

Sexual Ethics

Yom Kippur 1986

We will read from the Torah twice tomorrow, once in the morning and again in the afternoon. The rabbis who set the special readings for the holidays made a surprising choice for the afternoon of Yom Kippur. Instead of choosing a passage of soaring theological poetry or one of the great psychological narratives, they settle on Leviticus Chapter 18, the laws of forbidden sexual relationships.

This choice did not sit well with the liturgists of Reform Judaism, who substituted Leviticus chapter 19, which *is* one of the most uplifting passages in the Torah. While I do understand the modern impulse to read, on this holiest day of the year, one of the Torah's greatest hits, I also see the wisdom of the rabbis who chose Leviticus chapter 18 for the afternoon reading. In ancient times, as in our own day, the most complicated realm of personal ethics was the realm of sex. In the last few hours of this day of setting our lives back on course, the rabbis saw fit to call attention to matters of sexual relations.

For many of us, and especially for those here who are college students, there is no greater source of moral confusion, of guilt, of self-doubt, and of conflicting ideas and emotions...than sex. And so tonight, on Yom Kippur, our night of self-examination, I'd like to reflect a bit on sex, and personal morality, in our tradition and in contemporary America.

Maimonides, the most influential Jewish rabbi of the middle ages, wrote that "of all the commandments, the laws of sexual relations are the hardest to obey." If way back in the traditional society of the 1100's Maimonides thought it was difficult to live an ethical sex life, I wonder what he would say about the difficulty of making the right sexual decision in *our* world. Ours is an age of total confusion.

The following are just a few things that make it difficult to act rationally and ethically in our sexual relations today.

1. We marry late. Most of us are sexually ripe for ten or twenty years before marriage. That's a long time during which society expects us to deal with sexual energies in satisfying *and moral* ways.
2. This society gives mixed messages. Our primary teachers of values, parents and schools, generally discourage sex before marriage. But the merchants of our world, who really have made a science out of mind-control, teach a different lesson. This beer will get you sex. This car, this perfume will get you sex. These clothes, this soft drink....they all will get you sex. We humans generally try to listen to and to follow what our society tells us, but our society is sending our brains into overload.
3. One more recent development. It has been about fifteen years since colleges decided to allow men and women to live in mixed dorms. In our generation, teenagers spend the first four to six years after puberty under the close supervision of their parents and then...all at once...they are turned loose on each other. At no other time in our lives do we experience this instant complete freedom. It is a classic set-up for acute stress and maximum irrationality.

These three factors—our late marrying pattern, society’s conflicting messages, and the sudden freedom of college—all simply add to what Maimonides and the rabbis before him already knew about sex: it is a source of powerful emotion, irrationality, confusion, and sometimes of immoral behavior.

We Jews, when confronted with ethical problems, have traditionally turned to the Torah for guidance. It is one of the great failures of Judaism in our day that the Torah, and those who teach it, have not been very helpful when it comes to the modern dilemmas of whom to have sex with, and when.

One reason that the Torah has not been helpful lately is that the teachers of Torah in previous generations were *so* explicit. Look at Leviticus 18: No. No. No. The Talmud, written long after the bible, goes on in the same vein: No. Forget it. The one time the Torah says “yes,” of course, is to sex within marriage, with one’s spouse.

Personally, I would not want to rule out the possibility that the Torah is right. Maybe marriage really *is* the only legitimate context for sex. But, if *all* that the Torah can say about all extramarital sexual relations is “no way,” then hundreds of thousands of unmarried Jews will turn away from the Torah and look elsewhere for guidance in the difficult ethics of sexual intimacy. And in fact they have turned away—they have turned to psychotherapy, to kundalini yoga, to Dr. Ruth, and to anyone else who is giving answers.

Since this is the season of return, what if we return to the Torah briefly tonight, and look again, and listen for its less obvious wisdom, beyond the simple “if you’re not married, don’t do it.”

To begin with, we can learn a great deal from the Torah’s sexual vocabulary. Just like contemporary English, the Jewish tradition has many words for sexual intimacy. While they all refer to similar physical acts, they all describe very different emotional experiences. Even our own language teaches us that to “make love” is an utterly different experience from “getting laid.” And there is an even more dehumanizing experience which is described by a word which is so ugly and upsetting that most of us rarely if ever let it pass our lips. You know, the “f-word.”

Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew possess an even richer vocabulary than English for speaking of the various sexual relationships. We can begin to learn some of the Torah’s sexual wisdom simply by listening to our sacred language, Hebrew.

In Leviticus 18, we find an expression that is only used to describe various types of forbidden sexual contact. The expression *gilui ervah* is an idiom which signifies having sex, but it means literally “uncovering the nakedness.” It always refers to a negative, undesirable type of sex. Just as *f---* never refers to a positive, desirable sexual intimacy, in the same way, “uncovering the nakedness” only refers to unethical sex. The words themselves, I think, tell us *why* it is unethical.

The word *ervah*, which is usually translated “nakedness,” actually has no English equivalent. Our *ervah* is a place on our bodies...the place where Adam and Eve put their fig-leaves. But *ervah* is also a place on our souls. The *ervah* is our soft spot. The hidden, absolutely vulnerable place where our body and soul meet.

What, then, is *gilui ervah*, the Torah’s negative category of sexual relations? *Gilui ervah* is sex in which one or both person’s *ervah*—the soft spot, the place that is so easy to hurt—is uncovered, and then left exposed. Perhaps the best English translation of

gilui ervah would be f---. Very simply, it means making a person completely vulnerable, and then not taking care of them in their nakedness.

This, I think, is one of the Torah's most powerful lessons in the realm of sexual ethics, especially for unmarried people. *Know* that when you have sex, you are uncovering the most private, most fragile part of your body *and* of your soul. Do you trust this person with your soul's soft spot? Do you trust yourself with theirs? If not, then leave it covered.

Another expression often used in the Bible for sexual intimacy is *lada'at*, which most commonly means "to know." This is the source of the old favorite "Do you know her?" "Well, do you mean in the Biblical sense?" With this term, the Torah teaches about a second type of sexual relationship: *yediah*. Knowledge—in the Biblical sense, which is sex in which we can come to know and be known by another person.

This is utterly different from "uncovering the nakedness," which by its very name implies that no meeting of souls occurs. It is precisely the lack of true personal contact that is so devastating about *gilui ervah*. In the sex which is "knowing each other," two individuals *do* touch each other's souls...and they leave having known each other.

The Bible treats this type of sexual relationship as morally neutral. It may good, or it may be harmful. All of us want to know and to be known by people around us. Knowing each other makes life less lonely. But knowing another person is a powerful relationship. It gives you the power to comfort me, or to hurt me. It gives me the ability to manipulate you, or to help you.

By calling this type of sexual encounter *yediah*, the Torah teaches us another wisdom. *There is no such thing as casual sex*. Even when two good friends say to each other: "This is casual, right? Right! Don't worry. We're keeping this light, right? No expectations, right?" Still, no matter how light we keep it, sex brings us to a deep knowledge of each other, which is powerful and lasts and lasts...weeks, months, or even years after a single supposedly casual meeting.

Finally, a third term used in our tradition to refer to sex is the word *yichud*, which is usually translated "union." "Uncovering the nakedness," I suggested, means sex without a meeting of souls. It is the least desirable form of sex. Then there is *yediah*, knowledge, which refers to a sexual encounter with soul-contact and deep experience of the other person. *Sometimes good, sometimes harmful*. *Yichud*, union, is another type of sex altogether. *Yichud* comes from the same root as the word *yachad*, together, and is a merging with another person. Not permanently, but for a brief time two people actually becoming one.

In Judaism, *yichud* is the highest form of sexual encounter. *Yichud* expresses the possibility that through our sexuality, we can encounter God.

An idea I often hear in conversation is "Judaism doesn't believe that sex is dirty; Judaism believes that sex is *good*." Usually when I hear that report, I smile and nod, because Judaism needs all the good PR it can get these days. But in fact, it is more accurate to say that Judaism believes that sex is *powerful*. There are some sexual experiences which are powerfully harmful. And there is sex which is *yichud*, which is powerfully good.

The medieval kabbalists, the Jewish mystics, used to recite a blessing before having sex, in which they linked their own sexual intimacy with a cosmic coming together of the male and female aspects of the divine. I don't suppose it's likely that our

culture is going to see a revival of that custom. But...there is something wonderful about the notion that our sexual intimacy has cosmic implications.

I think that we all do sense that sex is a way of repairing the world. This was the insight of the medieval mystics, and also of the “free love” movement of the 60’s. That movement ultimately failed to realize the seriousness of their own idea, but they did have the right instinct. Sex, in its highest form, *is* the religious and moral opposite of war. *Yichud* is the idea that in our sexual lives we can increase the peace of the universe.

This,, at last may be the best wisdom our tradition has to offer us in our struggle to live ethically sexually. Our world suffers under a heavy burden of war, of thousands of human bodies throwing themselves at each other in the name of death. In the gift of sexuality, God has given us the possibility of joining with another human being in the name of life. In taking this gift into our hand, we will be blessed if our sexual encounters are guided by a desire to care for each other in our nakedness, an attempt to know the other person *in order* to support them, and an awareness that in our sexual lives, as in all we do, we have the ability to bring peace to this war-torn universe.