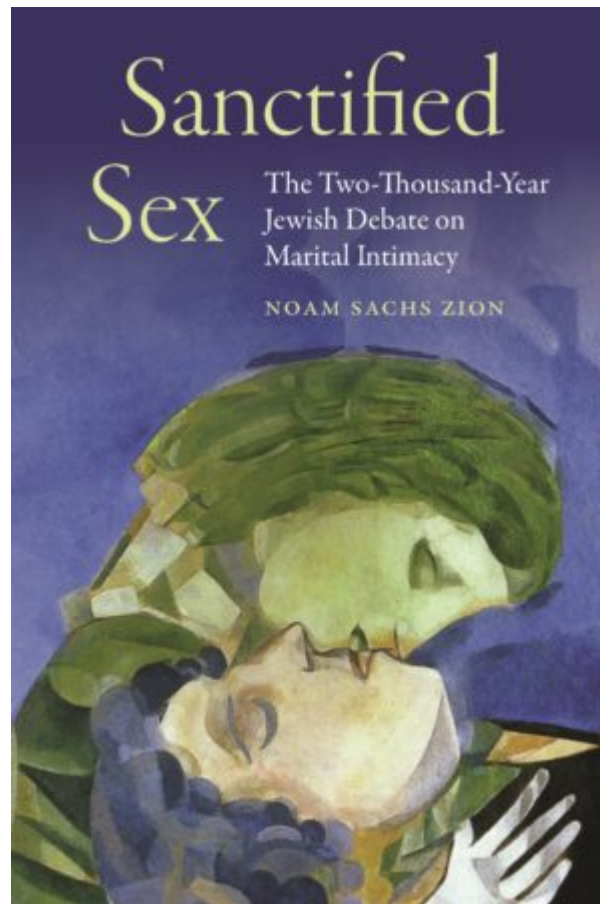


**The Two-Millennium Jewish Debate on Sex Education and Marital Intimacy:**

**From Espionage in Talmudic Bedrooms to the Contemporary Ultra-Orthodox Guidebooks for Newly Married Couples**

**Noam Zion**

**Hartman Institute in Jerusalem**



<https://jps.org/books/sanctified-sex/> 276-1466-6 \$36.00

## Opener: Reb Zalman Schacter Salome on Sacred Sex Education<sup>1</sup>

Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (1924–2014)



---

<sup>1</sup> Chabad missionary to Jewish students on American college campuses in the 1950s (along with “the singing rabbi,” Reb Shlomo Carlebach). After leaving Chabad and Orthodox Judaism (1962), he founded the Boston Havurah (1968). A decade later (1978) he created Bnai Or (later renamed Pnei Or to eliminate the masculine bias in the term *bnai* which means, literally, sons). Eventually it grew into **ALEPH**: The Jewish Renewal Movement and a seminary for neo-Hasidic Judaism that incorporated “vernacular Kabbalah” (integrating Jewish and Far Eastern meditational techniques)

## **1. Reb Zalman: Conflicting Models of Sex Education**

### **– His Yeshiva, The NY Subway, and the 1960s Movement for Sexual Liberation**

#### **a. Sex and Guilt: My Ultra-Orthodox Sex Ed:**

When I was a student in the yeshiva, I remember thinking of sexuality as that lousy trick that God played on us. How could God do such a terrible thing as to implant in us an urge that is so difficult to resist? I would even get “bad thoughts” from looking at the ads for Maidenform bras that were in the subway. (2007)

#### **b. Sex and Consumerism: Our Western Sex Ed:**

For Reb Zalman, the commercialization of sex in American media disenchant physical intimacy by turning it into a self-centered consumerism of erotic sensations.

#### **c. Sacred Sexuality as Real Sexual Liberation**

Sacred sex is the experience of ecstasy; it is the real sexual revolution. Sacred sexuality is about love—not merely the positive feeling between intimates, but an overwhelming reverence for all embodied life on whatever level of existence. . . . Sacred sexuality is about the re-enchantment of our lives. It is about embracing the imponderable mystery of existence. (1994)

#### **d. Reb Zalman’s Alternative Sex Ed:**

I ask my Bar Mitzvah boys, “Do you masturbate?” And first they are a little sheepish about it and then they say, “Yes,” and I say, “You know what? It is a good thing to do on the Sabbath! Take your time, put on some music, and explore your body and what feels good for you, and most important, let God in.”

**I fail my children when I cannot take them into our bedroom and show them how it’s done.** Every generation learns so much from generations past about everything else, but [about] our sexuality and how to make it sacred sex [that] we have to pick up in the gutter? The wise elder can encourage people to make love sacramentally, transforming a physical act into prayer and celebration.

## I. The Biblical Mitzvah of Onah – “how it’s done.”



Rembrandt, The Jewish Bride

## 2. Mitzvat Onah: From the Husband’s Prerogative to the Wife’s Conjugal Rights

- a. **Exodus 21:9-11:** “A husband should treat his wife in accord with the law of [marriageable] women. So if he marries additional [woman], he must not deprive his first wife of her *sheira*, her *kesut*, and her *onah*. If he does not provide these three, she exits [the marriage]...” (Exodus 21:9b-11)
- b. **Rashi** (11<sup>th</sup> c. France): "her *sh'eira*, her *kesut*, and her *onah*" are her food, her clothing and her sexual intercourse.
- c. **Ramban** (13<sup>th</sup> c. Spain): **(1) *sh'eira*** is a term for a "flesh" and blood relative. It recalls Adam and Eve who became one flesh in the garden, one family. But it may also mean that she may not be deprived of the touch of flesh of her husband. He is not to follow the Persian custom of having intercourse in his clothes. **(2) *kesut*** is her bed "clothes," her linens. She must be wooed in her bed in an honorable fashion, not on the floor like a prostitute. **(3) *onah*** is her "times" of lovemaking, regularly scheduled, even if a second wife is taken.
- d. **Rabbi Isaac Sher** (20<sup>th</sup> century, Mussarnik, Israel): “One who has sexual relations with his spouse without great desire has violated the Torah’s prohibition on denying one’s wife her *onah* (conjugal rights).”

## II. Talmudic Sexual Espionage: Learning about Marital Intimacy - “Zooming Into the bedroom” and Mandatory Rabbinic Voyeurism



### 3. Under Rav’s Bed: Kahana in the Master’s Bedroom: “This [too] is Torah and to learn I must!”

Rav Kahana went in under Rav's bed. He heard him chatting, jesting (playing, laughing, or engaging in foreplay) and gratifying his needs.

Rav Kahana said to him: "It seems as if the mouth of Abba had never before tasted that dish!"

Rav replied: "Kahana, are you *there*? Get out, for it is not the way of the world [i.e. it is not good manners (*derekh erez*)].

Rav Kahana answered back: “This [too] is Torah and to learn I must!”

(TB Brakhot 62a; see also TB Hagiga 5b)<sup>2</sup>

### 4. Wooing Your Wife like a Rooster Courts a Hen (4<sup>th</sup> c. Babylonia) (TB Eruvin 100b).

The Rabbis idealize the courting behavior of roosters as a positive model to emulate: “A rooster woos/appeases/courts [the hen] before performing intercourse,” as one sees when the rooster prances before the hen, stretches his wings, and scraps his feet.

---

<sup>2</sup> **Akiba in the Outhouse: This [too] is Torah**

Rabbi Akiba said: "Once I entered after Rabbi Joshua into the outhouse and I learned three things: one defecates facing not from east-to-west but from north-to-south; one defecates not standing up but sitting down; and one wipes [one's bottom] not with the right but with the left hand."

Ben Azzai told him: "Even to that extent you were brazen before your rabbi's face?"

Rabbi Akiva answered: “This [too] is Torah and to learn is what I must do!” (TB Brakhot 62a)

## 5. Imma Shalom's Homespun Advice on Eugenics

They asked Imma Shalom: "How do you merit such particularly beautiful children (sons)?"

She answered: "[My husband, Rabbi Eliezer] does not have intercourse [literally. "talk" (*m'sapeir*)] with me - neither at the beginning nor at the end of the night, but only around midnight.

I once asked him: Why [do we always have intercourse at midnight]?

He answered me: "So that I do not direct my eyes to another woman!"

That way his children would not become *mamzerim* / bastards.

Then, when he is having intercourse, he uncovers only a handbreadth and then he covers over a handbreadth. He acts as if a demon were coercing him [to have intercourse]." " (TB Nedarim 20b)

## Medieval Halachic Debate

### 6. Maimonides (12th c. Egypt) legislates according to Rav:

"A husband: shall not coerce her and force her into intercourse against her will (i.e. rape), but rather seek her consent and as an outcome of conversation (*sikha*) and joy (*simkha*)" (Maimonides, Laws of Marriage 15: 17).

### 7. Rav Yosef Karo (The Code of Jewish Law, *Shulhan Arukh* (1565) legislates according to Rabbi Eliezer:

- a. "Engage in intercourse with fear and awe just as it says of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus who would only uncover [his or her] body one handbreadth at a time and then cover it up again and who would behave as if he were being forced to do intercourse against his will as if coerced by a demon." (Yosef Karo, *Shulkhan Arukh*, Orah Haim, Laws of Modesty 240:8)
- b. "Even when one is having intercourse at the time of *onah*, **one should not intend to enjoy himself** but rather he should think of himself as one who is just **paying off a debt** for he is obligated to provide *onah* [to his wife according to the ketubah agreement], as one who is obligated to perform the Creator's mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply, and as one who wants to have children who will engage in Torah and keep Israel's mitzvot." (*Arukh HaShulkhan Even HaEzer* 25:4)
- c. A person should accustom himself to **extra holiness**, purity of thought, and proper character . . . Therefore, he should avoid levity, drunkenness, and erotic words.



### III. Ultra-Orthodox Guidelines for Newlyweds based on Talmudic Bedroom Protocols (19480 to today)



Unorthodox, Netflix Series

#### 1. Hassidic Revolution of Rebbe of Gur (1948 to today)

**Unpublished Ordinances on Holiness on Marital Intimacy** promulgated by 4<sup>th</sup> Rebbe of Gur Yisroel Alter (grandson of the author of the Sefat Emet)

FREQUENCY of Onah (Marital intercourse):

The couple shall have sexual intercourse **only once a month**, on *leil tevilah* (the night after the wife’s immersion in the *mikveh* at the end of her halakhically prescribed menstrual period).

QUALITY:

of

Erotic

Intimacy:

During intercourse, the couple shall aim to minimize physical contact. The husband shall wear some of his clothes, including his *tsitsit* (considered a *segulah*—supernatural remedy—against the sexual drive) and will not hug or kiss his wife or engage in any behaviour that is not required for the performance of the act of intercourse itself.

- The husband shall direct his thoughts as far away as possible from the sexual act.

SOCIAL DISTANCING with YOUR SPOUSE:

- Never walk alongside one’s wife in public but keep a distance of at least four cubits (about two meters). The husband should not address his wife by her first name.”

## **2. Litvak Revolution (from 1950s to today)**

**Rabbi Moshe Aharon Shohatovitz** (Litvak Ultra-Orthodox Educator, 2003):

**“Calling Out” a Yeshiva Teacher for his Frumkeit (Stringency on Marital Intimacy)**

In a Litvak yeshiva a misguided Talmud teacher told his young married students to follow what the Rav Yosef Karo legislates in the Shulkhan Arukh (1565):

“Engage in intercourse with fear and awe just as it says of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus who would only uncover [his or her] body one hand’s breadth at a time and then cover it up again and who would behave as if he were being forced to do intercourse against his will as if coerced by a demon.”  
(Shulkhan Arukh OH Laws of Modesty 240:8)

This stringent teacher’s ascetic instructions to his young married students so angered Shohatovitz that he dragged the teacher before Rav Kanievsky, head of the yeshiva, who interrogated the teacher as follows:

Rav Kanievsky: “When you do this act [of conjugal intercourse with your own wife] in fear and awe, *whom* do you fear?”

Teacher: “I fear God for intercourse involves the indwelling of the Shekhinah, so I do it with fear and awe.”

Rav Kanievsky responded incredulously: “You are concerned with the indwelling of the Shekhinah?! In your house there is no Divine presence! For we have learned: ‘The Shekhinah does not dwell where there is no joy.’ If there is any fear and awe in this act in your house it is *your wife’s fear* and awe before you. You are nothing but a lion who assaults and devours.”

## **3. Litvaks Reviving the Talmudic Kamma Sutra of Rav Hisda's Sex Ed for his Daughters**

- a. Rav Hisda taught his daughters. He hid a precious stone in one hand and a clod of earth in the other. He let them see the precious stone [in one hand], but he did not let them see the clod [hidden in the other hand] until he had caused them pain [by the denial of their desire to see what was in the other hand]. Then he did show it. (TB Shabbat 140b)





b. **Rashi** (12<sup>th</sup> c. France) explains the metaphor: “When your husband is feeling your body with a hand to the breast and a hand to that place [i.e. the vagina], give him your breasts to arouse his desire, but withhold the place of intercourse until his desire and his affection are aroused and he is feeling the pain of desire, then reveal it to him.”

c. **Rav Moshe Aharon Shohatovitz** (21<sup>st</sup> c. Israel): **Contemporary Practical Maxims from Rav Hisda for Brides**

“Let them see the precious stone” – **The woman must be active in this situation.** As opposed to the Christians who hold that a woman’s modesty entails her passivity, the Torah requires her to show off her precious stone. The

woman must arouse her husband’s sexual desire and she must respond with her active support to the man who is also seeking to arouse his own desire by engaging in foreplay with the woman’s genitals. The woman must use her guile, her wisdom, to tantalize her husband until his desire is so aroused that it hurts.

#### d. **Counselling for Newly Weds and the Model of Rav Hisda’s Sex Ed**

**Bridal Counselor** (an Orthodox woman scholar who counsels young brides for Rav Shlomo Aviner):

“Many brides are very anxious about the physical ties because they do not know what will happen. Hence they are afraid. Therefore women [bridal counselors] are obligated to explain to them exactly what will happen... There are inner restraints about talking about these topics and it is hard to unburden oneself from the shame. But the reality shows that brides are very pressured about this and that causes crises.

A woman also needs to make an effort to enjoy the physical connection. She must be very liberated (*m'shuhreret*) and cast aside all psychological restraints. **She should not be passive** and she must know that too belongs to Judaism.

Sometimes the girl is very delicate, pious and modest, and then the man feels bad and he does not reach (sexual) satisfaction. He feels that he is evil and uncouth and then he gets angry, nervous, and tense. Finally, he pours out his wrath on his wife without really knowing what he is doing... **Many women cannot understand that a student of Torah [like their yeshiva husband] can be such a man of desires.** But she should not be upset and she should not give him a sense that he is not normal. After all the Talmud reports what **Rav Hisda** taught his daughters].”



Gustav Klimt, The Kiss

#### IV. Reviving Desire in the Haredi Community:

**Rav Isaac Sher's Education for Sacred Eros** (Haredi Litvak Mussar Educator, Israel, d. 1952):

***The Sanctity of Israel: Pastoral Letter to Yeshiva Newlyweds (c. 1950)***

##### 1. Reviving Desire as the Educational Mandate for Today's Haredim

The virtue of love “is not properly developed among us [the *haredim*].” Therefore the couple must learn to speak words of love, “for surely, this love is natural, and it is a *mitzvah* to enhance and develop it properly.” “When the couple comes together, the husband must address his wife in a way that conveys not only ‘awe, piety, and chastity,’ but also **tenderness, affection, and erotic love (*agavim*)** ... The husband must speak to his wife explicitly even ‘about her [physical] beauty.’”

Parents and teachers, who truly and painfully worry about the happiness of their seed, ought to teach their children and students . . . the mitzvah of igniting [the flame of love] and preparing nature [i.e., bodily desire] for the act of sanctity [onah] which is the essence of happiness in life—namely, to delight in the Lord and to sanctify oneself in God’s sanctity. . . . For the core of sanctity is their union, which can only come about through powerful love between them, so that they become one in body and soul.

##### 2. Rav Isaac Sher: Every Night a Bride

One should learn from the case of Rav that it is a mitzvah to act lightheadedly (*kalut rosh*) with one’s wife exactly as she wishes as if he were a bridegroom just emerging from the wedding canopy who had never had intercourse in his life. She wants [him to behave] that way, so that she too will feel like a bride at the moment of her wedding. . . . And that is the way they should behave their whole lives . . . as it says, *I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me* (Song of Songs 6:3)

A couple would be wise to keep a notebook (*pinkas*) from their wedding celebration and to record all the words of love and compliments they spoke to one another as loving companions from each day and night of the seven days of their marital festivities. Then they should reread them on the [monthly] night of the immersion. Isaac Sher: “to imagine themselves in the Garden of Eden.”



### 3. **Rav Isaac Sher: Sacred Sex**

Desire itself is sanctified from its impurity when it brings them together to become one flesh. It is as important an act as prayers and sacrifices, and the fire of desire between man and woman is similar to the fire on the altar over which the Shekhinah dwells.

### 4. **Rav Isaac Sher: “To imagine themselves in the Garden of Eden.”**

The Rabbis say that God planted in the heart of Adam and Eve feelings of love and beauty. Then the Holy One [like the best man, *shushbin*, who arranges the wedding] braided her hair and brought her to Adam. He and she were happy with her beauty. . . . Even today at every wedding the Holy One is the true *shushbin*, making the couple happy.

### 5. **Dream Therapy during Intercourse:**

The woman is filled with love and pleasure arising from sanctity and spiritual elevation so that when she reaches the apex of the act [of intercourse] she is fully intoxicated, hovering in the world of imagination. Then she dreams pleasant dreams illustrated with beautiful images of angels filled with light and radiance flying above her and feting her with the very same pleasures as in the Garden of Eden itself. So too the man can in this desire, in this act, and with this woman be filled with elevated thoughts and elevated illustrations of love and sanctity in their unification.

### 6. **Rav Isaac Sher quotes Zohar (13<sup>th</sup> c. Spain): The Art of a Husband Courting his Wife**

One who wishes to join with his wife, must first convince her and sweeten her up with words, otherwise he should not sleep with her. For the goal is that their desire should become one—without compulsion. (Zohar I, 49a)

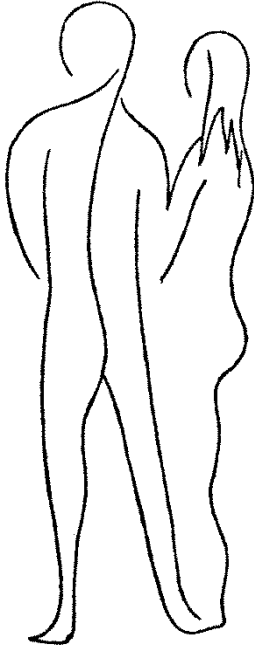
Adam’s first speech to the newly created woman—*And Adam said: “This time is it, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, so this shall be called ‘woman’ for she was taken from man”* (Gen. 2:23).

Zohar elucidates:

Come and look what it says: *Adam said: “This time!”* (Gen. 2:23)—These words of pleasantness, like a fragrance, draw her in affection and draw her to fulfill his desire and to arouse her to love him. Look how these words are filled with perfume, how many words of love such as *bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh*—show they are one and there is no separation between them at all.

Now he begins to praise her: *This shall be named “Woman”*—“She is incomparable! She is the most precious one of the household. In her presence all other women are as monkeys compared to humans, but she is complete perfection. This one

and no other!" . . . All sorts of words of love [that Adam speaks to Eve] . . . draw her in love, so she will cleave to him [as it says, *therefore a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and become one flesh*—Gen. 2:23-24]. (Zohar I, 49b)



## **Coda: The Work (Avodah) of Lovemaking**

### **(1) Lovemaking as Worship: A Labor of Love**

**Zohar teaches, “There is no labor like the [sacred] labor (avodah) of love.”**

**Rainer Maria Rilke, Austrian Poet:** “Those who love must act as if they had a great work to accomplish.”

**(2) Esther Perel, couple therapist: “Seducing my partner?”**  
(educated in Hasidic Antwerp):

“If you don't want sex to be another item on your to-do list, don't treat it like one. I'm not talking about scheduling sex, I'm talking about creating an erotic space and that takes time. What will occur in that space is open-ended, but the space itself is marked by intentionality.”

“Quite a few of my patients balk at the idea of deliberateness when it comes to sex. They find these strategies too laborious for the long haul, believing they should no longer be necessary after the initial conquest. ‘Seducing my partner? Do I still have to do that?’ ‘Why should I? You're supposed to love me no matter what!’”

“Just because you live with someone doesn't necessarily mean he's readily available. If anything, he requires more attention, not less. If you want sex to remain humid, this is the kind of attention you have to bring to it.” (*Mating in Captivity*)

## **Appendix: In the boudoir with Orthodox Jewish Photographers**

In her article, “In the boudoir with Orthodox Jewish women” (*The Guardian*, Sept. 2, 2015), Debra Kamin explores the use of photography in the cultivation of sensuality among contemporary Orthodox brides and wives. She reports on a recent development of sensual portraiture as an increasingly popular genre among Orthodox women. Perhaps her discoveries echo Rav Hisda's insight that one must instruct the pious daughters of Israel about making themselves more erotic in their sexual encounters with their

husbands. Orthodox women cannot become good sexual partners without knowledge, self-esteem and a strong religious mandate to become better lovers.

Kamin describes an Orthodox wife, residing in an Orthodox settlement in the West Bank with four children, who hired a female Orthodox photographer to create an erotic album for her husband:

A is a 30-year-old mother of four. In accordance with Jewish custom, she covers her hair with a hat or scarf, and wears modest clothing that doesn't reveal her knees, shoulders or cleavage. Today [in her photo shoot], however, she looks different. Dressed in a lacy black negligee, her hair styled in loose waves and her eyes done up with smoky powder, she lounges on a bed in an apartment in suburban Jerusalem and gazes coyly at a photographer's camera. "Come closer," the photographer, Rebecca Sigala, says to her. "Imagine the lens is your husband, and give him a smile."

Kamin explains the context:

"A has purchased today's boudoir session as an eighth anniversary gift for her husband. The photos will be presented to him in an album and remain private between the two of them. The shoot begins with hair and makeup...a number of lacy nightdresses, and even one of her husband's unbuttoned dress shirts. But while she thinks he will be delighted by the photos, she says she wouldn't want anyone in her community to know about the experience. 'It's simply too private. Intimacy is something you share just with your husband.'"

The Orthodox boudoir photographer explains the religious orientation behind her profession:

**"As observant Jews, we believe our sexuality is private and sacred. And since that part of ourselves is so holy, when we express ourselves within that realm, we can connect on a higher level – not just with ourselves, but with our husbands and with God."**

This Israeli wife, who was photographed in provocative clothing and positions, says: "It's something I want to be able to tap into. It's about the experience I am having today, and being able to know that I'm sexy. I can lay here on the bed and feel beautiful, feel *shalem* [whole, or complete]."

Orthodox women who turn to these photographers want to develop their own sacred sensuality, but they also want to enhance their sexual connection to their husbands by cultivating their erotic beauty.

The halakhic basis for this concern to make themselves more attractive to their husbands is well-grounded in Rabbi Akiba's policies about maintaining a wife's beauty. Rabbi Akiba, in contrast with the "early elders," made allowances for wives to keep their husbands' attention. He says, as we mentioned above, that a menstruant woman may put on eye-shadow or rouge and adorn herself with colorful clothing even during the time of her menstrual impurity. Otherwise, her lack of beauty "will lead to contention, and the husband may want to divorce her." Rabbi Akiba himself ruled that should a husband find another woman who is more attractive to him than his present wife that he has legitimate grounds for divorce. Therefore he made lenient halakhic decisions to make it easier for wives to maintain their allure.





"I don't care what religion you are — if you don't keep your husband excited, someone else will," says Malky: "It's not against Halakha [Jewish law] to keep your husband satisfied."

An Orthodox boudoir photographer from Brooklyn says her photo shoots sometimes double as therapy sessions: "For frum women, it can be extremely difficult to perceive themselves as beautiful. They're always having babies, or their friends are having babies and they can't, and they feel their bodies are somehow damaged. But everyone is beautiful in their own way, and by the end of the shoot, they can see themselves differently."

A Jerusalem photographer of Orthodox wives concurs with this therapeutic perspective on her profession: "There are a lot of misconceptions within the religious community, and there are women who feel trapped by those misconceptions. This can open their eyes to realizing that they can be religious, modest, and beautiful daughters of Hashem and still do something like this."

**It is likely that Orthodox men need their own therapeutic instruction in order to become better lovers and to fulfill their halakhic mandate to arouse their wives to perform *onah* willingly and to satisfy their wives' sexual needs.**