

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

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I. Opener: Reb Zalman on Sacred Sex Education

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)

Sex and Consumerism: Our Western Sex Ed:

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

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 our sexuality and how to make it sacred sex. 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.

Reb Zalman: Sacred Sexuality

Sacred sex is the experience of ecstasy, 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)

II. The Biblical Mitzvah of Onah



Rembrandt, The Jewish Bride

1. The Mitzvah of the One-Year Honeymoon

- a. When a man has taken a bride, he shall not go out with the army and not be assigned to it for any purpose. He shall be exempt one year for the sake of his household, to make happy the woman he has married. (Deut. 24:5)
- b. Rabbah (4th century, Babylonia) says: "A man is [always] obligated to make his wife happy with devar mitzvah" (a euphemism for onah) (TB Moed Katan 8b)

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

- a. **Exodus 21:9-11**

“He shall deal with her according to the law of [marriageable] women and if he marries another [woman], he must not deprive her of her *sheira*, her *kesut*, and her *onah*. If he does not provide these three, she goes out...” (Exodus 21:9b-11)

b. **Rashi** (11th c. France): "her *sh'eira*, her *kesut*, and her *onah*" are her food, her clothing and her sexual intercourse.

c. **Ramban** (13th 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** (20th 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).”

III. Sexual Espionage: Learning about Marital Intimacy by Any Means Necessary



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)

4. Kahana's Sin: Shame and the Invasion of Privacy

- a. Rav: "It is better to cast oneself into a fiery furnace than publicly to put to shame one's fellow creature" (TB Baba Metzia 59a).

אמר רב נוח לו לאדם שיפיל עצמו לכבשן האש ואל ילבין פני חבירו ברבים

- b. Rambam: "A husband who uses a vow to coerce his wife to tell others what he said to her or what she said to him regarding words of jesting (*s'hok*) and lightheadedness (*kalut rosh*) that a man and woman say to one another about matters of intercourse is required to grant a divorce and obligated to pay the full

ketubah settlement. He may not be so brazen before her face (*l'ha'ez b'faneha*) and not coerce her to say to others such shameful things... [He is obligated to divorce her] he tries to coerce her by a vow to do crazy things which have no value but are just foolish." (Maimonides, Laws of Marriage 14:5 based on Mishna Ketubot 7:3 and TB Ketubot 71b-72a)

- c. **Rabbi Yhiel Michel Epstein:** "It is forbidden to sleep in a room where a husband and wife are sleeping, even if the wife is impure after menstruation [and intercourse is forbidden], for there is a pleasure that a woman has when she is with her husband and she can speak to him and ask him whatever she wishes. But when there is someone else there, she is embarrassed before him." (Arukh HaShulkhan O.H. Laws of Modesty 240:3)

5. Akiba and Kahana: Studious Diligence or Hutzpah?

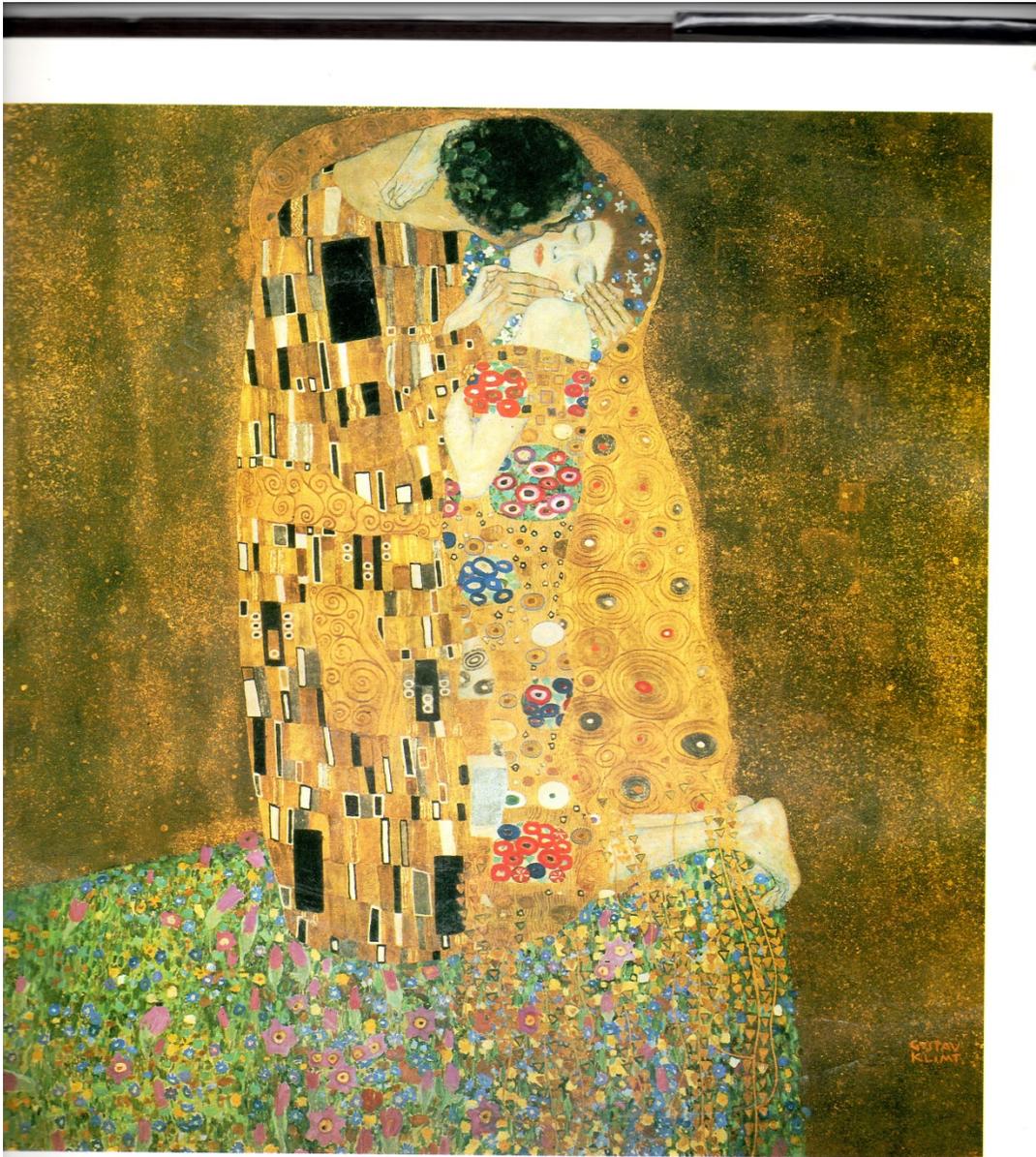
Akiba in the Outhouse: This [too] is Torah

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)

IV. Rav Hisda's Sex Education for his Daughters and its Contemporary Halakhic Exposition



Gustav Klimt: *Fulfilment/Embrace*. Working drawing for the Stoelet frieze. c. 1905/9. Tempera, watercolour, gold paint, silver bronze, pencil, zinc white, partly gold leaf and silver leaf, on paper. Dobai 152 l. 194 × 121 cm. Vienna. Österreichisches Museum für moderne Kunst

Gustav Klimt: *The Kiss*, 1907/8. Oil on canvas. Dobai 154. 180 × 180 cm. Vienna. Österreichische Galerie

Esther Perel, couple therapist: “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?’ This reluctance is often a covert expression of an infantile wish to be loved just as we are, without any effort whatsoever on our part, because we're so special. ‘Why should I? You're supposed to love me no matter what!’ (*Mating in Captivity*)

6. Rav Hisda's Advice on Sexual Attraction

- 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 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.”

7. Dialectic of Modesty and Attraction within Marriage

- a. Rav Hisda taught his daughters: “Be modest even before your husbands. Do not eat bread before your husbands. Do not eat greens at night [for it causes bad breath]. Do not eat dates at night or drink beer at night [for they both cause diarrhea]. Do not defecate in the same place that your husbands do [for that will disgust them].” (TB Shabbat 140b)

Rav Hisda said: “It is prohibited for one to have sexual relations during the day-time, as it states, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” But [the Talmudic editor asks;] What is the point [of Rav Hisda’s proof-text]? Abbaye replied: “He [the husband] might observe something repulsive in her and she would thereby become loathsome to him.”¹

- b. **Rava** said: “But if it was a dark house [during the daytime], it is permitted; and a [Torah] scholar may darken the space by extending his cloak and having sexual relations underneath it.” (TB Niddah 17a)

¹ “The Roman poet, Ovid (*The Art of Love* 3.769 – 92) suggests to women that they choose their sexual positions based on which part of their body they want their man to see. That is, a woman who thinks that she has a blemish will choose a sexual position that will conceal it. Ovid follows this with advice not to let light in, for it will expose ‘too much’ of the body, again risking discovery of blemishes.”

“On the Day of Atonement it is forbidden to ... wash, but the king and the bride may wash their faces.” (Mishna Yoma 8:1) - Why may a bride wash her face? Lest she become unattractive to her husband.” (TB Yoma 78b)

c. Rav Nahman’s dual policy of restraint and hutzpah

“The bride in her father’s house [before entering the marital canopy, the huppah] must maintain strict modesty in her husband’s presence [while she is just betrothed], but when she moves to her mother-in-law’s house [i.e. when she is married and moves in with her husband], she does not show modesty before her husband.” (TB Yoma 54a)

8. Ultra-Orthodox Guides to Newly Weds Inspired by Rav Hisda

- a. **Rav Shlomo Aviner** explains the logic of Rav Hisda in contemporary psychological terms:

“There are brides who are very ashamed due to their feeling of modesty and they also think they are not beautiful and that they may be seen as not beautiful in the eyes of their husbands. That is why the Rabbis commanded that the light be extinguished for the sake of *love your fellow as yourself* (Lev. 19:18).”

- b. **Bridal Counselor** (an Orthodox woman scholar who counsels young brides for Rav 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’shuhretet*) 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 told his daughters [about arousing their husbands’ desires].”

c. Rav Moshe Aharon Shohatovitz: Three Practical Maxims from Rav Hisda's Advice

- (1) "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 to her precious stone.
- (2) "Let them see the 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.
- (3) "The clod he did not let them see" – The woman must use her guile, her wisdom, to tantalize her husband until his desire is so aroused that it hurts.

Appendix: "In the boudoir with Orthodox Jewish women"

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.

An Orthodox boudoir photographer from Brooklyn says her photo shoots sometimes double as therapy sessions:

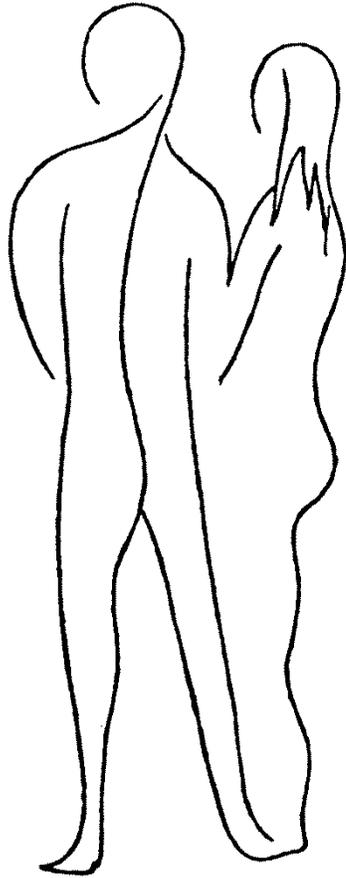
“For frum women, it can be extremely difficult to perceive themselves as beautiful. They’re always having babies, or their friends are having babies and they can’t, and they feel their bodies are somehow damaged. But everyone is beautiful in their own way, and by the end of the shoot, they can see themselves 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.

V. Education in the Arts of Lovemaking: Wooing, Foreplay, Pillow Talk and Guided Imagery



Benn, Adam and Eve

9. Wooing Your Wife like a Rooster Courts a Hen (4th c. Babylonia)

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. Rav himself explains the rooster’s courting gestures anthropomorphically, as if the rooster were promising to buy the hen a lovely coat (TB Eruvin 100b).

10. Maimonides (12th c. Egypt): “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).

11. Zohar (13th c. Spain)

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)

12. Rav Jacob Emden's Prayerbook (d. 1776): Lovemaking on Shabbat

“There is no copulation without preparing for it with hugging and kissing. There are two kinds of kissing: one before the sexual union is designed for the husband to appease his wife and to awaken the love between them, and then there is kissing during the sexual union”

“First, one helps make one’s wife’s mind achieve tranquility and then causes her joy and nourishes her with words/things that cause her heart joy in order that she will experience desire for him. **That will be apparent to him by attending to her breathing and [the light in] her eyes. Then they make love to one another.**” “Intimacy should come as the climax of hugging and kissing.”

13. Rav Isaac Sher (Haredi Litvak Mussar Educator, Israel, d. 1952): The Sanctity of Israel: Pastoral Letter to Yeshiva Newyw eds

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

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.

b. Refuting Hasidic Asceticism: Rav Isaac Sher

I have heard that some who are God-fearing [Haredim] make themselves out to be pious men (mit-hasdim) [i.e., pseudo-Hasidim], and make great preparations to fulfill this mitzvah for the sake of Heaven [alone] without any desire at all. The husband studies Torah and prays until midnight [on Shabbat night]. Then after midnight he comes home, wakes up his wife from her slumber, and prattles to her to placate her [so she will consent] to fulfill this mitzvah. As a result she permits him to do with her as he wishes for she knows from her mother how righteous people behave. . . .

It is well-known that . . . she has no craving when she is deep in sleep and she is angry that her husband is disturbing her. He is doing with her whatever he wants, not what she wants. . . . Rashi explains that "he doesn't desire her very much and he has intercourse with her only to fulfill the obligatory mitzvah of onah or he persuades her to consent to intercourse when his heart is actually disgusted by her (TB Niddah 17a)."

c. 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)

He should make this evening [after the mikveh] into a festive day (*yom tov*) and treat her with endearment as if this is the night of her marriage. . . . 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. They should also make an effort to add their own sweet and beautiful words, as it says, *Sweetness drops from your lips, my bride; honey and milk under your tongue* (Song of Songs 4:9, 11). Then [following the instructions of the German pietist Rabbi Elazar Hasid] on the night of immersion: “Make her happy, hug her, kiss her, sanctify yourself in marital intercourse . . . and delight in all sorts of expressions of affection, love and desire.”

d. 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.

e. Isaac Sher: 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.

14. Lovemaking as Worship: A Labor of Love

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

Rav Isaac Sher: 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.

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