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Heat That Can Melt Stone: Jewish Views on the Mystical Component of Sex

ALAN HANDMAN

*"This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.
This one shall be called woman, for from man she was taken."* Genesis

*"Let a man not consider sexual union as something ugly or repulsive,
for thereby we blaspheme God."* The Holy Letter (*Iggeret Ha-Kodesh*)

"He is not a man that is without a wife." The Talmud

Preachers don't preach about the joys of sex. If that statement seems a bit extreme, I suggest trying to find a churchgoing Christian who has any recollection of their minister having ever addressed the subject at length from the pulpit. Some may recall occasional references to the breakdown of sexual morality in general, or the condemnation of certain behaviors. Yet I think few will have heard an extensive treatment of the positive aspects of human sexuality. Some Christian preachers would like to cultivate a sense of the sacred surrounding the creation of life through sexual union, seeing how the union has been degraded by tawdry Hollywood images, rampant pornography and the popularity of provocative teen idols. Preachers most certainly should be critical of this downgrade trend.

But while criticism of biblically unlawful practices has been strong, comparatively little has been done to promote sanctified sexuality. Because of this avoidance from the pulpit, many people of faith tend to imagine sexuality as something to be closeted by a series of prohibitions, and little more. While many Christians have been taught that sex in the context of marriage is just fine, they may still be haunted by the strong but subtle message of their church culture that even the marriage bed may be the scene of something that is just a bit shameful. Worse, some may not be able to find sex exhilarating without thinking of it as fundamentally naughty.

The secular world has done some damage here in its own right. By reducing our sexual lives to a mix of biological urges and psychological programming, secular psychology has partially succeeded in treating some unhealthy taboos. Yet it has also helped rob sexuality of a powerful mystical significance which many people are pursuing without quite knowing how. The deep mystery of the union of man and woman celebrated in Song of Songs and the sexuality of pop culture makes for a very rough mix, like trying to blend Patsy Cline and Britney Spears.

In no other time more than our own is there a need for preachers to acknowledge the serious and joyful place sex has in our married lives. The good news of recent years is that the rate of divorce is declining. The bad news is that the reason it may be declining is that people are not bothering to marry at all. Combine this with the presence of pornography addiction and recreational sex as an accepted part of our "bread and circuses" postmodern worldview, and we see chaos, heartbreak and dysfunction arising where healthy marriage ought to be. Many call for a return to a biblical view of sex. I agree, albeit with some reservations, for many Christians confuse biblical values with Victorian inhibitions. A view of marital sex that regards

that ecstatic act as a dirty secret to be kept from the children is not the solution for the present crisis. What is needed is a frank approach to the joys of sexual union in the context of marriage. People need to be instructed not only about the sexual transgressions they are to *avoid*, but the joyous mystical union they are striving to *achieve*.

Judaism by and large has been much more successful in retaining this mystical sense of the union of husband and wife. Mystic rabbis have long associated the sexual act as a fleshly emblem of the mystical union between the *šekināh* (the “feminine” aspect of God’s creative nature side) and the universe. The context of marriage is non-negotiable, and the Torah has no small number of sexual prohibitions. Yet these prohibitions never denigrate the union of husband and wife. It is a common teaching within the tradition that a husband and wife should enthusiastically join in union on the Sabbath Eve, as this is a favorable time for the conception of righteous children.

From the very outset of the first creation account in the first chapter of *Bērēšit* (Genesis), living animate creatures are given a clear propositional command: *pěru ūrbū ūmil’ū*—“Be fertile and increase” (1.28). The command is initially broadcast to the swarming fish, sea creatures and birds, and passed along to the beasts of the field a few verses later. The message finally reaches its most exalted recipient in humankind. Since we can only presume that “test-tube” reproduction would have been beyond our first ancestors, this fruitfulness and fecundity must be arrived at via sexual reproduction. In other words, future generations are to be perpetuated by a man and a woman engaging in an intimate, mysterious and very exhilarating physical act that is both good and holy in its original intent.

The Greek scriptures of the New Testament have added a newer and far less fleshly component. The Second Adam, that is Christ, has no individual mate but is the bridegroom of the church collective. He does not reproduce his kind sexually, but rather through the word of God. This, combined with some pagan reverences for vestal virginity and Augustine’s denigration of sexual reproduction as a side effect of sin, has sometimes alienated Christian thought on sexuality from the robust Song of Songs attitude of the Jewish tradition from which Christianity emerged.

I believe that a familiarity with Jewish teachings on love and marriage based on the traditions and laws of the Bible and Judaism’s accepted interpreters throughout Jewish history can be helpful to preachers in this context, even if they are not authoritative. By consulting these guidelines, we may find some clues of how to bring a discussion of normative sexual conduct into the pulpit without verging into psychobabble or crassness. Jesus and Paul, lest we forget, are products of Jewish culture, as were virtually all the men who wrote the New Testament. If we are to understand what might be something of a first-century Jewish approach to sexuality, surely we must start with Judaism and not James Dobson.

The Torah establishes at the very early point that man is not meant to be alone, and the creation of a partner is a blessing of fulfillment and joy. Plaut has pointed out that “the words ‘It is not good for man to be alone’ (Gen 2.18) speak about man’s greatest need. The creation of woman in effect becomes the beginning of man’s social history . . . woman is more than man’s female counterpart. Like his rib, she is part of him, part of his structure and without her he is essentially incomplete.”¹ Surely sexual relations are part of that completion. As has been written in the *Zohar*, the supreme book of Jewish mysticism:

Loving words, spoken to win a woman’s affections, draw her closer to him, and arouse love within her. See how tender and how love enticing are the words: “A bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” They show her that the two are one and inseparable. And then he should praise her, saying “This one shall be called woman,” which means she is peerless and the pride of the house. Other women, compared to her, are as apes before men. “This one shall be called woman,” perfect in every regard, she and no other.²

1. W.G. Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1985), 31.

2. Rav P.S. Berg, *The Essential Zohar* (New York: Harmony/Bell Tower, 2004), 92.

Judaism does not see the world and all fleshly matters as having been corrupted by sin in the same way as Christian theologians have tended to view it. The Talmud teaches that when God created man, he created him with two impulses, the *yētzet har[ôb* and the *yetzer harā*, both the good and evil inclination.³ These competing impulses can sanctify or denigrate any human thought or activity, including those related to our sexual life. The famous story of Onan “spilling his seed upon the ground” (Gen 38.9) rather than impregnating Tamar could be seen as an example of the evil (or selfish) impulse. Rabbinic instructions are designed to encourage the good impulse in all aspects of life.

For many, Rabbi Maurice Lamm’s *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage* is the definitive modern text in English as a guide for married life. Lamm suggests an interpretation of the relationship of the high priest and the holy temple as a metaphor for the Jewish exaltation of marital relations. The high priest represents the role of the husband, while the temple wrapped in its various layers of sanctified courtyards represents the wife. One high priest is chosen from among all other priests to enter into the deepest and most intimate part of the temple to perform an act of release (in this case from guilt) that he and he alone has been granted legitimacy to do, the penetration of the Holy of Holies, imitative of the marital union.⁴ (This was only to take place once a year, so perhaps we should not push the metaphor too far!)

1. Basic to a Jewish mystical approach to sanctified sexuality are the general propositions about sex and its place in human society according to rabbinic teaching. This is critical, lest the mysticism degenerate into some depraved notion of sexual promiscuity creating holiness. The following directives recorded by Lamm serve as the traditional safeguards: Sexual relations may take place only between a man and a woman. This rules out homosexual activity on the part of either gender, and bestiality of any variety.
2. Sexual relations and marriage are not permitted with someone outside the larger circle of the Jewish people in general or inside the smaller circle of close relatives established by the Bible and Talmudic commentators. (Clearly, the new covenant no longer recognizes ethnicity as a boundary, but Christians may want to consider the perils of marrying outside the faith.)
3. Sexual relations are a *mitzvah* (religious duty) within a properly covenanted marriage in accordance with Jewish law. Premarital relations are not condoned, and extramarital relations are considered crimes.
4. Sexual relations within marriage must accord with the laws of family purity with respect to the wife’s menstrual cycle.⁵

Lamm has also codified the traditional Jewish views of sex and marriage into a series of Talmudic themes, each of which potentially may be used as a gateway to speaking on sexual matters from the pulpit. I examine five of them here.

THE HUMAN BEING IS NOT AN ANIMAL

Preachers may find it constructive to explore how God may wish those created in his image to view sex as more than a mere animal gratification. We have been created on the sixth day, along with the beasts of the field, so it is fair to say that we share something of their animal nature. But the beasts were not made in God’s image. So much of life as it is lived out in the developed world today is based on the gratification of what feels good, and leads to the fulfillment of our desires. These pursuits appeal to the animal mind. When our immediate material necessities are fulfilled, the animal mind tends to look not so much for greater moral meaning as for greater

3. Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, 33.

4. Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage* (Middle Village, New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1991), 33.

5. *Ibid.*, 27-31.

forms of entertainment. Alas, romance and sexual ecstasy have in large part become an aspect of this conduct. The result is predictable: broken homes, chaos, children raised without a moral compass.

The preacher may wish to explore how it is that human beings, while sharing the animal nature that lusts for more and more, are also called to be lords over creation and use discretion. Even in the realm of sexuality, human beings are called to do more than simply follow a primal urge and reproduce. The human reproductive urge is not guided by nature in the same cyclical way as many animal species. We are to regulate ourselves through our moral imprint. The more daring preacher might venture to illuminate how this reflects on the human obligation of sensitivity to one another's intimate needs during the sexual act itself. Dogs and cats rarely have such considerations. To quote again from the *Zohar*: "We learn that he who wants to mate with his wife must soothe her first and soften her with sweet talk. Failing to do so, he shall not sleep with her, because their desire must be mutual and without coercion."⁶

A HUMAN BEING IS NOT AN ANGEL

The preacher may find this instructive for addressing a tendency in some Christian thought toward a prideful aestheticism. Some of this comes as a reaction to the stress Christianity has always put on sexual morality. However, this stress no doubt grew out of pagan excesses that had characterized the Mediterranean world. As G.K. Chesterton wrote:

What had happened to the human imagination (during the pagan era), as a whole, was that the whole world was colored by dangerous and rapidly deteriorating passions; by natural passions becoming unnatural passions. Thus the effect of treating sex as only one innocent natural thing was that every other innocent natural thing became soaked and sodden with sex. For sex cannot be admitted to a mere equality among elementary emotions like eating or sleeping. The moment sex ceases to become a servant it becomes a tyrant.⁷

Seen against this background, the Christian stress on sexual purity combined with a mystic regard for marital relations can be understood as a liberation from the servitude of casual fornication. We need not strive to live as asexual seraphim when that is clearly not what we have been designed to be—but neither must we be slaves to our desires.

HUMAN SEXUALITY IS CLEAN AND NEUTRAL

This teaching gives the preacher opportunity to comment on a stark difference between Jewish theology (and most secular thought) and Christian theology. For Christians, human reality is not divided by a mutually blessed good and evil impulse as in Judaism. In the Jewish framework, the term "evil" may be better understood as "self-seeking." It is possible to see this impulse as a blessing if we understand that the self-seeking impulse is at work when we are earning a living or defending ourselves from destruction—but in excess it can be spiritually destructive.

Christian theology stresses that our overall nature, which must include our sexuality, has been marred by sin, so that "No one is righteous, not even one" (Rom 3.10), and hence Christ teaches that "from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean" (Mark 7.21–23). The preacher may wish to expound upon how this Christian understanding of human nature clarifies and differs from the Jewish view not only on sexual matters, but in general thought.

6. Berg, *The Essential Zohar*, 92.

7. G.K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 21.

SEXUALITY CANNOT BE SEPARATED FROM CHARACTER

The preacher can confront the attitude promoted by pornography and other crass depictions of inauthentic sexuality that denigrate the act to little more than a mechanical function designed to relieve pressure. The attitude we take towards our partners in terms of giving and receiving of pleasure reflects the attitudes of our hearts toward life in general. Surely human sexuality is complex and a selfish lover does not necessarily make for, say, a selfish grocery store clerk. It is still spiritually profitable to keep an awareness of how even our life under the covers says something about our general approach toward our fellow human beings.

Lamm writes:

There are two terms for the sexual act (in rabbinic literature). The better known is that which is used in the Bible and Talmud, *bi'ah* which means "a coming" as in "he came unto her." The second is a Kabbalistic term, *chibbur*, which means "joining."
 . . . The word and concept are based on the mystical vision of the cherubim facing and embracing one another in spiritual mutuality. It also connotes the ideal of *ye'diah*, "knowledge from the inside." The Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) considers knowledge and joining synonymous—true knowledge derives only from an interpenetrating and joining of the two bodies, the knower and the to-be-known. While *bi'ah* is simply descriptive of the physical position of the male, *chibbur* implies a coming together of equals.⁸

HUMAN SEXUALITY HAS MEANING ONLY IN THE CONTEXT OF RELATIONSHIP

People who pursue casual sexual relationships as a route to happiness frequently miss one of the most obvious of truths. If nonstop sexual encounters with new people brought happiness, sex slaves in third world brothels would be the happiest people in the world. As the Talmudic commentator Ramban wrote: "There can be no true oneness of the flesh without first experiencing a cleaving together of the heart."⁹ The preacher may develop the idea of how God's standards for marital purity imply the union not only of contractual obligation, but of shared soul. It is in fact this sharing of the soul that leads to a fulfillment of which the physical component is a mere emblem.

Viewed from these mystical perspectives, we see how the secularization, indeed degradation, of sex in popular thought has become a spiritual blight infecting the world. The union of male and female in a permanent union of shared body and soul is not experimental, fashionable, transient or merely biological. Christian preachers must address this topic boldly, and not like small boys approaching a dangerous dog. The happiness of marriage for many of our parishioners may depend to some degree on how well we guide them toward a passionate embrace of the sexual union of husband and wife. When we recover the mysticism of sex, many more marriages may endure the test of time and come to learn something of

. . . the dark secret of the ones long married
 A pleasure never mentioned to the young,
 Is the sweet heat made from two bodies in a bed
 Curled together on a winter night,
 The smell of the other always in the quilt,
 The hand set quietly on the other's flank
 That carries news from another world
 Light-years away from the one inside
 That you always thought you inhabited alone.
 The heat in that hand could melt a stone.¹⁰

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8. Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage*, 33.

9. *Ibid.*, 31.

10. Bill Holm, "Wedding Poem for Schele and Bill," in *Good Poems for Hard Times*, ed. Garrison Keillor (New York: Penguin, 2006).