

Gender Relationships In Marriage and Out

EDITED BY
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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.

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Excerpts from Interviews with Orthodox Singles

Koby Frances and Jennie Rosenfeld

The lives of unmarried Orthodox men and women are largely characterized by strivings for religious and professional growth amid struggles to find fulfilling relationships and intimacy. At times these efforts can coexist with emotional currents of loneliness, religious fragmentation, sadness and confusion particularly regarding how to incorporate and express desire within a halakhic framework.

Many seriously committed religious singles are discussing their thoughts and feelings about the conflict between their sexual and religious behavior and identity. They find themselves in halakhic, psychological and existential quandaries as they wrestle to reconcile feelings and behaviors with their Jewish observance. Lacking the religious structure found in marriage, family and community life, many Orthodox singles are seeking some form of expression, and perhaps some kind of reconciliation, with this struggle that may not have a solution in consonance with halakhah. Their voices, colored

by the unique background and personality of each individual, deserve our attention.

With this in mind we share the reflections of some thoughtful, articulate single men and women who were interviewed during the past year. The interview process was designed to allow the individuals to express their personal narratives in a way that felt comfortable, and with our strict commitment to complete confidentiality. The interviewees said that they were willing to share their private stories, ones which they hardly felt safe disclosing to anyone directly, in order to contribute to the greater purpose of addressing this problem in a serious and sensitive religious venue. While an honest discussion of an issue impacting a significant segment of the community is crucial, we are committed to conducting it with a sense of *tzniut* and awareness that these matters are personal.

We interviewed nine women and seven men ranging from ages twenty-one through forty, all of whom self-identified as Orthodox. For the most part our questions were open-ended. The one to two-hour interview began with one question: *Can you tell me about your religious and sexual life and how the two intersect, if at all.* As the interview progressed, we occasionally requested examples that would better illustrate a more abstract opinion.

The interviews were qualitative in nature and designed for the purpose of hearing people tell how they mediate between their religious identity and sexual identity. This was not a scientific sample, nor did it intend to be. We believe, however, that the results of these interviews are meaningful and have ramifications for our community as a whole.

Most of the interviewees grew up with strong religious Orthodox backgrounds. Those who grew up in less observant homes became more observant in their later teens. In terms of their occupations, they were Jewish educators and leaders, rabbis, corporate professionals and students of various disciplines. While the lives and personalities of these individuals varied greatly, similar themes became apparent.

When describing their experiences in intimate relationships, many expressed having felt an extraordinary amount of internal con-

flict and frustration. On the one hand stands halakhic observance, and on the other hand stand modern notions of what it means to be in a relationship and people's physical and emotional needs in such a relationship. Individuals often felt trapped in this dilemma, knowing that both sides brought rewards and consequences. Over and over again relationships were described as burdened by the decision of what to do. Sometimes the relationship would unravel because of this.

Interviewees often laid down the facts quite bluntly: single men and women are fully developed sexual beings who interact with a world saturated in sex. They have no halakhically permitted sexual outlet. Our community's value system is strikingly different from the secular one, posing a very real challenge to single men and women. As one twenty-two year old woman said, "I've thought a lot about this and I really believe that our generation is different and unique in the challenges that these laws pose to us – but then what? Should we get rid of the halakhot? I feel like that would be the easier answer, but it's not what I think should happen."

A thirty-two year old man who struggled to reconcile his sexual feelings and religious identity, described how hard it was for him to sing *d'rakheha darkhei noam* each Shabbat in shul. He believed that our community needed to better address the conflict between the values of modernity and our tradition. "Every resource should be used to communicate, internalize and protect our value system so it remains relevant to everyone who interacts with the modern world." He thought that if this did not happen, we would be allowing ourselves, our youth, and our single men and women in particular, to be exposed to – and perhaps swept away by – a tidal wave of alienation.

Another important theme discussed by the interviewees is that with the sexual lives of single people in particular, there are few venues for socially legitimate discussion and guidance. Unmarried couples who are in a conflicted quagmire about their intimacy and shared physical or sexual experiences, are often uncomfortable and ashamed discussing together the meaning of their relationship, the limits or discomfort in their intimacy, or their need to seek help and

talk about their feelings with others. The fact that the struggle of premarital sexuality is not addressed in any religious or communal context only exacerbates the pain, secrecy, fragmentation and denial that singles often experience.

When people internalize the message that this is not to be spoken of, it is not a far jump to believe that it also cannot be thought about. The result is that many single adults lack a language in which to internally process and outwardly discuss their sexual feelings and experiences. Pretending it's not there and that it never happened is sometimes perceived as the best, albeit least effective, option.

Silence on this issue was often accompanied by deep feelings of guilt and confusion, not only for actual physical contact, but even for experiencing the desire for such contact. The guilt was mostly unproductive in that it did not lead to any form of *teshuvah*, but only to increased feelings of shame and self-loathing. Feelings of guilt also led to decreased levels of religious observance in general, in order to avoid increasing conflict and hypocrisy. As one woman said, "After a while the split existence of night and day stops making sense and when you wake up six months later you're no longer the *frum* girl who is close to *Hashem*, has 2 weekly *havrusas*, and is very spiritually connected." Since singles often experience their sexuality in the context of sin, it becomes especially hard to integrate their striving for religious growth and stability when such an important aspect of their personality trails behind, weighing the rest of them down. The challenge of integrating their religious and sexual identity can prove almost insurmountable at times.

If we are to empathize with people who are going through what is perhaps the most difficult period of their lives, we need to normalize these issues for our community and for the individuals experiencing them. Despite the lack of any formal solution, the Rav's concept of "*adabra v'yanuah li*" – the redemptive quality of speech – is quite applicable to this situation. Interviewees, who were previously unable to discuss their feelings with anyone, felt a catharsis in finally being able to speak about their pain and conflict, often for the first time. By offering an ear, by giving voice to conflict and by empathizing with the serious challenges posed to single men

and women, however they were experienced and lived, this part of their identity was able to become both speakable and hearable. As the topic was discussed, and therefore made more available to consciousness, these individuals could start to believe that their actions did not ruin them as Jews or as people.

“Thank you for listening,” one man remarked, “I’ve never told anyone about this before, not even myself.” People we did not even know approached us and said thank you for listening to “our voices.” By simply listening to several individuals without commenting, judging, grimacing or squirming, a powerful result had taken effect.

The importance of being able to listen sends a message of care – that as a community we will not hide under the veil of *tzniut* from people’s real frustration and anguish or even conflicted pleasure. When we as a community engage actively and consciously in tough issues, we give permission for individuals to think in creative and complex ways about their own conditions. Our silence about this might be inadvertently creating the ideal social conditions for people to give up struggling in this area, which would be the real tragedy.

Note: The following vignette is a fictionalized sketch which represents a synthesis of actual interviews with several individuals. All identifying data have been changed and resemblance to any individual is incidental.

When I started dating there were a few relationships, some more serious than others, where we might have sat close to each other or stared into one another’s eyes, but there was never really a dilemma of wanting to touch and not being able to. The conflict of sexuality, which of course I was always dealing with internally, was separate from dating.

As I got older and moved to the City, maybe because of my mood or surroundings or just my natural development, or a combination, I started to become more aware of sexuality in my real life and not just in my private thoughts. I might meet attractive women at work or in the supermarket and instead of just noting to myself

that they were pretty, I would strategize how I can introduce myself to them and where we might go from there. My immediate desire for a physical relationship, for that kind of intimacy, seemed to override my needs for an emotional connection.

My dating life also changed. I found myself looking at dates differently, noticing their bodies, how they walked...conversation was often tinged with all kinds of innuendo – the question of life-long partner was irrelevant when there was so much sexual tension. I always struggled with sexual feelings and *hirhurim*, but I hadn't encountered these things in my real life quite this way before. I have to admit it was enticing but also scary; it didn't feel like this was me. It was hard to figure out who I was religiously when this was on my mind so much. How was this in line with the rest of my religious observance? In davening or learning I became a little apathetic – it wasn't where my heart was. I wished that these thoughts would go away.

Eventually I just got bored with this back and forth, seeing no way out of it – thinking about sex and feeling bad about it. The guilt just wasn't productive. Maybe if I lived in Williamsburg this standard would be reasonable and to some degree I think they have the right idea – not their world-view, but with sexuality, I don't know if they are challenged the way Modern Orthodoxy is. We are taught that it's okay to see movies and plays, go to college, hang out with secular people, read literature, socialize with women and date them for a few months if you have to – but don't even lay a finger on them, don't say sexual words, don't have sexual thoughts and don't tell anyone about them if you do. Can one get rid of sexual urges? Can you just cut off a natural experience that in every other context of our lives is normal, permissible and healthy? What – take a cold shower? Sit on my hands? Say *sh'ma*? Everyone knows the more you try to get it out the more it comes in.

Soon enough I met someone who I really connected with and liked. Her name was Leora. And when we met, the possibility of touching was constantly in the back of my mind, and it was confusing. Part of me wanted a physical relationship yet now I was scared to pursue it. I didn't want that kind of relationship with a person I respected, admired and saw as a marriage potential. This

wasn't a fling, a way to relieve sexual tension, but a real person with whom I wanted to do the right thing. I wanted to be shomer negiah because I didn't want the physicality to be a distraction or a source of contamination. So for a few weeks all we did was sit in my car and stare at each other in silence – it was extremely intense. I kept hearing in her head and in my own, “Nu already – are you gonna do something?” But this dilemma had me frozen, both in my words and in my actions.

And soon I realized that the only thing more distracting than touching was not touching. You know, I regret not talking this out with her, maybe we could have been stronger, because eventually we did start to be physical, but somehow it seemed like we needed to be silent about this – I don't know, maybe we were scared to speak about it because then we'd for sure succumb. In the end, I just wanted to get the touching over with so we could move on and continue with our relationship. One day, when I reached out for her hand, of course it was nice but I knew it was out of a sense of defeat. The question of 'to touch or not to touch' was too heavy for us.

Once that happened I figured that the question of touching would be less pressing, that our tensions would be relieved. But that's just not the case. Because stuff comes up all the time with this, like how far we are comfortable going, how we talk to each other about it if at all... And my relationship with G-d also feels strained. In every other way I feel myself to be a devoted Jew, willing to make certain sacrifices. But in this one area... it's very different.

Sexuality still brings us more pain than pleasure. And the worst part of it is that I can't help feeling like once I've decided to not be shomer negiah, I don't even deserve to have a place to figure out all these issues whether they are religious, psychological or about the relationship. In a way maybe this is my punishment for violating something so big. I'm still not really sure...

Note: The following vignette is a fictionalized sketch which represents a synthesis of actual interviews with several individuals. All identifying data have been changed and resemblance to any individual is incidental.

After dating Yitz for a while, not touching became a struggle – you reach a certain point in the relationship, a certain amount of emotional intimacy, and the physical seems to be the natural next step – though it took me a long time to admit to myself that that’s what I was feeling. But we were strong or at least trying to be. We even spoke to a rabbi at one point... But after being in the relationship for four months, and after many such episodes where we almost touched, even while taking every necessary precaution to avoid *yichud*, there was one night where the precautions just weren’t enough...

After Yitz left my apartment that night, it was unbearable for me: the pain, the shame, the guilt, but also the pleasure and sense of relief I had felt in finally touching Yitz, but which I tried to ignore. I was always the good girl, the one who didn’t need to change in Israel. But suddenly my past virtues were meaningless. I am now my students, I am now my campers. That line which appeared to me then, became a mantra over the next weeks and months – I am now my students, I am now my campers. I was now able to empathize with students in a new way, but it wasn’t worth the price; I was not fit to be a role model, to teach Torah or to learn Torah. I was overcome with self-loathing – I literally could not look at my own face in the mirror – isn’t the girl supposed to be the strong one? – what’s wrong with me? I remember my journal entry that night as if it were yesterday, ‘I will fast today to punish myself... Please G-d help me, please G-d help me...’

Afterwards we’d analyze and overanalyze and swear things would never happen again. The issue of touching or not touching took over the relationship; it became our obsession. But even though I couldn’t live up to *shomer negiah* in my actions, I still carried the worst type of *shomer negiah* baggage with me; like how we’d only be physical when completely overcome with desire, and then we’d end up going much further than either of us would ever have imagined – after all, wasn’t the distinction between holding hands and anything else halakhically artificial? Ironically, it was our strong commitment to laws we physically couldn’t keep that stopped us from assessing and setting realistic boundaries. You see setting those boundaries was like giving up and admitting that we weren’t *shomer*

negiah, when we were still fighting that reality. At the time I thought, “As long as I get upset or think about the *halakhah* every time we touch, at least I’m keeping some *halakhah*...” As long as I was still struggling it was okay...

After the breakup, I was a mess. I felt afraid of myself, of my own capacity for sexuality. Daily life was so difficult, feeling like I was living a contradiction, because those same actions which plagued me and tore me apart had simultaneously fulfilled my deepest need. And, there was no one I could talk to, no one I could trust. My family, friends, and teachers all had a certain image of me and I alone knew how false to that image I had been. I couldn’t bear to open up to them and face their inevitable disappointment. And then there were my students – sometimes while teaching I’d have flashbacks – what right do I have to speak words of Torah? What right do I have to stand here as a role model? I placed my hope in *teshuvah*, but somehow felt it didn’t go deep enough...

Years later, after several more relationships like Yitz, I just stopped struggling with *shomer negiah*. I was battle-worn from too many relationships that were characterized by constant struggle, and I was lonely... I felt I needed a sexual outlet, and at the same time I realized that touch was not only about sexual desire, it was also just a human need for closeness. Around that time, I met Shai, and we clearly connected on many different levels. It was the first relationship that I entered with the intention of just being “normal” and letting things take their natural course. Shai was from a different world, with none of my past and none of my hang-ups – he was the opposite of Yitz – I can’t really describe it – he had this infinite depth and ability to make me feel like I was the only one in the world when he listened to me. One night, a month into the relationship, we were sitting silently in his apartment, when I asked what he was thinking. He was thinking of how much he wanted to dance with me at that moment, so I just stood up and said we should dance. It was a moment... I can still feel the reverence in his hands and body as he drew me to him to dance. There were moments in which we were apart, each moving on different sides of the room, only our eyes still connected, and there were moments when he held me

close. I don't remember how long it went on or when the music stopped, but I felt exhilarated afterwards as we sat talking. Nothing more happened at the time, but I felt deeply fulfilled. And that too was a unique feeling; because *shomer negiah* had trained me to be hypersexual, not to understand the beauty and basic humanity of just hugging or holding another person.

There was a period following that night in which I reveled in my normalcy; my ability to hug and to hold hands, to reach out and feel someone's face – basically, my ability to find a space for the physical expression I craved, which wasn't a sexual space. Touch and physical contact in a caring way was a need for me – I couldn't bear the loneliness, and the feelings of not having felt a hand reach out to me in months... By the time I reached those decisions, there was no guilt left for me to feel – it was so untenable for me to live without love and touch in my life, that I no longer was in a position to struggle.