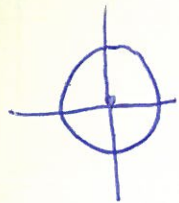




## עת דודים

**A GUIDE TO MARITAL RELATIONS  
FROM A TORAH PERSPECTIVE**

Supplement to "The Marriage Covenant" by Rabbi Elyashiv Knohl



"A Guide to Marital Relations from a Torah Perspective" by Elyashiv Knohl

"The Sanctity of Marital Relations" by Shmuel Ariel

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- ? Previous Knowledge? (no, no to speak ...) — spoken among selves? 1
- domestic abuse
- counseling

## INTRODUCTION

For reasons of modesty, this discussion of marital relations is treated in a separate booklet. Yet, like the rest of the volume, this matter too is an integral part of Torah; as our Sages teach: "This is Torah and I must learn it."<sup>1</sup>

Every couple requires guidance in this area, no less – and possibly more – than in any other. Though many works on this topic have been published, they may not be available to the reader. Moreover, we have attempted to present the subject from a slightly different perspective.

Composing this booklet was not an easy task: it is just as difficult to write about such intimate matters as it is to talk about them. Some may find the discussion too graphic for their taste. Nevertheless, having encountered people who lacked very basic information about physical intimacy and paid a terrible price for their ignorance, we concluded that a frank presentation of both the emotional and physical aspects of marital relations could fill a critical need.

The translation of this material into English presented further difficulties. Generations of Torah sages, using the Hebrew language, have couched detailed and specific attention to every aspect of the sexual relationship in somewhat metaphoric, euphemistic imagery, which has no parallel in English. In order for the English-speaking reader to make sense of the material presented here, it has been necessary, in most of the practical guidance, to resort to the terms and expressions generally accepted in the professional literature.



The discussion below incorporates the comments and suggestions of a number of different specialists in the relevant areas. In particular, we consulted at length with Dr. Anna Wruble, RN, a distinguished expert who has counseled countless couples in these matters. We seek to demonstrate, too, that the principles presented here echo statements by Talmudic Sages and later authorities.

The primary goal of the following chapters, beyond providing practical guidance, is to present marital relations as an act of holiness. Marital intimacy is a *mitzva* – a positive commandment – and integral to the holiness of the Jewish people; from this perspective the act is holy and spiritually uplifting. Marital relations do gratify a person's basic physical needs, but they also add a spiritual dimension to family life and enhance the love between husband and wife.

By highlighting this spiritual aspect, we are not attempting in any way to deny the physical pleasures of sexual intercourse. Our intention is to emphasize that engaging in intimate relations – which is central to developing a loving marital relationship – constitutes a *mitzva*. This is in addition to the *mitzva* of procreation.

We hope and pray that the following chapters will assist and inspire readers to ascend to ever higher levels of love and holiness, fulfilling the words of R. Akiva: "When husband and wife are worthy, the Divine presence abides with them."<sup>2</sup>

#### A few introductory points:

Our aim here is to provide general guidance; not detailed instruction. The following chapters address a number of issues that may arise in the sphere of marital intimacy, but no work of this size can relate to every possible question or situation. If a couple is experiencing difficulties, they need not suffer indefinitely. They can and should seek professional help.<sup>3</sup>

Talking  
about  
H

Before seeking outside assistance, the couple should try to engage in open and frank discussion. This may not be easy, especially at first, but husband and wife owe it to themselves to make the effort. Both partners need to remember that marriage transforms them into "one flesh",<sup>4</sup> so that they need not hide things from each other.

Every married couple needs to learn to resolve their divisive issues, if they wish to achieve a level of intimacy that is pleasurable and mutually satisfying (see further in Section I of the book, Chapter 3, "Openness").

Some people may feel inhibited about exploring certain physical aspects of their marital relationship. These inhibitions often reflect a deeply ingrained sense of modesty – an unquestionably fundamental value. Yet, when two people become husband and wife, they need to merge together into a family unit, and this conjoining has an important physical component. It is not always easy to adjust to this new lifestyle, and issues may arise that need to be discussed with one's spouse or even, in some cases, with a professional counselor.

Both husband and wife need to embrace the notion that the body is a Divine creation and marital relations are a *mitzva*. Their common goal should be for their physical intimacy to bring both of them pleasure, sexual gratification, and emotional and spiritual closeness. There is nothing immoral about deriving pleasure from marital relations (see the essay by R. Shmuel Ariel below).

Reading this booklet – or other relevant literature – together may make it much easier for the couple to discuss their feelings and their difficulties in this area.

having  
tranquil  
marriage

feelings of  
over  
modesty

kavanot  
of  
intimacy



## "YOU SHALL BE HOLY" - LIVING A LIFE OF HOLINESS

*"Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy."<sup>5</sup>*

The conclusion of the verse, "I... am holy," teaches that God is the source of sanctity in the world. However, the verse also commands us to be holy, meaning that through our actions we can somehow reflect God's holiness.

According to Rashi, citing the Sages, the directive to be holy entails refraining from forbidden sexual relations. In other words, we attain holiness by faithfully observing God's commandments, especially in the area of sexuality.

In contrast, Nahmanides (Ramban) maintains that holiness is achieved by adopting stringencies beyond the requirements of halakha, i.e., by refraining even from activities that are not explicitly forbidden, but are not worthy of a person striving for holiness. For example, one becomes holy by not eating or drinking in excess and by not engaging constantly in sexual relations, even when such activities are technically permitted. According to this view, living a life of holiness demands more than adherence to the positive and negative precepts of the Torah; it entails pursuing physical pleasures in moderation.

In principle, each of us should strive to attain the sanctity described by Ramban. This represents the ideal Torah lifestyle. When a couple maintains a physical relationship that satisfies their physical and psychological needs in moderation (as explained below), they epitomize the life of sanctity to which we all should aspire.<sup>6</sup>

Our challenge, then, is to live our lives in sanctity, in the sense of

the term explained by Ramban. In a modern society that celebrates permissiveness and indulges man's crudest instincts, living a life of holiness is no easy task; it demands unstinting commitment. Our challenge, then, is to aspire to attain ever higher levels of holiness.

At the same time, while there are singular individuals who achieve extraordinary levels of piety, married couples need to remember that observing the basic standards of *halakha* is itself considered living a life of holiness and represents a great religious achievement. Any ambition to go beyond this can be realized only in partnership and cooperation with one's spouse.

We reiterate that one of the commandments imposed on us is engaging in marital relations. It therefore follows that, like all *mitzvot*, this physical aspect of marriage can elevate one to new levels of holiness. We must therefore examine how Jewish law instructs us to conduct ourselves during marital relations.

The *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* ("Epistle of Holiness"), attributed to Ramban, points out that the Torah refers to marital relations as "knowledge," as in the verse: "And Adam knew his wife, Eve."<sup>7</sup> This indicates that the Torah views marital intimacy as a lofty endeavor:

*This union is pure and holy, when it is performed properly, at the proper time and with the correct intentions. Let no-one think that a proper union is in any way shameful or ugly, Heaven forbid, for a proper union is called "knowledge", and for good reason. Know that if this did not involve great holiness, the union would not be called knowledge.<sup>8</sup>*

The sanctity associated with sexual relations derives from several sources:

- Fulfilling the *mitzva* of marital relations adds a dimension of sanctity to one's life, as does the performance of other



*mitzvot*. Just as we try to perform other *mitzvot* joyfully and wholeheartedly, our approach in this sphere should be the same. This represents a life of holiness.

- Performing this *mitzva* in moderation, at appropriate times and when both partners are ready and focused, reflects an additional level of holiness – as we shall explain below.
- Aiming to bring pleasure and satisfaction to one's spouse is a manifestation of giving and of holiness, as we shall discuss further on.
- The spiritual and emotional bond created between husband and wife is itself an endowment of sanctity, since it reflects the Divine unity that underlies all of Creation.

Therefore, when fulfilling this *mitzva*, a couple should try to elevate their thoughts, as well as the act itself, and direct them towards the goal of deepening their love for each other." The greater their success in achieving this, the loftier their experience will be.

### THE MITZVA OF "ONA" (MARITAL RELATIONS)

The love that a husband feels for his wife, and that a wife feels for her husband, is not only a natural human value, but also an obligation based on the commandment to "Love your neighbor as yourself". This mutual obligation serves as the foundation for the entire marital relationship, an integral component of which is the *mitzva* of *ona* – the duty of cohabitation. Therefore, the performance of this commandment should aim to enhance and strengthen the love between husband and wife. It is an opportunity for giving and sharing; for ensuring that one is consciously enhancing the spouse's experience rather than focusing only on one's own needs.

The Talmud and later authorities appear to regard the *mitzva* to engage in marital relations as a mutual obligation, inherent in the

*ona is a way of expressing selflessness*

agreement to marry one another. Proof of this lies in the fact that *halakha* refers to either a husband or a wife who refuses to cohabit as "rebellious", and prescribes certain sanctions. In other words, each of them is obligated towards the other in this regard. While the Torah formulates the law in such a way as to impose the responsibility upon the husband ("Her duty of marriage he shall not diminish" – Ex. 21:10) <sup>9</sup>, the Sages do not rule out the wife taking the initiative and adopting an active role. Indeed, we find a number of sources emphasizing mutuality in the realm of marital relations.<sup>10</sup>

The *mitzva* to engage in marital relations is independent of the *mitzva* to procreate. The obligation applies throughout the entire duration of a marriage, even when the woman is incapable of becoming pregnant – with the obvious exception of periods when husband and wife are forbidden from engaging in physical intimacy. This testifies that the purpose of marital relations, from a Torah perspective, is not procreation. Rather, marital relations constitute an independent aspect of the marital relationship and one of the strongest expressions of love between husband and wife. As the verse states: "Therefore man will leave his father and mother and cling to his wife and they will become one flesh."<sup>11</sup>

*both being an integral part of the relationship*

*we are not only together to create children*

### FREQUENCY

How often should a couple engage in marital relations? *Halakha* does not establish a uniform standard for all couples. The Talmud, *Shulhan Arukh*<sup>12</sup> and other authorities stipulate a minimum obligation, taking into consideration the time the husband spends at home, the demands of his occupation, and his physical abilities. To take an extreme example, a sailor who is at sea for months at a time is only obligated to cohabit with his wife twice a year. The Sages presumed that a woman who marries a sailor knows and understands how



little time he will spend at home, and willingly accepts the situation. In contrast, men whose work allows them to be home every night are obligated to be with their wives twice a week; those whose occupation takes them away from home all week are obligated only once a week. Thus, each husband's minimum obligation is determined in accordance with his circumstances.

A man accepts upon himself this basic obligation towards his wife at the time of their wedding. At the same time, the wife also assumes the obligation of fulfilling this *mitzva*, as this is an integral part of married life. In the past, women tended to stay at home and therefore the Sages never formulated the wife's obligation to her husband; nowadays women are often away from home, and it stands to reason that a wife's obligation is analogous to that of her husband.

It may seem strange to speak of a legal obligation in connection with so personal and intimate a question as the frequency of a couple's marital relations. In fact, these guidelines are meant mainly for reference in the event of disagreement between husband and wife in this regard. Obviously, the existence of a minimum obligation does not limit the couple's right to be together more frequently, if they so wish. Conversely, if one or both partners prefer not to engage in marital relations at a particular time, then they are not obligated to do so even if, strictly speaking, the *mitzva* of cohabitation applies at such time.

Since physical intimacy is inseparably bound up with emotional intimacy, and sexual relations are an integral and vital aspect of the overall marital relationship, the guiding principle is for these issues to be resolved by mutual agreement. This will contribute to the couple's love for each other and bring about a more complete and wholehearted fulfillment of the *mitzva*.

The Sages understood the special quality of husband and wife being

we take on "this mitzva at marriage" - that is the nature of this relationship

reason for Halachic suggestion on frequency just sug.

description of gain in being open about this aspect of relationship

together on *Shabbat* eve (Friday night). Obviously, this applies only when it suits both partners, since the intention is that their union should enhance their *oneg Shabbat* - enjoyment of *Shabbat*.

Joe

There are generally times when a couple will naturally want to be together, such as on the night of the wife's immersion, after two weeks of abstention from intimacy. (The same applies immediately before one of the partners leaves home for a substantial period of time - more than a whole day - and upon his or her return.) The Sages established that a husband is obligated to have relations with his wife on these occasions. In other words, because they will want to be together, they should do so. Even on these occasions, if for whatever reason they prefer not to engage in marital relations, they are not obligated to. In a healthy relationship, however, and barring exceptional circumstances, a husband and wife will usually want to have relations after being apart for so long, or before being separated. They should therefore make every effort not to delay the wife's immersion and their subsequent cohabitation. Even if the evening coincides with some other important event, they may wish to consider carefully whether the event justifies delaying their resumption of intimacy.

In the early days of marriage, a couple will usually want to be together more frequently. This is both normal and natural, and neither partner should feel guilty or anxious that he or she suffers from excessive sexual desire. Their desire reflects a physical need common to most couples. As long as they satisfy their needs in accordance with *halakha* and by mutual consent their behavior is legitimate and proper.

early days more interest

Mutual (on Shabbat)

wife showing interest

The Sages assumed that a wife is less likely to explicitly ask her husband to be with her, so they required him to respond even to a hint of a request from his wife. Decisions regarding who will



① talk about these things ahead of time

initiate, and how, are intimate matters that every couple needs to address, but they should be discussed and agreed upon beforehand; they should not be left to the spontaneity of the moment.

good suggestion

The issue of the frequency of marital relations sometimes becomes a point of contention between husband and wife, and every possible precaution should be taken to prevent such tension from developing. At an early point in their life together, a couple should have an open and frank discussion aimed at understanding each other's feelings and desires in this regard. Hints and suggestions are rarely adequate; the only way for the partners to clarify their feelings is to engage in open discussion. This is not an easy subject to tackle directly, especially early in one's marriage, and so each spouse needs to glean from the other those thoughts that he or she finds difficult to utter explicitly. Moreover, the discussion should not be held at a time the couple plans to engage in marital relations, but rather at some quiet moment when both husband and wife are calm and relaxed.

good suggestion - pos. temperam. schedule

If, despite good communication, the question of frequency becomes a point of real conflict, it may be helpful to establish temporarily, a basic timetable for marital relations, to help bridge the gap between the desires of each spouse. While a schedule - however loosely defined - will necessarily stifle a certain degree of spontaneity in the marital relationship, it sometimes proves greatly beneficial in helping to prevent an unhappy cycle of unmet expectations, disappointment, frustration, resentment and pressure. Obviously, owing to the fluid nature of the relationship and the couple's changing circumstances, needs and desires, any agreement that they reach will need adjusting from time to time - once again, through discussion and mutual understanding. Just as obviously, the husband and wife may disregard the schedule if they wish, provided they

both agree. Most importantly, the narrow focus on the frequency of the act of sexual intercourse should be viewed as just one aspect of a couple's aspiration to develop long-term marital intimacy in its broadest sense (enjoying each other's company, sharing physical and emotional closeness, mutual respect and consideration, mutual giving, etc.).

A man needs to recognize that, even within an agreed-upon framework, his wife may not always be open to sexual relations. There are also times when, for physiological reasons, a woman may experience a diminished sexual drive. For example, during the early months of pregnancy, following childbirth when her vaginal region may still be sensitive, and when she is expecting her period.

The frequency of marital relations can also be affected by external factors. Feeling tired, a bad mood, the need to wake early the next morning - any of these may cause either partner to decline marital relations at a particular time. These situations will inevitably arise, and the other partner needs to be considerate and avoid applying undue pressure. Satisfying marital relations depend upon both husband and wife being physically and emotionally ready and willing. In the absence of such mutual interest, there is no point in trying to persuade one's spouse against his or her will.

Notwithstanding the need for mutual desire in order to engage in intimacy, there are times when a man experiences acute sexual tension, creating an overpowering need for sexual release. His wife should be understanding of this need, and wherever possible respond positively to her husband's overtures. Many women never experience such tensions, though for men they are not uncommon. This is one of the most striking physical differences between a man and a woman. While such episodes occur naturally, halakha frowns upon a man who deliberately brings himself to unnecessary arousal and excitement.<sup>13</sup>

Mens occasional physiological needs



Discrepancies in sexual desire are common. While it is often the husband who seeks greater frequency in marital relations, the opposite situation is not at all unusual. It is also perfectly normal for a woman's level of interest to change from time to time, even from day to day. Her husband should not feel rejected or deprived, but should recognize that this is a natural phenomenon. Moreover, a woman may often desire and enjoy marital intimacy that does not necessarily culminate in intercourse. In contrast, a man, having achieving a certain state of arousal, may find it physically impossible not to ejaculate. During a couple's life together, they will usually achieve a balance between the respective needs of each spouse. But in the early years of marriage, the wife will need to learn her husband's limits, while the husband will need to learn and understand his wife's different levels of sexual desire.

On *Sukkot*, the husband is exempt, where necessary for this purpose, from the *mitzva* of *sukka*: on a night when they want to be together he need not return to the *sukka* even after marital relations. (Engaging in marital relations in the *sukka* itself is also permissible, where conditions allow it.)<sup>14</sup>

In summary, with utmost care and sensitivity towards each other, the couple should agree on a frequency of relations that is mutually acceptable to both parties.

### When Marital Relations Are Forbidden

The following laws of separation are observed on the following days:

- *Yom Kippur*: Marital relations are prohibited by biblical law, and the standard laws of separation are observed.
- Ninth of Av: Marital relations are prohibited by rabbinical decree; the standard laws of separation are observed at night, but not during the day.<sup>15</sup>

If the 9th of Av falls on *Shabbat*, such that the fast is postponed to Sunday, the *Shulhan Arukh* rules that relations are permitted on Friday night. Rema disagrees, however, and Ashkenazi Jews follow his stringent opinion. If, however, the woman's night of immersion falls on that Friday night, marital relations are permitted.<sup>16</sup>

● Seven days of *shiva*: Marital relations are prohibited, but the laws of separation are not generally observed, except that the couple does not sleep in the same bed. According to the view of the Rema, embracing and kissing are also forbidden.<sup>17</sup>

On all other days, other than those mentioned above, marital relations are permitted.

*mitzva* While not obligatory, it is a sign of religious piety to refrain from marital relations on public fast days (the Fast of Gedalia, the 10th of Tevet, the Fast of Esther and the 17th of Tammuz) and on the night following the Ninth of Av. If, however, the Ninth of Av was postponed from *Shabbat* to Sunday, marital relations are permitted on the night following the fast. According to Kabbala, it is praiseworthy to refrain from marital relations on both nights of Rosh ha-Shana, the night of Hoshana Rabba, the night of Shemini Atzeret, the first night of Pesah, and the night (outside Israel: the first night) of Shavuot.<sup>18</sup> However, these are stringencies; not binding rules. A person who considers himself worthy may adopt such standards of piety, provided that they are acceptable to his spouse as well. However, the *mitzva* of *ona* supersedes these practices. Thus, for example, if the wife's night of immersion falls on one of these days, or if she expresses a desire to be with her husband, the couple should engage in marital relations. Similarly, a couple that has not yet fulfilled the *mitzva* of procreation – i.e., has not yet been blessed with both a son and a daughter – should also not observe these additional stringencies.<sup>19</sup>



The Sages list a number of situations in which marital relations are prohibited, because the mutual attraction between husband and wife is absent, reducing what should be a spiritually uplifting experience into a raw, physical act.<sup>20</sup>

- The wife does not desire marital relations at that time.
- There is antagonism between the spouses.
- One of the partners has been excommunicated (generally obsolete in modern times).
- The wife wants a divorce (even if she is willing to engage in marital relations), or if the husband has made up his mind to divorce his wife.
- Either the husband or the wife is drunk.
- Either partner is thinking of someone other than his or her spouse during relations.
- One of the partners is asleep.

Marital relations are also prohibited in the presence of the following:

- Torah scroll, *tefillin*, *mezuzot* or any sacred literature. However, relations are permitted if such articles are either:
  - i. Removed from the room;
  - ii. Placed in a closet or other enclosure with a minimum capacity of 40 *se'ah* (between 120 and 190 gallons)<sup>21</sup>;
  - iii. Enclosed in two coverings, one of which is not specifically designed for such an item. For example, in the case of a bound book, one may treat the book's cover as one covering, to which another covering must be added. For a *mezuzah* located inside the room when the door is closed, in addition to the *mezuzah* case, the parchment should be covered with clear plastic wrap or the like. The same requirement applies to a *mezuzah* outside the room if the door is ajar.
  - iv. Separated by a stable partition or divider at least 32 inches

high, such as a curtain or sheet tied in place at the top and bottom.<sup>22</sup> (Such a partition may not be erected on *Shabbat*.) In the case of a Torah scroll, if the partition is transparent then the Torah scroll must also be covered.<sup>23</sup>

- v. According to certain opinions,<sup>24</sup> in exceptional circumstances – when no other room is available and the sacred books cannot be covered – the couple may engage in marital relations if they completely cover their bodies and heads with a sheet, blanket, or the like.<sup>25</sup> However, this leniency does not apply in the case of a Torah scroll or any other biblical book written on parchment.<sup>26</sup>
- Another person. (In exceptional circumstances, relations are permitted if the other person is asleep, or in the case of a baby who cannot talk, even if the baby is awake.<sup>27</sup>) As an added measure of modesty, no animal should be present in the room<sup>28</sup> (this does not include insects).
- Marital relations are prohibited outdoors in an open area, such conduct being deemed promiscuous.<sup>29</sup> But within an enclosed structure, including a tent, or a structure with walls but no roof, relations are permitted.<sup>30</sup>

#### **RECITING THE BLESSING OF "HA-MAPIL" AND THE SHEMA**

Ordinarily one recites the *ha-Mapil* blessing and the *Shema* before going to sleep at night. Should these be recited before or after marital relations?

Most halakhic authorities maintain that *ha-Mapil* should be recited afterward. However, the couple may fall asleep and miss saying the blessing. Strictly speaking, this blessing need not be said immediately prior to falling asleep because it praises the gift of sleep in general. Moreover, there is an opinion maintaining that the phrase in the blessing, "let my bed be whole before You," refers to marital



relations, which would permit recitation of the blessing before relations.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, some authorities permit recitation of the *Shema* before marital relations.<sup>32</sup> For those who recite the blessing without God's name, it is certainly permissible to recite it before relations.<sup>33</sup> One who recites the blessing after marital relations should take care to wipe or wash off any remnants of semen, and then wash hands and recite *ha-Mapil* and the accompanying verses.<sup>34</sup> If one did not wash hands at night, one should do so in the morning before praying.<sup>35</sup> Although generally one should refrain from speaking after reciting *ha-Mapil*, one who recites it before marital relations may speak to one's partner in the normal manner associated with marital intimacy.

It is customary to position the bed along a north-south axis, but some opinions permit a different placement. One may rely on these opinions if the bed cannot be arranged to lie north-south.<sup>36</sup>

### PREPARATION

The Sages teach that preparing for the *mitzva* of marital intimacy itself constitutes part of the *mitzva*.<sup>37</sup>

The experience of the sexual encounter is affected by psychological, emotional and physical factors. The couple therefore needs to prepare for the experience, as described below. Each spouse's needs during this process will be different and each will proceed at a different pace; but they should move ahead together, patiently and with mutual consideration, aiming for ultimate closeness.

The preparations for intimacy begin with creating a cordial atmosphere in the home. Both partners should try to avoid arguments, since anger and tension do nothing to enhance closeness and to set the mood for intimacy. Instead, they should focus on what unites them, and look for ways to express their love: compliments, hugging, kissing, and other affectionate behavior. The idea here is

not to put on an external "show", but rather to consciously convey sincere expressions of emotion, which are often neglected in the commotion of daily life. In this way, at day's end, both partners will feel more inclined to be together.

The importance of making an effort to maintain a pleasant and cordial atmosphere in the home (at all times) cannot be overstated. This provides the nurturing environment in which the couple's relationship (in all its aspects) can grow and flourish. It is out of closeness and happiness in each other's company that a couple will experience mutual desire and motivation to enjoy intimacy when the opportunity presents itself.

Both men and women require a preparatory stage prior to engaging in physical intimacy. A woman's attractive appearance and pleasant fragrance will usually cause her husband to become aroused. While the wife may sometimes be sexually aroused in a similarly reflexive way, her needs are generally different. For her it is the feeling of being loved that prepares her for intimacy: attentiveness, conversation, compliments, etc. all demonstrate that her husband is interested in her and appreciates her. A woman shares marital relations primarily out of a desire for emotional intimacy with her husband.

Each spouse needs to remember that their love life will not be full and satisfying until each of them learns to provide the other with what the spouse requires by way of preparation for marital relations.

Some people are insecure about their physical appearance when they are undressed. For women, especially, this can make it difficult to participate in marital relations in a relaxed frame of mind and without inhibitions. The Sages were sensitive to this, and were reassuring: "A woman's charm captivates her husband."<sup>38</sup> In other words, when a man is attracted to a woman, he will find her beautiful. Obviously, a wife should make an effort to make herself attractive to her husband.

The same is true for the husband, in terms of appearance, grooming



and personal hygiene. Each spouse should adhere to accepted standards in these areas, especially before engaging in any form of physical intimacy. Neglecting these issues can seriously affect a partner's desire for closeness and enjoyment of the experience.

It is important to be aware of the fact that although husband and wife engage jointly in intimate relations, they experience it differently. In addition, the experience of every person is affected by physiology, personality, social and religious norms, communication skills, and previous experiences. Other factors include each partner's self-image, how they feel about their bodies, their willingness to compromise, their patience, curiosity, playfulness, imagination, creativity, etc. Yet another set of variables includes circumstances that change over time, such the level of harmony or tension between the partners, the wife's hormonal changes, and different stages in their lives.

Hence, there is no comparing how two people experience marital relations, even when they experience it together.

Above all, we need to recognize that the mind plays the most important role in this process. It governs all of our bodily movements, our thoughts and feelings; it gives rise to our ability to convey feelings to each other through touch, etc. The ability to concentrate and direct our thoughts towards bringing pleasure to each other, and to read each other's subtlest reactions, is the key to a successful love life.

During their years of marriage a couple will acquire the ability to adjust to one another. At the same time, it must be remembered that "performance" in this area differs from one stage of life to another: a couple in their twenties is in a different situation from a couple that is already much older. Likewise, their relations during periods when they are forbidden to each other for two weeks out of every month will have a different quality from other periods when they are permitted to each other uninterruptedly, such as during pregnancy

and nursing. There will naturally be ups and downs, and the couple should coordinate their expectations accordingly.

The experience of marital relations requires concentration and effort, but it rewards the couple with pleasure and happiness.

③ When the time is right, the couple needs to prepare each other for the act of intercourse through mutual stimulation. Every partner needs to guide and teach the other how to bring him or her pleasure. Each person has areas that are particularly sensitive to touching or stroking; with time, husband and wife should show each other where and how they like to be touched, and how to heighten each other's pleasure.<sup>39</sup>

Following are some general principles in this regard:

- As noted above, the mind plays a central role in this experience. Touching and stroking devoid of thought and feeling will generally not arouse one's spouse. Therefore, while stimulating each other, husband and wife should concentrate on expressing their deep love for each other.
- Different forms of mutual stimulation may have various possible effects: a certain touch may be generally pleasurable; it may cause sexual arousal; it may have no effect at all, or it may cause discomfort.
- Areas of sensitivity vary from one person to another. Even the same person may find that stimulation of a particular area is pleasurable at some times but uncomfortable at others. (In particular, a woman's frequent hormonal changes will tend to have this effect.) These variations heighten the need for a couple to exercise sensitivity and mutual consideration. Body language plays a central role in their dialogue, and each of them needs to pay close attention to each other's responses.
- The husband needs to understand that certain areas of a woman's body are highly sensitive and can be touched or

teach!  
↓  
read!



- stroked only with the utmost gentleness.
- There are different levels of physical intimacy, and a couple may experience and enjoy any one of them, or move on, depending on their mood. Intimacy does not always have to culminate in intercourse (subject, of course, to the prohibition of wasting seed: a couple will come to learn what level of intimacy they can comfortably enjoy without the man being aroused to the point where not progressing to coitus becomes problematic.)
  - Full sexual intercourse is usually achieved after advancing through a series of stages: During the initial stage of intimacy the couple is usually still clothed. They gradually move to physical closeness and more focused acts of mutual stimulation and pleasure, leading to sexual arousal that immediately precedes intercourse and orgasm. For a woman in particular, this gradual progression is essential to achieving the necessary state of readiness for optimal enjoyment of sexual relations. The husband needs to learn that only by advancing gradually will the couple achieve a mutually fulfilling marital intimacy.
  - For some women the act of intercourse itself provides sufficient stimulation in order to climax, but in most cases orgasm is achieved through gentle stimulation of the vaginal area (specifically, the clitoris – see the Appendix “Biological Background”, or an internal spot located on the front inner wall of the vaginal canal). While masturbation is forbidden to men because it involves wasting seed, a woman has no such limitation, and there is no problem with a husband bringing his wife to orgasm in this way. (For such stimulation to be pleasurable, it is important to ensure adequate lubrication – see below regarding aids for this purpose.)

Each partner also needs to adjust to the “pace” of the other. The husband in particular must be conscious of the fact that a woman

generally needs more time to become aroused. He should, therefore, pace himself and demonstrate patience until his wife achieves the desired state of arousal. It may take time and practice together before he is able to exert sufficient control to ejaculate only when they are both ready. In extreme cases, where early ejaculation is an acute and recurring problem, he should consider seeking professional help.

Not every experience of marital relations will lead to both partners experiencing orgasm – either simultaneously or separately. Indeed, this is not a requirement for a couple to be happy together and to be quite satisfied with their sexual intimacy. Their primary objective should be to love each other and to give each other pleasure. In some cases, this will result in climaxing; even where it does not, it will be a special bonding experience.

What is the nature of sexual climax? For a man, the moment is clearly defined: he ejaculates, and then becomes flaccid for a time. When a woman achieves orgasm, she has a similar experience – extreme sexual arousal and rapid contractions leading to a climax. The process takes only seconds. Most men ejaculate almost every time, whereas a woman may experience sexual pleasure without achieving orgasm. Nevertheless, she should not miss out on this experience, which is so fundamental to their life as a couple, and they should make an effort to achieve it, often, if not always.

*Climax defined*

The need for a husband to tend to his wife’s enjoyment of the experience is illustrated by the Gemara in a striking story:

R. Kahana hid under Rav’s bed in order to observe how Rav conducted himself during marital relations. R. Kahana was astounded by the length of time Rav spent “chatting and playing,” prior to the act. How could the greatest rabbi of the generation behave so frivolously with his wife? Was not such behavior unbecoming so great and holy a man as Rav? Unable to contain his astonishment, R. Kahana cried



Usually  
Challenging for couple to  
continue relations & man  
finishes first - so if happens sometimes wife  
doesn't have opportunity to climax

out in amazement from under the bed. Rav immediately rebuked his student, saying: "Leave, for this is poor manners!" But R. Kahana protested: "This is Torah, and I must learn it."<sup>40</sup>

The inclusion of this story in the Talmud testifies to the Sages' endorsement of Rav's behavior and teaches us that this is, indeed, the way of Torah.

Elsewhere, the Talmud relates R. Hisda's advice to his daughters, to "play" with their husbands before marital relations in order to intensify their desire for each other.<sup>41</sup> R. Hisda's daughters were married to the foremost rabbis of the generation, including Rava.<sup>42</sup> This advice speaks volumes in and of itself; its inclusion in the Talmud, once again, teaches us that it was viewed by the Sages as proper and worthy.

More recent halakhic works contain similar advice. The Torah sages evidently felt strongly that marital relations require an atmosphere of mutual love and desire, and sufficient preparation of both partners. This is the practical meaning of the commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself" in this regard.

As we shall see, the Talmudic Sages promised great reward to the husband who ensures that his wife derives full pleasure from marital relations. This demonstrates that our Sages were aware that women do not climax as easily as men do, and they regarded the husband as responsible for making it happen. (In most cases, unless the husband restrains himself he will climax before his wife reaches the same level of sexual arousal.) This view seems to underlie the conduct of Rav and the advice of R. Hisda.

The Sages repeatedly emphasize that a man should restrain himself until his wife is fully aroused. If he does so, they say, he will be rewarded with male children. (In talmudic times a male child was one of man's greatest desires, as is evident from many sources<sup>43</sup>).

For example:

"What should a man do to ensure that his children will be male and will flourish? He should fulfill the desires of Heaven and the desires of his wife."<sup>44</sup>

"Rava said: He who wants all his children to be males should have marital relations twice in succession."<sup>45</sup>

"Because they restrain themselves during intercourse so that their wives should emit their seed first, their offspring will be males"<sup>46</sup> 'If a woman has conceived seed, and borne a male child' - a woman who brings forth seed first, will have a male child."<sup>47</sup> (The phrase "bring forth seed first" refers not to ovulation, which is an involuntary physiological process, but rather to a woman climaxing before her husband.)

The Sages do not present as scientific fact their advice that allowing the wife to climax first will ensure male offspring<sup>48</sup>. Rather, they are teaching the husband a moral lesson: if he is considerate of his wife - and sees that she too has a pleasurable sexual experience - then God will fulfill his desires as well, and reward him with a son.

This interpretation is confirmed by the following Talmudic passage: "What kind of reward is the fruit of the womb? R. Hamma b. R. Hanina said: As recompense for his forbearance during intercourse so that his wife should emit seed first, the Holy One, blessed be He, rewards him with fruit of the womb."<sup>49</sup>

Thus, our Sages viewed male offspring as a Divine reward, not a natural consequence of allowing one's wife to climax first.

This is also the view of Ra'avad (R. Avraham Ben David): "For God searches all hearts, and all the deeds that are performed for the sake of Heaven are good. One who thinks that he is able to do this without allowing extraneous thoughts to enter his mind, and restrains himself so that his wife should enjoy the act and bring forth



seed first – he intends to perform a *mitzva* and does so, and the Holy One, blessed be He, rewards him with male children."<sup>50</sup>

In short, the birth of male children is the reward for fulfilling a *mitzva*, not a law of biology.

These and other rabbinic teachings reflect the view that a man's natural behavior during marital relations will most likely focus only on his own needs and sexual gratification. The Sages, therefore, instructed that during marital relations he should concentrate on pleasing his wife and making her happy.

The guiding principle during marital relations should be giving. The ability to give is a Divine trait and the act of giving ennobles a person by giving expression to the "image of God" within him or her.<sup>51</sup> One who concentrates on pleasing his or her spouse not only provides the spouse with maximum pleasure, but is spiritually uplifted by the act of giving. At the same time, concentrating on the needs and pleasures of one's partner is not a purely selfless act; it also brings a richer experience and far greater sexual satisfaction than that derived from a selfish focus on one's own gratification. Of course, this in no way suggests that one should not derive pleasure from the stimulation received from one's spouse.<sup>52</sup>

*Halakha* dictates that during marital relations the husband may not look at or kiss his wife's *mekom ervat* – genitals.<sup>53</sup> Any other act that strengthens a couple's love for each other and enhances the marital intimacy is permitted, provided that the husband is careful not to climax before actual penetration. The halakhic requirement that the room be dark and the couple be covered applies only during the act of intercourse itself. Thus, there is nothing to prevent the husband and wife from seeing each other naked, only the prohibition of a husband gazing at his wife's *mekom ervat*, which is naturally hidden in any case.

closet  
Rambam -  
but restrict -  
Consenting

## THE MITZVA

*Halakha* provides the following guidelines for the actual act of intercourse:

- Both husband and wife should be completely naked.<sup>54</sup>
- They should be covered with a sheet or blanket, if not completely, then at least from the waist down.<sup>55</sup>
- Conversation should be limited to matters relating to the couple's marital act. The Sages discouraged discussing other matters lest such talk cause the husband to think of other women or the wife to think of other men. They may, of course, express their affection and love.<sup>56</sup> They may also recite prayers expressing the holiness of the act of physical union and their aspirations – provided that they do not mention God's name or recite biblical verses.<sup>57</sup>
- The room should be dark. A small amount of light in the room is permitted, but light should not shine directly on the couple.<sup>58</sup> If there is a light that cannot be extinguished (e.g., on *Shabbat* or a festival), one may cover the light in order to darken the room.
- When a couple stays in someone else's house, they should bring their own towel and place it under them.

The recommended position according to the Sages, is for the wife to lie on her back with the husband on top. This is also the most naturally comfortable position. However, a couple may choose a different position that suits them better. At times, they may also wish to experiment with new positions. This is permissible, provided the semen is ejaculated into the vagina. It goes without saying that any change of this kind requires the mutual consent of both partners.

The Talmud explains that darkness is required during union: "Lest he see in her something offensive and be disgusted by her."<sup>59</sup> In other words, we want the imagination to flow freely. The husband and

Read - advices  
sup

Not with it!



wife love each other: she is beautiful in his eyes; he is pleasing to her. But the Sages were concerned that at the height of physical intimacy, the smallest blemish or imperfection may destroy the mood. In this context, darkness contributes to the romance and passion of the moment.

For the same reason the Sages generally forbade marital relations during daytime. If, however, a couple needs to be together, they may do so, provided they darken the room or completely cover themselves.<sup>60</sup>

#### **AFTER COITUS**

Upon climaxing, the husband should not withdraw before he has finished ejaculating. Afterwards, he should remain together with his wife for as long as she wants. These vital moments have great potential for sharing and closeness; sometimes no less so than the act of intercourse itself. Following ejaculation a man feels completely satisfied, while a woman who experiences orgasm desires continued physical contact with her husband, and often the emotional intimacy of conversation. If the husband withdraws immediately, his wife may feel that, having achieved gratification, he has no further interest in her.

In short, at every stage of marital relations, the man and woman have a different pace. During foreplay, the man becomes aroused more quickly and needs to hold back at a certain point, so as not to climax before his wife. After ejaculation, his arousal dissipates rapidly and completely. In contrast, a woman becomes aroused more slowly, and after climax her arousal recedes more gradually. (She may also experience additional climaxes if stimulated further.) Following intercourse, she will likely want to continue the physical contact as well as conversation and other expressions of closeness.

daytime  
restriction

Each spouse needs to understand these differences and respond accordingly.

Clearly, marital relations are a delicate and complex process. Following is a summary of the different stages:

- Creating a favorable atmosphere in the home, full of love and mutual affection, at all times, and especially when the couple is planning on engaging in marital relations.
- Attending to one's physical appearance and grooming.
- Gradual progression to higher levels of physical intimacy.
- Mutual stimulation in preparation for intercourse.
- When the woman is sufficiently aroused, engaging in intercourse.
- Following intercourse, maintaining physical contact and, if desired, intimate conversation.

Some men follow the custom of immersing themselves in a *mikveh* following marital relations. This custom in no way implies that marital relations are base or sordid; we serve God through the *mitzva* of marital relations just as we serve Him through other *mitzvot*. The custom of immersion is based on an enactment of Ezra the Scribe, and merely reflects the special spiritual purity that is required for prayer and Torah study. But this practice was not adopted by the majority of the Jewish people and therefore never became normative law. While the practice is not mandatory, one who follows this custom acts in a virtuous manner.<sup>61</sup>

cool



THE FIRST TIME

When bride and groom engage in marital relations for the first time, each brings certain hopes and expectations. They aspire to a perfect physical and emotional union. While this aspiration may not be realized in full at their first attempt, the groom in particular has a special obligation to do his best to ensure that his wife's hopes and desires are realized.

Before the wedding a couple should discuss their respective expectations for the wedding night and try to prepare themselves for the experience. First, each of them needs to personally think through his or her attitude towards marital relations. If one of them feels nervous or afraid, it is important that these feelings be shared with the other partner, so that they can address and overcome the fears or hesitations together. The goal is for the couple to approach their first sexual encounter in a relaxed and loving frame of mind. If one or both partners feel that they are not sufficiently prepared, we recommend that they read though this booklet together. As time goes on, a sexual relationship that is mutually satisfying both emotionally and physically will add an important and powerful dimension to their marriage. On the other hand, every couple also needs to understand that they might not achieve total physical and emotional satisfaction the first few times that they are together; but these initial experiences will enable them to achieve greater satisfaction in the future.

(Even later on, of course, not every attempt at marital relations will be a complete success. That is a universal phenomenon and every couple faces this reality from time to time. Conversation and closeness offer the couple the ability to overcome such moments.)

Ideally, the newlywed couple should engage in full relations on their wedding night. However, for all the reasons discussed above, they

Sometimes a Process  
First Night - together  
Ideal - last in

should do so only if there is mutual agreement and desire; neither partner should pressure the other. If either partner prefers that they engage in intimacy that stops short of intercourse, then they should proceed slowly. One or both partners may prefer to remain fully or partially clothed during their initial physical contact, and only later or the following night completely undress. Thus, it is possible that a few nights will pass before they feel ready to complete the act of intercourse. This is quite acceptable; each couple should advance toward greater intimacy at their own pace.

When the couple is together, each progressive stage of physical intimacy needs to be taken with mutual agreement. One should always have permission from one's partner before advancing to the next stage, even if only by intimation or tacit agreement. At the same time, it should never be assumed that silence signifies consent, and each partner needs to be especially sensitive to the other's reactions.

When engaging in intercourse, the husband needs to take great care not to use force. An inexperienced groom may use more force than necessary, both during the preliminary stages of intimacy and during actual penetration. A woman's vagina is extremely sensitive; incorrect positioning or undue pressure may cause discomfort or pain, which may in turn curb her desire and readiness for marital relations. The husband should, therefore, ask his wife to gently guide his organ and position it, so as to avoid causing her any pain or discomfort.

The wife, for her part, needs to know that if she is anxious or afraid, her vaginal muscles are likely to contract, which may cause her pain during intercourse. This pain may then lead to further contraction, creating a vicious cycle. She should therefore try to relax her muscles so that intercourse will be more comfortable for her.<sup>62</sup> Her husband can contribute by demonstrating patience, and expressing his love for and confidence in her.

Relaxation key.

Work together to connect



It is recommended that the woman use tampons prior to the wedding, in order to accustom herself to penetration of her vagina. This should help her a great deal during the first experience of intercourse.

Vaginal dryness may also present a problem during the initial attempts at intercourse, when anxiety may cause muscle contraction, making penetration more painful. It is recommended that the couple make use of a water-based personal lubricant (KY Jelly, Astroglide etc.); these products are readily available at pharmacies. Because such lubricants are manufactured specifically for this purpose, the couple may prefer to make the purchase at a pharmacy where the staff does not know them personally. If a water-based lubricant such as KY Jelly is not available, the couple may try using baby oil. (Some oils may cause irritation; a gynecologist should be able to assist in finding an appropriate substitute.) For some women, sexual arousal causes glands in the vaginal wall to discharge a natural lubricant that facilitates intercourse. For others, dryness of the vagina is a chronic issue (drinking more can sometimes help remedy this condition). Hormonal changes as well as other factors (e.g., taking antihistamines for a cold) can cause dryness at a later stage, too. Initially, it is recommended that an artificial lubricant be used. On *Shabbat*, a liquid oil may be applied; if KY jelly is to be used, it should be mixed with a little water before *Shabbat*.

The lubricant is meant to ease penetration and should therefore be applied both to the male organ and in and around the vaginal opening. Where necessary, a woman may also obtain suppositories especially designed for the purpose of easing initial discomfort caused by marital relations.

It is recommended that the couple place a towel or some other cloth under them to absorb any blood or semen emitted during relations. This will ensure that their bedding remains dry and clean. For

towel  
\* Towel suggestion

Buy!  
liquid oil ok  
for jae

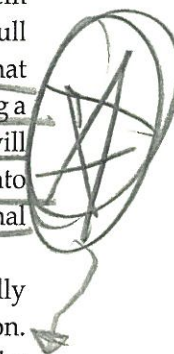
halakhic reasons, a colored towel is preferable. Sometimes a woman finds intercourse more comfortable if a pillow is placed under the towel.

As noted, the couple is not obligated to reach full sexual intercourse on their first night together. Their level of intimacy is up to them alone, and they should feel free to progress gradually toward full physical union over a few nights. The aim is to achieve intimacy that will be a pleasurable, uplifting experience for both of them, creating a deep emotional bond. Taking longer to achieve intercourse that will ultimately be special and intimate is preferable by far to rushing into relations that bring the woman nothing but physical and emotional pain.

During the first week after the wedding the couple is usually attending *Sheva Berakhot*, where they are the center of attention. Under these circumstances, they may wish to publicly observe the laws of separation during the entire week, so that their transition from physical closeness to separation is not noticeable.

If a woman is regulating her period prior to the wedding by means of the Pill, she should try to arrange that her next period begin a few days after the wedding, so that if she and her husband do not engage in full intercourse on the first night, they will still have a few more nights before her next period begins. (This can be achieved by continuing to take the Pill for a few days after the wedding.) If she is not taking the Pill, it is important that they try to achieve full relations before she expects her next period to begin.

It is common for a groom to experience tension and anxiety during the first few days of marriage, which can prevent him from achieving a full erection. In such a situation, he may not achieve complete penetration of the vagina. In such case, even if the wife has her period, the restrictions of *yihud* will not apply.<sup>63</sup> If the





Separation under  
 most circumstances  
 after relations  
 Previously married  
 ladies do not  
 have to  
 b/c been married  
 too often

woman experiences uterine bleeding before the couple attempts full physical union, they should consult a rabbi. (The laws of *yihud* that apply to a newlywed couple are very complex, and the scope of this discussion does not allow for attention to every possibility.)<sup>64</sup>

As explained in detail in the book, a husband and wife are forbidden to each other upon the appearance of uterine blood. Technically, *dam betulim* – hymenal bleeding – is not classified as uterine blood, since it originates in the outer vaginal opening. Nevertheless, the Sages forbade further physical contact between husband and wife if there is hymenal bleeding because of the possibility that a drop of uterine blood may have mingled with the blood from the hymen. Moreover, even if no bleeding results from the first act of marital intimacy, the couple is forbidden to each other afterward, because there may have been a drop of blood that went unnoticed. As a result, the couple must cease all physical contact immediately after their first full sexual union, even on their wedding night. Although this rule poses a difficult challenge, there is no room for leniency in this regard, and the couple should devote the days that follow to developing their emotional and spiritual love for each other, until the wife is ready for immersion.

To summarize: If the couple achieved total penetration of the penis into the vagina, then all further physical contact is forbidden, whether or not the woman experienced bleeding, but *yihud* is permitted. If penetration was incomplete and there was no hymenal bleeding, physical contact is permitted. Regarding the extent of penetration, it is the woman who determines whether or not penetration was complete, because she generally senses the depth of penetration more accurately than the man does. If neither one is certain, they are permitted to maintain physical contact. These laws will be explained further below.

unless see Blood.

After the couple's first act of marital relations, the wife need not conduct an internal examination to check for hymenal blood. If there is no external sign of blood (on either of them, the bedding, etc.) then it may be assumed that there was no such bleeding. An internal examination, on the other hand, may irritate the hymenal region and actually result in bleeding.

beivot  
 only after  
 hymenal  
 bleeding  
 stops.

The couple should consider the possibility that on the first night, due to anxiety or fatigue, the husband may have difficulty reaching a full erection. This should not be cause for concern, as the problem usually resolves itself over the course of the next few attempts. In some cases, the husband's difficulty in achieving a full erection may extend for a longer period of time. Obviously, this may exert additional emotional pressure on him, making it even more difficult for him to return to normal erectile functioning. This is a common occurrence that usually corrects itself over time, as the couple becomes more relaxed and more familiar with one another. The couple may wish to consult a therapist, the person who counseled the groom prior to the wedding, or a doctor. Medical professionals advise that in a majority of cases, the problem disappears within three months. If there is no significant improvement within that time, with regular marital intimacy, the couple should consult their family doctor or a medical professional specializing in this area. Contemporary medical science is well equipped to address this problem. A man who knows that he usually has no difficulty in achieving an erection should rest assured that the problem is temporary and will resolve itself as he becomes more relaxed. It is also very important that the wife remain supportive and demonstrate confidence in her husband. By expressing her love and confidence, she can contribute to her husband's successful performance. Relaxation and calm are necessary conditions for a return to normal functioning.



A couple may also experience the opposite problem during the early days of marriage: the husband may experience early ejaculation. This is a common phenomenon, and the man should not be concerned that he is violating the prohibition against wasting seed. Rather, he should view it as part of learning how to perform the *mitzva* of marital relations. If he is able to direct his penis toward the vaginal opening, so that the semen issues in that direction, so much the better. Even if he cannot, the couple should know that they are not violating any prohibition, but merely learning how to perform the *mitzva* properly. Men often encounter initial difficulties; this is quite natural. If the problem persists, the man should try to identify the specific actions that excite him to the point of ejaculation, and, if possible, the couple should avoid them temporarily, so as to be able to achieve full relations. Here, too, the wife plays an important role in reassuring her husband and affirming that she supports him.

It goes without saying that, in trying to solve this problem, the husband should not cause his wife pain or discomfort, for example by trying to prevent early ejaculation by hurrying his penetration before she is ready.

Some women are very fearful of pain that may be caused by the widening of the hymenal opening. The degree of discomfort involved is different for each woman, but the experience will certainly be very painful if, as a result of fear and anxiety, the woman's vaginal muscles contract and her husband attempts to penetrate with force. Thus, the more relaxed she is, the less pain she will feel. The groom should ensure that penetration proceeds gently, while the bride should try to relax her muscles to ease the penetration. With the proper gentleness, mutual stimulation, correct positioning with the woman's assistance, liberal use of lubricants and passage of time, the problem of constriction of the woman's

vaginal opening should eventually disappear. If she experiences continued contraction of the vaginal muscles even after the first few attempts at marital relations, she should seek medical attention. (In general, there is a certain amount of discomfort during the first few experiences of intercourse, but this results from the penetration itself, rather than from the opening of the hymen.<sup>65</sup>)

Our Sages teach that as women get older, there is a gradual widening of the opening of the hymenal membrane, to the point where it may almost completely open. Thus, women who marry in their late twenties or in their thirties (as well as younger women who have used tampons for some time, engaged in sports, etc.) may well experience no tearing of the hymen because it is almost entirely open and any remnant is flexible. In such a situation, there may be no bleeding even after the first experience of sexual relations. For some couples, however, the opposite may be true: bleeding may occur after the first experience of intercourse, as well as on several subsequent occasions.

We have emphasized the importance of continued physical and emotional intimacy following intercourse. However, a newlywed couple must separate after their initial relations because of the rule governing hymenal bleeding. This does not require a hasty separation, but once they have completed the act and have separated from each other in a relaxed and leisurely manner, they must begin to observe all of the laws governing physical separation between husband and wife that apply from the onset of menstruation until immersion in a mikveh.

In order to further clarify the laws governing a newlywed couple the first time they engage in marital relations, we bring here an extract from the halakhic section of the book, as a summary of all that has been stated above.

do not have  
to separate  
in a hurry -  
when ready



read



A newlywed couple's first experience of marital relations results in one of two possible outcomes:

1. If the woman experiences hymenal bleeding, the couple is forbidden to each other, whether or not they have achieved full relations, and whether or not this was their first time together. The one exception is if a medical professional determines that the blood did not originate from the hymen, but from some other source.
2. If the woman does not experience any bleeding, the couple is forbidden to engage in physical contact only after the first time that they achieve full relations (i.e., full penetration).<sup>66</sup> The woman determines whether full penetration occurred. If they are uncertain, they are permitted to maintain physical contact until they have achieved full relations or until the woman experiences bleeding.

The woman is not required to conduct an internal examination for hymenal bleeding. If they find a bloodstain (e.g., on the bed linens), it will be clear that bleeding occurred. If they find no bloodstain, they are not required to search for one; rather, they may assume that there was no bleeding.

The moment there is bleeding, or following their first full relations even if there was no bleeding, physical intimacy is immediately forbidden to the couple as if the wife had begun menstruating. In this particular instance, however, she may begin counting seven clean days after four days, and not – as is normally the case after the onset of her period – only after five days. This is true even according to Ashkenazi authorities.

While the woman is counting the seven clean days following her hymenal bleeding, she may begin menstruating. In that case, she needs to wait the standard five days if she is following Ashkenazi

(we sep. in pub. while we are attempting)

on HT  
if hymen  
no problem  
ask RPN

practice, and four days if she is following Sefardi practice according to the *Shulhan Arukh*. However, in this situation she begins waiting the four or five days from the time when she and her husband had full relations (following which they separated because of the rule concerning hymenal blood). Even if the bleeding continues for less than five days, when it ceases she will generally not have to wait to begin counting seven clean days.

If the woman experiences bleeding after the first full relations, she should exercise extreme care in conducting the examinations associated with the *hefsek tahara* and the seven clean days, so as not to irritate the vaginal area. If she sees blood on an examination cloth, she should consult a rabbi regarding how to proceed with her counting; there may be room for leniency, since hymenal blood does not create a prohibition except when it issues during intercourse.

If there is bleeding after a second (or subsequent) occasion of marital relations, it is treated exactly like bleeding after the first time. Thus, even according to Ashkenazi practice, the woman waits four days – not five – before counting her seven clean days. If she is concerned that she may begin menstruating before the seven clean days are up, she may – immediately after the marital relations in which she experienced hymenal bleeding – thoroughly wash the vaginal area with warm water, taking care to remove any traces of semen (pharmacies sell special products for douching). The following day before sunset she performs a *hefsek tahara*, whereupon she may begin counting seven clean days.<sup>67</sup>

Even taking account all permissible leniencies, this situation can still be very frustrating for a newlywed couple. After all, each time the woman immerses in a *mikveh*, the couple is permitted to each other only for one night, as the bleeding following their marital relations causes them to once again be prohibited to each other. Hence, if they

bedicot  
after  
first relations  
after 4 days  
careful!



reoccurring  
hymenal bleeding

have reason to think that the problem of hymenal bleeding will recur, it is recommended that the wife consult her doctor. Liberal application of a lubricant along the penis and inside the vagina can often prevent such bleeding.

If all attempts at penetration are unsuccessful, the wife should consult a doctor, as in rare cases it is necessary to have the hymen surgically removed. Following this procedure, she and her husband are permitted to engage in physical contact afterwards, even if she experienced bleeding; in fact, they may engage in marital relations as soon afterward as is medically advisable.<sup>68</sup> If there is bleeding after their first experience of marital relations following the removal of the hymen, they must observe the standard rules of separation that apply after the first act of intercourse. If there is no bleeding after the marital relations following the procedure, they are not forbidden to engage in physical contact.

## CONCLUSION

We have tried to present a general picture of marital relations from a Torah perspective. The sources show that the Sages demonstrate extraordinary understanding of and sensitivity to the marital relationship, and their insights remain relevant today.

This guide presents a brief overview of the subject, with the hope that the newlywed couple will succeed in applying what they have learned here to the various issues that may arise in the future. It goes without saying that if there is no answer here to a particular problem that bothers them, help should be sought from other sources. Keeping a problem to themselves without trying to find a satisfactory solution will not make it go away. The couple should remain strong in their faith that nothing should spoil their love for each other, and that with God's help they will overcome all difficulties.

We recommend reviewing this booklet repeatedly. The advice presented here comes from a wide variety of experts and provides answers to most of the problems that commonly arise. Therefore, if an issue does develop, look for an answer here first. Seeking professional help should only be necessary in extraordinary circumstances.

Remember, too, that not everything presented here will become a reality immediately after the wedding. Trust, sensitivity and openness develop over time. As the years of marriage go by, the couple will have new experiences that refresh and renew their love for each other. Even the occasional problem can serve to bring them closer, as they work together to find a solution. Throughout the marriage, the principles presented here can serve as guidelines. There is no doubt that a fulfilling love life enriches the couple's relationship and endows it with a special dimension.

The first few days after the wedding are days of joyous celebration – the wedding night, *Shabbat Hatan*, and the week of *Sheva Berakhot*.



On the other hand, this is also the couple's first experience of living together. It is not an easy time. Situations may arise that seem trivial to one partner, but critically important to the other. They will not always agree on how to run the new household. They will see each other not only at their best, as when they were dating, but also in less attractive states – first thing in the morning, without makeup, hair unkempt, and the like. In most cases, all of this is taking place while physical intimacy is forbidden to them - a difficult time for any couple, but especially for newlyweds just setting out on the road of marriage. In addition, as explained above, the period during which they are forbidden to each other after their first union is often extended because of the onset of menstruation.

The couple should be fully aware of the challenges that present themselves during this period. But they should also remember that this is a uniquely beautiful time; a time of new beginnings, a time of the special love of newlyweds. The couple has a unique opportunity, during this period when physical intimacy is forbidden to them, to focus on the emotional intimacy that is developing between them, on the joy of being together, and the exhilaration of building something that is entirely new, and their own. As explained elsewhere,<sup>69</sup> our attitudes and outlook ultimately govern our feelings and experiences.

1 *Berakhot* 62a

2 *Sota* 17a

3 In Israel they may turn to the Pu'ah Institute in Jerusalem, which offers counseling and assistance in this area, among others. They are located at 19 Azriel Street, Givat Shaul, Jerusalem, phone: 02-6515050.

4 Gen. 2:24

5 Lev. 19:2

6 The Sages teach that the *mitzva* to be holy was proclaimed in the presence of the entire nation of Israel. This indicates that the obligation to strive for holiness is not imposed on extraordinary individuals only, but on every member of the Jewish people. As the verse states: "Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy."

Yet, in practice, the term "holy" is usually applied only to unique individuals. This would seem to contradict our premise that every member of the Jewish people is commanded to be holy.

We may resolve this apparent contradiction by suggesting that there are two different levels of holiness. There is an exalted sanctity attained only by exceptional individuals. This level is reached only after traversing the path described in The Path of the Just, by Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, whereby a person first acquires the traits of watchfulness, alacrity, cleanliness, temperance, purity, piety, humility and the fear of sin. Only then can one aspire to this level of holiness.

There is, however, another level of sanctity; one demanded of "the entire congregation of the children of Israel." This is the holiness we invoke daily in the *Amida* prayer: "You are holy and Your Name is holy, and the holy ones will praise You every day," where the term "holy ones" refers to the entire Jewish people. So too the verse, "You shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," (Ex. 19:6) and many other such sources teach us that the Torah expects every member of the Jewish people to achieve and embody holiness.

We may ask, how can the single term "holiness" be applied to two such dramatically different forms of conduct? The answer is that God is the source of all holiness in our world; the closer we draw to Him, the higher we ascend on the spectrum of sanctity. It follows that we can achieve different degrees of holiness. The Jewish people, from its very inception, has been close to God – "Israel is My first-born son" – and therefore holy. When this nation – in whole or in part – lives in accordance with the Torah, it acquires an additional level of sanctity. Obviously, an exceptional person who acquires all the traits enumerated in The Path of the Just reaches a special level of closeness to God which earns the encomium "holy." Thus, one can speak of varying degrees of "holiness."

7 Gen. 4:1

8 *Iggeret ha-Kodesh*, attributed to Ramban, chapter 2

9 This refers to the situation in biblical times, when the husband could turn for satisfaction to a second wife. Yet, even authorities writing at a later period – when



- men were prohibited from marrying a second wife – spoke of the obligation as belonging to the husband. This may be because *halakha* generally focuses on the man. Also the man, by nature, tends to be the more active partner while the woman is more passive. Nevertheless, the obligation falls on both man and woman. See *Tur, Shulhan Arukh Even ha-Ezer* 76-77. However, this conclusion seems to conflict with the *halakha*, which requires a husband to fulfill the *mitzva* of *ona* by responding to his wife's desire for marital relations (*Orah Hayyim* 2401:1), but does not mention a *mitzva* for a woman to accede to her husband's desire for marital relations, only a general requirement to respond to his needs. The explanation for this distinction may lie in the essence of the *mitzva* of *ona*, which – as we have said – lies in building love between husband and wife. As will be discussed below, a woman's desire for marital relations grows out of a feeling of love; hence we require the husband to fulfill his obligation of *ona*. In contrast, a man's sexual drive is mostly a physiological reaction which can easily be aroused at any time, even in the absence of loving feelings. Therefore, a man's desire for marital relations does not necessarily represent evidence of love and does not give rise to an obligation of *ona* on his wife's part.
- 10 See for example *Shabbat* 140b, regarding R. Hisda's advice to his daughters how to behave with their husbands; see also Rashi and the other commentaries ad loc. Cf. *Nedarim* 20b.
  - 11 Gen. 2:24
  - 12 *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 240:1
  - 13 *Ibid.*
  - 14 Rema, *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 639:2, and *Mishna Berura*, no. 7.
  - 15 *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 615:1, 554:19, and *Mishna Berura*, no. 37
  - 16 *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 554:19, and *Mishna Berura*, nos. 39-40.
  - 17 *Shulhan Arukh Yoreh De'ah* 383:1
  - 18 *Mishna Berura* 240:7 and 664:8
  - 19 *Bi'ur Halakha*, on *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 240 – “*Mi-Leil Shabbat*”, and *Mishna Berura*, ad loc., no. 7.
  - 20 *Nedarim* 20b; *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 240:2-3, 6.
  - 21 *Darkhei Tahara*, p. 207
  - 22 *Mishna Berura, Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 240:25
  - 23 *Darkhei Tahara*, p. 206. *Kaf ha-Hayyim* 240:44 adds that the partition must be at least six feet long. Neither the *Shulhan Arukh* nor the *Mishna Berura* mention this condition. See also *Shemirat Shabbat Ke-Hilkhata* 24:30, which states that a partition of four *tefahim* (12-16 inches) is sufficient.
  - 24 *Shenot Mayyim Hayyim*, Maharshak, 118.
  - 25 See *Darkhei Tahara*, p. 209, which allows for leniency in exceptional circumstances, unless a *Sefer Torah* is present in the room.
  - 26 *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 240:6, and *Mishna Berura*, no. 23.
  - 27 *Shulhan Arukh Even ha-Ezer* 25:2.
  - 28 *Nidda* 17a

- 29 *Shulhan Arukh Even ha-Ezer* 25:4
- 30 *Mishna Berura, Shulhan Arukh Even ha-Ezer* 240:39
- 31 *Da'at Torah*, Maharsham 239
- 32 Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, *Responsa Yehave Da'at* IV, 21; Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, *Responsa Tzitz Eliezer* VII, 27.
- 33 *Siddur Kol Eliyahu*, p. 319; *Yehave Da'at* IV, 21. See also *Yalkut Yosef*, Blessings, p. 664, and *Darkhei Tahara*, p. 216.
- 34 *Mishna Berura* 239:5 and *Shulhan Arukh* 613:11.
- 35 *Mishna Berura* 4:39
- 36 *Darkhei Tahara*, p. 191
- 37 *Darkhei Tahara*, p. 186, based on *Kalla Rabbati*, chap. 2; *Tur Orah Hayyim* 240.
- 38 *Sota* 47a
- 39 For further guidance, see the various manuals on marital relations readily available in bookstores. See also R. Yehiel Faust, *Et Dodim*, and the biological introduction to his work. See also *Iggerot Moshé, Even ha-Ezer*, I, 102:6.
- 40 *Berakhot* 62a
- 41 *Shabbat* 140b
- 42 *Berakhot* 56a
- 43 *Kiddushin* 82b; *Bava Batra* 16b and 151a; the prayer of Ramban to be recited prior to marital relations; and elsewhere.
- 44 *Kalla Rabbati*, Chap. 2.
- 45 *Nidda* 31b
- 46 *Nidda* 31b
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 There is no known scientific correlation between the sex of the child and the state of the couple at the time of the cohabitation that led to conception. Various theories are proposed that bring the words of the Sages closer to reality as we know it. We, however, prefer the explanation offered in the text.
- 49 *Nidda* 71a
- 50 *Ba'alei ha-Nefesh, Sha'ar ha-Kedusha*.
- 51 See above, regarding the importance of 'giving.'
- 52 All of the above seems difficult to reconcile with the directive of the *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 140:8, which presents, as the ideal for a person of spiritual caliber, the performance of the conjugal act in haste, “like one forced by a demon”. The ideal as presented there seems to be that a man should engage in intercourse in the manner of a person who is forced to do so, so as to minimize his pleasure, and that he should keep the act as brief as possible. The *Shulhan Arukh* here is based mainly upon the Gemara in *Nedarim* 20b, concerning the statement of Imma Shalom, wife of Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkenos. See also Ra'avad, *Ba'alei ha-Nefesh, Sha'ar ha-Kedusha*, p. 120 (Rav Kapah edition), proposing a different interpretation of Rabbi Eliezer's behavior: that he kept the sexual encounter brief lest he think about some other woman during the act. This is also, actually, the simple meaning of the Gemara. Ra'avad mentions



as an alternative that a person may take his time over intercourse, so long as his intentions are pure and he will not think of any other woman. In other words, there is no principled opposition here to relaxed, loving intercourse, but rather an expression of concern lest a person entertain foreign thoughts. So long as the man knows that he is able to concentrate, during intercourse, on loving his wife, the couple should certainly conduct themselves in a relaxed, loving manner.

Many contemporary halakhic authorities have instructed their students to conduct themselves as we have described in the body of the text, for various reasons. Some have explained that the *Shulhan Arukh* above does not mean to represent practical guidance for a bride and groom at the outset of their marriage, nor even general guidance to couples for the duration of their marriages. As the *Shulhan Arukh* itself states – the standard that it sets out is for “*ba’alei nefesh*” – people who have elevated themselves to a spiritual level where bodily desires are no longer part of their experience; such select people may aspire to the asceticism appropriate to those who have ascended Ramhal’s “path of the righteous” and attained this status. It is apparently to such individuals that the *Shulhan Arukh* above addresses itself. For this reason this instruction is not recorded in the section of *Even ha-Ezer*, which sets out the husband’s duties to his wife with no mention of the above approach.

A review of the Beit Yosef demonstrates the range of opinions on this subject. It would seem that Rabbi Yosef Karo, author of the *Shulhan Arukh*, chose to record his instruction in this regard only in *Orah Hayyim* (140) but not in *Even ha-Ezer* (25), in order to teach us that not every custom and expression of piety is required by law. The relevant section of *Orah Hayyim* includes other moral teachings that are similarly not regarded as halakhically binding, for example 140:5,14,15. Hence it would seem that in this section the author saw fit to include moral, pietist teachings, while in *Even ha-Ezer* he focuses primarily on those laws that are halakhically binding.

Even in these matters of moral and pietist stringencies, there is debate among the leading halakhic authorities. Therefore I humbly suggest that ascetic instruction is appropriate to ascetics, and not to the general Torah-observant public. Furthermore, several contemporary authorities have recommended even to strictly observant people who maintain certain pietist customs, to behave in this regard in accordance with the approach that we have described, rather than following the instruction of the *Shulhan Arukh* in *Orah Hayyim*.

Clearly, in light of the above, neither partner should try to adopt the approach of the *Shulhan Arukh* without the other’s agreement. This principle is set out clearly in a well-known letter by Rabbi Y. Kanievsky (the Steipler Rebbe), who discussed this matter in correspondence with students at yeshivot in Bnei Brak. See also Magen Avraham ad loc. 8, and at the end of this booklet – the article by Rabbi Shmuel Ariel.

- 53 Lit. “place of nakedness,” euphemistic term for the genitals. This represents the majority view. There is no prohibition against the husband seeing his wife naked during the time they are permitted to each other, except for the *mekom ervah*. (As noted, the rules requiring that the couple be covered and that the room be darkened

apply only during the act of intercourse itself.). The Talmud in *Nedarim* 20b records a dispute between Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Yohanan ben Dehebai as to whether a husband may gaze upon and kiss “that place,” and whether the husband may lie with his wife on top of him. Rabbi Yohanan ben Dehebai prohibits both of these acts. Rabbi Yohanan disagrees and rules that “whatever a husband wishes to do with his wife, he may do.” Rambam in *Hilkhot Issurei Bi’a* 21:9 follows the lenient opinion: “A man’s wife is permitted to him. Therefore, whatever he wishes to do with her, he may do. He may cohabit with her whenever he wants and he may kiss any part of her body. Nonetheless, pious conduct dictates that one not behave in a lightheaded manner, but rather that he sanctify himself during intercourse.” Ra’avad, in his work *Ba’alei ha-Nefesh, Sha’ar ha-Kedusha*, also rules in accordance with Rabbi Yohanan. He maintains, however, that Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Yohanan ben Dehebai only disagree about the position of the husband and wife during relations, but concur that gazing at and kissing the *mekom ervah* is forbidden.

Rambam in *Hilkhot De’ot* (5:4-5) emphasizes that during marital relations the husband and wife are involved in the formation of a new life. For this reason, the general atmosphere and conduct surrounding their relations are of great importance. Rambam may be hinting that, while the law follows Rabbi Yohanan, he recommends that one act in accordance with Rabbi Yohanan ben Dehebai.

The *Shulhan Arukh* in *Even ha-Ezer* does not mention Rambam’s position in *Hilkhot Issurei Bi’a*, but Rema cites Rambam in his gloss to *Even ha-Ezer* 25:2. In *Orah Hayyim*, however, the *Shulhan Arukh* rules in accordance with Ra’avad who forbids gazing at and kissing the *mekom ervah*. The differing presentations in different sections of the *Shulhan Arukh* may be explained as follows: in *Orah Hayyim*, the *Shulhan Arukh* sets forth an elevated standard of pious conduct, as is evident from other rulings found there. In *Even ha-Ezer*, on the other hand, where the *Shulhan Arukh* records the basic standards required by *halakha*, this prohibition does not appear. In this context, Rema cites the lenient position of Rambam as the law, adding that “one who abstains from that which is permitted is called holy”. Most later authorities follow the *Shulhan Arukh* in *Orah Hayyim* and therefore forbid looking at and kissing the *mekom ervah*.

- 54 *Ketubot* 48a.  
 55 *Mishna Berura* 240:36.  
 56 *Nedarim* 20a.  
 57 *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 73-74.  
 58 R. Ya’akov Emden, *Siddur Beit Ya’akov*, “Behavior on *Shabbat* Eve”, Section 2, paragraph 2; *Mishna Berura* 240:39.  
 59 *Nidda* 17a  
 60 *Shulhan Arukh* 240:11 and Rema ad loc. See also *Darkhei Tahara*, p. 205.  
 61 Instead of immersing in a *mikveh*, the man may take a shower using at least 13 quarts of water. This mechanism may be used by a male after intercourse to satisfy the enactment of Ezra, but does not provide a substitute for a woman who requires a *mikveh*. *Mishna Berura* 88:4; Responsa *Shevet ha-Levi* I, no. 24, Responsa *Minhat Yitzhak* III, 15:11.



- 62 Additional information regarding muscle relaxation may be obtained from physiotherapists who specialize in this sphere.
- 63 A man and a woman between whom sexual relations are forbidden, may not be alone together behind closed doors, when it is unlikely that they will be interrupted by a third party. See Rema, *Shulhan Arukh* 192:4; *Badei ha-Shulhan* 192, Explanations - *kodem she-ba aleha*; *Taharat ha-Bayyit* p. 494; R. Shlomo Levi has also ruled accordingly. As a general rule, the prohibition of *yihud* for a newlywed couple addresses the concern that a couple that has not experienced intercourse before the onset of the wife's period, may be unable to restrain themselves from engaging in forbidden relations. In this case, however, the couple engaged in relations to the best of their ability, and the law assumes that their passions will not lead them astray, for they are currently unable to achieve greater intimacy.
- 64 *Shulhan Arukh* 192:4, and Rema and Shakh ad loc; *Darkhei Tahara* pp. 102-103; *Taharat ha-Bayyit*, I, p. 494.
- 65 This is probably the meaning of the claim attributed to the husband in various talmudic texts: "I have found an open opening." A man may not be able base his claim that his wife was not a virgin on the absence of bleeding, because her hymen may no longer have been intact – in which case bleeding would not have been expected. He can, however, still claim that she was not a virgin based on the fact that that he had no difficulty in his initial penetration. See also Dr. Uri Levi, in *Assia: Original Articles, Abstracts and Reports on Matters of Halachah and Medicine* (ed. M. Halperin), No. 57-58, Kislev 5757 (November 1996) (Vol. 15, no 1-2), pp. 83-91.
- 66 However, if there was penetration but no ejaculation, there is no room for concern that a drop of blood may have become lost in the semen; *Shi'urei Shevet ha-Levi*, 193, par. 1 - *vehipahu shikvat zera*. See, however, *Hokhmat Adam*, 115:15, who rules stringently on the matter.
- 67 *Taharat ha-Bayyit* I, p. 508; *Responsa Yabbi'a Omer I*, *Yoreh De'a* 15:12. R. Yaakov Ariel told me that Ashkenazi Jews may rely on this ruling as well.
- 68 Some later authorities disagree. See *Nishmat Avraham*, *Yoreh De'ah*, pp. 96-97, who cites various opinions. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach all rule leniently.
- 69 Section I of the book, Chapter 2, "Gratitude"

## THE SANCTITY OF MARITAL RELATIONS

R. SHMUEL ARIEL<sup>1</sup>

### ENJOYING SEXUAL RELATIONS - A SPIRITUAL VIEW

One of the most significant questions regarding the sanctity of the marital relationship is the proper attitude toward enjoying sexual relations. In other words, how are we supposed to relate to the sexual drive and the pleasure it provides?

Some halakhic sources indicate that the pleasure involved in sexual relations is an obstacle to sanctity. The clearest example is the statement of the *Shulhan Arukh* that a person should not intend to derive pleasure from intercourse, but should engage in the act only for the sake of fulfilling the *mitzva*.<sup>2</sup> The *Shulhan Arukh* also prescribes certain measures intended to minimize the pleasure associated with the act. In fact, this passage is not presented as binding law, but rather as advice for "people of spiritual stature" (*ba'alei nefesh*). Yet, the underlying message is clear: physical pleasure is the antithesis of holiness, and to the extent that a person minimizes his pleasure, so he will grow spiritually.

On the other hand, many of the great Torah luminaries of recent generations advise couples to disregard this section of the *Shulhan Arukh*, either completely or partially.<sup>3</sup> Some explain that the *Shulhan Arukh* is addressing only exceptional individuals, not the community as a whole; others suggest that its approach may be hurtful to women; etc.

Yet, these explanations share the assumption of the *Shulhan Arukh*



that ideally one should avoid deriving pleasure from marital relations. The only difference is that these more contemporary authorities recognize that this ideal is beyond the reach of most people today. But is this assumption true? Should one really strive to avoid deriving pleasure from sexual relations? Is the sexual drive inherently wicked?

In general, Judaism views the physical world as fundamentally good, but containing some corrupt elements. In practice, our task is to distinguish between the good and the evil and to avoid those aspects we deem negative.

Yet, according to the approach of the *Shulhan Arukh*, the emotional force of the sexual drive is entirely negative, and we would rather it did not exist.

This attitude raises the question: Why then did God create this drive? Is it there solely to test us? As a couple approaches marriage, they need to consider this all-important question: what is the spiritual significance of the sexual drive?

If we review the traditional Jewish sources on this issue, we find a wide range of approaches. As we have seen, there is a view that pleasure derived from marital relations distances a person from holiness, and one should try to minimize such pleasure. This perspective is reflected in the passage from the *Shulhan Arukh* discussed above. But a substantial number of Talmudic and medieval authorities take a more natural view and see nothing wrong with enjoying the conjugal act.<sup>4</sup> This perspective animates the guidance we bring here from leading contemporary rabbis – to act naturally during marital relations.

We do not mean to suggest that pleasure and holiness are one and the same. There is no doubt that sanctity is attained through the spiritual elevation of sexual relations, and not from physical gratification and pleasure. But, at the same time, pleasure is not antithetical to holiness, and there is nothing wrong with a couple acting naturally and

normally and deriving pleasure from marital relations. In fact, with the proper intent, the pleasure experienced may even serve as a means toward sanctity, as we shall explain below.

Let us examine some relevant rabbinic sources:

The Gemara relates that Rav, in the context of marital relations, “chatted and played and did as he was required.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, one of the greatest Talmudic sages is described as behaving naturally, happily, without attempting to minimize the pleasure of the act. The Gemara brings this as an example for us to follow, as Rav’s disciple, R. Kahana, declares: “This is Torah, and I must learn it.” In other words, our Sages explicitly instruct us to behave naturally during relations. In several Talmudic sources the husband is advised to ensure that his wife derives pleasure from marital relations; if he does so he is promised Divine reward.<sup>6</sup> Thus, not only did the Sages see nothing wrong with enjoying the act; they actively require that the husband and wife give each other pleasure.

The main source underlying the approach of the *Shulhan Arukh* – that pleasure should be minimized – is a Talmudic passage recounting how R. Eliezer would consummate the act quickly.<sup>7</sup> Many different explanations of R. Eliezer’s conduct have been proposed; the *Shulhan Arukh* quotes four such explanations and concludes that a person of spiritual stature follow all four of them, so as to minimize his pleasure. But this interpretation is by no means obvious: in the Gemara, R. Eliezer is asked to explain his behavior and says: “In order that I not cast my eye on another woman.” Thus, several medieval commentators conclude that the reason for R. Eliezer’s haste was to avoid having thoughts about another woman, and not to avoid deriving pleasure.<sup>8</sup>

Several Medieval authorities explore the concept of sanctity in the context of marital relations; they offer a variety of practical guidelines without even a hint at avoiding or minimizing one’s



pleasure.<sup>9</sup> Clearly they did not believe that deriving pleasure from the act distances a person from holiness. Other sources mention the enjoyment of marital relations as something natural and normal and in no way unworthy. Thus, for example, the *Menorat ha-Maor* states: "During intercourse, too, a person should not act solely for his own pleasure, but also to bring pleasure to his wife, and as one fulfilling the obligation placed upon him in [the commandment of] *ona* that is written in the Torah."<sup>10</sup> In other words, it is entirely natural that a man engaging in sexual relations intends to derive pleasure, and there is nothing wrong with this. But he must remember that the act is not for his pleasure alone, but also for the pleasure of his wife. Moreover, he is affirmatively obligated to ensure that his wife derives pleasure from the act.

Rashi goes further: not only is there nothing wrong with deriving pleasure, but it is actually desirable that a person enjoy intimacy with his wife. The Gemara (*Nidda* 17) states that a man should not engage in marital relations when he is tired. Rashi explains that in this state "he does not feel great desire for her, and he engages in relations purely for the sake of fulfilling the *mitzva* of *ona*, or to please her, while in his heart he rejects her." In Rashi's view, then, a husband should feel passion for his wife during intercourse; he should not merely be "going through the motions," while actually feeling indifferent toward her.

### **THE GOAL OF THE MITZVA OF ONA - TO BRING THE COUPLE TOGETHER**

Why does Rashi write that a man should feel passion for his wife during marital relations?

The explanation would seem to be that the *mitzva* of *ona* is not meant only to satisfy the physical needs of the couple, but also to strengthen the inner bond between them: "He shall cleave to his wife and they shall be one flesh."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is not sufficient that the couple engages in the physical act; they must unite together as partners in an emotional sense.

The passion and pleasure with which God imbued the act of marital relations play an important role in this process: when a husband and wife engage in intercourse, they share a powerful emotional experience, which creates a profound bond between them. Of course, a person may experience relations as a selfish pleasure – in which case there is nothing virtuous about it; quite the contrary. But with the proper intention, this emotional climax may be elevated to holiness. If the husband and wife focus their attention during intercourse on achieving greater closeness, they can achieve a kind of perfect union, physical and emotional. This will strengthen their home and the emotional bond between them. As our Sages taught, marital relations "implant peace in the home"<sup>12</sup>.

In his discussion of holiness, R. Yitzhak Alfasi (the Rif) also sets forth certain guidelines regarding the husband's conduct during marital relations: he should ensure that his wife derives pleasure from the act, and he should not think about any other woman. This teaches us that holiness exists not only in a person's relationship with God, but also in the love and the bond between husband and wife. We also see that the pleasure from sexual relations may create holiness – provided it is not selfish pleasure, but pleasure that issues from giving, from the creation of a mutual bond.



Regarding the Rif's specific guidelines, they may seem mundane and not related to the lofty concept of sanctity. But if we look deeper, we will see that they have profound meaning and demand serious effort:

***Not thinking about another woman.***

The idea that the couple should not, during intercourse, be thinking about other people, is self-evident. But more generally a couple needs to keep in mind that, when they get married, each of them becomes the one and only partner of the other. Everyone understands the importance of remaining faithful to one's spouse in practice, but there is also an emotional faithfulness of husband to wife and vice versa. For example, a man's obligation not to gaze immodestly at women assumes a new significance: not only is he fulfilling a covenant with his Creator, but also upholding the covenant with his wife.

Nowadays, especially, immodesty is all around us, on the streets, in the media, bombarding us with sexual images. Sadly, a person whose head is full of such images may find they have a harmful effect on the relationship with his or her spouse. The spouse will no longer be the "one and only," but will be forced to compete with these mental images. In contrast, a person who tries to keep his or her thoughts pure will be able to maintain a deeper bond with his or her spouse.

***Giving pleasure to one's wife***

As discussed at length in this pamphlet, during marital relations each partner should focus on stimulating the other. In this way, rather than a source of selfish pleasure, the act will become an expression of true love. The same principle applies when the couple experience disagreements regarding how frequently to engage in marital relations or whether to do so on a particular occasion. The goal of the experience is not one's personal pleasure, but deepening the mutual bond with one's spouse. With this as the couple's point of departure, they will be able to achieve the balance that is right for them.

***THE ESSENCE OF THE SEXUAL DRIVE***

To complete our discussion of the sanctity inherent in marital relations, let us briefly consider the sexual drive.

The sexual drive is enormously powerful. It consumes people far more than, for example, the urge to eat – despite the fact that sex, unlike food, is not necessary for an individual's survival. Because of the explosive force of the sexual urge, we tend to view it as a threat to spirituality and sanctity; we see the negative consequences when people lose control of their sexual impulses. These dangers are reflected in a variety of halakhic rules, such as the prohibition against *yihud* (a man and a woman being alone together), the severe punishments for the various types of forbidden sexual relations, and the requirement to give up one's life rather than violate these prohibitions.

By the same token, the vast power of the sexual drive also testifies to its enormous potential. It is precisely because of the extraordinary importance of the sexual drive that using it improperly is so grave a sin. Greater potential involves greater risk. The damage that can be caused by a kitchen knife cannot be compared to the potential damage of a nuclear reactor.

For this reason too we recite, during the wedding ceremony, the following blessing: "Blessed are You, Lord ... Who has commanded us concerning forbidden sexual relations ... and permitted us those married to us..." We specifically mention forbidden unions at a wedding, because these are two sides of the same coin, the risk and the potential: the contamination of forbidden sexual unions, on the one hand, and the sanctity of marriage, on the other.

What is the special power of the sexual drive? There are two main elements to it:

- a. The act of intercourse is the single greatest act of creation a human being can engage in: the creation of a new human



being. This is profoundly significant in and of itself - the creation of human life, bringing a new soul into the world. But on another level, a child represents family continuity, someone who will continue his or her parents' line of succession to a new generation, someone who embodies the unification of husband and wife as "one flesh."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, on the national level, a child constitutes the continuation of the chain of generations of the nation of Israel. Finally, on the universal level, the birth of a child represents the habitation of the world, as it is written, "He did not create [the earth] a wasteland; He formed it to be inhabited"<sup>14</sup>.

Thus, when marital relations have the potential of resulting in conception, the couple may feel a certain sense of awe, as they contemplate the possibility of joining as God's partners in the creation of a new human life.

- b. Intercourse requires two people – the husband and wife. Each one is required to climb out of his or her private self and join with the other. While all of us maintain friendships with people on different levels, we generally stay closed up within ourselves; we do not open ourselves fully to other people. But the act of intercourse forces a husband and wife to open up to each other, to utterly expose themselves to each other, physically and emotionally. This creates a unique bond, one that breaks down the barriers between them. The sexual impulse is a drive for physical closeness, a deep-seated desire to bond, to join with someone, to step out of one's private world.

These two elements are themselves connected: the act of marital relations binds a person to his or her spouse, but also serves to connect the couple to the generations of the Jewish people. Only a person who emerges from his or her solitary existence becomes

worthy of eternity, of descendants who will live on after he or she leaves this world: "And prepared for him, from himself, an everlasting edifice...."

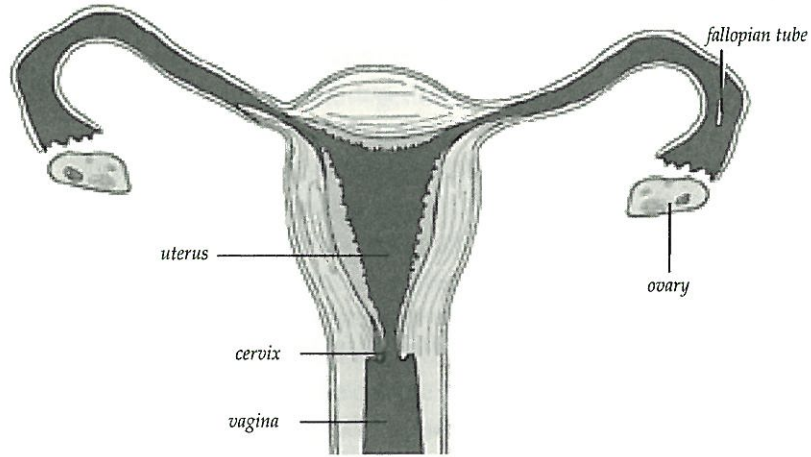
From this perspective, the act of marital relations is not a mundane act, one more pleasure like any other, but something momentous and special, with the potential to create a complete spiritual world, to join two souls together, and thereby to bring a new soul into the world.

- 1 Rosh Kollel Halakha at the hesder yeshiva of Otniel. See further on this subject in his article in *Tzohar* 20.
- 2 *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 240:1,8
- 3 See *Mishna Berura* 140 s.v. 36, and in *Sha'ar ha-Tziyyun* s.v.18; *Kafha-Hayyim* 140 s.v. 61. *Darkhei Tahara* does not cite these guidelines, and even sets forth contrary guidance. Other authorities have offered similar instruction, whether written or oral.
- 4 One might argue that even if there are different opinions on this issue, surely once the *Shulhan Arukh* rules that pleasure should be discouraged, we have no right to follow the other view. The answer, as stated above, is that many of the leading sages throughout the generations ruled contrary to the *Shulhan Arukh*, because they interpreted that passage as advice for a spiritual elite, not a ruling of normative law.
- 5 *Berakhot* 62a
- 6 *Nidda* 71a and other sources, as discussed earlier in this pamphlet.
- 7 *Nedarim* 20
- 8 It is possible to reconcile the directives of the *Shulhan Arukh* with this statement of R. Eliezer. But the interpretation of the *Shulhan Arukh* is certainly not the only possible one, and is not unanimously accepted by the Medieval authorities.
- 9 See Rif on *Shevuot* 1b, *Sefer ha-Eshkol*, *Laws of Modesty*, etc.
- 10 Sec. 185, p. 390 in the Mossad ha-Rav Kook edition.
- 11 Gen. 2:24; see Ramban (ad loc.), who explains this as referring to the emotional bond between the couple, over and above their performance of the physical act.
- 12 *Shabbat* 152a, and Rashi ad loc.
- 13 This is stated explicitly by Rashi, commenting on Gen 2:24; he interprets "they shall be one flesh" in the sense that the child unites both parents in a single body.
- 14 Is. 45:18

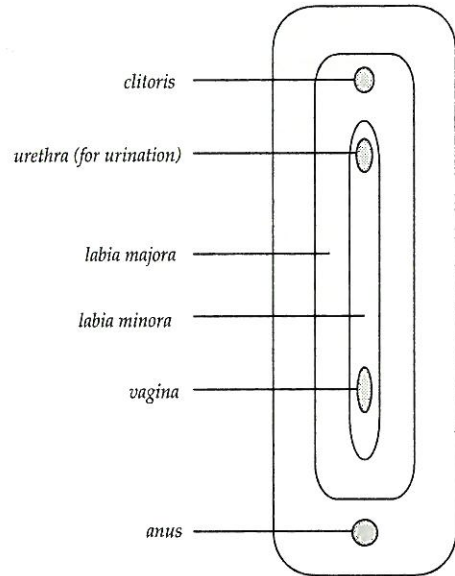


**BIOLOGICAL BACKGROUND — SUPPLEMENTARY DIAGRAMS**

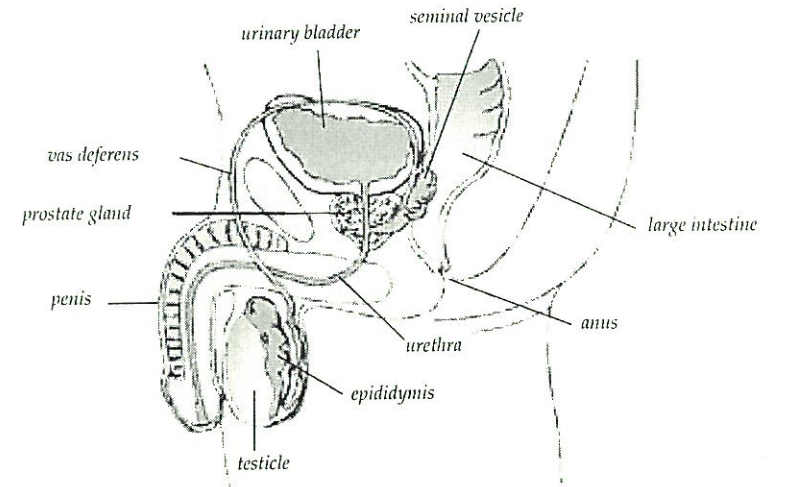
**FEMALE SEXUAL ORGANS (TRANSVERSE SECTION)**



**FRONT VIEW**



**MALE SEXUAL ORGANS (SIDE VIEW)**



**FEMALE SEXUAL ORGANS (SIDE VIEW)**

