

Gender Relationships In Marriage and Out

EDITED BY
Rivkah Blau

Robert S. Hirt, Series Editor

THE MICHAEL SCHARF PUBLICATION TRUST
OF THE YESHIVA UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW YORK



THE ORTHODOX FORUM

The Orthodox Forum, initially convened by Dr. Norman Lamm, Chancellor of Yeshiva University, meets each year to consider major issues of concern to the Jewish community. Forum participants from throughout the world, including academicians in both Jewish and secular fields, rabbis, *rashei yeshivah*, Jewish educators, and Jewish communal professionals, gather in conference as a think tank to discuss and critique each other's original papers, examining different aspects of a central theme. The purpose of the Forum is to create and disseminate a new and vibrant Torah literature addressing the critical issues facing Jewry today.

The Orthodox Forum
gratefully acknowledges the support
of the Joseph J. and Bertha K. Green Memorial Fund
at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary
established by Morris L. Green, of blessed memory.

The Orthodox Forum Series
is a project of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary,
an affiliate of Yeshiva University

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Orthodox Forum (17th : 2004 : New York, NY)

Gender relationships in marriage and out / edited by Rivkah Blau.

p. cm. – (Orthodox Forum series)

ISBN 978-0-88125-971-1

1. Marriage. 2. Marriage – Religious aspects – Judaism. 3. Marriage (Jewish law)

4. Man-woman relationships – Religious aspects – Judaism. I. Blau, Rivkah Teitz, 1941– II. Title.

HQ525.J4O78 2005

296.7'409 – dc22

2007026007

* * *

Distributed by
KTAV Publishing House, Inc.

930 Newark Avenue

Jersey City, NJ 07306

Tel. (201) 963-9524

Fax. (201) 963-0102

www.ktav.com

bernie@ktav.com

Copyright © 2007 Yeshiva University Press

This book was typeset by Jerusalem Typesetting, www.jerusalemtype.com

Contents

Contributors	viii
Series Editor's Preface <i>Robert S. Hirt</i>	xi
Preface <i>Rivkah Blau</i>	xiii
Introduction: The Past and the Future of the Forum on "Gender Relations" <i>Jennie Rosenfeld</i>	xv
1. Of Marriage: Relationship and Relations <i>Aharon Lichtenstein</i>	1
2. Marriage, Sexuality, and Holiness: The Anti-Ascetic Legacy of Talmudic Judaism <i>Adiel Schremer</i>	35
3. How Jewish Society Adapted to Change in Male/Female Relationships in 19 th / early 20 th Century Eastern Europe <i>Shaul Stampfer</i>	65
4. Sanctity, Sanity and Connectedness: Struggles For Commitment Among Orthodox Jewish Singles <i>Daniel Rothenberg</i>	85
5. Perfect Person Singular: Unmarried Adults in Contemporary Orthodox American Jewish Communities <i>Sylvia Barack Fishman</i>	91

6. Observations on <i>Perfect Person Singular</i> <i>Shmuel Goldin</i>	115
7. Excerpts from Interviews with Orthodox Singles <i>Koby Frances and Jennie Rosenfeld</i>	121
8. Premarital Guidance Literature in the Internet Age <i>Yuval Cherlow</i>	131
9. Thoughts on Teaching Taharat HaMishpahah: The Role of the Teacher Today <i>Abby Lerner</i>	173
10. Preparing Modern Orthodox <i>Kallot</i> and <i>Hatanim</i> for Marriage <i>Devorah Zlochower</i>	207
11. “So She Can Be as Dear to Him as on Their Wedding Day”? Modern Concerns with <i>Hilkhot Niddah</i> as Demonstrated by Anonymous Email Questions <i>Deena R. Zimmerman</i>	225
12. Life Values and Intimacy Education: Methods and Messages <i>Yocheved Debow and Anna C. Woloski-Wruble</i>	243
Orthodox Forum Seventeenth Conference <i>List of Participants</i>	293
Index	297

OTHER VOLUMES IN THE ORTHODOX FORUM SERIES

Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy

edited by Moshe Z. Sokol

Jewish Tradition and the Non-Traditional Jew

edited by Jacob J. Schacter

Israel as a Religious Reality

edited by Chaim I. Waxman

Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah:

Contributions and Limitations

edited by Shalom Carmy

Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law

edited by David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman, and Nathan J. Diament

Engaging Modernity:

Rabbinic Leaders and the Challenge of the *Twentieth Century*

edited by Moshe Z. Sokol

Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering

edited by Shalom Carmy

Jewish Business Ethics: The Firm and Its Stakeholders

edited by Aaron Levine and Moses Pava

Tolerance, Dissent, and Democracy:

Philosophical, Historical, and Halakhic Perspectives

edited by Moshe Z. Sokol

Jewish Spirituality and Divine Law

edited by Adam Mintz and Lawrence Schiffman

Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age

edited by Marc D. Stern

Judaism, Science, and Moral Responsibility

edited by Yitzhak Berger and David Shatz

למודות The Conceptual Approach to Jewish Learning

edited by Yosef Blau

Rabbinic and Lay Communal Authority

edited by Suzanne Last Stone

War and Peace in the Jewish Tradition

edited by Lawrence Schiffman and Joel B. Wolowelsky

Introduction:
The Past and the
Future of the Forum
on “Gender Relations”

Jennie Rosenfeld

At the fourteenth Orthodox Forum in 2002 Moshe Halevi Spero, a psychotherapist who lives in Israel, said that American Modern Orthodox Jews often use dissociative mechanisms to avoid discussing the real issues. The issue which he singled out as a paradigm of this phenomenon was sexuality. As a student in Advanced Talmudic Studies for Women at Stern College attending the Orthodox Forum for the first time, Dr. Spero’s comment, followed by Rabbi Robert Hirt’s call for topics for future discussion at the Forum, struck a chord within me. Too shy to speak out at the conference itself, a few weeks later I drafted a proposal for a conference on “Judaism, Sexuality, and Meta-Halakhah” that I sent to Rabbi Hirt. The proposal matured into the 2005 Orthodox Forum on “Gender Relationships – In Marriage and Out,” on which this volume is based.

The conflict between living as an Orthodox Jew and simultaneously living in the modern world is acute in the areas of sexuality and relationships. Jewish law, *halakhah*, is our “way of life” and goes in the opposite direction from the traffic around us. Ranging from adolescents who confront the media’s portrayal of sexuality but lack a Jewish response from their schools and parents, to singles who try to find a balance between their desires and *halakhic* restrictions as they remain single for longer, to the newly married who are trying to reconcile their expectations with reality and want to find a healthy way to incorporate this new dimension into their relationship, individuals at all stages of life are struggling.

The web of silence which has surrounded this realm of human experience, at least on a communal level, is potentially harmful. Individuals are left to wonder “Am I normal?” without any way of finding an answer to this question. We began by simply asking questions, although the list that follows is far from exhaustive.

How are we, or aren’t we, educating our youth about sexuality, and what is the communal impact of the way in which our young people are or are not being educated? Is there a Jewish sexual ethic which we can use as a tool in confronting the open spirit of Western values and the lack of sexual ethics in American life?

What is the psychological impact of the lack of education about the body and sexuality? What is the impact of marriage upon *halakhically* observant people who within the span of several hours turn from almost a denial of the physical to a sexual relationship? Does the complete sexual innocence with which one or both of the parties enter the marriage cause problems or does innocence, even to the point of ignorance of basic anatomy, breed bliss? How many couples are hesitant to seek help and may not even know whom to ask, although their marriages may suffer as a result? Is there a mind-body disconnect and are negative notions of sexuality dragged into marriage out of ignorance?

For those who with a later age of marriage find it increasingly difficult to maintain the *halakhic* restrictions of *yihud* and *negiah*, the prohibition of a couple being alone in an enclosed space and of touching before marriage, how can we on a communal and psycho-

logical level relate to this problem? How can we create a *halakhic* space for individuals who are dating to fulfill emotional needs which are often expressed through touch? Is there a *halakhically* mandated alternative language of closeness which does not involve the physical? On the communal level what should our response be to this intense conflict which is experienced by members of our community?

From the scientific perspective, one question is biological: to what extent are the restrictions placed on sexual expression by the *halakhah* physiologically normative? The conclusions of science may raise sensitive issues as they have in many other realms of religious life, but whether we accept or reject them, current assumptions about sexual practices must be addressed.

Underlying the personal challenges in the realm of sexuality and intimacy which individuals face, are the broader intellectual and philosophical challenges of what Judaism expects from us today. What models are there in the classical rabbinic literature for relationships between men and women, both inside and outside of marriage? To what extent do these descriptions constitute ideals? To what extent are we required to aspire to those models in our own lives? When gendered roles are no longer accepted in society, should Jewish society continue to embrace them? How can we use the models within *Hazal*, our Sages' writings, to grapple with the difficult questions that emerge as realities continue to change?

The Orthodox Forum demonstrated that it is possible to speak about the most intimate issues in an appropriate atmosphere. When done with the right intentions and in the right settings, *tzni'ut* (modesty) can be maintained. This also reflects a deeper sense of what *tzni'ut* means – it is not leaving our youth in ignorance, or abandoning them to pick up sexual knowledge from the street, nor is it pretending that problems in the realm of sexuality don't exist “in our community.” Dealing with these issues effectively can be true *hatzalat nefashot*, saving lives, saving souls, and maintaining strong marriages.

As they study gender relationships both in and out of marriage the authors of these papers are aware of the dynamic tension between

our traditional sources and the reality in which we live. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein begins his overview of the topic with “a measure of ambivalence and trepidation” without which we cannot speak on this topic and with a prayer that “the Giver of Torah spare and save us from any fault or blemish in its dissemination.” I hope that the sense of trepidation and prayer is as pervasive in this volume as it was at the conference.

Rav Lichtenstein surveys the literature of *Hazal* and focuses on different models of marriage: an intimate relationship whose sole goal is procreation and is often ascetic, versus sexuality being valued outside of procreation as a means of pleasure, love and companionship. He notes the two extremes which pervade a discussion of the issue, and brings an array of sources that point to both sides, showing the discomfort and even disgust with which some *Rishonim* discussed sexuality, contrasted with positive texts in the Talmud and the delight in sexuality presented in the *Iggeret HaKodesh*. He grapples with the question of how we can be so unreservedly positive about sexuality within marriage when there are strains within our tradition and especially among the *Rishonim*, scholars of earlier times, that are less than enthusiastic about the entire sexual realm.

On the historical front, Professor Adiel Schremer discusses the attitudes toward sexuality and pleasure during the Talmudic period, and Professor Shaul Stampfer brings us closer to contemporary issues in discussing societal changes in male/female relationships in 19th and early 20th century Eastern Europe.

Three of the essays deal with various aspects of what people today expect of marriage, how we are or aren't educating people for marriage and what classes for the groom and bride, *hatan* and *kallah*, should include but often don't. Abby Lerner writes about her curriculum for bridal classes, which includes both the *halakhot* of *taharat hamishpahah*, the laws of family purity, as well as preparation for the sexual relationship, helping to clarify expectations. Her tone reflects the sensitivity and empathy necessary when being instrumental in shaping the expectations of *kallot*.

Devorah Zlochower surveys the current *taharat hamishpahah* literature, revealing the pros and cons of various books as well as

making recommendations for improving the way we prepare young people for marriage. She points to a general lack of adequate sexual information which pervades the available literature (with one or two exceptions), and recommends that pre-marriage classes do a better job of conveying realistic expectations for the sexual relationship in clear and non-euphemistic language. She also suggests that grooms and brides receive pre-marriage classes together, so that their expectations can be aligned in this important area.

Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, writing from the Israeli perspective and from his experience answering more than 20,000 online questions, discusses the significance that the new realities of the Internet present for the realm of *halakhah* as well as “what rabbinic initiatives are called for at this time to enhance the observance of *halakhah*,” how this should impact the premarital preparation literature and what new elements should be included in it. With the belief that “the range of questions addressed to rabbis on such sites can provide an indication of what topics are lacking in the literature related to Jewish family law,” Rabbi Cherlow delineates several areas that he believes need to be included. They include discussion of premarital intercourse, masturbation (about which he claims “There is thus a need for rabbinic guidance to strengthen observance of this prohibition while reducing the level of fear and trepidation which accompanies it”), what details about one’s past (such as homosexual thoughts) should be revealed and when, questions of the first night and practical sexual questions, assistance during the childbirth process, birth control, and infidelity in an age of virtual adultery.

Dr. Deena Zimmerman, herself the author of a new book on *hilkhot niddah*, the laws of separation, begins with the statement of R. Meir explaining the institution of seven days of *niddah* as increasing the intimate bond between husband and wife. Using as data *she’ailot*, questions, received anonymously on the *Nishmat* website, she questions whether most couples’ *niddah* experiences today are in consonance with the picture painted by R. Meir, quoting from e-mails which express deep frustration and resentment. While she claims that sometimes the pain is not due to the *halakhah* but rather to women’s ignorance of certain *halakhic* leniencies (which could

be solved through more comprehensive premarital education), she concludes with the prayer for the rebuilding of the Temple when “we will again have authorities who can judge *ben dam ldam* and we will likely be able to return to the seven-day separation of Rabbi Meir’s statement.”

Dr. Sylvia Barack Fishman addresses the question of how we can encourage marriage as a norm while remaining fully open to those who are not married, including singles and single-parent families. Rabbi Goldin’s response outlines what each community can do for all its members.

From another angle, the interviews that Koby Frances and I conducted with Modern Orthodox single men and women, together with our introductory comments, attempt to convey the phenomenology and the experience of Orthodox singles who are grappling with sexual-religious tensions. The interviews reveal conflict in trying to balance one’s identity as a sexual being and modern ways of being in relationships, with commitment to *halakhah*. Each interviewee felt deeply alone, as if he or she were the only one struggling with these issues and no one was able to “win” the battle no matter what their choices. We hope that publication of these vignettes can serve as a source of comfort to individuals who are struggling, and promote empathy among others who read the accounts.

To prevent many of the problems dealt with later in life, sexual education at an age-appropriate level should begin early, before normal developmental issues turn into crises. There was a sense among those who are left picking up the pieces that *hatan* and *kallah* classes are too little too late, and education from a younger age is needed.

Yocheved Debow and Dr. Anna Woloski-Wruble’s paper on “Life Values and Intimacy Education” presents a framework for such education; their sample curriculum encompasses much more than simply sexual education – although it includes that as well – dealing with issues of communication, social skills, personal values and the Jewish sources which can inform these areas. Wruble and Debow have designed a comprehensive curriculum to suit the needs of yeshivah day schools and high schools and the unique challenges of Modern Orthodoxy. We congratulate the Fuchs Mizrahi School in

Cleveland, OH and Miki Wieder who wrote guidelines and took the initiative in getting the program started. In the wake of the conference, Tzelem has worked to pilot this curriculum in one grade of SAR Academy (Riverdale, NY) and Yeshivat Noam (Bergenfield, NJ). With the expansion of such preventive education, we hope individuals will grow up better adjusted and less in need of “emergency education” before they marry.

What is Tzelem? It is a project that began because the Forum revealed a need for a resource to help individuals navigate the challenges of intimacy and sexuality as Orthodox Jews. The Forum demonstrated that a dialogue on complex and sensitive issues can happen when the participants work for pure ends, *l'sheim shamayim*. Through the vision of Richard Joel, President of Yeshiva University, Tzelem was accepted as an inaugural incubator project of the Center for the Jewish Future where it has been nurtured under Rabbi Kenneth Brander's leadership. I pray that Tzelem will continue in the path charted at the Forum and that its efforts will be pleasing to *Hashem* and valuable to the community.