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תורה היא וללמד אנחנו צריכים

IT IS TORAH AND WE MUST TEACH: COMPREHENSIVE, VALUES BASED  
SEXUALITY AND INTIMACY EDUCATION IN THE SYNAGOGUE

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## Table Of Contents

|    | Section                    | Page Number |
|----|----------------------------|-------------|
| 1  | Introduction               | 3           |
| 2  | Part 1- Is It Torah?       | 5           |
| 3  | Who Teaches Sex-Ed?        | 5           |
| 4  | Procreation and Pleasure   | 8           |
| 5  | Contraception and Abortion | 13          |
| 6  | Healthy Relationships      | 17          |
| 7  | Consent                    | 21          |
| 8  | Part 1 Summary             | 23          |
| 9  | Part 2- In the Field       | 23          |
| 10 | Part 2 Summary             | 32          |
| 11 | Part 3- A New Model        | 33          |
| 12 | Conclusion                 | 54          |
| 13 | Bibliography               | 55          |

## **Introduction**

In 4th grade, my synagogue had an optional sex-ed program. It happened after Sunday School, and was taught by someone my synagogue had contracted. We were joined by our parents, and it was an introduction to the biology of sex-ed, mostly exploring the changes that would happen to our bodies as we grew older.

Later, at my Jewish high school, my 9th grade biology and 10th grade anatomy classes studied aspects of sex-ed. We explored methods for birth control, information about STIs, and what happens during pregnancy. Yet, there were pieces missing to this programming. We didn't learn about sex outside of the heterosexual norm, we didn't learn about values and ethics and communication, and how to ensure that, when someone is ready to have sex, they do so in a safe, honest, and healthy way.

We owe our children more, and we owe ourselves more. This change is already being made throughout the country, through innovative and dynamic programming, by rabbis, cantors, and educators who are willing to have tough conversations and teach tough topics, by congregants who are willing to sign up for these programs and send their children to them, and by executive directors and lay leaders who are willing to instill and uphold ethics codes and anti-harassment policies.

While this thesis has a limited focus,, the values of this work apply to each and every aspect of sexuality, intimacy, and identity. Each and every one of us is created in God's image, and that includes our full identity as humans across the gender and identity spectrum. We each contain divine sparks, and the ways in which we engage with ourselves, each other, and the world must reflect that.

The language and content of sex education has changed drastically in 50 years, and, in the next 50 years, the language of this thesis might be outdated, and more inclusive translations of our texts may be available. However, the values incorporated into this thesis, and into Jewish sex education, will continue to be central to Judaism.

This thesis was a labor of love, and I hope a taste of one way where we can create Jewish spaces where consent, bodily autonomy, kindness, and honesty are woven into their very fabric. I am so grateful for the visionaries that helped this thesis come to life:

Rabbi Lisa Grant, my thesis advisor, for helping me put to words that, although language changes, values don't, and Jewish leaders have a unique responsibility to not only uphold our values but to teach them.

The rabbis and Jewish educators who took the time to send me their programs, research, and share their wisdom with me via interview: Stephanie Tankel, Ira Miller, Rena Crawford, Hannah Demick, and Rabbis Mara Young, Zoe McCoon, Jessica Minnen, Jonathan Stein, and Billy Dreskin.

To the Year-In-Israel Cohort of 2019-2020 and the Ordination Class of 2024 for your unwavering support, kindness, and openness to hooting and hollering.

To my parents Rick and Tracie, my brother Greg, and my friends-turned-family for spending hours on the phone with me as this thesis has come to life.

To **you** reading this thesis- by virtue of being here, you are willing to discern, to heed, learn and teach Torah from a place of values.<sup>1</sup> The Jewish community, *our* community, is better, kinder, and stronger with you in it.

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<sup>1</sup> Elise D. Frishman, *Mishkan T'Filah: A Reform Siddur, Transliterated*. (New York: CCAR Press, 2007),

## Part 1- Sex-Ed: It is Torah

The story of Rav Kahana hiding under Rav's bed is well known.<sup>2</sup> As Rav tends to his wife's sexual needs, Rav Kahana interrupts with commentary. When Rav asks him why he is there, Rav Kahana responds "it is Torah, and I must learn." The humor (and breach of consent) of the story aside, we can learn a lot about the Jewish value of sex education from this story. As Evyatar Marienberg writes in *Traditional Jewish Sex Guidance: A History*,

The editor who placed this amusing story together with two other stories in which students follow their masters to the bathroom for a similar reason, to learn how to perform actions that are generally considered rather intimate, does not seem to express criticism of the students' behavior. The students even get the right to say, literally, the last word in each of these exchanges. The editor seems to agree with their point of view: even details of supposedly intimate activities such as defecating or sexual relations should be learned from a master.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, there are values and protocols behind intimate actions. From a Jewish point of view, there are correct ways to engage in actions and relations that are often done behind closed doors. These actions can only be done correctly if they are taught. Unlike the story of Rav Kahana, while sex education nowadays is not experiential, there remains a strong argument to support learning about healthy, consensual, safe, and even sacred sex in Jewish educational spaces.

## Who Teaches Sex Ed

What do our Jewish sources say about whose role it is to teach sex ed? In a Talmudic teaching about obligation to circumcise, we read:

§ The *baraita* teaches that a father is obligated **to circumcise** his son. The Gemara asks: **From where do we** derive this? The Gemara answers that this is **as it is written: "And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac"** (Genesis 21:4). The Gemara comments: **And** in a case **where one's father did not circumcise him the court is obligated to circumcise**

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<sup>2</sup> Berakhot 62a

<sup>3</sup> Evyatar Marienberg, *Traditional Jewish Sex Guidance: A History*. (Boston: Brill, 2022), 15

**him**, i.e., if this obligation is not fulfilled by the father it applies to the community as a whole, **as it is written: “Every male among you shall be circumcised”** (Genesis 17:10), in the form of a general mitzva that does not apply only to the father. **And** in a case **where the court did not circumcise him** the son **is obligated to circumcise himself** when he reaches adulthood, **as it is written: “And the uncircumcised male, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off from his people”** (Genesis 17:14).<sup>4</sup>

By following the connection from circumcision to genitalia to sex, we can expand on this text and imply that the order of obligation to circumcise would similarly follow the order of who is meant to teach their children about sex education. Beginning with the father, this would imply that it is originally a parent’s obligation, followed by the community, and, only if the community did not follow through with their obligation, an individual would be obligated to teach themselves.

While a parent may not have the knowledge or resources to teach a comprehensive sex education program, the Jewish values and wisdom behind a sex education curriculum are taught in the home from a young age. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children be taught proper names for their body parts, taught consent and bodily autonomy (for example, a child does not need to give grandma a hug or a kiss), and should be reminded that, when in doubt, they can go to a trusted adult with any questions.<sup>5</sup> These lessons and values are intrinsically linked to sex and intimacy education and can be taught by parents and caregivers regardless of their background.

Outside of the home, the community is obligated to continue to teach and reinforce these lessons. As Rabbi Zoe McCoon shared, “there are ways to incorporate Jewish intimacy values into synagogue programming in both formal and informal settings.”<sup>6</sup> Community leaders such as

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<sup>4</sup> Kiddushin 29a

<sup>5</sup> “10 Tips for Parents to Teach Children about Body Safety and Boundaries,” American Academy of Pediatrics, April 11, 2023,

<sup>6</sup> Jamie Field and Zoe McCoon, Interview with Rabbi Zoe McCoon, personal, November 7, 2023.

rabbis, cantors, and Jewish educators must continue to include these values in programming, spiraling from our youngest learners to our oldest. From ensuring children at Tot Shabbat have the option of a wave, a high five, or a hug as they leave, to including values of consent and respect within a series of classes to implementing a policy on sexual harassment, these values should be instilled by the community continuously and regularly. For example, if a synagogue is offering a weekly adult education class exploring the erotic language of Song of Songs, the instructor can and should invite conversation around safety and consent, even if that is not the main focus of the text study. A text study focusing entirely on the Akeidah welcomes commentary, even brief, of openness and honesty in a relationship in looking at Abraham and Sarah. A religious school lesson plan exploring Yom Kippur might touch on bodily autonomy, setting boundaries, or self-respect. Incorporating these values need not be the bulk of the lesson plan, but including them when possible affirms to learners and educators alike their role in Jewish life.

From following the chain of obligation to circumcision in Kiddushin 29a from parent then to community, we are left with the role of the individual, whose work is constant and continuous. If Jewish values are ingrained in a sexual ethics education from a young age, the individual has the opportunity for continued learning and growth. As our learners grow and explore the world, we can hope that the lessons learned in and out of the synagogue, formally and informally, will prepare them for the ways in which sex and the boundaries and opportunities attached to it can and should have a positive impact on their lives.



## Procreation and Pleasure

Many Talmudic sources around the value of sex education are focus on to procreation. In Genesis, God tells Adam and Eve to, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it.”<sup>7</sup> Marienberg wonders whether this is a commandment or a blessing. He writes “it is hard to say with certainty. Such a distinction might be very much based on complex theological questions... In any case, what is clear is that God expects humans... to ‘be fruitful and increase in number.’ As sexual activity is the only way- leaving aside artificial methods- for humans and many other animals to multiply, sex seems to be tolerated and even expected.”<sup>8</sup>

How do we move from “tolerated and even expected,” to “celebrated and taught?” We can draw on our sacred sources to explore what the contents of sex education taught with Jewish values in mind should include.

A story in Talmud Yoma 69b recounts the Israelites praying for their evil inclination toward sexual sin to be destroyed. Their prayer is answered, and the prophet Zechariah warns them that their desire to procreate will also be destroyed. For three days, all creatures lost their sexual inclination, and no eggs were laid in Eretz Yisrael. Eventually, the Israelites ritually adjusted their prayer, and humans only lost their urge for incest, but maintained their sexual inclination.<sup>9</sup>

Bereshit Rabbah expands and connects the creation story directly to the evil sexual inclination. After creating humanity, God “saw all that had been made, and found it very good.”<sup>10</sup> Nahman in the name of Rav Shmuel describes that “it was very good” relates to the good

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:28

<sup>8</sup> Marienberg, 9

<sup>9</sup> Yoma 69b:12

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 1:31

inclination and “found it very good” is the evil inclination, explaining that without the evil inclination “a person would not build a house and not marry a woman and not beget children.”<sup>11</sup>

The tendency to explore human sexuality through a negative or neutral lens, ranging from “evil” to “expected” seems to be a common theme in contemporary sex education. Even curricula and lessons that explore the beauty of sexuality through God’s creation share the dangers of teaching about sex. *God’s Design for Sex* is a Christian book series for parents and their children that teaches about sex education. In its guide for parents, it is advised “it should be in your home that your child first learns that many people in our world do not believe in reserving sex for marriage, and it should be in your home that your child first understands such problems as pornography, teenage pregnancy, gay marriage, sexual identity and gender issues, and so forth. In this way, you can help build your child’s defenses against departing from God’s ways.”<sup>12</sup> The Vatican’s guide to premarital counseling that was published in 2022 teaches “Chastity lived in continence allows a relationship to mature gradually and thoroughly. Indeed, when, as often occurs, the sexual-genital dimension becomes the primary, if not exclusive, element holding a couple together, all other aspects inevitably fall into the background or are obscured, impeding the relationship from progressing.”<sup>13</sup> These conservative viewpoints use God and religion as a vehicle to limit the scope of what healthy sexual relationships look like.

These views that implicitly or explicitly define what is “proper” sexual activity continue to be challenged and explored through sex and intimacy education taught in religious institutions.

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<sup>11</sup> Bereshit Rabba 9

<sup>12</sup> Stan Jones and Brenna Jones, “An Important Word to Parents,” introduction, in *How and When to Tell Your Kids About Sex: A Lifelong Approach to Shaping Your Child’s Sexual Character* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2019), XVIII  
<https://files.tyndale.com/thpdata/firstchapters/978-1-63146-944-2.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Catechumen Pathways p 59

[http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/amoris-laetitia/OrientamentiCatecumenatomatrimoniale/Catechumenal%20Pathways\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/amoris-laetitia/OrientamentiCatecumenatomatrimoniale/Catechumenal%20Pathways_ENG.pdf)

In 2008, the organization Tzelem published *Life Values and Intimacy Education*, a curriculum for Orthodox Jews aiming to “[educate] students about sexuality, intimacy, communication, human development, interpersonal relationships and values all from within a traditional perspective. It represents a vision of comprehensive school based education towards healthy decision making, healthy lifestyles and healthy relationships.”<sup>14</sup> In 2019, Pope Francis stated that sex education should be taught in schools.<sup>15</sup> The United Church of Christ’s *Our Whole Lives* (OWL) curriculum teaches sex education in a way that “respects the diversity of participants with respect to biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, and disability status in addition to cultural and racial background. The activities and language used throughout the program have been carefully chosen to be as inclusive as possible of this human diversity<sup>16</sup>.” Tzelem and OWL expand the understanding, through the lens of the communities they are created for, of how a community acknowledges, and teaches, about sexuality and intimacy.

As we’ve seen, classical Jewish texts mirror both of these conflicting contemporary themes- that sex is an “evil inclination” and that for Rav Kahana, sex is “Torah.” Also, there are plenty of sources that explore- and support- pleasure through sexual interaction. Biblically, as Sarah is told that she’ll have a son in her advanced years, she responds laughing, and says “now that I’ve lost the ability, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?”<sup>17</sup> In this text,

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<sup>14</sup> Sarah Kricheff January 16, “Orthodox Schools Test The Waters with ‘Intimacy Education’ Classes,” The Forward, January 16, 2008, <https://forward.com/culture/12470/orthodox-schools-test-the-waters-with-intimacy-01117/#:~:text=According%20to%20Jennie%20Rosenfeld%2C%20director,a%20program%20in%20the%20community>

<sup>15</sup> “Apostolic Journey to Panama: Press Conference on the Return Flight from Panama to Rome (Papal Flight, 27 January 2019): Francis,” Apostolic Journey to Panama: Press Conference on the return flight from Panama to Rome (Papal flight, 27 January 2019) | Francis, January 27, 2019

<sup>16</sup> Honest, Marshall Miller, and Shari Woodbury, “Our Whole Lives: Lifespan Sexuality Education,” UUA.org, August 31, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 18:12

procreation and pleasure<sup>18</sup> go hand-in-hand. Sarah, in her laughter, does not distinguish between sex for the sake of pleasure and sex for the sake of procreation.

In Parashat Ki Tetzei, the Torah portion with the most *mitzvot*, a newly married groom is forbidden from enlisting in the army for a year in order to ensure he can “give happiness<sup>19</sup>” to his new wife. In this case, the wife’s pleasure is demanded from the husband.

In Parashat Mishpatim, a man who takes another wife must not withhold his conjugal duty towards her.<sup>20</sup> The Shulchan Aruch expands this to share that one should not withhold conjugal duty especially to cause her pain, though the circumstances are different if he is ill or weak, therefore physically unable to have intercourse.<sup>21</sup> Removing the gendered language of the text can provide additional understanding of sexual pleasure in Judaism. Partners in a relationship should not withhold pleasure from each other, especially for the sake of emotional punishment towards the other partner. Within the realms of a consensual sexual partnership, individuals are obligated to provide each other pleasure.

In later rabbinic texts, a wife’s pleasure is seen as an act that should be rewarded. We read in the Talmud:

Rabbi Yitzhak says that Rabbi Ami says: The sex of a fetus is determined at the moment of conception. If the woman emits seed<sup>22</sup> first, she gives birth to a male, and if the man emits seed first, she gives birth to a female, as it is stated: “If a woman bears seed and gives birth to a male” (Leviticus 12:2).<sup>23</sup>

Here, the rabbis’ understanding of the ultimate reward of having a male heir comes with ensuring a woman’s pleasure comes before the man’s.

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<sup>18</sup> The Hebrew word נִיחָם only appears once in the Torah, in this verse, and is often translated as enjoyment

<sup>19</sup> Deuteronomy 24:5

<sup>20</sup> Exodus 21:10

<sup>21</sup> Shulchan Arukh, Even HaEzer 76:11

<sup>22</sup> Meaning- Reaching Orgasm

<sup>23</sup> Niddah 31a:23

The view of pleasure through sex expands past its relation to procreation. Maimonides writes in his *Mishneh Torah*, “Sexual relations are considered a dimension of Sabbath pleasure. Therefore Torah scholars fulfill their marital obligations once a week, on the Shabbat.”<sup>24</sup> For Maimonides, this obligation remains timebound to Shabbat, but is an aspect of enjoying pleasure on Shabbat, not just for the sake of procreation.

Berakhot also explores pleasure Berakhot 57b:10:

The Gemara says: **Three food items enter the body yet the body does not benefit from them: Cherries, bad dates, and unripe dates.** In contrast: **Three matters do not enter the body yet the body benefits from them, and they are: Washing, anointing, and intercourse. Three matters are microcosms of the World-to-Come, and they are: Shabbat, the sun, and intercourse.**<sup>25</sup>

Here, we see again the connection between Shabbat, sex, and pleasure. Again, there is no mention of procreation.

The support for pleasure through sexuality continues past rabbinic sources into a contemporary context. In *Reform Jewish Sexual Values: Central Conference of American Rabbis Ad Hoc Committee on Human Sexuality*, Rabbi Selig Salkowitz writes:

Human sexuality, as a powerful force in our lives, has the potential for physical closeness and pleasure, emotional intimacy and communication. The experience of sexual pleasure and orgasm, both in relationships and individuals, can greatly delight women and men. Our tradition teaches that procreation is not the sole purpose of sexual intimacy; it not only recognizes but also rejoices in the gratification that our sexuality can bring to us. As an expression of love, the physical release and relaxation, the enjoyment of sensuality and playfulness that responsible sexual activity can provide are encouraged by our Jewish tradition. The sages teach that the *Shechinah*, the “Divine Presence,” joins with people when they unite in love, but add that if there is no joy between them, the *Shechinah* will not be present will not be present (*Shabbat* 30b, *Zohar* 1). Judaism insists that the

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<sup>24</sup> Mishneh Torah Sabbath 30:14

<sup>25</sup> Berakhot 57b:10

*simchah* of human sexual activity should be experienced only in healthy and responsible human relationships.<sup>26</sup>

Although the language used here represents sex within a gender binary, the point remains both consistent and expanded here. Within a “healthy and responsible” relationship, joy and pleasure is supported and encouraged in a sexual framework. Here, this pleasure is completely separate from a connection to procreation. Pleasure does not ensure a male heir. Instead, Rabbi Salkowitz shares that pleasure and sensuality is divine and, within the context of healthy and consensual sex, can welcome the *Shechinah*.

Classical Jewish sources assume sex takes place within the confines of a marriage, even including it in the list of obligations from a man to his wife.<sup>27</sup> However, here, the CCAR intentionally does not mention sex exclusively within the framework of marriage. Healthy and safe relationships are an important value both within and outside of marriage.

### **Contraception and Abortion**

Sex is not without risks. Even within the bounds of safe, healthy, and responsible relationships, sex can result in sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and in some situations, unintended pregnancy. Comprehensive, values based sex and intimacy education can mitigate those risks and provide tools for understanding and assessing options. Our Jewish sources offer us insight into preventative measures for pregnancy and options for those who become pregnant who may desire not to be. The values-based core of Jewish views on contraception and abortion is advocacy for bodily autonomy.

The Talmud teaches us:

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<sup>26</sup> Selig Salkowitz, “Reform Jewish Sexual Values: Central Conference of American Rabbis Ad Hoc Committee on Human Sexuality,” *CCAR Journal* XLVIII (Autumn 2001), 245

<sup>27</sup> Exodus 21:10, Ketubot 47b:2

It was taught in the mishna: If a person is **ill** and requires food due to potential danger, **one feeds them according to the advice of medical experts. Rabbi Yannai said: If an ill person says they need to eat, and a doctor says they do not need to eat, one listens to the ill person. What is the reason for this *halakha*?** It is because the verse states: **“The heart knows the bitterness of its soul”** (Proverbs 14:10), meaning an ill person knows the intensity of his pain and weakness, and doctors cannot say otherwise. The Gemara asks: It is **obvious** that a person knows themselves better than anyone else does. Why does this need to be stated explicitly? The Gemara answers: It is **lest you say that the doctor is more certain** because they have had more experience with this condition. Therefore, the verse **teaches us** that even so, it is the ill person who knows their own suffering better than anyone else.<sup>28</sup>

Although this text refers to fasting rather than pregnancy, Rabbi Leah Berkowitz extends its use in context to bodily autonomy. She writes “while a medical professional might intervene if a person is putting themselves in danger, if a person demands a certain intervention for themselves, the medical professionals must defer to them. A person is considered the authority when it comes to their own body and their own experience.”<sup>29</sup> In regards to both contraception and abortion, an individual’s autonomy remains the most central aspect of the conversation, with open and honest conversation with the other party (or parties) also important. As I explore other texts that advocate for or against contraception and abortion, the bodily autonomy and a self-understanding of one’s needs remains at the heart of Jewish sex and intimacy education.

The story of Tamar and Onan in Genesis 39 is the basis for a textual argument against “spilling seed,” which is often linked to barrier forms of birth control such as a condom, or other methods such as withdrawal. In the story, after Tamar’s first husband dies, his brother is obligated to provide offspring. Onan, the brother, knows that the offspring will not count as his own, and so he “lets the seed go to waste.”<sup>30</sup> God finds this displeasing and so takes Onan’s life.

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<sup>28</sup> Yoma 83a:2

<sup>29</sup> Leah Berkowitz, “Reproductive Justice and Judaism Annotated Talk,” Sefaria, March 15, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Genesis 38:9

Because the Halakhic obligation to procreate is on a man and not on a woman, it may seem like the concern of blocking procreation is entirely on a man as well.<sup>31</sup> Yet, Tractate Niddah invites women to use a *mokh* (a sort of contraceptive barrier) in certain circumstances:

The *baraita* specifies the reason for allowing these women to use contraceptive absorbent cloths: **A minor, lest she become pregnant and perhaps die** from this pregnancy; **a pregnant woman, lest** she be impregnated a second time and **her older fetus become** deformed into the shape of a **sandal** fish, by being squashed by the pressure of the second fetus; and **a nursing woman, lest** she become pregnant and her milk dry up, in which case **she weans her child** too early, thereby endangering the child, **and it dies.**<sup>32</sup>

Here, we see a list of circumstances in which one is permitted to use a *mokh*. While the scientific accuracy is to be debated, we can use the values behind the circumstances in which a *mokh* would be permitted to reinforce Jewish values of contraception. For the first circumstance (a minor) the reasoning behind using a *mokh* is to ensure the wellbeing of the woman. Therefore, one would be permitted to use contraception in the case that the woman is not physically or mentally ready or capable to have a child. For the second circumstance (an already pregnant woman) the reasoning behind using a *mokh* is to ensure the wellbeing of the fetus. Should a woman not be able to have a healthy child (for example, in the case of genetic disease), one would be permitted to use contraception. For the third circumstance (a nursing woman), the reasoning behind using a *mokh* is to ensure the wellbeing for the family. Therefore, one would be permitted to use contraception should the family not be able to mentally, physically, or financially provide a safe environment for a child. With expanded understanding of a *mokh* as any form of contraception, not just barrier contraception, this text gives autonomy to the mother in respect to her own wellbeing, the wellbeing of her future child, and the wellbeing of her family unit.

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<sup>31</sup> Yevamot 65b

<sup>32</sup> Niddah 45a:12



Should contraception fail, Jewish texts also provide us with wisdom about abortion. Parashat Mishpatim contains the primary Biblical text for entering the conversation around abortion. In fact, the NCJW's Repro Shabbat occurs each year on the Shabbat in which we read this Torah portion, as its verses "form the basis of the Jewish approach to reproductive freedom—the story of an accidental miscarriage that teaches us much about how Judaism does, and doesn't, regard the personhood of a fetus."<sup>33</sup> These verses say "when [two or more] parties fight, and one of them pushes a pregnant woman and a miscarriage results, but no other damage ensues, the one responsible shall be fined according as the woman's husband may exact, the payment to be based on reckoning. But if other damage ensues, the penalty shall be life for life."<sup>34</sup> The teaching here is that, if one were to have a miscarriage based on physical fighting, the monetary damages must be paid but if the woman were to be killed, the damages would be a life for a life. In other words, because the damages are financial, the fetus in itself is not yet considered a life.

Classical Jewish sources elaborate on the concept of a fetus not yet being a person, with one saying "until forty days from conception the fetus is merely water,"<sup>35</sup> and another that compares a fetus to its mother's thigh.<sup>36</sup> Because the mother's status is firmly in personhood, and the fetus' status is not yet a person, the mother's life takes priority over the fetus. Thus, abortion is permitted. It is important to note that there are restrictions to abortion in Judaism, and, that being said, Judaism, especially progressive communities, invites a pregnant person to make their own informed decisions based on their knowledge of their body. Reform Jewish communities around the country are living their values of a person's right to an abortion and

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<sup>33</sup> National Council of Jewish Women, *Reproductive Shabbat Booklet*, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Exodus 21:22-23

<sup>35</sup> Yevamot 69b

<sup>36</sup> Gittin 23b

implementing them into their congregations. In May 2022, after the leaked Supreme Court decision to repeal Roe V. Wade, Central Synagogue in New York sent a message to congregants expressing concern and sharing Judaism's view on abortion, inviting learners to join their clergy for conversations and study on Jewish texts and traditions relating to abortion.<sup>37</sup> Rabbi Stephanie Alexander, Senior Rabbi at Kahal Kodesh Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina, shared her Rosh HaShanah sermon about religious freedom, including the right to an abortion, in September, 2022.<sup>38</sup> In February, 2024, congregations around the country joined the National Council of Jewish Women to celebrate Repro Shabbat. However, there are communities, especially those in states with restriction to abortion, that did not officially sign on to Repro Shabbat.<sup>39</sup> In these states, programming around abortion becomes more complicated even though our Jewish texts invite us to be having these conversations. It therefore becomes even more important that rabbis and Jewish educators in states where abortion guidelines are more progressive become beacons of vocal and public support for abortion.

### **Healthy Relationships**

Beyond teaching about the mechanics of sex, pleasure included, sex and intimacy education can and should include teaching about healthy relationships. In his sermon to Union for Reform Judaism's sixty-eighth General Assembly, Rabbi Eric Yoffie shared in relation to the URJ's Sacred Choices curriculum, "the issue here is not the cold and clinical biological facts,

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<sup>37</sup> Central Synagogue, "Central Synagogue, a Reform Congregation in Midtown Manhattan," A Message From Your Clergy: The Jewish Lens on Abortion Rights - News at Central Synagogue, accessed February 26, 2024, <https://www.centralsynagogue.org/news/a-message-from-your-clergy-the-jewish-lens-on-abortion-rights>.

<sup>38</sup> Rabbi Stephanie Alexander, "September 2022," Storied Life, Illustrated., September 26, 2022, <https://storiedlifeillustrated.com/2022/09/>.

<sup>39</sup> "Repro Shabbat 2024," Jews for Abortion Access, accessed February 26, 2024, <https://www.jewsforabortionaccess.org/repro-shabbat-2024>.

which are generally available. The issue is the ethics of relationships and sexuality, which are not.”<sup>40</sup> These “cold and clinical biological facts,” are readily available, but the context in which we teach them is important. How do we ensure that the biological facts are up-to-date, and the language we teach them in is inclusive? How do we ensure that the young people in our communities are practicing the realities of these biological facts safely, and that they have the resources to explore and feel comfortable asking a trusted adult if they have questions? In her thesis titled *Educating the Whole, Holy Human*, Rabbi Zoe McCoon shares that the “central focus of intimacy and sexuality education is the bringing foundational questions, knowledge, and skills about what it means to be human, to be in relationship- with one’s self and with others, and to be in community.”<sup>41</sup> Jewish sources empower us to interact with ourselves, with each other, and with the world from a place of values. This includes the way we interact with one another in intimate, sexual relationships. Incorporating Jewish values in sex and intimacy education strengthens the ways in which those in sexual relationships are able to treat one another and be treated by one another.

A crucial aspect in teaching positive relationships is an understanding of a healthy self relationship. Genesis affirms that we are each made in God’s image.<sup>42</sup> This concept of our creation *btzelem Elohim* allows us to hold firm in the blessing of our existence. Although one’s value should not be determined by a biblical affirmation, Genesis serves as a reminder that each individual is a vessel for the divine.

Bava Metzia teaches of two people traveling with only one jug of water. If they share the water they will both die, and Rabbi Akiva shares on this “חייך קודמים לחיי חבירך, your life should

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<sup>40</sup> Laura Novak Winer, “Sacred Choices: Adolescent Relationships and Sexual Ethics: The Reform Movement’s Response to the Need for Faith-Based Sexuality Education,” *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, January 2011. Page 23

<sup>41</sup> Zoe McCoon, “Educating the Whole, Holy Human” (thesis, 2021), 5

<sup>42</sup> Genesis 1:27, Genesis 9:6

come before the life of your friend.”<sup>43</sup> Although there are times to care and support one another’s well-being, it is also important for learners to recognize how and when to prioritize themselves. Self-prioritization can also allow the individual to understand their limitations within the context of a relationship and its included intimacy. What are they willing to do? Where are there boundaries and limits? What are they comfortable with? By exploring one’s relationship to oneself, one can learn their boundaries and set them with others.

This is further emphasized in the often quoted Pirkei Avot, “If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for my own self [only], what am I? And if not now, when?”<sup>44</sup> Creating a positive self-relationship comes with a balanced understanding of self in relationship to others. Pirkei Avot teaches that one should be able to emphasize both oneself and others. By teaching learners to care for themselves, we can ensure they have the tools and understanding to identify when they are being treated kindly and respectfully.

Our texts also share the importance of fostering and maintaining healthy relationships with others. Before creating Eve, God says in Genesis, “It is not good for the Human to be alone; I will make a fitting counterpart<sup>45</sup> for him.”<sup>46</sup> The term in Hebrew, עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, can be literally translated to mean “a helper against him.” The Talmud expands what an *ezer kenegdo* looks like:

**The Sages taught:** Concerning an orphan boy who has come to marry, the community tries its utmost to provide for all of his needs. The charities **rent a house for him, arrange for him a bed and all his utensils, and thereafter they marry him a wife, as it is stated:** “But you shall surely open your hand to him, and shall surely lend him **sufficient for his deficiency in that which is deficient for him**” (Deuteronomy 15:8). With regard to the phrase “**sufficient for his deficiency,**” **this** is referring to **the house**. “**Which is deficient**”; **this** is referring to a **bed and table**. “**For him [lo]**”; **this** is

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<sup>43</sup> Bava Metzia 62a

<sup>44</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:15

<sup>45</sup> Term usually translated to be “fitting counterpart,” but literally translated as helper against

<sup>46</sup> Genesis 2:18

referring to a wife. And similarly the verse states: “I will make him [*lo*] a helpmate for him” (Genesis 2:18), when God created a wife for Adam.<sup>47</sup>

Here, this fitting counterpart provides for their partner’s deficiencies. In this context, the Torah creates an example for a healthy relationship and provides an example for what a partnership can look like. In her book *Rediscovering Eve*, Carol Meyers offers a number of alternate translations for this helpmate, or *ezer kenegdo*: “helper as partner” from the NRSV, “suitable partner” from the New American Bible, and her own offering of “powerful counterpart”.<sup>48</sup> While all these translations offer us different interpretations of the text, what is clear is the message of meaningful, collaborative partnership. Meyers writes in context of the *ezer kenegdo* “the two people will be neither superior nor subordinate to each other; the phrase connotes a nonhierarchical relationship.”<sup>49</sup> Healthy, open, and honest relationships provide support and equity, where each person is seen and treated as an equal part of the partnership.

Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* offers additional guidelines and advice for what he deems as a healthy relationship:

Similarly, our Sages commanded that a man honor his wife more than his own person, and love her as he loves his own person. If he has financial resources, he should offer her benefits in accordance with his resources. He should not cast a superfluous measure of fear over her. He should talk with her gently, being neither sad nor angry.<sup>50</sup>

At first glance, this may be a nice view of how a husband should treat his wife. However, in a deeper reading, there is a tension between our sources on self-worth and value and some of our sources on healthy relationships. In general, one should talk to their partner gently, and, although they may be sad or angry, they should still maintain a level of respect and care in the

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<sup>47</sup> Ketubot 67b

<sup>48</sup> Meyers, Carol, 'Eve in Eden: Genesis 2–3', *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (2012; online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 May 2013), <https://doi-org.huc.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199734559.003.0004>

<sup>49</sup> Meyers, Carol, 'Eve in Eden: Genesis 2-3'

<sup>50</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, Marriage 15:19

relationship. Maimonides also emphasizes a “superfluous measure of fear” creating an expectation that some level of fear in a relationship is healthy. Additionally, what does it mean to “honor his wife more than his own person,” and how does one hold this in connection to Pirkei Avot?

Reframing this text from a non-gendered, reciprocal point of view can answer these questions. If both partners equally honor each other, the reciprocated respect and generosity can ensure they are each cared for. If both partners offer each other benefits in accordance to the resources they have, including emotional capacity, they can ensure each other’s well being is being taken into account. If they both talk to each other gently, they will be able to support each other through times of disagreement or tragedy.

### **Consent**

Jewish sex and intimacy education must advocate for sexual encounters to take place within the context of enthusiastic consent. The Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN) defines consent as:

Consent is an agreement between participants to engage in sexual activity. Consent should be clearly and freely communicated. A verbal and affirmative expression of consent can help both you and your partner to understand and respect each other’s boundaries.

Consent cannot be given by individuals who are underage, intoxicated or incapacitated by drugs or alcohol, or asleep or unconscious. If someone agrees to an activity under pressure of intimidation or threat, that isn’t considered consent because it was not given freely. Unequal power dynamics, such as engaging in sexual activity with an employee or student, also mean that consent cannot be freely given.<sup>51</sup>

Consent is an ongoing process, and ensures every party in a sexual encounter is able to hold to boundaries and feel physically and emotionally safe. Maimonides writes “the sages forbade a man to have marital relations while thinking of another woman. Nor may he initiate

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<sup>51</sup> “What Consent Looks Like,” RAINN, <https://www.rainn.org/articles/what-is-consent>.

sex while drunk, nor out of spite or hatred, nor may he rape her or initiate sex while she is afraid.”<sup>52</sup> Again, reading this text from a non gendered lens leads us to an understanding that both parties must consent to sex without fear or influence of drugs or alcohol or anger.

Genesis 24 provides us with a powerful example of consent. After finding a wife for Abraham’s son Isaac, Abraham’s servant offers her and her mother presents. Abraham’s servant wants to take Rebekah back with him right away, but first, her mother and brother affirm that she is willing to go. They ask her if she will go with them, and she responds “*elekh*- I will go.”<sup>53</sup> In this story, although Abraham’s servant tries to put pressure on the situation to move quickly, Rebekah has the support of her family and she does not leave with him until she affirms her consent and desire to go. Including Jewish lessons of consent within our sex and intimacy education can act like Rebekah’s mother and brother. These lessons support our learners in being able to slow down and ask for, and give, open and honest consent without external pressures.

To be clear, there are a number of times in our biblical texts where stories of rape and sexual violence occur. Rabbi Jennifer Queen writes in her thesis *We Will Listen and We Will Do*:

There are many examples, explicit and interpreted, of sexual violence in the bible. In Genesis 12, we read about Sarah, and in Genesis 34, about Dinah, women who are compromised sexually. In Chapter 39, when Joseph is (wrongly) accused of rape, he is jailed indefinitely. Leviticus and Deuteronomy provide laws concerning תוירע , sexual sins or wrongful sexual interactions, including those which inform the rabbis’ understanding of rape, and what to do in response. Also in Deuteronomy, the threats of curses that will befall the Israelites if they disobey the commandments include threats of sexual violence against women. Still, none of these explicitly outlaws rape outright. The laws are cited as determinants of culpability for adultery, depending on where the act occurred and whether the victim, always a woman, cried out for help. Their primary concern is the value placed on a woman’s body and particularly, on her virginity, and how to reconcile the loss thereof and make restitution. The laws are not read with the notion of

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<sup>52</sup> Mishneh Torah Forbidden Intercourse 21:12

<sup>53</sup> Genesis 24:51-58

consent as a factor, or with interest in the violation of bodily autonomy or dehumanization of the victim.<sup>54</sup>

Where our biblical texts are lacking in explicit statements of advocating for and teaching consent, our Jewish spaces and institutions have the opportunity and responsibility to ensure these values are taught.

### **Summary**

The values and ethics of our Jewish texts empower Jewish institutions to teach accurate, comprehensive, science-based sex education. We have the opportunity and obligation to ensure our young people are able to understand themselves and each other from a place of kindness and mutual respect. And, sexual intimacy and ethics education should not begin, or end, with a formalized sex education curriculum. These values should be woven throughout our Jewish learning- both formally and informally. Continuing to explore these values through text, liturgy, and ritual ensures that our learners will be instilled with them. Sexual ethics and intimacy education is a path to teaching Jewish learners of all ages how to better themselves, and, therefore, the world.

### **Part 2: In the Field**

Sexuality and intimacy education is becoming increasingly popular in synagogue programming throughout the country. In her 2021 thesis, Rabbi Zoe McCoon surveyed clergy, Jewish educators, and Jewish organization staffers to examine sex and intimacy education in Jewish spaces. Of the 103 people who took the survey (not all of whom answered every question), approximately 23.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed when asked if their

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<sup>54</sup> Jennifer Queen, “We Will Listen and We Will Do” (thesis, 2019), pages 14-15



organization offered some form of sex education. However, numbers shifted when asked about the specifics of what programs were offered, with 16.7% of 102 respondents never offering programming on “Gender Identity and Roles,” and 27.5% of 102 respondents never offering programming on “Sexuality and Coming Out of the Closet.”<sup>55</sup>

Rena Crawford, the Social Justice Manager for Women of Reform Judaism, explored the implementation of sexuality education in the South in her 2022 capstone titled *Everybody's Doing It, We Might as Well Talk About It: Supplemental Sex Education by Jewish Educators in the South*. In her research, she interviewed 5 Jewish educators running sex education programs in southern synagogues and analyzed their content and implementation. As a whole, Crawford's research participants shared that their programming explored anatomy and biology, sexual and gender identity, healthy relationships, and sexual health. Additionally, participants also shared that they discussed the concept of sexual education being preventative, and their hopes that learners will be able to accept their natural desires and act on them in a healthy way. Some participants shared that their programming explores LGBTQ+ sex education, while others shared that their programming is primarily heteronormative, although there is a desire to move away from this in the future. Additionally, while, as a whole, the programming of participants in Crawford's study explored the mechanics of sex, they did not discuss the role of pleasure for parties involved.<sup>56</sup> While Crawford's data is limited to Southern Congregations, her research can be used to explore areas for change and growth in sexuality and intimacy education programming in Jewish spaces around the country.

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<sup>55</sup> Zoe McCoon, “Educating the Whole, Holy Human” (thesis, 2021), 32-34

<sup>56</sup> Crawford, *Everybody's Doing It* 9-10

While it may be difficult to see the gap in offerings exploring sexuality and intimacy, the research explored by Rabbi McCoon and Rena Crawford offers that we are only in the beginning of seeing such programming in Jewish spaces. McCoon's study suggests that fewer than one-quarter of synagogues and Jewish communities already incorporate some aspect of sex education curriculum into their formal or informal programming, despite the URJ's strong commitment as expressed through their *Sacred Choices* curriculum. Additionally, those congregations that emphasize sex education often invest considerably in it. For example, Washington Hebrew Congregation (WHC) in Washington, DC, Temple Beth Or (TBO) in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Woodlands Community Temple (WCT) in White Plains, New York, all developed and implemented sexuality retreats in their communities.

In examining the reasons behind implementing these retreats, it is clear that they exist at the intersection of Jewish values, American society, and a desire to give learners the tools they need to engage, should they choose, in sexual relationships mindfully, respectfully, and safely. Rabbi Mara Young, Senior Rabbi at WCT, shared, "Judaism is a vehicle in which a person can optimize themselves in the world around them. This is one area that is sorely missing from every aspect of a kid's life because their schools are not teaching it, and we need to constantly be on the lookout to debunk what American society is telling our children- which is religion hides sex because they're being told by Conservative Christian America that gender and sexual identity is part of the secular world not the religious world."<sup>57</sup> Rabbi Billy Dreskin, Rabbi Emeritus at WCT who helped bring this program to life, echoed Rabbi Young's sentiment in saying, "even if the secular school is doing a fantastic job of teaching the physiological side, there is such a strong

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<sup>57</sup> Feb 1 Interview with Rabbi Mara Young

favorability for adding the synagogue to the number of sources that kids have for learning about how to make their way through the world.”<sup>58</sup>

These retreats and the programming included offer explicit learning goals for their participants. Examining their goals offers a window into the values and content included in their programming.

The URJ’s *Sacred Choices* does not define itself as a sex education curriculum, but rather lessons on Jewish ethics relevant to the human experience, sexual behavior, and relationships.<sup>59</sup> *Sacred Choices* includes developmentally appropriate modules for both high schoolers and middle schoolers, and is available for synagogues and organizations to adapt for their own communities. This is why it includes guidelines, such as “Creating a safe learning environment” and “Notes on Language Uses.” *Sacred Choices* uses the “Understanding by Design” curriculum development model to offer the following series of enduring understandings and essential questions:

The enduring understandings of the Sacred Choices initiative are as follows:

1. My body and soul—including my sexuality—are gifts from God.
2. Jewish tradition provides guidance in making sacred choices about how I use and care for those gifts and in coping with the consequences of my choices.

The essential questions of the Sacred Choices initiative are as follows:

1. What does it mean to view my life—my body, soul, and sexuality—as well as that of others as gifts from God? How does it affect my own thoughts and actions? How does it affect my thoughts about and actions toward others?

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<sup>58</sup> Jamie Field and Billy Dreskin, Interview With Rabbi Billy Dreskin, personal, February 6, 2024.

<sup>59</sup> Laura Novak Winer, *Sacred Choices: High School Module Facilitator’s Guide*, (New York: URJ Press, 2011) 10.

2. How does the way I treat my body and soul matter to myself, to God, and to others, particularly to other people in my Jewish community? 3. What is the guidance that Jewish tradition provides in this area? Which elements resonate with me, and which do not? How can I incorporate Jewish beliefs and behaviors into my own life as I make these choices?

4. What are the consequences of my choices? How does Judaism help me to cope with those consequences? How does God help me to cope with those consequences? What do I do if I made a choice that does not treat my life and that of others as a sacred gift? Are all choices with regard to sexuality sacred?

5. How is the guidance that Judaism provides in consonance with the messages I receive from pop culture and society? How is the guidance that Judaism provides at odds with these messages? How can I evaluate the range of messages I receive? For the high school curriculum we have added an additional developmentally appropriate essential question:

6. How do I hear and stay true to my inner voice?

As they explore and answer these questions, the participants will begin to develop an understanding of Judaism's stance on these ethical issues about their bodies and behavior, the relevance of them to their lives, and their personal connection to them.<sup>60</sup>

In the opening communication to parents inviting them to their Sex Ed Retreat's Parent Information Session, Temple Beth Or offered the following goals for their programming:

1. Create a safe space for the participants to explore issues of sex, sexuality, and Judaism.
2. Introduce the concept of B'tzelem Elohim and demonstrate how it influences one's self-understanding.
3. Empower students to regard their bodies and sexuality with kavod (honor).
4. Introduce the students to images of love in Jewish text.
5. Demonstrate that Judaism values healthy relationships.
6. Connect the Jewish texts to participants' lives.
7. Offer students Jewish perspectives on sex and sexuality.

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<sup>60</sup> Laura Novak Winer, *Sacred Choices: High School Module*, (New York: URJ Press, 2011), page 9

8. Explore issues of internet safety, sexting, and general “mixing” of technology and sex.
9. Share information about AIDS, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), and methods for safe sex.
10. Assess and examine various relationship and peer pressure situations.
11. Define and promote healthy relationships.<sup>61</sup>

In the 2022 facilitator’s manual for Washington Hebrew Congregation’s retreat “A Jewish View of Love, Relationships, and Sexuality,” which was historically run by sexuality and relationship educations and certified sex educators Charles and Amy Miron before their retirement in 2023, their goals are listed as follows:

#### Overall Goals for the Retreat

By the end of the retreat, participants will:

- have learned about sexuality and relationships in a synagogue-sponsored environment, demonstrating that the Jewish religion, Rabbis and other trusted adults can be valuable resources throughout life.
- have been introduced to Reform Judaism’s ethics, values, beliefs, and traditions about relationships and sexuality.
- obtain medically accurate information about the biological issues surrounding sexuality including anatomical functions, birth control, sexually transmitted infections, safer sex practices, and other health and relationship issues.
- explore concepts and issues of: sex assigned at birth, gender (identity, role, expression, privilege,) sexual orientation and romantic orientation.

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<sup>61</sup> Unpublished 2022 Sex Ed Retreat Info Letter for Parents Temple Beth Or Raleigh NC

- provide resources for those participants who may be questioning their sex assigned at birth, sexual orientation, gender identity or romantic orientation.
- evaluate how language related to gender, affection and sexuality can influence feelings, actions, and decisions.
- obtain information about what love is and what it isn't.
- develop positive attitudes to help make responsible decisions about affection, love, relationships, and sexuality.
- recognize how to express their feelings of affection and love in many ways other than through sexual behavior.
- evaluate and establish criteria for readiness to engage in sexual activity. ➤ abstain from or delay shared sexual activity longer than if they had not participated in this program.
- discuss how sexual behavior is not something you do to a person or for a person but rather a mutually affirmative decision in a cooperative relationship.
- explore the necessary role of enthusiastic mutual affirmative consent. ➤ use safer sex practices when they choose to be sexually expressive.
- consider sexual activity in terms of affection, love, and intimacy rather than just physical actions.
- discuss how sexual activity can be a pleasurable experience with the right person, at the right time, under the right circumstances, for the right reasons.
- analyze the short term and long-term effects of teen pregnancy.
- be more prepared to resist peer pressure to be sexually active.
- have been exposed to other gender's thoughts and feelings regarding sexuality and relationships.
- be sensitized to the need for bystander action if others are perceived to be in difficulty.
- recognize if they are in an abusive relationship and have resources to help.

➤ define sexual harassment and have strategies and resources should it occur.

➤ develop strategies for teens and their parents to better communicate about sexuality and relationships.<sup>62</sup>

In their 2023 Leader's Guide for their Retreat "Judaism Takes an Honest Look @ Love, Gender, and Sexuality," Woodlands Community Temple lists their goals as:

1. Demonstrate that Judaism, in its insistence upon the equality, dignity, and worth of every human being, demands that we:
  - a) assist young people in their efforts to explore their emerging sexuality and gender identity;
  - b) help them to combat the pressure to become sexually active from both their friends and commercial media (television, movies, internet and social media); and,
  - c) should they choose to become sexually active, provide them with the information they need to act safely and responsibly.
2. Provide a setting where young people can openly and honestly bring their own questions and puzzlements, and explore their thoughts and feelings, in a disciplined manner with trusted, responsible leaders.
3. Decrease confusion and increase understanding of gender and sexuality issues.
4. Develop increased confidence and ease in talking about gender and sexuality issues — with teachers, with peers, and with parents.
5. Invite young people to ask, "What does this mean to me?" "What does it say to what I have already been taught, learned from parents, heard from significant persons and sources, ancient and modern?" And finally, "What does it say to my vision of what I want to be?" "What does it say to my actions?"
6. Affirm Judaism's teaching that sexuality is a positive and enriching force of life and embraces gender expansiveness.<sup>63</sup>

Although these three synagogues represent a particular geographical range, they also represent a diverse mix of Reform synagogues. Washington Hebrew Congregation is a large

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<sup>62</sup> Unpublished Washington Hebrew Congregation Facilitator's Manual A Jewish View of Love, Relationships, and Sexuality Page 5

<sup>63</sup> Unpublished 2023 Leader's Guide "Judaism Takes an Honest Look @ Love, Gender, and Sexuality," Woodlands Community Temple Page 2

(2000+) family member congregation with both urban and suburban campuses in downtown Washington, DC, and Potomac, Maryland. Woodlands Community Temple is a suburban congregation with 300+ family units, and Temple Beth Or is a southern congregation in a mid-sized city with approximately 500+ family units.

The overlap in these goals represents the shared values that spans the geographical and community differences between these congregations.<sup>64</sup> Each congregation shares the goal to provide a safe and trusting space to explore this content, each incorporates ethics and values, and each offers participants to learn about safety and responsibility in relation to sex and sexuality.

In incorporating a formal sexual and intimacy education program into their communities, synagogues are making a larger commitment to incorporating the values behind these programs into the larger synagogue community. For example, Rabbi Young shared that WCT has, through an LGBTQ+ task force, worked to incorporate gender inclusive language that embodies the fullness of the person. Their work for gender inclusivity includes gender inclusive restrooms that also provide information about gender expansive identity. Additionally, Rabbi Young shared a personal passion of hers, which are signs around the synagogue that invite breastfeeding parents to feed in any space in the building, including the sanctuary, or offering alternate private spaces should a parent prefer to feed their child there.<sup>65</sup>

Both TBO and WHC actively express the values of sexuality and intimacy education outside of their retreats. Hannah Demick, Assistant Director of Programs and Education at TBO, shared:

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<sup>64</sup> I am only comparing the three synagogue curricula here, not Sacred Choices

<sup>65</sup> Jamie Field and Mara Young, Interview With Rabbi Mara Young, personal, February 1, 2024.



TBO prioritizes the values of identity and safe, healthy relationships throughout our community. In bathrooms, signs from the InterAct Center offer warning signs and resources for victims of domestic and sexual violence. Valuing identity is part of all of our youth programming- we ensure pronoun stickers are available for participants at all of our youth group events and teen retreats to promote inclusive spaces, and the value of healthy relationships extends to our workplace culture, where clergy and staff work together to cultivate an environment where individuals can go to each other for support, advice, and feedback.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, Stephanie Tankel, Director of Lifelong Learning at WHC shared:

We offer a class called “Parenting is Hard, Judaism Helps,” and other adult programs that continue the conversation around life’s complexities and the ways Judaism can help us navigate them. We also ask for pronouns in each and every registration form for events and programs at our synagogues, and allow people to write in their own pronouns if their identity isn’t listed. In these ways and more, Washington Hebrew places an emphasis on the importance of trusting, safe, and healthy relationships and the ways Jewish values can guide us through them.<sup>67</sup>

At Woodlands Community Temple, Temple Beth Or, and Washington Hebrew, the values they strive to teach their learners are not only taught in their sexuality retreats, but also modeled through their communities. In their own individual ways, these communities target both congregants and staff of all ages and ensure that they feel valued, comfortable, and respected in their spaces.

## Summary

Reform congregations are taking the concept of “it is Torah and we must teach,” and turning it to action with dynamic and innovative sexual and intimacy education programming. These programs ensure that learners are empowered to see their Jewish spaces and educators as safe spaces and places of wisdom, including on topics that are complicated and, at times,

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<sup>66</sup> Jamie Field and Hannah Demick, Interview With Hannah Demick, personal, February 16, 2024.

<sup>67</sup> Jamie Field and Stephanie Tankel, Interview With Stephanie Tankel, personal, February 20, 2024.

uncomfortable. Led by Jewish values, this format of sexuality and intimacy education ensures learners have up-to-date biological information about sex as well as the psycho-emotional information, combining aspects of both physical and emotional safety within their goals and guidelines for programming. The values that are taught during this programming don't exist in a vacuum, and, in fact, are spread throughout other programming and offerings by the community, including both signage and policies. As country-wide offerings of sexual and intimacy education begin to expand, synagogues are able to expand Jewish understanding and values of equality, bodily autonomy, and safety. As Rabbi Jonathan Stein, who helped originate sex education programs in the synagogue shared with me, “it's all about values and ethics. Sexuality is core to human life, it's just an integrated part of who we are, and it needs to be expressed and channeled in the most appropriate way.”<sup>68</sup>

### **Part 3- A New Model**

In the research for this thesis, I have been inspired by the spirit of innovation in sexual and intimacy education around the country. The dynamic curricula and conversations with rabbis and educators have inspired this new model of curricula. This model combines the knowledge of Jewish wisdom with the ever changing field of sex education. Rabbis, cantors, and Jewish educators are experts in their field, and are able to use their vast knowledge of Jewish tradition, ritual, history, and Torah and weave that knowledge through lessons about sex, intimacy, and ethics. And, unless they happen to be certified, most rabbis and Jewish educators are not sex educators. This new method invites learners to learn from experts in both fields- clergy, educators, and a sexuality educator licensed by the American Association of Sexuality

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<sup>68</sup>Jamie Field and Jonathan Stein, Interview with Rabbi Jonathan Stein, personal, February 8, 2024.

Educators, Counselors, and Therapists. This allows learners to receive the values and ethics central to their community and receive the most quality, accurate information about sex, anatomy, and biology.

In this section, I provide sample lessons for an introductory class and four additional topics that could form the basis for a synagogue sex education curriculum. This programming is intended for high school students between 10th-12th grades. These lesson plans only demonstrate the content that would be taught by clergy or the Jewish educator- the sexuality educator either contracted out or within the community would provide their own lesson plans and content tying in with the Jewish value. The lesson plans here are only a sample of a few offerings in order to demonstrate how this model could be implemented- sexuality and intimacy education is expansive and can and should include more (such as procreation, gender identity, sexuality, and more). This model can be adapted for each synagogue- some may choose to incorporate it within preexisting teen programming, some may ask families to sign up for this specific programming in the time slot following religious school, and some may choose to adapt it to a retreat. Each of these sample lessons is designed to take 90 minutes; 30 minutes to be led by the Jewish educator, followed by a ten minute break, followed by 50 minutes led by the licensed sexuality educator. The introductory class is an hour long, taught only by the Jewish educator. The “goals” of each lesson should be achieved by the end of this 90-minute session, through either the Jewish educator, sexuality educator, or both.

### **Lesson One: An Introduction To Jewish Sex-Ed**

**Topic:** Introduction to Sex-Ed

**Goals:**

1. Learners understand “what’s Jewish?” about sex-ed
2. Learners have a framework for the rest of the sexuality and intimacy education programming

**Materials:**

Paper

Pencils

**Learning Plan:**

**1-15 Minutes: Introduction**

Learners should take a few minutes to write a list of places where they have learned about sex.

Then, the facilitator should invite each learner to share their name, pronouns, and one place that they have listed.

The facilitator should note if any learners have included synagogue on their places where they have learned about sex. Invite learners to discuss the following questions:

1. What did the places you all listed have in common? What were the differences?
  - a. Invite them to explore the difference between formal sex education (for example- in the classroom) vs informal sex education (for example- from the internet, from movies, from friends)
2. Why do you think we’re offering this course of sexuality education in the synagogue?
3. What do you think is Jewish about sex education?

**15-30 Minutes: Music Round**

It seems like sex is everywhere- in movies, TV shows, and more. But what’s Jewish about sex?

- In small groups of 2-4, learners should take 5 minutes to list as many songs as they can about sex (songs that mention sex or allude to sex of any sort are acceptable.). Explain that each group will win a point for each song they have listed.

- After 5 minutes, bring back the group and tell them to put their pencils away. Explain that learners will only get points if they mention Jewish values through sex. They are welcome to look up the lyrics at their turn.
- Groups will go in a circle and each share one song. If a group shares a song and another group has the same song, neither group will get points. Groups must share the lyric in the song that talks about values (for example, in the song “Say You Won’t Let Go” by James Arthur, the lyric “And you asked me to stay over, I said, ‘I already told ya, I think that you should get some rest,’”<sup>69</sup> discusses consent, given that both parties in the song are not sober).
- Each group will continue to go until they are out of songs and there is a winner, or until the activity has taken ten minutes
- Discuss:
  - What were some of the values mentioned in the songs?
  - Where do values align with sex?
  - What is Jewish about them?

### 30-45 Minutes: Text Study- Sex Through Values

As a group, the facilitator will guide learners through the following texts.

#### 1. Genesis 1:27

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

And God created the human in God's image, in the image of God He created that one; male and female God created them.

- What does it mean to be created *btzelem Elohim*?
- How do we treat ourselves as if we are created in God’s image?

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<sup>69</sup> Say You Won’t Let Go- James Arthur

- c. How do we treat others as if they are created in God's image?

## 2. Mishneh Torah Sabbath 30:14

תַּשְׁמִינֵשׁ הַמָּטָה מֵעֵנֶג שַׁבָּת הוּא. לְפִיכָךְ עֹנֶנֶת תִּלְמִידֵי חֲכָמִים הַבְּרִיאִים מְשַׁמְשִׁין מִלֵּיל שַׁבָּת לְלֵיל שַׁבָּת

Sexual relations are considered a dimension of Sabbath pleasure. Therefore, Torah scholars who are healthy set aside Friday night as the night when they fulfill their conjugal duties.

- a. What does it mean for sexual relations to be a “dimension of Sabbath pleasure?”
- b. In what ways does Judaism allow/encourage enjoyment of the physical?  
(examples- blessing over the wine, taking the time to eat, only fasting on specific occasions etc).

## 3. Eilu Devarim

THESE ARE THINGS that are limitless,  
of which a person enjoys the fruit of the world,  
while the principal remains in the world to come.  
They are: honoring one's father and mother,  
engaging in deeds of compassion,  
arriving early for study, morning and evening,  
dealing graciously with guests, visiting the sick,  
providing for the wedding couple,  
accompanying the dead for burial,

being devoted in prayer,  
and making peace among people.

But the study of Torah encompasses them all.<sup>70</sup>

- a. Why is it that these things are limitless?
- b. In what ways do they express Jewish values?
- c. How does studying Torah encompass them all?
- d. What do these have to do with sex?

#### **45-60 Minutes: Wrap-Up**

- Explain logistics of the series- each class will be taught in coordination with a licensed sex educator. Learners will discuss the ways Jewish values intersect with an expanded biological, anatomical, psychological, and sociological understanding of sex. Learners will be invited to ask questions at any time during the course of the class.
- Explain that parents/adults/caregivers are aware of what is happening in these classes. Learners are empowered to share, and it is assumed that what is shared during these series of courses is confidential. That being said, if a learner says something that demonstrates that they or someone they know are at risk of hurting themselves or others, it is not possible to keep this confidential. Learners should feel that the clergy/Jewish educator, sexuality educator, and their caregivers are safe people to go to for questions, concerns, and advice.
- To close, learners should be invited to share one thing they learned during this class and one thing they are excited to learn in the coming classes.

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<sup>70</sup> Elise D. Frishman, 206

## **Lesson Two: Healthy Relationships**

**Topic:** Healthy Relationships

### **Goals:**

1. Learners understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships  
(including platonic, romantic, and sexual)
2. Learners identify models of healthy relationships in their lives
3. Learners differentiate between unhealthy and abusive relationships

### **Materials:**

- Printout of text study
- Paper
- Pens or highlighters

### **Learning Plan:**

#### **1-7 Minutes: Introduction**

- In partners or small groups, learners should take a few moments list one example of a healthy relationship from pop culture, and one example of an unhealthy or toxic relationship
- Learners should share what marks each relationship as healthy or unhealthy

#### **7-15 Minutes: Text Study**

- In partners or small groups, learners should look at the following to stories from the Torah. Ask them to identify which is a healthy relationship and which is an unhealthy relationship (or, if there are pieces of both) and why, and to discuss if the reasons that made them healthy or unhealthy were similar to the relationships they shared before.



## 1. Genesis 27:1-13- A summary

Rebekah and Isaac were married and had twin sons. Rebekah favored one son, Jacob, and Isaac favored the other, Esau. When Isaac was old and blind, he invited his son Esau to talk. He asked Esau to go to the fields and hunt and then prepare a meal for him. Isaac told Esau that, after he did these things, he would receive a special blessing before Isaac died. Rebekah overheard this conversation. When Esau left to go hunting, Rebekah told Jacob what happened. She told Jacob to get two goats from the field and she would make the dish for Jacob to bring to his father in order to trick him into offering Jacob the blessing. Jacob was concerned because Esau was hairy and he was not, and he did not want to be cursed by his father. Rebekah told Jacob that, if he is cursed, the curse will be on her.

### ● Discussion Questions:

- What is happening in this text?
- What does this say about the relationship between Isaac and Rebekah?
- If you were offering Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau advice, what would you say?

## 2. 1 Samuel 18:1-4

(א) וַיְהִי כְּכֹלְתּוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֶל-שָׂאוּל וַנֶּפֶשׁ יְהוֹנָתָן נִקְשְׁרָה בְּנֶפֶשׁ דָּוִד (וַיֵּאָהֲבוּ) [וַיֵּאָהֲבֻהוּ] יְהוֹנָתָן כְּנֶפֶשׁוֹ: (ב) וַיִּקְרָהוּ שָׂאוּל בְּיוֹם הַהוּא וְלֹא נָתַן לְשׁוֹב בֵּית אָבִיו: (ג) וַיִּכְרֹת יְהוֹנָתָן וְדָוִד בְּרִית בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ אֹתוֹ כְּנֶפֶשׁוֹ: (ד) וַיִּתְּפֹשֶׁט יְהוֹנָתָן אֶת-הַמָּעִיל אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו וַיִּתְּנֵהוּ לְדָוִד וּמִדָּג וּמִדֵּי וְעַד-חֲרָבּוֹ וְעַד-קֶשֶׁתוֹ וְעַד-חֲגָרּוֹ:

When [David] finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved David as himself. Saul took him [into his service] that day and would not let him return to his father's house.— Jonathan and David made a pact, because [Jonathan] loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the cloak and tunic he was wearing and gave them to David, together with his sword, bow, and belt.

### ● Discussion questions:

- What do we learn from David and Jonathan?
- Do David and Jonathan have a healthy relationship?

- If you could talk to David and Jonathan, what advice would you give them?

### **15-25 Minutes: Healthy Relationships with Ourselves**

- As a group, read the following text:

Pirkei Avot 1:15

הוא הִיָּה אומר, אם אין אני לי, מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני. ואם לא עכשיו, אימתי:

If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am only for my own self, what am I? And if not now, when?

- Discuss the following questions:
  - How does this text speak to our relationship to ourselves?
  - How does this text speak to our relationship to others?
  - How does the way we view ourselves impact the way we treat others?
  - What are some ways in which we can treat both ourselves and others with respect and kindness?

### **25-30 Minutes: Wrap Up**

- Ask learners to think of the relationships they shared in the beginning of class- do they still view the same ones as a healthy/unhealthy relationship? Why or why not?

## **Lesson Three: Contraception and Abortion**

**Topic:** Contraception and Abortion

**Goals:**

1. Learners understand Jewish views on contraception and abortion.
2. Learners understand that sex can lead to pregnancy or STIs, and how to prevent them
3. Learners become aware to resources available to them locally

**Materials:**

- Paper
- Pens
- Printout of Text Study

**Learning Plan:****1-7 Minutes: Introduction**

- Learners should list the joys and challenges of having children and share them.
- Explain that, in the Torah, we are commanded to “be fruitful and multiply.”<sup>71</sup> However, there are many reasons why someone would not want, or physically could not or should not have children.

**7-21 Minutes: Text Study**

- The facilitator will guide students through the following texts and questions on abortion and contraception.

**Abortion Texts:**

1. Exodus 21:22-25

וְכִי־יִנְצְוּ אֲנָשִׁים וְנִגְפוּ אִשָּׁה הָרָה וַיִּצְאוּ יָלְדֶיהָ וְלֹא יִהְיֶה אֶסְסוֹן עָנוּשׁ יַעֲזֹשׁ בְּאִשָּׁר יִשִּׁית עָלֶיהָ בְּעַל הָאִשָּׁה וְנָתַן בְּפָלְלִים:

וְאִם־אֶסְסוֹן יִהְיֶה וְנִתְּתָה גֹפֶשׁ תַּחַת גֹּפֶשׁ:

עֵינַי תַּחַת עֵינַי נָשׁוֹן תַּחַת שֵׁן יָד תַּחַת יָד רֶגֶל תַּחַת רֶגֶל:

כְּוִיָּה תַּחַת כְּוִיָּה פֶצַע תַּחַת פֶּצַע חֲבוּרָה תַּחַת חֲבוּרָה:

When [two or more] parties fight, and one of them pushes a pregnant woman and a miscarriage results, but no other damage ensues, the one responsible shall be fined according as the woman's husband may exact, the payment to be based on reckoning. But if other damage ensues, the penalty shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

2. Further Explanation on Text One

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<sup>71</sup> Genesis 1:22

In other words, if someone accidentally causes a miscarriage to take place, they are obligated to pay financial reparations only; the case is not treated as manslaughter or murder, which would demand the death penalty. The "other damage" that would demand the death penalty would be the death of the pregnant person. Causing the termination of a pregnancy is not, in the Torah, considered murder.<sup>72</sup>

- Discussion questions:
  - What is happening in this text?
    - Use this question to clarify that learners understand the premise of the story?
  - In what ways does Judaism value a fetus?
    - Use this question to explain that parents may have emotional attachment to a fetus, and this legal discussion does not mean that a miscarriage would not be tragic and heartbreaking. This text explains the legal status of a fetus, and that it is not “legally,” (although it may be emotionally) considered a life).

### 3. Gittin 23b:9

קִטְבֵּר עוֹבֵר יָרֵךְ אִמּוֹ

**A fetus is considered as its mother's thigh**, i.e., a part of its mother's body

- Discussion questions:
  - What do you think this text means?
  - Do you think this is a fair comparison? Why or why not?

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<sup>72</sup>

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/62a874c9150c8e5bb63a5fd1/t/655642430f4b6d1c0e129cc5/1700151876183/Torah+of+Repro+Freedom+v2.pdf>

## Contraception Texts:

### 1. Genesis 38:8-9

(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְאוֹנָן בֶּן אֶלְעָנָשׁ אֶחִיד וַיְבָרֶכְהוּ אֹתָהּ וְהָקָם זָרַע לְאֶחָיו: (ט) וַיֵּדַע אוֹנָן כִּי לֹא לוֹ יִהְיֶה הַזָּרַע וְהָיָה אִם־בָּא אֶל־אִשְׁתּוֹ אַחִיר וְשָׂחַת אֶרְצָהּ לְבִלְתִּי נָתוּן־זָרַע לְאֶחָיו

Then Judah said to Onan, “Join with your brother’s wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother.” But Onan, knowing that the offspring would not count as his, let the seed [the semen] go to waste whenever he joined with his brother’s wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother.

### 2. Further Explanation on Text 1

Tamar married Er, Judah’s firstborn son, who died young and childless. Judah told his second son, Onan, to marry Tamar and thus provide offspring for his dead brother. Onan, unwilling to have his children carry his brother’s name, spilled his seed on the ground whenever he made love to Tamar. He also died childless.<sup>73</sup>

- Discussion questions:

- What is happening in this story?
  - Use this question to clarify that learners understand the narrative of the story.
- What is meant by “spilling seed,”? Does the Torah approve of this?
- How does this relate to birth control?

### 3. Niddah 45a:12

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<sup>73</sup> David Mandel, “Who Was Tamar?,” My Jewish Learning, August 10, 2017, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tamar/>.

קטנה שמא תתעבר ותמות מעוברת שמא תעשה עוברה סנדל מניקה שמא תגמול את בנה וימות

The *baraita* specifies the reason for allowing these women to use contraceptive absorbent cloths: **A minor, lest she become pregnant and perhaps die** from this pregnancy; **a pregnant woman, lest** she be impregnated a second time and **her older fetus become** deformed into the shape of **a sandal** fish, by being squashed by the pressure of the second fetus; and **a nursing woman, lest** she become pregnant and her milk dry up, in which case **she weans her son** too early, thereby endangering him, **and he dies**.

- Discussion Questions:
  - We know that this is not scientifically possible, but what are the three reasons that this text says a woman can use barrier style contraception?
    - A minor
    - A pregnant woman, in order to preserve the older fetus
    - A nursing woman, to ensure that she is able to continue nursing and can feed her existing children
  - What do these three women have in common?
  - Why do you think these are the categories of people allowed to use birth control?

### 21-30 Minutes: Discussion and Wrap-Up

- As a group, read the following text and the accompanying quote by Rabbi Leah Berkowitz.

- It was taught in the mishna: If a person is **ill** and requires food due to potential danger, **one feeds them according to** the advice of medical **experts**. **Rabbi Yannai said: If an ill person says they need to eat, and a doctor says they do not need to eat, one listens to the ill person. What is the reason** for this *halakha*? It is because the verse states: “**The heart knows the bitterness of its soul**” (Proverbs 14:10), meaning an ill person knows the intensity of his pain and weakness, and doctors cannot say otherwise. The Gemara asks: It is **obvious** that a person knows themselves better than anyone else does. Why does this need to be stated explicitly? The Gemara answers: It is **lest you say that the doctor is more certain** because they have had more experience with this condition. Therefore, the verse **teaches us** that even so, it is the ill person who knows their own suffering better than anyone else.<sup>74</sup>
- While this text refers to fasting rather than pregnancy, it indicates the autonomy of an individual when it comes to making decisions about their own health. While a medical professional might intervene if a person is putting themselves in danger, if a person demands a certain intervention for themselves, the medical professionals must defer to them. A person is considered the authority when it comes to their own body and their own experience.<sup>75</sup>
- Discuss:
  - What does this text mean in terms of the texts about abortion and contraception?
  - In what ways does one know oneself more than a doctor knows them?
  - How does Judaism ensure bodily autonomy?

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<sup>74</sup> Yoma 83a:2

<sup>75</sup> Leah Berkowitz, “Reproductive Justice and Judaism Annotated Talk,” Sefaria, March 15, 2022

## Lesson Four: Consent

**Topic:** Consent

**Goals:**

1. Learners understand enthusiastic, ongoing consent
2. Learners are empowered to offer or deny consent
3. Learners understand that our Jewish values empower individuals to only engage in sexual and physical encounters if there is ongoing consent

**Materials:**

Printouts of sources

**Learning Plan:**

**1-12 Minutes: Introduction**

- Facilitator should briefly explain improv concept of “yes, and,”:

The basic concept of these two words is that you are up for anything, and will go along with whatever gets thrown your way. Essentially, you don’t use the word “No” in improv very often! The “And” part comes in when you are in a scene and can add to what your partner started rather than detract from it.

A large part of improv is that you are always there for your scene partner or partners, and, in turn, they are always there for you. This is the goal of “Yes, And”! By saying yes to your scene partner, you create something much more entertaining. If you start a scene by saying that you are an alien, and your scene partner completely commits to also being an alien, being abducted by an alien, etc., both of you know you can count on the other person. On the other hand, if you start by saying you are a puppy, but your scene partner says “Wait, I thought you were a cat!”, the scene is compromised. Not only do you feel less confident, but also the audience is less entertained.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> “How to Say ‘Yes, And,’” The Second City, accessed February 26, 2024, <https://www.secondcity.com/how-to-say-yes-and/>.



- Facilitator will invite two learners to play the improv game of “freeze,” with the scenario that one learner is the rabbi, and the other learner wants to go on a field trip to the moon. After thirty seconds, the facilitator will yell “freeze.” Learners will freeze exactly where they are, and a different learner will take their spot in the same pose. After yelling “unfreeze,” learners will begin a completely new scene of their choice based on the poses they begin in.
- After one more “freeze,” for a total of three rounds, the facilitator will invite two students to act out the first scene once again, but instead of saying, “yes, and,” they will use a, “no, but” model.
- After about 30 seconds of this scene, the facilitator will invite learners to freeze and sit down.
- Guided by the facilitator, the learners will discuss the following questions:
  - How did it feel for those who were in the “yes, and,” scenes? How did it feel for those who were in the “no, but,” scenes?
  - For those who were watching these scenes, how did it feel as the observer? What was the shift?
- Explain: in improv, actors use the “yes, and” to be able to move the scene along. In physical and sexual interactions, things should only progress if there’s enthusiastic, affirmative “yes,” from both parties. If there’s a hesitant yes, someone is under the influence, or they say no, then things should not progress forward.

### **12-24 Minutes: Group Discussions**

- Divided into two groups, one studying the Abraham and Isaac texts and one studying the Joseph text, learners will read the story out loud and discuss the following questions:

- Was there consent in the story? Why or why not?
- What did the biblical figures do right? What did they do wrong?
- What do we learn about consent from these texts?

## Joseph Text

Genesis 39:1-20- a summary

When Joseph was taken to Egypt, a man named Potiphar bought him and became his master. God was with Joseph and made sure he was successful, so Potiphar took a liking to Joseph and made him his personal attendant. Joseph was very handsome, and so Potiphar's wife told Joseph "lie with me," but Joseph refused. Potiphar's wife continued to ask, and Joseph continued to refuse. One day, she grabbed him by his clothing and said "lie with me." As Joseph ran away, his clothing came off in her hands. She showed it to her husband and told him that Joseph tried to sleep with her, but when she screamed, he left his clothing and ran away. Potiphar was furious.

## Abraham/Isaac Text

Context: Abraham, now an old man who felt he was close to death, asked his senior servant to promise him that he would find a wife for his son from the land of his (Abraham's) birth. The servant asked Abraham, "what if the woman does not consent to follow me back there," and Abraham responded "if the woman does not consent, then you have fulfilled the obligation of your oath, do not make her go with you." The following verses come as Abraham's servant finds a woman he thinks could be a fit for Abraham's son, Isaac.

Genesis 24:54-58

בא) הִנֵּה רַבֶּקָה לְפָנָיו קָח וְלָךְ וְתָהִי אִשָּׁה לְבִן־אֲדֹנָיִךְ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה: (גב) וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר שָׁמַע עֶבֶד אֲבִרָהָם אֶת־דִּבְרֵיהֶם (גד) וַיֹּצֵא אֶרְצָהּ לִיהוָה: (נג) וַיֹּצֵא הָעֶבֶד כְּלִי־כֶסֶף וְכָלִי זָהָב וּבְגָדִים וַיִּתֵּן לְרַבֶּקָה וּלְמַגְדָּלָתָהּ נָתַן לְאֵחִיהָ וּלְאִמָּהּ: (נד) וַיֹּצֵא וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָהּ לִיהוָה:

וַיִּשְׁתּוּ הוּא וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר-עִמּוֹ וַיִּלְכוּ וַיָּקוּמוּ בִּבְקָר וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחְנִי לְאֹדְגִי: (נה) וַיֹּאמֶר אָחִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ תֵּשֵׁב הַנַּעַר אִתָּנוּ יָמִים  
אֹדְגִי עֲשׂוֹר אַחֵר תִּלְךָ: (נו) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אֶל-תַּאֲחֵרוֹ אֶתִּי וַיְהִי הַצֵּלִיחַ דְּרָכִי שְׁלַחְנִי וְאֶלְכָה לְאֹדְגִי: (נז) וַיֹּאמְרוּ נִקְרָא  
לַנַּעַר וְנִשְׁאַלָה אֶת-פִּיהָ: (נח) וַיִּקְרְאוּ לְרַבֵּקָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶיהָ הֲתִלְכִּי עִם-הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה וְתֹאמַר אֵלָיו:

Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be a wife to your master's son, as יהוה has spoken.” When Abraham's servant heard their words, he bowed low to the ground before יהוה. The servant brought out objects of silver and gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; and he gave presents to her brother and her mother. Then he and the entourage under him ate and drank, and they spent the night. When they arose next morning, he said, “Give me leave to go to my master.” But her brother and her mother said, “Let the maiden remain with us some ten days; then you may go.” He said to them, “Do not delay me, now that יהוה has made my errand successful. Give me leave so that I may go to my master.” And they said, “Let us call the girl and ask for her reply.” They called Rebekah and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” And she said, “I will.”

## 24-30 Minutes: Wrap-Up Discussion

- Learners should be invited to briefly share the stories they read and the questions they discussed.
- Facilitator should explain that there are a number of texts in the Torah where people do not follow the guidelines of consent. That being said, our values teach us that we must listen to others and only engage in sex and related activities consensually.

## Lesson Five: Pleasure

**Topic:** Pleasure

**Goals:**

1. Learners understand that physical pleasure is encouraged in Judaism
2. Learners understand ways to engage in pleasure that are safe and healthy

**Materials:**

White board

Paper

Pens

## Learning Plan:

### 1-8 Minutes: Introduction

- Write the following list on the whiteboard
  - a. Seeing lightning
  - b. Hearing thunder
  - c. Seeing beautiful mountains
  - d. Seeing beautiful rivers
  - e. Seeing beautiful hills
  - f. Buying a new house
  - g. Entering a new city
  - h. Leaving a new city<sup>77</sup>
  - i. Seeing a rainbow<sup>78</sup>
- Learners should write down which of these occasions Judaism has blessings for
- Answer- all of them!
- Discuss:
  - What do these things have in common?
    - Each of these is a moment of joy, beauty, or celebration. Judaism encourages us to take notice of moments like these. Judaism is not an ascetic religion, but one that encourages us to take pleasure in the world around us.

### 9-25 Minutes: Text Study

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<sup>77</sup> This list of blessings comes from Mishnah Berakhot 9:2-4

<sup>78</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Noach 6:1

- The facilitator will read the following context, and then read the text:
  - This text is explaining more about God's creation of the world, when God says "it was very good." Rabbi Nahman bar Shmuel bar Nahman explains this means the "evil inclination," which, in Judaism, means man's desire to engage in sexual pleasure. Although this language is gendered, we can expand it to mean anyone's desire to engage in pleasure. Rabbi Nahman bar Shmuel bar Nahman is saying that, without the evil inclination, or desire for pleasure, one could never have a house, or get married, or have children, or engage in business.
  - Bereshit Rabba 9:8

רבי נחמן בר שמואל בר נחמן בשם רב שמואל בר נחמן אמר, הנה טוב מאד, זה יצר טוב. והנה טוב מאד, זה יצר רע. וכי יצר הרע טוב מאד, אמתהא. אלא שאלולי יצר הרע לא בנה אדם בית, ולא נשא אשה, ולא הוליד, ולא נשא ונתן. וכן שלמה אומר (קהלת ד, ד): כי היא קנאת איש מרעהו.

Rabbi Nahman bar Shmuel bar Nahman said in the name of Rav Shmuel bar Nahman: "Behold it was very good" – this is the good inclination; "and behold it was very good" – this is the evil inclination. Is the evil inclination, then, very good? This is a rhetorical question. Rather, were it not for the evil inclination, a man would never build a house, would never marry a wife, would never beget children, and would never engage in commerce. Likewise, Solomon says: "[And I have considered all toil and all excelling in work,] that it is each man's envy of his counterpart" (Ecclesiastes 4:4).

- Ask the following questions:
  - What do you think Rabbi Hahman bar Shmuel bar Nahman means when he says that, without the evil inclination, one could never have a house, get married, have children, or engage in business?
  - How is pleasure important here?

## 2. Genesis 18:11-14

(יא) וְאַבְרָהָם וְשָׂרָה זָקְנִים בָּאִים בַּיָּמִים הַדֵּלִי לְהֵיוֹת לְשָׂרָה אֶרֶח כְּנָשִׁים: (יב) וּתְצַחֵק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרֵי כִלְתִּי הֵיטְהֵלֵלִי עֲדָנָה וְאֵדְנִי זָקֵן: (יג) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָהָם לְמַעַן זֶה צָחָקָהּ שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר הֲאֵפֶּה אֲמַנָּם אֵלֶּךְ וְאֲנִי זָקֵנָתִי: (יד) הִיפְלֵא מִיְהוָה דְּבַר לְמוֹעֵד אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כָּעֵת חַיָּה וְלִשְׂרָה בֵּן:

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having her periods. And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, am I to have **enjoyment**—with my husband so old?” said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’ Is anything too wondrous for יְהוָה ? I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sarah shall have a son.”

Discussion:

- a. Explain- here, the word “*edna*” translated as enjoyment, is assumed to mean “reaching orgasm.” Why do you think Sarah laughed? What does this say about the relationship between one’s desire for pleasure and age in Jewish tradition?

## 3. Proverbs 25:27 (if there is time)

אֶלְל דְּבַשׁ הֲרַבּוֹת לֹא־טוֹב

It is not good to eat much honey

Discuss:

- a. What does this text mean? In what ways is seeking too much pleasure unhealthy? How do we balance a desire for pleasure with consent, safety, and communication?

26-30 Minutes: Wrap-Up Discussion:

- What are different ways that pleasure is viewed in Judaism?
- How does this translate to our everyday lives?

### **Conclusion**

Jewish values around positive and healthy relationships and the values of sexuality and intimacy education are intrinsically linked. The values synagogues hope to instill in their youth and educational programming, such as seeing others and themselves as created in God's image, *b'tzelem Elohim*, helping to repair and shape the world around them, and being kind, communicative, respectful mensches, are inherently part of sexual ethics. Thus, using our time and resources to teach the young learners in our community sex education is a piece of the puzzle in creating the Jewish future we hope our learners are a part of. As clergy and Jewish educators, we have the content knowledge and sacred obligation to use our vast knowledge of Jewish texts, rituals, and traditions to help instill these values in our youth. This is only one of the ways in which we can instill these values in our community as a whole. As Rabbi Billy Dreskin shared with me, "may we always understand that, at its most basic, [sex] is about human beings connecting with human beings in an I-Thou relationship. That it not be transactional, but compassionate, respectful, and loving."<sup>79</sup> *Ken Yhi Ratzon*- may it be God's will.

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with Rabbi Billy Dreskin, February 6, 2024

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