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## An Introduction to the Nature of Sex and Marriage in Modern Jewish Life

One of the things that I find most fascinating about Judaism is how amenable it is to modern life, even when practiced in a fairly strict, traditional manner. I find it difficult to believe that our ancestors could have foreseen all of the situations and circumstances that we would face in the modern day. However, modern interpretation of the Torah, Talmud, and other texts, has allowed the practicing of Judaism to complement, not contradict, the manner of life that most people choose to lead. After partaking in Sinai Scholars I am especially struck by the flexible, yet still fulfilling, nature of our practices and traditions. This impression may very well be the result of the Lubavitch bias – the late Lubovitch Rebbe believed in finding and teaching every Jew – other groups of ultra-orthodox Jews might not be so forgiving and accepting, but I think that they find themselves a diminishing minority in the world.

The institution of Jewish marriage is one of the many aspects of our tradition and law that is amenable and complementary to modern life. From the insistence on chastity before marriage to the laws regarding family purity – ideas, laws and traditions that may seem outdated upon first inspection, in fact, provide fantastic guidelines for some of life's greatest joys: finding and keeping a partner, and finding fulfillment and joy in the conception and nurturing of children. Among these laws and traditions are rules governing the nature of sex in the marriage. I believe that traditions such as chastity among the unmarried, the mikvah, the various traditions of the wedding ceremony, and

other rules and traditions that are somehow tied to sex, make it a very positive, powerful, and holy force in Judaism. It seems that sex, evidence of the remnants of man's carnal, uncivilized aspect, is often considered base, taboo, or somehow wrong. This is not just in other religions, some of which consider sex a motive for self-castigation, but to a large extent in modern society.

To begin this (brief) exploration into the nature of marriage and sexuality in Judaism, let me progress chronologically. I begin with the case of children and young adults. As with most other cultures and religions, the Jewish way of life very heavily discourages pre-marital sex and sexual contact between the un-married. Young boys and girls are not encouraged to interact excessively, in order to avoid the inflaming of passions and carnal instincts. This separation ultimately serves to heighten the apparent importance of sex and interaction with the opposite sex. Put simply, people always want what they cannot have; therefore, separating young men and women elevates the uniqueness and importance of the interaction when it does occur. This separation, however, cannot occur without a rigid family structure and a strong set of ideas that have been ingrained since childhood. The abstinence from physical contact among betrothed couples makes them all the more anxious to give themselves to each other, but it also forces the establishment of a certain level of communication between the two people – they learn to deal with relational issues, and with each other, rather than simply skirting the issue by engaging in a meaningless sexual act. It is all too often that children and young adults today partake in meaningless sexual acts that leave them mentally or physically traumatized, and often result in unwanted pregnancies.

Continuing onwards, our aforementioned young couple finally reaches the wedding day. At this point immersion in the mikvah has already occurred for the first time, but I will address this later as it is an act that primarily occurs after marriage. The most prominent symbol of the Jewish wedding is the chupah under which the bride and groom are married. This symbolizes the union of the two people in a house that has been sanctified with the blessing of G-d. In fact, this is not merely symbolic, as it is the husband's responsibility to provide food and shelter for his wife; if he does not do so it is considered grounds for divorce. However, more interestingly, the third mandated responsibility, the incompleteness of which again mandates divorce, is the sexual satisfaction of the wife. This is not an idea that I have ever come across in learning about other religions and cultures, which shy away from female sexuality. It is generally held that women are more holy than men – it is they who have specific responsibilities, and the only specifically gender-specific mitzvah: lighting the Shabbat candles. The fact that husbands must sexually satisfy their holier counterparts makes sex a holy act unto itself. In modern terms it is clearly of paramount importance that the wife be satisfied in the relationship in order to ensure the happiness of her husband and even more importantly that of her children. It goes almost without saying that a cohesive family unit is the one that is most likely to result in successful, productive, and happy offspring, who will in turn serve as positive role models for their own children.

Let us return to the marriage ceremony. Upon completion of the marriage ceremony and all its parts (circling the bride, bestowal of the ring, stomping on the glass) the bride and groom are taken to a private room where they are allowed to be together unaccompanied for the first time. This is a momentous occasion, truly marking the

beginning of their lives together – sexually, spiritually and practically. From this point onwards, one of the most egregiously wrong acts that either husband or wife could partake in is adultery. There is no commandment that mandates marriage or procreation, but there is one that specifically prohibits adultery. It is said that G-d makes matches in Heaven and sanctifies every marriage. A violation of this sanctity is like a slap in the face to G-d himself.

The final idea that I will touch upon is that of immersion in the mikvah. It is said that during a woman's menstrual flow, and in the weeklong period following it, she is spiritually impure. During this time she sleeps separately from her husband and does not partake in any physical contact with him. At the end of this period she immerses herself in the waters of the mikvah in order to cleanse her soul. A woman does this for the first time prior to her marriage, in order to be spiritually pure for this important event. To the unknowing eye this might seem like an outdated, silly tradition; however, I believe that it can be a tremendously beneficial one. The mikvah immersion does not serve to cleanse the woman physically – she should do that beforehand – and the tradition is not instituted simply to separate a woman from her husband so that he should not witness or have to interact with her during a time in which she is physically unclean. Rabbis explain that women are by their nature more spiritual than men and become spiritually unclean at this time; this is why they must immerse themselves. Men, on the other hand, are not nearly as spiritual as women, so they cannot become spiritually impure, and thus do not immerse in the mikvah.

There are multiple consequences of the mikvah tradition and the separation that it creates. Firstly, the physical separation results in an increased sexual desire among both

parties – again, this follows the principle of wanting what one cannot have. This increased passion serves to strengthen the relationship. Just about anyone will grant that “sex is a powerful force” is a true statement, whether they believe that it is a good one or not. In most other religions and cultures the use of sex is not often encouraged as a means of strengthening a relationship, but I believe that Judaism’s stance on this issue is much more realistic and practical. Secondly, the lack of a physical relationship necessitates expression and communication by different means. The husband will not see his wife as a sexual object during this time, and he will be forced to interact with her on a different level – namely intellectual and spiritual. Finally, it cannot possibly be a coincidence that the time during which a husband and wife are allowed to engage in sexual activity corresponds perfectly to the time during the ovulation cycle in which a woman is most likely to get pregnant. Although sex, and abstinence from it during menstruation and the week following, can be a powerful tool to hold a relationship together, as well as a great pleasure, it is still a couple’s “genetic destiny,” as it were, to reproduce. As such, sexual acts such as masturbation or ejaculation outside of the vagina are frowned upon.

There is, of course, much more to the story than this quick introduction that I have laid out here. There are all sorts of explanations and stories behind the various marriage rituals, such as the groom covering the bride’s head with the veil. There are many questions about what is permissible in the bedroom: what kinds of birth control are allowed, what kinds of sexual acts are permissible, and more. One’s rabbi is always in the best position to answer these kinds of questions. However, this much is clear: Judaic tradition and law relating to marriage and sex is surprisingly (to some) insightful – even

for the modern way of life. If nothing else, these guidelines were set down by men wiser and more pensive than us, and they provide the basis for intuitions that should, ideally, guide our actions.