezekiel 16:8,36,37

7I let you grow like the plants of the field; and you continued to grow up until you attained to womanhood, until your breasts became firm and your hair sprouted. You were still naked and bare

8when I passed by you [again] and saw that your time for love had arrived. So I spread My robe over you and covered your nakedness, and I entered into a covenant with you by oath—declares the Lord God; thus you became Mine.

9I bathed you in water, and washed the blood off you, and anointed you with oil.

Yehovah is talking of Israel here and taking her to be his wife.

Hosea 2:11-12

11Assuredly, I will take back My new grain in its time And My new wine in its season, And I will snatch away My wool and My linen That serve to cover her nakedness.

12Now will I uncover her shame In the very sight of her lovers, And none shall save her from Me.

Again talking of Israel. This time he removes the covering to expose her shame of infidelity by having relations with foreign gods (her lovers).

We can see nakedness as used here denote the genitals area of the body and their use in copulation. We also have seen that Yeshayahu was naked 3 years by command of Yehovah. We also see that Aaron and his sons were not to expose their nakedness at the altar as it was uncleanness. Special breeches were made for them to wear at the altar. So does that mean they did not wear them at other times. We can see for historial records and Egyptian reliefs that most slaves during the time Israel was there would be covered in a simple cloth or went naked. You can search on fashion in ancient Egypt and find some pictorial examples of both bare chested men and women of that time. Until recent history most tribes in Africa the women wore no top coverings until the introduction of Christian standards of decency.

It is very likely that the Israelites had the same fashions in their time.

The next word used as naked is arom (ayin-resh-vav-mem) which is found on page 736 in the BDB as reference number 6174 and is an adjective.

Bereshit (genesis) 2:25

25The two of them were naked (aram), the man and his wife, yet they felt no shame.
They had no clothing at first. It was only when they were aware of their nakedness that they started wearing clothing.

Shemu’el Aleph (I Samuel) 19:23-24

23 He was on his way there, to Naioth in Ramah, when the spirit of God came upon him too; and he walked on, speaking in ecstasy, until he reached Naioth in Ramah.

24 Then he too stripped off his clothes and he too spoke in ecstasy before Samuel; and he lay naked (arom) all that day and all night. That is why people say, “Is Saul too among the prophets?”

Saul was overcome by the spirit of Elohim which caused him to strip naked and speak in ecstasy to Shemu’el.

Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) 5:14

14 Another grave evil is this: He must depart just as he came. As he came out of his mother’s womb, so must he depart at last, naked (arom) as he came. He can take nothing of his wealth to carry with him.

Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 58:7

7 It is to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked (arom), to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin.

Naked here is used to denote someone without the means to cloth himself.

Hosea 2:4-5

4 Rebuke your mother, rebuke her—For she is not My wife. And I am not her husband— And let her put away her harlotry from her face And her adultery from between her breasts.

5 Else will I strip her naked (arom) And leave her as on the day she was born: And I will make her like a wilderness, Render her like desert land, And let her die of thirst.

If Israel does not put away Idolatry then Yehovah will strip her naked (expose her) for the sins she commits.

Another word for naked or nakedness is eyrom (Ayin-yod-resh-mem) which is page 735 in BDB. It is used as both s masculine noun and adjective. It is reference number 5903.

Bereshit (genesis) 3:7,10,11
Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were **naked** (eyrom); and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.

Notice the word loincloths it is reference number 2290 which is chagorah (chet-gimmel-vav-resh-hey), which is translated also as girdle, or belt also. Thus, they covered themselves only at the waist (genital area). It is found on page 292 in two references on that page.

He replied, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was **naked** (eyrom), so I hid.”

Then He asked, “Who told you that you were **naked** (eyrom)? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?”

Later he clothed them with a tunic (3801) of animal skin in verse 21.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 28:47-48

47 Because you would not serve the LORD your God in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything, 48 you shall have to serve—in hunger and thirst, **naked** (eyrom) and lacking everything—the enemies whom the LORD will let loose against you. He will put an iron yoke upon your neck until He has wiped you out.

Yehezkel (Ezekiel) 16:22, 39

22 In all your abominations and harlotries, you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were **naked** (eyrom) and bare, and lay wallowing in your blood.

39 I will deliver you into their hands, and they shall tear down your eminence and level your mounds; and they shall strip you of your clothing and take away your dazzling jewels, leaving you **naked** (eyrom) and bare.

Jerusalem will be left with nothing or figuratively stripped naked.

These sum up the words that are translated as nakedness or naked. We have seen that the main purpose was to identify that the genitals are what should be covered. We have also seen instances where people were completely naked because Yehovah caused them to be. And in the beginning we were naked and no shame. Adam and Havva were naked and covered their genitals out of awareness of them. We also saw that nakedness as commanded not to uncover was about the act of copulation.

So while nakedness is seen today as any exposure of the chest (more for woman than men) or genitals. The Tanakh indicates that the genitals are what should be covered especially for priests doing offerings.