

Loving Jewishly by Gila Berkowitz

This essay appears in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, edited by Rivkah Slonim (Urim Publications) 2006, 39–49.

Printed by permission of the author, Gila Berkowitz

Buried deep beneath the rubble of assimilation, shrouded by the dry language of legalism, lies an extraordinary secret of Judaism: the treasure of Jewish sexuality.

Those who would explore this mine with discipline, discretion, and wisdom will find the opportunity to express the most exquisite sweetness of their physical, emotional, and spiritual selves. In the union of man and woman, they will become a metaphor for divine union; in their love for one another, they will achieve the most perfect evocation of the commandment to “Love your friend as yourself.”

Judaism seeks to make of the marital bed an altar.

Despite the blushing nomenclature of “Family Purity,” the focus of the Mikvah laws is on establishing strong marriages by providing lifelong sexual satisfaction and excitement within the wedded union. Spiritually, the system is even more ambitious. It seeks to elevate every sexual act to the realm of holiness. There is a sexual ménage à trois at the heart of Judaism: husband, wife, and God.

At first glance, the restrictive aspects of the laws seem prohibitive and puritanical, but even a single month’s experience of loving Jewishly can open new vistas in a marriage. Researchers at the world-renowned Kinsey Institute have shown that couples observing the sexual laws of Judaism, compared to similar subject populations, not only tended to be more satisfied with sex in general, but actually enjoyed a greater number of sexual episodes. In fact, of all American groups studied by Alfred Kinsey in his landmark *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Indiana University Press, 1949), observant Jews had the most sexual experiences over the course of a lifetime.

Most people are nothing less than astonished to hear of Judaism’s enthusiastic support of a vibrant sexual life for adult, married members of the community. After all, we are used to seeing “religion” and “sex” as diametrically opposed, and marriage as the anticlimax of sexual adventure. Christianity and Islam view sexual desire as a human weakness, and Eastern thought sees the marital act as an impediment to the pursuit of full enlightenment. On the other hand, Western, materialistic society is opposed to religion in direct correlation to the extent to which it is fixated on sex.

Judaism takes an entirely different approach from any of these philosophies. It rejects the notions that sex is a necessary sin, an essential defect, or a distraction from the spiritual. It also vehemently denies that sex is a mindless pleasure, a value-free diversion. Instead it models human sexuality on a divine template: the consummation of the relationship

between Israel the Bride and God the Bridegroom. Sanctified by the Torah, the union between man and woman exalts each spiritually and makes their bond a common bond with God.

For Jewish thinkers, particularly the mystics, sex is a high—perhaps the highest—form of worship. According to tradition (Yoma 54a–b) the golden cherubim that adorned the Ark of the Law, situated in the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem, were male and female. When the Children of Israel found grace with the Lord, the cherubim were locked in coitus. When the Israelites sinned, the cherubim turned their backs to each other like a quarrelling couple.

Throughout rabbinic literature, sex sanctified by the Mikvah laws, while always veiled in modesty, is exuberantly positive. One dictum (*Taanit 8b*) declares that sex is one of the three hints of Paradise that humans can experience during their lifetime (the others are the Sabbath and sunshine).

Like other forms of worship (and the Sabbath and sunshine, for that matter), sex requires physical parameters to define its spirituality. These parameters include defining the sexual partner as exclusive and sacred, and defining the time of sexual activity and sexual rest in the Mikvah laws. Judaism promises that within those borders, each partner in a marriage can find not only satisfaction and comfort but an inner truth.

On a mundane level the laws enhance performance and pleasure, increasing the mutual- and self-esteem of each of the partners. In the spiritual scheme of things, Family Purity invests the act of physical union with holiness and purpose. The historical result has been better and more stable marriages, the key to the survival and flourishing of the Jewish people.

The tenacity with which Jews throughout the ages and everywhere in the world have clung to this tradition is powerful testimony to its efficacy. In Ethiopia, a parched land, the Jews were known as “the people who stink of water.” In Afghanistan, mountain women proudly took their axes with them to chop holes in frozen rivers so that they might immerse. In the Soviet Union, Jewish engineers built illegal, ingenious mikvahs in the closets of tiny apartments. At Massada, the Jewish rebels left behind the marvel of ritually and aesthetically perfect mikvahs. In martyrdom, as in life, they acted not as individual heroes but as eternally unified families.

But what can Family Purity do for couples in the post technological era?

It can, and almost always does, transform a marriage. While sex the Jewish way cannot save a bad marriage, it can make a good one transcendent. It does so in immediate and dramatic ways, as well as by subtle means whose effects become manifest only after years or even decades.

The most direct result of observing the cycle of separation/immersion/consummation is an intensification of the couple’s sexuality.

Since the dawn of time, humans have sought to sharpen the sexual experience, to recapture the ardor of youth and courtship. But aphrodisiacs of every sort work temporarily, if at all. Because sexuality is such a strong component of identity, with the ebbing of desire many individuals see the loss of their own vitality and worth.

All humans face a paradox: sex is a complex feeling involving body, mind, and spirit, but while mind and spirit love best when loving long, the body reaches a point of exhaustion relatively soon. This dip in ardor is often mistaken for a loss of interest in one's partner or a failure in oneself. When the event occurs—as in a seven-year itch, in the second-year slump, or even on the honeymoon—the results can be catastrophic. Either husband or wife, or both, may seek out other partners, conclude that the marriage has failed, and/or take desperate, humiliating, or even dangerous measures in the attempt to rekindle the flame.

The monthly separation of the purity cycle is a simple but highly effective means to keep the fire burning. On a regular basis absence makes the heart grow fonder—and the hormones surge with more vigor. Caresses and physical endearments that can otherwise become clichéd are newly appreciated after a refreshing pause.

A frequent comment about the mikvah night is: “We feel like a bride and groom each time.” Physical memory is short, so each post immersion encounter has the giddy excitement and expectant thrill reminiscent of the wedding night.

Yet there is more to the experience than simple separation. Wife and husband continue without pause to be lovers in mind and spirit. All the experiences that nourish and enrich the partnership continue. Only their bodies take a hiatus to recharge.

The predictability of the cycle promotes cooperation, mutual interests, and expressions of affection other than the sexual, which are vital to any marriage.

In the early part of a relationship, while everything is bathed in the glow of sexual desire, it is easy to overlook differences in favor of the shared passion and convenient to settle disputes by the kiss-and-make-up technique.

Once the glow fades, unpleasant reality can set in. Rarely do personalities mesh as neatly as sexual organs. The partner's faults come to the fore.

“He is not the person I married.” “All she ever wants to do is... [something that bores me to tears].” “He never wants to talk.” “All she ever wants to do is blab.” “I've grown, but my partner hasn't.” “We have nothing in common.” The pair concludes that the end of the sizzle means the end of the steak. Divorce, all too often, seems the only recourse.

But the practice of the Family Purity cycle underscores—early in the relationship, while there are still large reserves of good will—the necessity of working together for mutual goals, developing shared interests that don't require physical intimacy, facing up to differences, and solving disagreements in a civil way.

These skills become useful throughout the cycle and leave sex as a preserve of mutual love and enjoyment, rather than forcing it to meet all the challenges and carry all the burdens of a marriage.

Although the system takes the pressure off the couple's sexuality to act as a cure-all, it actually emphasizes the importance of sex in marriage.

Ironically, our sex-obsessed culture, which uses this basic instinct to swing elections and sell trucks, downplays sexuality within marriage. Most people recognize the social advantages of a legal union but concede that sexually it is the end of exploration and growth. For many, marriage is a sexual compromise; the era of sexual adventure is the single years of adolescence and adulthood that are remembered with wistful nostalgia.

The arts and popular culture collude in downgrading the sexuality of married people. While young lovers' excitement garners sympathetic winks, people who have been married for a while are expected to "grow up." In other words, they are supposed to concentrate on supposedly more important things: work, mortgages, children, and other responsibilities.

Judaism maintains that one's sexual potential can only be reached within marriage. The wedding is not the end of the fairy tale, but its possibility-rich beginning.

What's more, sexuality is not bait to keep adults toeing the line of responsibility. A rich sexuality is central to the functioning of adult life. For the tuned-in Jewish couple, at least once a month, on the night of immersion in the mikvah, all other responsibilities are put on hold. With the exception of medical emergencies and very few religious obligations (such as Yom Kippur), nothing keeps a couple from reconsummating their marriage. The needs and wants of other people—even their own children—are secondary to those of husband and wife.

The Family Purity system augments and supports other sexual laws, particularly the commandment of *onah*, the husband's obligation to sexually satisfy his wife. While a woman is enjoined from denying her mate sexual access out of spite, a man is obligated by the positive Torah precept to "delight his wife" and the negative one, "her marital rights he shall not withhold." Within the allotted period, the husband is better able to sensitize himself to what may be obliquely expressed overtures from his wife. Thus the notorious communication gap between the sexes can be breached.

While observing the sexual laws does not put all of life's disappointments and responsibilities on a neat schedule, it guides a couple's reactions to the challenges of intimacy by pacing intimate episodes.

It is a rueful fact of life that lovers' desires do not always coincide. He may be bright-eyed and bushy tailed on the very evening of the day she lost an important account, got an irate call from Junior's math teacher, and ran out of gas on the highway. She may lay out her red satin nightgown and douse herself with perfume only to hear him say, "Oh, I forgot to tell you, honey, I asked the accountant over tonight to do our taxes."

In the former case, for example, the frazzled wife, if she is in the *niddah* period, can insist on talking out her bad day and receiving sympathy and advice, after which she can get some rest. If the bad day happens during the active cycle, she may decide to shelve the disasters for the night and release her tensions sexually.

In the second case, if it takes place during the *niddah* period, the couple may decide to share in the task of tax preparation, or the wife might allot the time for herself by taking a long bath or reading a novel. If it occurs in the ritually pure period, the husband might reschedule his appointment or limit the session to business at hand, rather than linger into the wee hours with refreshments and social conversation.

The natural pacing of Family Purity becomes especially helpful during pregnancy and the postpartum period. Intercourse and other physical expressions of intimacy are encouraged during a healthy pregnancy. This helps to relax the parents-to-be, who are apt to be quite anxious, and bond them in a united love for their child.

After childbirth, immersion in the *mivkah* is delayed until seven days after the mother has stopped all bleeding—that is, is completely healed. The onus of a sexual relationship is taken from the parents, who are likely to be overwhelmed with caring for the newborn. The woman is not asked to please her husband at the expense of her own well-being, nor is she required to “choose” between her man and her baby. The husband, having to put his sexual desires on a longish hiatus, does not risk hurting his wife, being put in the humiliating position of competing for her caresses, or having to take her sexual disinterest as personal rejection.

Another way in which Family Purity promotes a better marriage is by legitimizing personal and shared “space.”

One of the pervasive fears of marriage is that one’s spouse will devour one’s individuality. Both men and women are terrified that they will lose all sense of themselves in the marital “we.” But attempts to assert individuality by pursuing interests and friendships without the partner can be seen as extremely threatening to the relationship.

The halachic sexual system defines separate physical and emotional space during the nonsexual phase. One has, at the very least, a bed of one’s own. Yet this separation is not a criticism of the partner, but a prescription of the law. During the physically active phase of the cycle, the partners will naturally try to maximize their mutual activities, in and out of bed, affirming their basic commitment to each other.

One of the ways the feminist movement has affected modern sensibility is by making us aware of the extent to which sex is used to wield power, to manipulate, coerce, and oppress. This awareness makes one particularly appreciative of how effectively Family Purity curtails sexual power plays.

The power of sex, and the sexiness of power, are hauntingly universal. Yet the stability of the human race—embodied in marriage—depends on overcoming conquest, subjugation, and force as part of eroticism.

Sexual coercion, however, remains an ugly constant in modern marriage, in forms as crude as rape or as subtle as the threat to withhold money for household necessities.

Sex as a tool of oppression is mostly used by men. Their superior physical and economic strength gives them a decisive edge in violence and harassment. The ability to *limit* a partner's sexual satisfaction, on the other hand, is a sexual weapon that many women wield.

The Family Purity laws make it difficult for either partner to take control of when or whether sex will take place. Compliance with the laws puts control in the system, defusing the jockeying for supremacy. It also severely limits the use of sex as a reward or its withdrawal as a punishment.

Another universal problem that is tackled by the Mikvah system is the uneven distribution of sexual experience through life. That is, in an unregulated life, sexual activity will be concentrated in youth. But sexual needs are often greater in middle age and persist into old age. Family Purity regulates and maintains sexual frequency throughout adult life.

When Alfred Kinsey surveyed American sexual practices in the late forties, he studied many social and ethnic groups, including Orthodox Jewish men (of whom a substantial proportion could be expected to maintain the Family Purity laws). In the youngest age group studied, the Orthodox men had far fewer sexual episodes than other ethnic cohorts. This can be explained by the supposition that Orthodox men have fewer premarital sexual experiences, and that, among married men, ritual separation forced them to curtail the frequency of sex that is natural to young men. However, in subsequent age groups, the Orthodox men equaled and then exceeded other cohorts in frequency of sexual episodes. Calculating total sexual experiences in the course of a lifetime, Kinsey found that the Orthodox men scored highest of any group studied.

The practice of the sexual laws paces sexual experiences but does not diminish them. Although a cap is placed on youthful passion, that energy is apparently preserved, for there is little diminution in sexual activity during middle age—as there is in the general population. Upon entering old age, when the practice of the laws becomes largely moot, the couple still maintains an active sex life, fueled by the rhythms learned in youth.

There is a growing body of scientific evidence that the practice of Family Purity shields against gynecologic disease, enhances fertility, and promotes genetic health.

For centuries young Jews were warned against the ills that would befall them—specifically, painful, embarrassing sicknesses and defective children should they violate the laws. The enlightened generally dismissed these as old wives' tales. Now biologists such as MacArthur scholar Margie Profet of UC Berkeley posit that during menstruation the uterus cleanses itself of semenborne pathogens.¹ This theory has special immediacy in light of epidemiological evidence that menstrual blood is a highly efficient

¹ *Quarterly Review of Biology* (September 1993).

conduit of the HIV virus, as well as viruses responsible for Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C.²

But the Jewish sexual laws go beyond abstaining from sex during menstruation, and this difference accounts for some interesting aspects of women's and infants' health. It should be noted that the majority of cultures have taboos against menstrual intercourse, and many individuals feel naturally squeamish about it. Moreover, prior to modern disposable tampons, barrier devices, and laundering, such sex meant hours of labor cleaning up after the act.

Yet differences definitely exist between populations that adhere to the Torah laws and those that merely abstain from coitus during the period. For example, it has long been noted that Jewish women have a lesser incidence of cervical cancer than non-Jews. Since this difference holds true among the contemporary Jewish population, the great majority of which does not practice Family Purity, it has been assumed that the benefit is conferred by male circumcision (almost universal, even among nonreligious Jews). But a historical overview suggests otherwise.

Hiram M. Vineberg, chief gynecologist at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, analyzed records of the incidence of the disease between 1893–1918. The study included over 50,000 women. Between 1893–1906, Jewish women were twenty times less likely to have cervical cancer than gentile women. Between 1906–1911, Jewish women were fifteen times less likely to suffer the disease; between 1911–1918, ten times less likely. The drop in protection parallels the drop in mikvah use among New York's Jewish population during that time.³ Protective advantage against cancer of the cervix drops to five percent or less among contemporary Jewish women who do not observe Mikvah law. Dr. A. Shechter of Beilinson Hospital in Petah Tikvah, Israel, believes it is negligible.⁴

In 1930, Dr. Howard Kelly at Johns Hopkins University studied deliveries to Orthodox Jewish women in Baltimore. He found they had a smaller percentage of forceps deliveries, a lesser incidence of trauma during such deliveries, and fewer cesarean births than in the general population. Kelly noted the similarities to the Jewish women of the Book of Exodus who were "notorious as being more lively on the birth stool than the Egyptian women, so that midwives found it hard to get to the mothers before the babies were born." He also noted that while the rate of noncervical cancer of the uterus was equivalent to that of the general population, the mortality rate was lower.

² DeWitt W. Brown, *Journal of the American Medical Association* (January 26, 1990).

³ Jacob Smithline, *Scientific Aspects of Sexual Hygiene* (New York: United Jewish Women, 1967). (Smithline was consulting gynecologist to the White House during the Truman Administration.)

⁴ Michael Kaufman, *Love, Marriage, and Family in Jewish Law* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992), p. 208.

He attributed the results of his study to the Jews' "better regulated sex life, more restraint in intimate relationships, less promiscuity [which lead to] less liability to persistent congestions."⁵

The Family Purity laws are geared to maximize the chances of advantageous conception. While technological advances lull us into thinking we have great control over human fertility, the fact is that rates of infertility have been climbing steadily for a generation. Today, one in five American couples have difficulty in conceiving.

The time of Mikvah immersion usually coincides with ovulation, thus ensuring the best chance for insemination. At this time the ovum has been freshly released into the fallopian tubes and has not yet begun the process of rapid decay that can result in miscarriage or birth defects.

Male fertility is also at its peak on Mikvah night. Immediately after the period of continence, the ejaculate is rich with active sperm; their number as a percentage of the semen decreases with frequent ejaculation. Also, healthy sperm are highly motile, so they are most likely to beat out defective sperm in the race to fertilize the ovum.

When intercourse takes place considerably before ovulation, the most active sperm die out while the slower ones linger, already deteriorating genetically, to inseminate the ovum. When intercourse is delayed considerably past the time of ovulation, the ovum has begun this process of deterioration.

Medical surveys among ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel indicate a markedly lower incidence of genetic problems such as Down's Syndrome, although, of course, such ills do occur even among those who scrupulously observe Family Purity.⁶

There is new evidence regarding the increased immunological strength of the female body during ovulation and the period following it. Those women who have breast cancer surgery during the ten days following ovulation have two to four times the chance of being cancer-free ten years later than women having surgery at other times during their cycles.⁷ Other types of surgery, it is indicated, also tend to be more successful at this time, so many surgeons are timing elective surgery for this period for all premenopausal patients.

God created all the cures, says the Talmud, before He created the diseases.

The Jewish sexual system promotes more than physical health. A return to the salubrious practices of Judaism can help Jews overcome the psychological ravages of the Diaspora on a Jew's sense of self, which is so deeply grounded in sexuality.

⁵ Smithline, *Scientific Aspects of Sexual Hygiene*.

⁶ Richard M. Goodman, *Genetic Disorders Among the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

⁷ William Hrushesky, Veterans Administration Medical Center, Albany, NY, reported in *McCall's* (July 1993), p. 42.

So much of Jewish humor, literature, and other aspects of popular culture present the Jew as a sexual misfit. The Jewish man is seen as sexually inadequate, the Jewish woman as frigid and bitter.

It is obvious that these images, largely created by Jews themselves, are a reaction to anti-Semitic images of the Jews as sexual monsters. While Nazi-era depictions of hook-nosed, fiendishly powerful polluters of the Aryan gene pool are thankfully absent from the mainstream, many Americans continue to believe that Jews have too much economic and political power. Jews have succeeded in mollifying jealousy by promoting an image of themselves as losers in the one area where even the disenfranchised can affirm their basic worth: in bed.

But this deflection of resentment has come at a high price: Jews have convinced themselves that they are unattractive, undesirable, and sexually incapable. Because sexual self-image is integral to self-definition, failure of the sexual self turns all other successes to dust.

The Jewish lover, lame and halt, worthy of nothing but laughter, is now what most Jews see in the mirror. It is what they think of themselves when they think of themselves as Jews. Often the shame of this image is unbearable. Many seek to free themselves of it by disposing of their Jewishness entirely.

What is to be done? How can the American Jew—“crushed in the privy parts”—be healed?

The solution lies in reclaiming Judaism’s sexual roots. In returning to the way of Family Purity, Jewish men and women can realize a potent and dynamic sexual identity. The very word “mikvah” comes from the root “to hope.” “Mikvah Israel,” the Hope of Israel, is one of God’s names. This God has provided for the survival of His people through a special strength and joy embodied in the Law.

The benefits of Family Purity extend even to those who do not practice it. The peace it promotes extends to the young, the unmarried, the widowed. The strength and the joy radiate outward, to the family, to the community, to the Jewish people, and, ultimately, to all humanity in the great prophetic vision of redemption.

“The Lord will give strength to His people; the Lord will bless His people with peace.”