

**Teenagers and Sex:**  
**A Modern Jewish Ethic**

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Thank you to my family: Brian, I love you. Mom and Dad, thank you for a life of blessings.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Teenagers think about sex and adults worry about the teenagers thinking about sex. Many teenagers are involved in or consider initiating sexual relationships at this time in their life. What are the resources teenagers use to make decisions relating to their sexuality? Do they listen more to peers or elders, teachers or rabbis-if they even listen to others at all? How do they then make their decisions? The goal of this thesis is to examine the Jewish sex ethic, to educate about it and to enable and empower teenagers to learn to make their own ethical decisions about sex.

The assumption of this thesis is that teenagers listen to all sources on sexuality, whether fact or fiction. The constant exposure of sex in the media influences how a teenager thinks about situations, but so can a special class with a rabbi or a one on one conversation with a parent. Teaching teenagers about sexual decision-making is invaluable because it is impossible to measure the impact that a positive and healthy interaction between a teacher and student can have.

### **Rationale**

Teenagers not only think about sex, they weigh the voices that educate them about the topic. While peers and entertainment can be some of the primary voices teaching about sex, the voices of the rabbi and parent can also influence teenagers' decision-making and actions. It is for this reason that rabbis and parents should be well prepared and educated about what the Jewish tradition has to say about sexual ethics. If the information is presented appropriately and

the adult is prepared for the conversation, teenagers may listen to what parents and rabbis have to say, so it is imperative that a resource be available to educate parents and teachers that draws from the Jewish tradition. One voice that was used to reduce the number of youth smokers in the United States was a media blitz that encouraged parents to talk to their children about the ill effects of smoking. Part of this education included material for parents so that they were prepared with facts and conversation points. According to the Center for Disease Control, these messages proved effective and shrunk the statistic of youth smokers<sup>1</sup>. In other words, the teenagers are listening to the media, commercials, health educators and their parents.

Although there is no way to guarantee that a rabbinic voice would absolutely impact the way a young person thinks about sex, health educators believe that the more sexual information one provides, the more conservative teenagers are likely to be and the later the onset of their sexual activity<sup>2</sup>. Rabbis and parents should be teachers of sexual education including both the physical and physiological aspects of sexuality as well as the moral and ethical aspects.

### **Urgency**

A recent article in Lilit magazine details new sexual mores among teenagers that should concern us as Jewish adults. The author reported that Jewish teenagers develop casual understandings of their own sexuality. New practices such as "friends with privileges"(referring to sexual acts without a

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<sup>1</sup> (Cdc.gov April 16, 2004) Comprehensive state anti-tobacco programs, especially those with strong advertising (i.e., paid media) campaigns, have contributed to the substantial decline in youth smoking since 1997.

<sup>2</sup> (Lilit Magazine, Winter 2003-4 Volume 28 Number 4 p. 14, Amy Miron-long time sex educator)

relationship) or "hooking up" (referring to acts of a sexual nature sometimes including sex) or shared sexual partners without intimacy occurs as young as B'nai Mitzvah age. Many of these sexual encounters occur in synagogues during B'nai Mitzvah parties, at youth group events, retreats or during summer camp. Rabbis and educators need guidance to respond to these problems that take place in their Jewish educational settings. In the greater American society, an interview with Katie Couric<sup>3</sup> aired in December of 2004, exposing these previously unknown teenage sexual mores to a larger American audience.

The urgency in educating teenagers about sexuality is that many of their casual sexual practices pose a danger for the health and well-being of our teenagers. As sexual contact becomes more informal we have greater concern about their practice and safety. Therefore both physical and emotional health are affected. Infection, disease and virus threaten their lives and young people may not be cautious in protecting themselves. And new sexual behaviors without intimacy prevent teenagers from experiencing the opportunity for heartbreak thereby affecting their spiritual and emotional development. The casual nature and invincible feelings these behaviors create may be one reason why teenagers are attracted to them, but, this ability to separate physical intimacy from emotional intimacy introduces relationships which only fulfill sexual or physical needs, if those. This emotional disconnect does not allow teenagers to fall in love and learn to develop the balance between emotional and sexual intimacy. It

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<sup>3</sup> ("Nearly 3 in 10 young teens 'sexually active'" NBC News, PEOPLE Magazine commission landmark national poll)

also prevents them from experiencing a gradual growth of a relationship from attraction to signs of affection through emotional and sexual expression.

In reaction to blatant sex in the media and open sexuality, the religious right works hard to lobby for control over the sexual education programs in the public schools in America. This creates a dangerous future for our young people. Sexual education as defined by the conservative right teaches "abstinence-only", which is extremely problematic. These programs often provide misinformation at the least<sup>4</sup> and at the most absolute lies about birth control, sexual safety, health and abortions. Some even teach old wives tales about how women become pregnant. Furthermore there is no evidence that teaching "abstinence-only" prevents teenagers from having sex; in fact the evidence indicates the opposite<sup>5</sup>. Especially during a time of increased conservative control and influence in politics and policy liberal rabbis need to be prepared and empowered to assume a pastoral presence for the teenagers.

An investigation of a modern Reform teenage sex ethic is needed both because there is an explosion of unhealthy sexual practices, and teachers and parents need to be informed by Jewish resources in order to answer the religious questions teenagers have about sexuality.

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<sup>4</sup> (Planned Parenthood) In 2004, Rep. Henry Waxman (CA), released a report about the state of abstinence-only sexuality education....curricula used by more than two-thirds of government-funded abstinence-only programs contain misleading or inaccurate information about abortion, contraception, genetics, and sexually transmitted infections....also found that many abstinence-only curricula even go so far as to blur the line between religion and science, and treat gender stereotypes as scientific fact (Committee on Government Reform, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> (Kristof) A National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy task force examined the issue and concluded: "There do not currently exist any abstinence-only programs with strong evidence that they either delay sex or reduce teen pregnancy." Worse, there's some evidence that abstinence-only programs lead to increases in unprotected sex.

## **Our Responsibility to Educate for New Challenges Today**

On the one hand every generation has been alarmed by its young people's sexual practices, as Eugene Borowitz wrote over 30 years ago in his book "Choosing a Sex Ethic"<sup>6</sup>:

"I begin with a sense of outrage at the sexual tone of our civilization. For all the positive activities today between the sexes, there is all about us an unnatural, sick concentration on sex that is surely contagious. I suppose no age has ever been without serious sexual temptations. The rabbis speak of the prevalence of prostitutes, and Jewish medieval literature regularly ponders the difficulties occasioned by adultery and incest...Today almost everything is suffused with sex, and the mass media, serving as an exploitative economic apparatus, keep sex continually before us. Then, in a pious mood, society says, "Wait until marriage." The titillation is constant, but the ideals remain supposedly quite pure; this is the real obscenity of our time."

Borowitz notes that throughout time sexual temptations have always existed, but that presently there is a "sick concentration on sex". Further, he points out a deep complexity that although everything is immersed in sex, society tells us to wait until marriage. He believes that the real obscenity is not only the inundation of sex alone but that even though the exposure to sex is constant, the professed ideal of anti-premarital sex has not changed. If this was true over thirty years ago then it applies even more now, as young people are introduced to sex at younger ages and everywhere they look.

Borowitz identifies a tension that teenagers feel, express and explore all of the time-"should I have sex or should I wait? What is sex? Is oral sex, sex-or is it not-really sex?" This tension can provide an opportunity for rabbis, educators

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<sup>6</sup> (Borowitz, 101)



and parents to talk to young people about these issues through a Jewish ethical frame.

For reasons to be discussed later, sex is often not a comfortable conversational topic across generations. From a Jewish perspective however, a question to consider is: Should teaching about sex be different than any other responsibilities to a child?<sup>7</sup> Is it different from teaching Talmud Torah, teaching a trade, swimming etc.? Why is it that talking about sex is different?

Swimming teaches a child to survive; teaching sex could be teaching an entire people to survive. Or maybe it is assumed that people inherently just know about procreation the way that animals do. Teaching sex may also be different because sex carries more weight than the instruction of swimming or Talmud; sex is an act that exists in both the physical and spiritual plane. For one thing, sex is the most private of actions between human beings, a physical expression. And when sex is performed with the holiest of intentions, the act involves God as well; it is a spiritual expression. Articulating a relationship with God is extremely difficult and complex. We should keep this comparison in mind in order to reveal the sanctity in sex education.

Teenagers want to be informed of the Jewish tradition in terms of sexuality. When given the opportunity they enroll in classes about Jewish views on sexuality and are eager to listen and participate. In classes with a rabbi they write anonymous questions about Judaism and sex, yet they are detached from

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<sup>7</sup> Talmud (*Kiddushin* 29a) "A father is obligated to do the following for his son: to circumcise him, to redeem him if he is a first born, to teach him Torah, to find him a wife, and to teach him a trade. Others say: teaching him how to swim as well."

the messages in the classical narrative. If given the chance, they ask many questions about how their sexual choices relate to Jewish teachings. They recognize that they live under an entirely different set of social mores and historical circumstances than the Jews in the texts from the Biblical or Rabbinic time periods. And they are disconnected because the scenarios from the ancient texts do not necessarily guide them through their own sexual decision-making.

Further, teenagers don't only want to know what the tradition says, they also want to know how the tradition can guide them. Most rabbis teach special confirmation classes about the topic of sex and Judaism, so they have an entrée into the world of the Jewish teenager. Rabbis and teachers want to address the sexuality of their teenagers and yet they worry about how to do so "properly". Nevertheless, there is little written as a guideline for these educators regarding a modern Reform Jewish Sex Ethic for Teenagers. Why has Reform Judaism successfully produced answers, responsa and ways of dealing with changing Jewish opinions on Kashrut, liturgy, minhagim, and even intermarriage, yet this most important rite of passage has been largely ignored?

Perhaps it is the inherent privacy of the topic, or the inability of teachers to teach effectively and comfortably on the topic. But perhaps it is because it is so complicated to relate our Jewish texts on sex to the modern Jew. By investigating a sampling of sex ethics or Jewish educational guides to sex available to teenagers and pre-teenagers, one may learn a lot about what elements and components could be successful in a modern Reform teenage sex

ethic. Moreover, utilizing the CCAR's list of sexual values--each of which is grounded in a classical text--can be a starting point for discussions about sex, led by teachers, parents, and rabbis. Synagogues, Youth Groups and Camps need resources to deal with the change in attitudes among young people and our seeming inability to address the situation until it is too late and a sexual violation has occurred.

An example of one of the most significant issues that is universally accepted but perhaps not yet uniformly taught is the Reform acceptance of homosexuality. While issues of homosexuality were not even spoken about 30 years ago, Reform Jewish attitudes on the issue of homosexuality have undergone a deep transformation in recent years. This transformation reflects a similar movement within Western culture as a whole, and it conflicts radically with much of what our tradition has to say on the subject<sup>8</sup>. This is an indicator that our teaching of sexual values and ethics needs to continue to change reflecting the evolution of the Reform movement and the larger host culture.

### **What is Sex and What is a Sex Ethic?**

In his book "Choosing a Sex Ethic", Borowitz identifies the complicated nature of sex ethics: "Sex is a personal and private matter. Ethics is a public and abstract discipline. 'Sex ethics' thus seems to be a contradiction in terms<sup>9</sup>." Arriving at a definition for a sex ethic is extremely complicated, but understanding a sex ethic is less so. A sexual relationship exists between two people of the same or opposite sex who are engaged in stimulating each other physically and

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<sup>8</sup> (Borowitz, 319)

<sup>9</sup> (Borowitz, 3)

sensually<sup>10</sup>. Ethics can be understood as the discipline dealing with what is "good and bad"<sup>11</sup>. A further relevant definition is that ethics consists in the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group-a guiding philosophy. Sex ethics for Jewish teenagers can be a guiding philosophy of how they should conduct themselves when they are faced with decision-making about sex and what values they call upon in order to inform their decision.

Included within the definition of a sex ethic is room for the option that a Jewish teenager may decide not to have a sexual relationship. However, teenagers are still obligated to learn about sex even if they are not engaged at the time in a sexual relationship. They need help in articulating their own sexuality including the many reasons why they may not wish to engage in sex.

### **Reform Judaism**

What is a specifically Reform approach to a sex ethic? In his book "Jewish Living", Mark Washofsky states that the Jewish tradition's teachings on sexuality can be understood as a series of footnotes to Genesis 2:24<sup>12</sup>. The verse establishes a heterosexual marriage relationship as the proper framework for the human sexual relationship. From the Bible to the later rabbinic literature and the responsa of the great medieval rabbis, marriage becomes the norm for appropriate sexual behavior. Anything outside of that is defined, in great or small terms, as deviant behavior. The question Washofsky raises is whether it can

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<sup>10</sup> (Author's own definition)

<sup>11</sup> (Merriam Webster Dictionary)

<sup>12</sup> (Washofsky, Jewish Living, 317) Genesis 2:24 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall be one flesh."

ever be proper for two unmarried, consenting adults to engage in sexual intercourse.

He offers two opposite responses from Maimonides and Nachmanides. According to Maimonides, one who has intercourse without the benefit of marriage (*kiddushin*) violates the prohibition against harlotry. Nachmanides in contrast argues that "harlotry" refers only to casual non-marital sex<sup>13</sup>. This implies that even monogamous ongoing relationships might be considered as "concubinage". Washofsky then concludes that while these relationships are not holy, they are not sinful either<sup>14</sup>. These two options do not help us approach a modern sex ethic that assumes that non-marital and pre-marital sex is common if not the norm.

Further, these views only answer the question as to whether having sex before marriage is proper. They do not help an individual make any decisions leading up to the point of intercourse. This merely sets up a dichotomy where situations are labeled "good" or "bad", "proper" or "improper". In reality, as opposed to the rabbinic imagination, decision-making involves shades of gray where answers are not so obviously labeled good or bad. Washofsky's response however, is classically Reform because it preserves the rabbinic tradition and utilizes it as a source of inspiration, definition and structure<sup>15</sup>. In a Reform approach to sex ethics, informed choice should be an integral element. In his book, "Choosing a Sex Ethic", Borowitz models this approach.

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<sup>13</sup> (ibid, 317)

<sup>14</sup> (ibid, 470)

<sup>15</sup> (ibid, xxi)

Another distinctly Reform voice, which argues against Washofsky's understanding of the discussion of sex ethics, is the list of Jewish sexual values that was the result of a report from the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR's) Ad Hoc Committee on Jewish Sexual Values. Historically, the Committee on Jewish Sexual Values was tied with the CCAR Responsum on Homosexual Marriage. This is an important historical connection because while Washofsky's model narrows to only include a heterosexual relationship, the Committee on Jewish Sexual Values broadens the definitions to include healthy homosexual relationships as well. These resources, together with an investigation of the traditional texts, are the starting point for reaching a modern Reform teenage sex ethic.

The investigation of the classical texts must include both an understanding of the intention of the text and a rationale as to why the traditional text has value today. The teenager should be able to draw wisdom from the text or to comfortably disagree with it. In studying text, a student learns that dissenting and concurring opinions both have value. The difficult part for the young adult is then translating the ideas and discussions into ideas or values to inform choices. This is the moment where ethics becomes applied ethics.

**For the Teenager:**

This is a guide about sexual decision-making. You will neither find permission to engage in sexual relations nor will you find a prohibition against such action. This is a guide to steer your decisions. You are the teenager; you ultimately choose. As a Reform teenager, you should know that the model of the

movement is informed choice. For an example, let's use the observance of Kashrut. The Reform ideal would encourage that you first learn about the laws of keeping Kosher including what you are allowed and forbidden to eat, how food must be prepared, how a kitchen can be made Kosher, and what are the time restrictions between eating certain foods. Then the Reform Jew must decide whether practicing the Mitzvah of the dietary laws will be meaningful to her and how she can best bring Kashrut into her life.

Sexual decision-making is both the same as and different from this example. It is the same because it is first important to learn what the tradition teaches about sexuality. It is also the same because many people who observe Kashrut believe that their adherence to the law strengthens their relationship with God. Sexuality is different because while it is connected to the relationship with God, it most directly affects your relationship with others and most important it reflects how you perceive yourself. Another serious difference between Kashrut and sexuality is that each time you eat you make a separate choice in your Kashrut observance-this could happen ten times a day! With sex, the decisions you make build upon each other and the results stay with you forever. This presents a greater amount of power and responsibility than in matters of Kashrut. Rabbi Roland Gittlesohn shared his opinion about the responsibility of making sexual decisions:

"You are the only person in the world who can choose the basic direction of your own sex life. You are also the one who will benefit or suffer most because of that choice. If your sexuality expresses itself only as a search for physical stimulation then you will experience sex but not sexual fulfillment. If, on the other hand, your sexuality is enriched

by love and understanding, then you will experience not only physical pleasure in sex but also the deep satisfaction that only a spiritual and emotional commitment can bring.<sup>16</sup>

## **OUR BODIES, OUR SOULS, OURSELVES**

### **The Problem with "abstinence-only", and the Reform Response**

Our current educational model in the United States is showing leanings towards an "abstinence-only" sexual education<sup>17</sup>. This push comes from the right-wing conservatives and the Christian right. This is related to the fact that in our country states are once again rehashing the debate of science and religion reminiscent of the Scopes "Monkey Trial" of 1925<sup>18</sup>. The right pushes to make religion the science of public schools and they do so with justification that "abstinence-only" is the solitary moral choice. As Reform Jews we should question this confusion of science and religion as it affects our education system and particularly how it affects sex education. There is a way to teach about sexuality that is rooted in tradition and relevant to teenagers today and it includes teaching teenagers about their physical bodies as well as their spiritual selves.

The argument ultra-conservative politicians make about the danger of teaching sex ethics along with the science and instruction of sex is that the more the teenagers understand and know, the more likely they are to experiment with sex. The fallacy of this argument is two-fold. First of all, the more young people know and understand about their bodies and biological systems, the safer their

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<sup>16</sup> (How Do I Decide pp.118, Gittelsohn)

<sup>17</sup> (Kristof, New York Times)

<sup>18</sup> (New York Times, May 6, 2005) In June, Kansas could join Ohio, which took a similar step in 2002, in mandating students be taught that there is controversy over evolution... and the battle over evolution is simmering on the local level in 20 states.



health choices and practices will be. Second, teaching "abstinence-only" places an ultimate value on virginity and sexuality. In other words, when students are taught abstinence as the only sexual option, it limits their understanding of sexuality to solely vaginal intercourse.

This creates a paradigm in which only vaginal intercourse is sex and anything else is not. One could argue that the effects of this type of education in fact work against the values that the right-wing wishes to teach. We are finding that in order to justify their sexual curiosity and activity, many young people no longer think of oral sex as sex<sup>19</sup>. Some believe that only vaginal sex is "real sex" and that oral sex is merely a way of casually connecting with someone. This polarizes and isolates the value of vaginal sex and puts all other activities on another end of the scale. By defending the sanctity of vaginal intercourse they forfeit the opportunity to teach the many values involved in sexual decision-making. Furthermore, they miss an opportunity to teach about these values in terms of relationship and connection because of their myopic goal about vaginal sex. This creates a picture that is only black and white and does not allow teenagers to explore the complexities of sexual relationships. This is a system that preaches morals and ethics but instead dilutes sexuality into options that are only "right" or "wrong", where only the teacher, school board or state can determine what is right.

According to Bonnie Halpern-Felsher, PhD, associate professor of adolescent medicine at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), adults should discuss more than one type of sexual practice when they counsel teens. She

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<sup>19</sup> (Lilith Magazine, Winter 2003-4 Volume 28 Number 4, p. 14)

conducted a survey of 580 ethnically diverse Northern California ninth-graders in the first study to investigate adolescents' perceptions of the consequences of having oral sex as opposed to vaginal sex<sup>20</sup>. Overall the study results indicated that teenagers (average age 14 years old) believed that oral sex was less risky, less likely to have negative social consequences, and was less of a threat to their values and beliefs than vaginal sex. These conclusions should alarm us because sexual intimacy regardless of whether it is vaginal intercourse, oral sex, abstinence, or kissing involve the same values. Perhaps it indicates that our young people hear a lot about "values" but can not identify what some of them may be. Jewish ethics of sexuality should encourage teaching about the physical and spiritual self together. Teaching ethics can only be effective if taught alongside the biology involved in the choices.

The larger concern for us as Reform Jews is that by not educating our young people about the science of sexuality we strip them of their abilities to make informed choices. It is our obligation as Jewish educators to teach about the physical and physiological aspects of sexuality in order that the young people know the scientific truth about sexual health as it goes hand in hand with their sexual decision-making. The only more problematic instruction than not teaching about sexuality is providing misinformation, which unfortunately is also becoming common around the issues of AIDS and pregnancy.

As Jewish educators we have the opportunity and obligation to teach about the values and the physicality together. One of the sexual values relevant here

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<sup>20</sup> (UCSF, April 4, 2005)

from the list of Jewish Sexual Values<sup>21</sup> is the value of "*b'ri-ut*". In summary, *b'ri-ut* teaches that our tradition enjoins upon us the responsibility to rejoice in and to maximize our physical, emotional and spiritual health<sup>22</sup>. As humans we are given the gift of a physical body and the gift of wisdom. It is therefore incumbent upon us to learn how our bodies work and how to use them responsibly. Learning about sexually transmitted infections, diseases, birth control and pregnancy are all a part of the wisdom we must offer when teaching about the ethics of sexuality. For this, it is important that Jewish educators call upon sexual health experts as a part of the ethical decision-making curriculum. Bringing in a trained health educator legitimizes the importance of the "*B'ri-ut*" aspect of sexuality for a Jewish teenager. It gives integrity to the topic and it also humbles us to know that this is an area best handled by an expert. Further, using a health expert exemplifies the Jewish value of "*emet*". While *emet* refers specifically to the authentic and honest truth shared between two partners in a relationship, it is important for us to recognize that when instructing about sexuality, teacher and student are also in a holy relationship. The student is relying on the information of the teacher to guide her and in order for the information to be complete it should demonstrate a balance of body and soul, biology and spirit.

In order to engage in proper decision-making, teenagers need to know about their own changing bodies and the development and functioning of their sexual reproduction systems. These are topics that should be covered in an ethics of Jewish sexuality course by a trained professional within the health field because

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<sup>21</sup> (CCAR Ad Hoc Committee Jewish Sexual Values and Chapter 4 of this Thesis "Ethical Decision-making Model)

<sup>22</sup> (CCAR Yearbook 1998, p.31)

it makes a statement that health is an integral part of Jewish ethics. This also includes, physiology, intercourse and pregnancy, and types of sexual activity including masturbation and mutual masturbation. Some of the topics that should be covered include: human growth and development, the physical changes of bodies, and the male and female reproductive systems in the process of human reproduction. For some, including these elements in a Jewish and ethical education may be a revolutionary and perhaps even a controversial idea. The urgency, however, of teaching ethics and sexual health and safety together is too strong for the sexual activity alternatives to be left out. Later in this thesis, alternatives to vaginal intercourse will be included as a statement of the importance of educating holistically in order to address the larger problem. The statistics indicate that we need a drastic change in how we educate our young people in order to provide them with the information they need to be healthy and knowledgeable. The transformation in the sexual mores of teenagers demands a powerful response from Reform Jewish educators, rabbis, parents and adults. Further it is a statement that as Jews we teach about the connection between their Jewish soul and their physical bodies.

One example of a balanced teaching between body and soul is learning about the Jewish perspective on masturbation. Jewish teenagers, including liberal Jews, sometimes believe that the only Jewish opinion on masturbation is that it is the greatest evil a Jew can commit. This is based solely on a traditional interpretation of the biblical story of Onan, where upon being required to have sex with his fallen brother's wife, he "spills his seed", or ejaculates after

withdrawing<sup>23</sup> (Genesis 38:6-11) and God punishes Onan with death. Some try to simplify the story into a cause and effect, Onan masturbated, this was displeasing to God and God takes his life. This interpretation, however, has many limitations, including the tremendous amount of guilt it creates for a person who wants to explore his body. Additionally, it reduces an extremely complicated narrative about jealousy and loss, obligation and defiance into a tale of crime and punishment.

Instead, consider that masturbation may be seen to model the value of "*B'rit*" because it is an act that, when done privately, allows a person to enjoy pleasure and it is safe and healthy. In his book, "When Living Hurts", Sol Gordon writes exactly to the point:

Masturbation is a healthy, normal expression of sexuality for both males and females. It is not physically harmful no matter how frequently you do it (males, by the way, do not use up their supply of sperm; it is replenished and available all their lives). You can, however, live a healthy, normal life never having masturbated. But it's difficult to be healthy if you feel guilty about masturbation. If you don't like it, don't do it. But it's normal-almost all males and most females masturbate.

It's always better if a behavior is voluntary. For example, eating is normal but, if people eat too much because of anxiety (not because they are hungry), eating becomes involuntary (compulsive). The same is true of drinking alcohol. But, if you must have a compulsion, please choose masturbation. Nobody has ever died of over-masturbating; however the leading cause of death in this

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<sup>23</sup> (Jewish Study Bible, 77) Onan would have to expend his own resources to support a child that is legally someone else's, and the child, as heir to a first-born son, would displace Onan in the line of inheritance. While many try to reduce this to a simple story of a man who masturbates and is punished by God, his is a complex story that involves Levirate marriage, birthright and jealousy. (Etz Chaim, 234 Early levels of the biblical narrative could understand the untimely death of a young person only as being caused by some sin on that person's part. Otherwise, the world would make no sense. Later in the biblical period, and in the time of the Talmud a more nuanced, less judgmental approach to misfortune emerges...Jewish law permits various forms of contraception for medical and other reasons but prefers methods that do not destroy the generative seed (Mishnei Torah Forbidden Intercourse 21:18)

country is related to compulsive eating and alcoholism (compulsive drinking).<sup>24</sup>

Masturbation is unlike any other sexual decision because it does not involve other people. This means that feelings of guilt, loneliness, and frustration are all experienced alone, but it also means that feelings of empowerment and confidence are experienced by oneself. Masturbation is a safe way to explore and experiment with one's own body without involving anyone else. If a person is unresolved or uncomfortable with the idea of masturbating, this could cause them discomfort because of the connection between their action and the judgment of their own mind.

The example of masturbation reminds us of the bond between the mind, soul and body. The value of "*B'ri-ut*" epitomizes the connection of the physical to the spiritual. In the morning blessing "*asher yatzar*", we bless the God who has created a physical body that is the vessel for the soul and contains our knowledge. When we make decisions for ourselves and interact with others, we are body, mind and soul.

### **Comparing God and Sex**

The connection between spirit and sex is deeply imbedded in Jewish tradition. According to Yitzhak Buxbaum, an Orthodox man devoted to Chasidic teaching, turning the sexual impulse in a spiritual direction is a central goal of Judaism and spiritualizing sexuality is the foundation of a life lived for holiness<sup>25</sup>. He points to

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<sup>24</sup> (When living hurts, 63)

<sup>25</sup> (Buxbaum, 589)

a midrash<sup>26</sup> that reminds us that the covenant with Abraham is made on the male sexual organ so that the fear of God would keep us from sexual sin. This midrash emphasizes the potential danger and hurt that can be caused by sexual offenses. This classical midrash highlights a common theme in teaching about sexuality, that sexual activity and deviance can cause great pain. But Buxbaum also teaches of the beauty of sexual relationships.

Buxbaum believes that sexual energy should be directed into spiritual energy because sexual energy has the dangerous power to turn into wrongful yearnings, thereby diminishing devotion to God. Therefore unrestricted sexuality and indulgence not only lessen the energy that should be turned to God, but, like all lusts and bodily pleasures, generally undermine spirituality<sup>27</sup>. Because of this, sex, one of the strongest of drives, must be given limits, and the sex which is permitted must be purified and sanctified and raised up into the spiritual realm. Buxbaum believes that because sex alone does not serve God, we need to elevate sex into the spiritual realm in order for it to be holy. One powerful idea to draw from his writing, is that sex can be holy. He writes, "in loving sex there is great wonder in realizing that our true completion comes to us in the form of another human. In that experience of love, of completion, God's presence can be recognized<sup>28</sup>." Utilizing Reform Jewish values, we can imagine a relationship where sex between two people is so special that it is also sacred. This image invites God into that relationship.

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<sup>26</sup> (Buxbaum, 589, (Midrash Tadshe, Beit ha-Midrash, Jellinek, Part 3, p.171))

<sup>27</sup> (Buxbaum, 590)

<sup>28</sup> (Buxbaum, 592)

Buxbaum explores a common dichotomy in teaching about sexuality. Sex can be a sacred part of spiritual life, or it can be a great danger. In Jewish books written as resources for teenagers, too often sex is paired with other teenage issues that are of concern because of their danger. Alcohol, drugs and sex grouped together can give a teenager the idea that teachers and rabbis believe that this is a trio with which they should not experiment. It is however, important to express the real risks of pregnancy and disease, but intelligent teenagers will see through sensationalist teachings on sexuality. While it is challenging to teach both the danger and the beauty, one approach is to reveal both sides because teenagers thrive when they are pushed to see two sides of a situation.

Another way to consider the relation between spirituality and sex, I would argue, is to examine how teaching about sex is like teaching about God. Both have unknown potential, both are extremely private, difficult to describe, involve intimate relationships, both are extremely revealing. You can't hide from God, neither can you hide from your naked partner in sex. Both are thrilling, frightening, exciting, full of power and full of possibility. God is found in the sexual act and Kabbalists believed that aspects of God (*Sefirot*) were sexually involved with one another. The issue for teenagers is at what point is a sexual relationship merely sex and in what type of relationship does sex sanctify a holy relationship. These are questions about how to make a relationship holy and how to bring God into intimate and physical moments.

There is a Hasidic teaching that the world would look very different if each time humans looked at each other's faces, we instead would see the face of God.



It would be the ultimate reminder that humans are created *B'tzelem Elohim*. This is a great challenge to us as we look at others with interest, including sexual interest. It means the responsibility of always treating each other with dignity and respect. It also leaves us wondering what would that face of God look like if we were truly able to see it.

There is something intriguing about a God that people have never seen. The God of the Israelites has been revealed to only very few among the prophets, and only Moses had the privilege to see God's face. Our God is a God of mystery and a God that remains unexposed and concealed from human eyes and understanding. Our God is so unknown that human beings are unable to even pronounce God's name. The Jewish God is an intimate God, who has had special relationships with people since the creation of humanity.

### **A New Understanding of *Tz'niyut***

This is also a beautiful metaphor for us to understand the intimacy of a sexual relationship. Just like an intense relationship with God, not everything need be revealed immediately upon the inception of a connection. *Tz'niyut*, modesty, is one way of keeping our most intimate and special aspects to ourselves, only to be shared when we are ready with those we care for. After all, God is extremely private and has only appeared to those that have been the closest to Godself. This makes God's appearance and revealing deeply personal.

*Tz'niyut* may be expressed in different ways. Ultimately it is about how much is revealed, and how much is kept hidden. In a healthy and honest relationship, as it grows, two people will naturally want to share more with the other, more

feelings, more of their souls and more of themselves physically. In turn, sharing the body, sexually, is one way of expressing and growing spiritual closeness to another person. This involves trust and mutuality.

*Tz'niyut* also applies to how we talk about relationships and with whom we share these intimate matters. If we talk using *tz'niyut*, we will be respectful and bring dignity to our conversations instead of being careless or even intentionally crude with our language and ideas. This includes finding those whom we can trust to talk about such private things. There can sometimes be a lot of pressure, even among friends, to share "details" of sexual encounters or relationships. It is important to recognize that with a true friend and trusted person, it will never feel like pressure to share, it will feel natural and serve a higher purpose than fitting in with others. With trusted friends a person can share one's concerns be for the sake of making the sexual relationship or encounter better or healthier.

Sexual activity involves one's own and another's body and soul, therefore it should be treated thoughtfully and delicately. Our words and our actions are deeply linked in such a way that if we learn the language of *tz'niyut*, we may also learn how to act appropriately in the sexual realm. Learning the list of Jewish Sexual Values from the CCAR committee can help give a language of *tz'niyut* to our teaching of it. This first value is the introduction to the language of the chapters that follow. *Tz'niyut* is therefore a guiding value throughout this thesis. Explicitly when *tz'niyut* mentioned, and implicitly as the hope of the author is that the language of the thesis is a language of *tz'niyut*. At times when language may seem forward or even inappropriate, it is the author's hope that if the reader

returns to the understanding of *tz'niyut*, that he will remember it is for the sake of adjusting the dialogue about sexuality for the modern teenager.

## WHAT OUR TEXTS TEACH

### A Reform Approach

Is the Jewish tradition of old relevant today in dealing with sexual ethics for teenagers? Jewish texts are rich to study in modern times because the art and science of interpretation brings new understandings to old ideas.

Forty or fifty years ago the great Talmudic scholar, Dr. Saul Lieberman, won a prestigious award. A reporter from the New York Times was sent to visit him. When the reporter came into Lieberman's study he pointed to a book on Lieberman's desk and asked "what is that?" He replied, "That's the Torah." "The book next to it?—the Mishnah—what is that?" "A second century commentary on the Torah." "What is the stuff below the Mishnah—that is the Gemora. What is that—Fifth century explanation of the Mishnah. What is that stuff in the corner? That is the commentary of Rashi. Who is Rashi?" asked the reporter, "Rashi was a tenth century commentator on the Gemora. The reporter smiled and said "I get it! Judaism is a continuing conversation between the generations."<sup>29</sup>

The Jewish text is our time elevator to transport us back in order to dialogue with the great rabbis of the past. Texts are a starting point for engagement in the discussion between Jews of all time. When we learn what was written long ago and then how Jews responded to that writing throughout time, we learn the foundational layers of Jewish society. Although we may look at a text with a fresh perspective, we still learn from engaging in the conversation across generations. With the proper guidance, these texts can be used to help inform a

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<sup>29</sup> (Jack Riemer, *Ancient Wisdom , Modern Rabbis*)

decision a teenager makes today. The rabbi, parent and student learn together and then the teenager, empowered by learning, makes an informed choice.

One complication is that since time travel in this manner is not perfect, we do not always understand completely what the authors or interpreters meant. This can be frustrating for us as modern readers. However it can be a great opening for new interpretation based on our present situation.

### **Sex in the Texts: A Modern Reference to the Intergenerational Dialogue**

Paul Yedwab wrote "Sex in the Texts", a source book dealing with what the Jewish tradition says about sex. His treatment is extremely valuable because he gathers many of the accessible Jewish sources together in one book. He pointedly remarks that as educators we tend to teach *about* Judaism rather than teach Judaism itself<sup>30</sup>. By investigating texts, we are able to explore through primary sources what our tradition teaches about sexuality. He prepares his reader for what is to be expected and for what may come as a surprise. He writes, "Ancient Jewish texts are often brilliantly insightful and remarkably sensitive to both men's and women's concerns. They also can be sexist, politically incorrect, and even downright wrong<sup>31</sup>."

In his book, sexuality is defined broadly, including romance, marriage, divorce, dating, gender identity and sexual politics<sup>32</sup>. All of these are important contexts for ethical sexual decision-making. The author views the book as a holy study opportunity and he includes the blessing before the study of Torah as part of his teaching method. This is an important spiritual statement. It reminds us

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Yedwab, *Sex in the Texts* pp. xii

<sup>31</sup> (Yedwab, *ibid*)

<sup>32</sup> (Yedwab, *ibid*)

that the journey through our texts is a holy journey and it should be treated in that manner.

His chapters include texts from Torah, Midrash, Song of Songs, mysticism etc. He writes on topics including sexism, sexual pleasure, faulty science in the texts and sex as sacred. Each chapter leads the reader through a text in Hebrew and English with guiding questions, transitional comments and concluding questions. Yedwab's insights are thoughtful and thought-provoking. They can easily be used to generate discussion.

Some of the conclusions he draws include that Jewish texts are often more human and forgiving than we would expect. Although often sexist, texts are also marked by an abiding appreciation for, and sense of wonder at, the innate goodness and holiness of women<sup>33</sup>. Overall his point is that Jewish attitudes towards sexuality have changed throughout time and vary from community to community<sup>34</sup>. This conclusion has implications for how we read the tradition today and how we adapt to changing sexual mores. One could reason that just as the tradition has continuously changed and been interpreted, so too do we need to take a fresh modern perspective. Further, in Judaism, sex is not bad, or evil, or dirty. While religious fundamentalists in America often describe sex this way, the Jewish sources often idealize sexuality<sup>35</sup>. His book guides readers through the breadth of the diverse texts about sex with examples, relevant themes and ideas and minimal commentary.

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<sup>33</sup> (Yedwab, 112)

<sup>34</sup> (Yedwab, 112)

<sup>35</sup> (Yedwab, 112)

Alone it does not provide the framework for teaching ethics. It is extremely thorough in its development of texts as springboards for conversations about ethics. As a companion to a decision-making model, it provides ample options for teaching texts as a means to extract values and begin a discussion of ethics. It covers a tremendous amount of material and includes ideas and themes that are relevant to modern teenagers. This book generates discussion, debate and is a resource that creates a foundation for ethical exploration of sexuality. Alone however, it does not offer guidance on how to make decisions. It does not help young people determine what values they should use in their sexual decisions. An ethical discussion while rooted in text from the past, needs also to have application today. The study of the texts alone does not adequately prepare a teenager for the scenarios she will encounter.

### **Text Content**

In the Jewish tradition sexuality is discussed in different types of writing, including narrative and law. Narratives can be used as a springboard to discuss decisions characters have made in stories. Young people can consider these stories to be examples of the kinds of decisions they would choose to make or not make. One can make an ethical decision based on conclusions that come from exploring a story. For example we can read a story about our ancestor Jacob, learn about his characteristics and actions, and consider whether and how his situation could apply to us. This applies a narrative model of ethics, utilizing stories to extract principles on which to make decisions. Narratives may

also be ambiguous, allowing readers to extract principles from what may be unwritten in the scenarios.

Legal texts tend to be more clear-cut and often explicitly describe permitted and forbidden sexual relations. Following law, however, is not necessarily an ethical act. We can read law and determine how choosing to follow that law or how deviating from the law in some cases may be an ethical decision. For example, the law of Levirate marriage demands that a woman who is widowed, if she has no children, must marry the brother of her deceased husband. While this would be an extremely uncomfortable mandate from the perspective of the modern Reform movement, there are meaningful values that can be extracted from this scenario. First there is the value of *mishpacha*, family, that a woman who was unable to have children with her husband will be provided with another husband, from the same family so that they can begin a family. Second, there is a value of companionship. It is pretty safe to assume that in those times a woman who lost her husband before they were able to have children was losing her husband at a young age. Finally there is the value of *rachmanut* or compassion. *Rachmanut* reminds a community to take care of someone who has suffered a loss and to be sympathetic to them.

Our ethical decisions can be informed from both of these types of texts, and ethical decisions can be rooted in principles, concepts and laws from the Jewish tradition. In fact, each value from the CCAR list of Jewish Sexual Values is based upon a selection from Jewish literature. The list reflects a rededication to exploring the Jewish tradition for answers in our modern world. It encourages



the contemporary Jew to engage in the learning of interpretation. Learning Jewish texts on sexuality furthers our sense of authority and invites us into the dialogue between generations. This practice of continuous interpretation also welcomes us into what is described in the Pittsburgh Principles<sup>36</sup> as “ongoing revelation”. In other words, our participation in study and interpretation of texts renews our witnessing of the giving of Torah at Sinai. Some of the texts and values that were particularly well rooted and interpreted are included below.

### **Values Connected to Texts**

All of the sexual values enumerated in the CCAR list together work toward the ideal of “Sh’leimut” or completeness. The authors recognize that sexuality and sexual expression are integral and powerful elements in the potential wholeness of human beings. The fundamental idea, *B’tzelem Elohim*- (in the image of God) articulated in Genesis 1:27, is at the core of all Jewish values. The writers of the CCAR Jewish sexual values document root all of the sexual values within *B’tzelem Elohim* because it underscores the inherent dignity of every person, woman and man. It affirms that consensuality and mutuality are necessary to validate a sexual relationship as “in the image of God.” The text states:

So God created man in His own image, in the image of God  
created He created him; male and female He created them.

כֹּז נִבְרָא אֱלֹהִים וְאֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ  
בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וְנִקְבָּה בָרָא אֹתָם:

Since each person is created in the image of God, each person is holy. Holiness deserves honor and respect and, most of all, responsibility. This is the starting

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<sup>36</sup> (Pittsburgh Principles, 1999)

point for any sexual relationship because it is the negation of using people as objects<sup>37</sup>. Martin Buber best summarized this powerful lesson in his book "I and Thou" which he wrote in 1923. He explains that in un-holy relationships, people treat the other as an object, making an I-it relationship. When we treat others as created in the image of God, recognizing their holiness, we create an I-Thou relationship. This is an extremely important starting point for young adults. It teaches that Judaism values relationships between people and does not value relationships as a means for personal sexual satisfaction alone. It further encourages that sexual relationships with their great responsibility can inspire holy interactions between partners.

*B'tzelem Elohim* is deeply connected to the value of *Kedushah*. In Leviticus 19:2, God commands the people to be holy, for God is holy:.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel, and say to them, You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.

אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: בְּדִבְרֵי אֵל-כָּל-עֲדָת  
בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

It emphasizes the distinctiveness of relationship, in which two people are set apart from others. Holiness is not simply a state of being; rather it is a continuing process of human striving for increasingly higher levels of moral living. In a Reform Jewish context, a relationship may attain a measure of *kedushah* when both partners voluntarily set themselves apart exclusively for each other, thereby finding unique emotional, sexual and spiritual intimacy<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> (Martin Buber, I, Thou)

<sup>38</sup> (CCAR Jewish Sexual Values)

One value that might be subsumed under *B'tzelem Elohim* in the CCAR document but that I believe could stand on its own, is the value of *Ezer K'negedo*- Mutual respect, Genesis 2:18:

And Adonai, God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help to match him."

יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לֹא טוֹב הָיִיתָ הָאָדָם לְבֶדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה-לּוֹ עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ:

God creates for Adam a partner, "ezer k'negedo", who can be both a helper and an opponent. In relationships with mutual respect, your partner provides your greatest support and your deepest criticism. This can be used as a model for all relationships whether heterosexual or homosexual, whereas Genesis 2:24 is useful only as a model for heterosexual relationships.

The value of *Emet*, (truth) is also a foundation for a young adult relationship.

Within this value, two texts are utilized in order to make two different points.

Zechariah 8:14-16 states:

14. For thus says the Lord of hosts: As I intended to do evil to you, when your fathers provoked me to wrath, says the Lord of hosts, and I did not relent;

15. So do I intend in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Do not fear.

**16. These are the things that you shall do: Speak every man the truth to his neighbor; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates;**

17. And let none of you plot evil in your hearts against his neighbor; do not love false oaths; for all these are things that I hate, said the Lord.

יְדַבֵּר כָּל אִישׁ אֶת-כָּל-אֶלְהָהּ אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה צְבָאוֹת בְּאָזְנוֹ וְלֹא נִחַמְתִּי טוֹב כִּן שְׁבִיתִי וְנִחַמְתִּי בַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה לְהִיטִיב אֶת-יְרוּשָׁלַם וְאֶת-בֵּית יְהוּדָה אֶל-תִּירְאוּ טוֹ אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּ דִבְרוּ אִישׁ אֶת-רֵעֵהוּ אֱמֶת וּמִשְׁפָּט שְׁלוֹם שְׁכֻטוֹ בְּשַׁעְרֵיכֶם יִזְוֹאֵשׁ אֶת-רֵעֵהוּ אֶל-תַּחֲשְׁבוּ בְּלִבְכֶם וּשְׁבַעַת שֶׁקֶר אֶל-תִּתְּחַבְּבוּ כִּי אֶת-כָּל-אֶלְהָהּ אֲשֶׁר שָׁנַאתִי נֹאסִי יְהוָה:

This passage from the prophet instructs the people, in the words of God, to speak the truth. Honesty, trust, and truth are cornerstones of a healthy and open

relationship. Too much truth, however, can be harmful. The writers warn against truth that can be destructive because it may lack the appropriate mercy and gentleness. The second text for the value of *Emet* indicates the authors' ambivalence about relationships that are completely candid. The psalms teach: "Mercy and truth shall meet, justice and peace shall embrace" (Psalms 85:11). For there are times when honesty is unhelpful and even disparaging. *Emet*, the truth, must therefore be balanced with *rachamim*, mercy as described in the verse from Psalms.

Our liturgy is also an inspiration for values. In the Shachrit service we read: "Blessed is our Eternal God, Creator of the Universe, who has made our bodies with wisdom, combining veins, arteries and vital organs into a finely balanced network" (Gates of Prayer 284). The value of *B'ri-ut* (health,) is the responsibility of keeping our bodies and others' safe from harm. It further recognizes the link between our physical health and our sexual behavior. Our sexuality is a blessing of science and spirit. It is a miracle and wonder of God and biology and it is the vessel of our precious souls.

These texts model how study of them can birth new meaning and extract modern values from ancient writings. An ethical exploration of sex in the Jewish tradition must explore texts both old and new in order to gain perspective on the intergenerational dialogue of all time. The great Jewish literature is an inspiration for creating a modern Jewish sex ethic for teenagers because what is new must emerge from where it is rooted.

## ANALYSIS OF OTHER SEX ETHICS

This guide is designed to express an approach to a Reform Jewish sex ethic. Before we do this, it is useful to examine ideas that are already taught in an effort to synthesize new understandings. Part of the analysis of other treatments of sex ethics will include determining the particular point of view of the author. It is therefore important to outwardly acknowledge that the perspective or bias of this viewpoint is that of a liberal and egalitarian perspective. In order to clarify this partiality, it was important to investigate a perspective with an entirely different leaning. Dr. Miriam Grossman wrote a book designed for pre-teenage young women named, "Wonder of Becoming You: How a Jewish Girl Grows Up". Grossman is a physician and an Orthodox woman.

She has dozens of years of experience in teaching this age group and gender. In her book she carefully outlines the nature of human growth and physiological development, but she teaches through the traditional Jewish concept of modesty, *Tz'niyut*. *Tz'niyut* applies to all aspects of life, describing the way women should model behavior from the way they dress to the modest and proper words they use. *Tz'niyut* is an extremely important word in the Orthodox community because it is a core differentiation between men and women. The value of *Tz'niyut* epitomizes the Orthodox belief that women should be safely admired for what is on the inside, and that true beauty does not come from the outside. Physical appreciation of a woman is reserved for her husband alone.

Grossman deals with younger teenagers (approximately 10-12 years old), teaching the topic of emerging physical changes with integrity and modesty. For

example, a typical textbook sketch of a woman's reproductive organs is included, but instead of the woman's body being depicted as naked and scientific, she is clothed in a long-sleeved dress with her reproductive organs presented only as they look internally. There are no pictures in this book of a woman's body as it would look naked. Needless to say, in this modest book for young women, there are absolutely no pictures of male reproductive organs.

The book was published in 1988 by Feldheim Publishers, a popular and reputable Orthodox publisher. A most interesting format note is that the book first contains letters of recommendation from rabbis who find this an acceptable resource for their followers. This indicates that within the Orthodox community information on such a topic would need to be approved by a rabbi in order for it to be acceptable resource material. It is written for younger girls, the tone is extremely gentle, and the book is easy to read. At the back of the book there is a dictionary of Hebrew and Yiddish terms that Grossman sprinkles throughout her writing. This indicates that not every reader would recognize the Yiddish words so commonly spoken in the Orthodox world, and also that the technical physiological words may also be unfamiliar.

Grossman's book is written like a conversation between teacher and student and could easily be read or used by parent or child. She teaches gently and in a conversational tone. Grossman utilizes texts as a way to reveal God's wonder in the world. This is a method of showing reverence for the text and its application. This differs from the method of proof texts, where a text is found to support the presented idea.

While the guide helps prepare a young Orthodox girl for the changes her body will experience and the development of her social roles, it does not deal at all with male growth and change or reproduction. *Tz'niyut* extends in this case to girls learning only about girls and boys learning only about boys.

The guide does not teach about human reproduction or sexual intercourse, but only indicates that this *mitzvah* is carried out once married. There is no mention of masturbation or how the body may have sexual desires or needs. The book instead teaches at length about how the body prepares for this big change around the time of the girl becoming a Bat Mitzvah. This is the change that will lead to the ultimate *mitzvah* of procreation with a husband (*pru u'rvu*). While the book anticipates the changes of a young girl into a young woman, there is no description of the responsibilities of the married woman to take care of her monthly periods in the proper legal framework of *Mikveh*. It does not at all describe the laws of *Niddah* or *Mikveh*. Perhaps it is too early for the detail of the *mitzvot* of family purity, or some of the information should be reserved until the time to prepare for marriage.

In fact, the book does not deal with any texts that are specifically about sex. The many texts included in the book express reverence for God who has created such an amazing, complex body and amazing work. Although intended for Orthodox readers, the use of the texts in this book can also be inspirational to us as Reform Jews. Text study about sexuality should not only be limited to texts that mention sex. There is a great spiritual lesson here as well. Our bodies are an incredible miracle of science and God working together. That we breathe and

that our hearts beat are awesome occurrences each moment and every day. The Jewish texts can teach us the great wonder of our physical beings that we too often take for granted. The sexual pleasure and excitement our bodies experience, like our heartbeat, is a gift from God. Recognizing this deep physical and spiritual connection brings us closer to our creator and gives us a better appreciation for the phenomenon of life.

Grossman's book challenges us to look at the way in which other guides utilize texts and Jewish concepts. This perspective can shed light on the way in which liberal rabbis quote classical texts, encouraging liberal rabbis and teachers to root themselves in the classical literature. Further, Grossman models how text can be used to share ideas rather than only make arguments. Her book exemplifies a fully Orthodox viewpoint without being self-conscious or apologizing to a larger audience.

While Grossman's book is designed for a specific audience, Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn wrote for a wider teenage audience and he recognized that the audience changed over time. He was a teacher and pulpit rabbi for decades and is perhaps the most published liberal rabbi on the topic of sex, love and marriage. One of his last publications on teenagers and sexuality, "Love in Your Life: A Jewish View of Teenage Sexuality" was published by the UAHC Press in 1991.

He authored texts for couples, teenagers and marriage preparation, and his writings have taken the form of textbooks and guides. The last title he published before his death in 1995 is "How Do I Decide", a textbook published by Behrman House in 1994, designed for confirmation age students on issues such



as drugs, sex and peer pressure. This textbook is commonly used in Reform and Conservative religious schools for high school and confirmation classes. His constantly changing format in teaching about sexuality reveals that he understood that teaching about sex changes through generations.

He writes with a Reform/Reconstructionist perspective that is modern and liberal. At times his liberal bias can feel preachy. His work is tied to texts, but he strongly builds upon the texts as a springboard for dissent, for young people to engage with and disagree with texts. He often includes open-ended questions as a technique for encouraging dialogue between people or inner-monologue for the thoughtful reader. As a whole his perspective is modern and technical in that he includes chapters not only about the spirituality of sexuality but also the physical nature of sex.

In his book<sup>39</sup>, he examines sex as it relates to the love relationship between two people. There are many scenarios, which ask "what would you do". He also writes cases with questions so that people can talk out or role-play based on the different situations. It seems that this book could be used in a classroom, between two friends, with a parent and child or by oneself. Scenarios are one way to begin a discussion on sexual ethics. The narratives can help a teenager identify a value or a conflict of values that influence sexual decision-making.

In the chapter, "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been in Love?" Gittelsohn encourages the teenager to make a differentiation between love and infatuation. He argues that love has the enduring quality to stand the test of time while

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<sup>39</sup> "Love in Your Life: A Jewish View of Teenage Sexuality"

infatuation carries the appearance of lasting forever, but quickly subsides and dies. His differentiation is helpful because it encourages the partners to analyze their relationship. He further explains that an infatuation is only about what the other can provide; it is a one-way relationship where one person becomes more important than another. Love, however can help individuals grow to become more important to themselves in proportion to the other person. In the chapter that follows, he discusses maturity and outlines stages of love development. This is an investigation of sex from sociological, psychological and relationship points of view.

The book also describes sex physiologically in a chapter on the fact and fiction of sex. It further explores the connection between sex and God. One of the major points Gittelsohn makes is the way in which humans differ from other animals. According to Gittelsohn, only among humans do the partners generally face and see each other during the act of intercourse. Secondly, only in humans does intercourse serve purposes other than propagation of the race. Third, only among humans does intercourse have a spiritual as well as physical aspect. Finally, among humans, forced coitus is called rape. These observations lead Gittelsohn to describe the sanctity of sexual relationships between people. Further and most important, when there is a violation of that sanctity there is a violation of God as well. This abhorrent occurrence destroys a relationship with God, whereas a healthy sexual relationship can contain *Kedushah* and can strengthen a relationship with God.

Gittelsohn explores the modern issues of birth control methods, and STDs/AIDS. He also includes a section on masturbation. He explores gender differences and bravely investigates non-heterosexual issues. He utilizes both scientific research and sociological research.

The focus of his book was on relationships, dating and compatibility. It was written for teenage use. It attempted to also be a practical guide by including narratives for discussion or to determine how the individual reading the scenario would decide. Another significant chapter is based on sexual behavior titled, "If Not Now, When?" This chapter name is a play on Rabbi Hillel's text on taking action. This section contains sexual behavior indicators or predictors of when people will have sex. It contains rubrics for analysis on dating possibilities and sexuality: "if you are experiencing A, then it means B". These charts are predictions composed from the great experience of the rabbi, and not necessarily any definitive sociological experiments. While the scenarios can help a teenager sort out issues, the charts do not deal with the complexity of ethics. Rather, they seek to influence behavior by working with the teenager's self-analysis of where he fits in as a statistic.

Gittelsohn's book is unabashedly liberal. While this makes for compelling, free-thinking, and tolerant Reform writing, it is potentially narrowing because it seems entirely intolerant of other views. While a Reform Jewish sex ethic should be liberal, it should not be so limiting that it becomes narrow or even prejudiced. Some significant matters are missing from Gittelsohn's body of work. The book does not investigate Jewish texts at length though some are included.

The reader considers the piece at face value and does not necessarily struggle with the deeper meaning or complications of the text. The book is dated, the photographs set it in the decade of the 1980's and perhaps this indicates that the approach is also dated.

An important lesson learned from the body of Gittelsohn's work is that unless the sex ethic is continually updated or contains within it a reforming element, then it will quickly expire. Gittelsohn has constantly revised his books and formats in order to keep up with the changing issues in sexuality. A truly "Reform" ethic will need to express openness to a continuously changing sex reality. This should be a foundation of a Modern Reform sex ethic.

In its time, "Choosing a Sex Ethic" by Professor Eugene Borowitz, Reform Rabbi and professor at the Hebrew Union College, was revolutionary because it acknowledged and organized different types<sup>40</sup> of sexual relationships using four values: "Healthy Orgasm," "Mutual Consent," "Love," and "Marriage." The book was published by B'nai B'rith Press and intended for a collegiate audience.

Borowitz's book is an exploration of sexuality based in the Reform concept of choice. The basic technique utilized is to identify "types of people" and hypothesizes about their ability to make choices. It is written in academic language and in an intellectual format. Classical texts are utilized, but only in English. The recent rededication of the Reform movement to teaching Hebrew

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<sup>40</sup> (Jonathan Stein writes in his "Taxonomy for Reform Jews to Evaluate Sexual Behavior": In his book *Choosing a Sex Ethic* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), Rabbi Eugene Borowitz actually proposed a taxonomy without calling it by that term. The hierarchy that his argument takes up includes (from "lowest" to "highest") "Healthy Orgasm," "Mutual Consent," "Love," and "Marriage." Although they remain very different, there are certain similarities and parallels to Rabbi Stein's Taxonomy)

and to teaching text suggests that Hebrew texts should now be incorporated into Reform sexual materials.

Sexuality is described in college-level English, yet this language is elevated beyond the current consumer, a much younger person. Additionally, many of the assumptions made about the mores of teenagers from this time have changed dramatically. For example, Borowitz writes, "I think highly of friendship, but sexual intercourse seems to me a rather extravagant way in which to express it<sup>41</sup>." One of the issues rabbis confront today is a relationship referred to as "friends with privileges". Further, cohabitation and concepts of homosexuality have significantly progressed and Borowitz' views expressed in this book are no longer consistent with the Reform movement.

The strengths and weaknesses of the books suggest what is most needed in a modern Jewish sex ethic for teenagers. While Borowitz and Gittlesohn may not struggle enough with text, Yedwab's book is the other extreme, all text with no guidance. The modern ethic will best serve teenagers if it is rooted in text that can be the basis for an individual's encounter with the tradition. The textual aspect of a sex ethic allows a teenager's mind to really engage in the important matters. It will need to be written or taught in a way that is appropriate for younger teenagers than ever before as sexual awareness reaches a younger audience. But it is not only the matter of the mind and the body, Grossman's emphasis on reverence and *tzn'iyut* teach the value of addressing the body and soul and mind altogether. This will be the model for a sex ethic, a modern decision-making model that links together mind, body and soul.

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<sup>41</sup> (Borowitz, 107)

## **ETHICAL DECISION MAKING MODEL**

An ethical dilemma is a situation where a potential action presents a tension between conflicting values and there are two or more possible conclusions that may involve an undesirable choice<sup>42</sup>. In order to avoid unethical behavior, a person needs to be in touch with the values that she or he holds in order to solve the problem by brainstorming options to make a decision. The tricky part is that in an ethical dilemma, the alternative possibilities may not be obvious; it takes a process in order to help them be revealed.

### **A Process for Ethical Decision-making**

Learning how to engage in ethical decision-making includes everything from deciding whether to date someone to making decisions about sexual behavior with another person. It is any behavior that is determined from any of the values.

Teenagers, like any other individuals, are constantly making decisions. They decide what to eat, how to study, how to spend time with their friends and what clothes to buy. Values inform their decision-making. If young people believe deeply in the ethical treatment of animals, they may choose to eat as a vegetarian. If they feel strongly about saving the earth they will choose to recycle and even try to encourage their school to start a recycling program. Ethical sexual decision-making is also based in identifiable values. This should be reassuring to young people who worry that when a decision is placed before them, in the heat of the moment, that they will have a hard time making a choice.

Adults may argue that few young people would ever employ such a sophisticated system when they are wrapped up in an emotional and sexual

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<sup>42</sup> (Merriam Webster and author's definition)

experience. But the process is something that with practice, consideration and mastery of the values can become a part of the young person. It can serve as a foundation and a system for how they make these vital decisions.

Before exploring the proposed model for ethical decision-making, an important step is identifying the values that are utilized in the process. Two documents will be extremely useful in the process of analyzing ethical dilemmas. The first is a list of values that was prepared by the Central Conference of American Rabbis Ad Hoc Committee on Jewish Sexual Values in 1998. Each value listed is grounded in a classical Jewish text. The second is Jonathan A. Stein's document, "Toward a Taxonomy for Reform Jews to Evaluate Sexual Behavior", a classification of relationships between people in a range from healthy to unhealthy and holy to forbidden. Rabbi Stein's taxonomy emerged out of his work as chair of the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Values. The taxonomy and the values are related in that the values inform the choices and the choices inform the overall relationship between people. These two separate documents will be used together in order to explicate the complexity of sexual decision-making for teenagers and in order to help them analyze their own relationships.

### **Values**

The following comprise a list of Jewish values that are to be employed in sexual decision-making. When an individual makes decisions, values inform her choices. The following values are helpful in breaking down an ethical dilemma into a situation about making choices. Further, decisions can also be made toward the goal of an overall relationship as it is defined in the taxonomy of

behavior. The values are the result of the work of the Committee on Jewish Sexual Values as printed in the 1998 CCAR Yearbook and they are here reproduced in full:

"*ShLM*" is the Hebrew root that expresses the ideal of wholeness, completeness, unity and peace. Sexuality and sexual expression are integral and powerful elements in the potential wholeness of human beings.

Contemporary interpretations of human *shleimut* include:

- 1) *B'tzelem Elohim*- (in the image of God) This fundamental Jewish idea, articulated in Genesis 1:27, "And God created Adam in the Divine image...male and female..." is at the core of all Jewish values, *B'tzelem Elohim* underscores the inherent dignity of every person, woman and man, with the equal honor and respect due to each individual's integrity and sexual identity. *B'tzelem Elohim* requires each of us to value one's self and one's sexual partner and to be sensitive to his/her needs. Thus do we affirm that consensuality and mutuality are among the values necessary to validate a sexual relationship as spiritual and ethical and therefore "in the image of God".
- 2) *Emet*- (truth) Authentic and ethical human relationships should be grounded in both truth and honesty. "These are the things you are to do: speak the truth to one another, render true and perfect justice in your gates" (Zechariah 8:16). People can only truly know each other and appreciate the Divine in all people when they come to each other openly and honestly. Both partners in an intimate relationship should strive to communicate lovingly. They should tell each other what gives them sexual pleasure and what does not, and should honestly share their love as well as the challenges that their relationship presents to them. However, honesty that is destructive of the relationship lacks the quality of *rachamim*, mercy. "Mercy and truth shall meet, justice and peace shall embrace" (Psalms 85:11). For that reason, intimate partners should be mindful that there may be moments when they are better served by not being totally candid with each other. In addition, falsehood that manipulates is sinful. Dating partners must not lie to each other in order to mislead the other into a sexual relationship. Neither partner should use the other as a sexual object. Finally, parents should learn how to teach their children both the facts and the consequences of sexual behavior, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Parents should then use that teaching to help their children face the realities of the contemporary world.



- 3) *B'ri-ut*- ("health") Our tradition enjoins upon us the responsibility to rejoice in and to maximize our physical, emotional and spiritual health. "Blessed is our Eternal God, Creator of the Universe, who has made our bodies with wisdom, combining veins, arteries and vital organs into a finely balanced network" (Gates of Prayer, page 284). Reform Judaism encourages adults of all ages and physical and mental capabilities to develop expressions of their sexuality that are both responsible and joyful. The abuse of human sexuality can be destructive to our emotional, spiritual and physical health. We have a duty to engage only in those sexual behaviors that do not put others or ourselves at risk. In our age of HIV/AIDS and epidemic sexually transmitted diseases, irresponsible sexual behavior can put our lives and the lives of others at risk. We must act upon the knowledge that our sexual behavior is linked to our physical health.
  
- 4) *Mishpat*-("justice") Judaism enjoins upon us the mandate to reach out and care for others, to treat all of those created in the image of God with respect and dignity, to strive to create equality and justice whenever people are treated unfairly, to help meet the needs of the less fortunate, and to engage in *tikkun olam*, the repair of God's creation. The prophet Amos exhorts us to "Let justice well up as waters, righteousness as a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24). As a people who have historically suffered at the hands of the powerful, we must be especially sensitive to any abuse of power and victimization of other human beings. According to the sages, the *yetzer ha rah*, through its sexual component, may sometimes lead to destructive behavior and to sin. All forms of sexual harassment, incest, child molestation and rape violate the value of *mishpat*. Our pursuit of *mishpat* should inspire us to eradicate prejudice, inequality and discrimination based upon gender or sexual orientation.
  
- 5) *Mishpacha*-("family") The family is a cornerstone of Jewish life. The Torah, through the first mitzvah (Genesis 1:28), *p'ru u'rvu*, "be fruitful and multiply," emphasizes the obligation of bringing children into the world through the institution of the family. In our age, the traditional notion of family as being two parents and children (and perhaps older generations) living in the same household is in the process of being redefined. Men and women of various ages living together, singles, gay and lesbian couples, single-parent households, etc., may all be understood as families in the wider, if not traditional, sense. "Family" also has multiple meanings in an age of increasingly complex biotechnology and choice. While procreation and family are especially important guarantors of the survival of the Jewish people, all Jews have a responsibility to raise and nurture the next generation of our people. The importance of family, whether biologically or relationally based, remains the foundation of meaningful human existence.

- 6) *Tz'niyut*-("modesty") The classic *Iggeret HaKodesh*, "The Holy Letter," sets forth the Jewish view that the Holy One did not create anything that is not beautiful or potentially good. The human body in itself is never to be considered an object of shame or embarrassment. Instead, "...it is the manner and context in which it (i.e., the body) is utilized, the ends to which it is used, which determine condemnation or praise." Our behavior should never reduce the human body to an object. Dress, language and behavior should reflect a sensitivity to the Jewish respect for modesty and privacy. As Jews we acknowledge and celebrate the differences between public, private and holy time as well as the differences between public, private and holy places.
- 7) *B'rit*- ("covenantal relationship") For sexual expression in human relationships to reach the fullness of its potential, it should be grounded in fidelity and the intention of permanence. This grounding mirrors the historic Jewish ideal of the relationship between God and the people Israel, with its mutual responsibilities and its assumption of constancy. The prophet Hosea wrote, "I will betroth you to Me forever; I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion, I will betroth you to Me in everlasting faithfulness" (Hosea 2:21-22). A sexual relationship is covenantal when it is stable and enduring and includes mutual esteem, trust and faithfulness.
- 8) *Simcha*-("joy") 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 individually, can greatly delight women and men. Our tradition teaches that procreation is not the sole purpose of sexual intimacy; it not only recognizes but rejoices in the gratification that our sexuality can bring to us. As an expression of love, the physical release and relaxation, and the enjoyment of sensuality and playfulness, which responsible sexual activity can provide, is encouraged by our Jewish tradition. The sages teach that the *Sh'chinah*, the Divine Presence, joins with people when they unite in love, but add that if there is no joy between them, the *Sh'chinah* will not be present. (Shabbat 30b, Zohar1). Judaism insists that the *simcha* of human sexual activity should be experienced only in healthy and responsible human relationships.
- 9) *Ahava*-("love") The mitzvah from Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am Adonai," serves as an essential maxim of all human relationships. The same Hebrew value term, *ahava*, is used to describe the ideal relationship between God and humanity as well as between people. The Jewish marriage ceremony speaks of "*ahava v'achava, shalom v'reiyut*," love and affection", wholeness and friendship" as ideals that should undergird holy relationships. For Jews, *ahava* is not only a feeling or emotion, but also the concrete behaviors we display

toward God and our fellow humans. *Ahava* implies self esteem, the internal conviction that each of us should appear worthy in our own eyes. To be loved, one must consider oneself lovable; without regard for self, one can hardly care for others. *Ahava* forbids any abuse or violence in sexual or any aspect of human relationships. *Ahava* should be expressed through behavior that displays caring support and empathy.

- 10) *Kedushah*-(“holiness”) This value comes from the root meaning of the Hebrew word *KDS*, “distinct from all others, unique, set apart for an elevated purpose.” The Torah instructs us: “You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). Holiness is not simply a state of being; rather it is a continuing process of human striving for increasingly higher levels of moral living. In a Reform Jewish context, a relationship may attain a measure of *kedushah* when both partners voluntarily set themselves apart exclusively for each other, thereby finding unique emotional, sexual and spiritual intimacy.

Some additional values to add<sup>43</sup>:

*Ezer K'negedo*-Mutual respect. In Genesis 2:18, God creates for Adam a partner, “ezer k'negedo”, both a helper and an opponent. In relationships with mutual respect, your partner provides your greatest support and your deepest criticism. Although this is an aspect of *B'tzelem Elohim*, *Ezer K'negedo* is the value of the human responsibility of the mutual relationship for one another.

*Rachmanut*-compassion, sympathy, and empathy. *Rachmanut* teaches that there are different times for each. The root of the word reminds us that we all come from a womb, “*rechem*”. This concept is connected to but different from *B'rit*. Whereas *B'rit* implies that there will be a long lasting relationship, *Rachmanut* instead encourages that at each encounter people will treat each other well. One never knows whether a beginning will blossom into a deeper relationship.

In addition, part of the aforementioned value of *simcha* is laughter and sense of humor. This includes the celebration of each other and of being a couple.

## Ethical and Physical

One issue that is extremely important to address is how to deal with the presentation of sexual education materials that explicitly describe sexual acts within the framework of ethics. It is this author's opinion that if we are grounded in the value of *Emet*, we are obligated to teach alternatives to sexual intercourse

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<sup>43</sup> (Author's addition)

in order to properly prepare teenagers for sexual decision-making. The alternative, to teach abstinence-only, is not an option<sup>44</sup>. One could argue that it is not the rabbi or teacher's obligation but rather that of a health professional. This ethical guide encourages a course where the physical and ethical are taught together. Therefore in the process of working through an ethical dilemma, the author provides information from Planned Parenthood about "Outercourse", alternatives to intercourse. These alternatives are preserved in their entirety in the footnotes to the ethical dilemma.

#### **Exercise-working out a problem:**

In order to prepare for ethical dilemmas that will challenge applied decision-making, it is essential to practice the process by using situations that have happened to other people. A narrative about someone else can guide us to learn how to go through the process ourselves. Three scenarios are presented in this chapter. The first scenario is explicated in the ethical decision-making model<sup>45</sup>.

#### **A Scenario of a Relationship is Presented:**

##### **Scenario Number 1**

Sarah (18 years old) and David (19 years old) have been dating for 8 months exclusively (not dating anyone else) and have been sexually active for three months. They really care about each other and Sarah thinks she is falling in love with David and may even one day marry him. Sarah has been feeling sick for

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<sup>44</sup> (See Introduction)

<sup>45</sup> (Based on an ethical decision model from Rabbi Arthur Gross Schaefer)

about two weeks, and was diagnosed with mononucleosis (mono)<sup>46</sup>, a virus that manifests like a flu that is spread through saliva. One of the symptoms of mono is that the patient is exhausted all the time.

David has an extremely challenging year academically and does not want to become infected with mono, so he has told Sarah that until she is no longer contagious, he will not kiss or make out with her. David however, has been asking if they can have sex without any kissing involved so that he can still be sexually satisfied.

**Initial Analysis for Scenario Number 1, Warm-up to get to know the case:**

***What values are present and which are ambiguous in each relationship?***

*Emet is present, David is honest about his own sexual needs and what he understands about mononucleosis. He is keeping in mind his own sexual and physical health.*

*David is aware of his own sexual and physical B'ri-ut.*

*Ahava is ambiguous in this scenario, it may or may not be present. According to the scenario, "they really care about each other and Sarah thinks she is falling in love with David and may even one day marry him." But when compared with*

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<sup>46</sup> Included in the scenario in accordance with the value of *Emet*: Infectious mononucleosis is most common in people 10 to 35 years old. While mono is not usually considered a serious illness, it may have serious complications. (FDA.GOV)

**Contagiousness** Infectious mononucleosis is most contagious with a fever. After the fever, the virus is still carried in the saliva for up to 6 months, but in small amounts. Overall, mononucleosis is only slightly contagious from contacts. Boyfriends, girlfriends, roommates, and relatives rarely get it. The incubation period for mononucleosis is 4 to 10 weeks after contact with an infected person.  
([http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/pa/pa\\_mononucl\\_hhg.htm](http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/pa/pa_mononucl_hhg.htm))

*the definition of Ahava (see definition earlier in chapter in statement of Jewish values) which includes "wholeness" and "friendship", and also implies self esteem and that to be loved one must consider oneself lovable, this relationship falls short. It seems that while Sarah may feel that she is in love the actions and behaviors that she and David exhibit do not reflect this value.*

***Which values are absent from the scenario?*** (One person may apply a value only to oneself and not the other; similarly a value absent from one individual's reasoning may be present in the other's.) This may be a value that is absent from the scenario-sometimes there is ambiguity in the application of the values to the scenario.

*While he considers his own B'ri-ut, David seems to ignore Sarah's health. He is trying to maximize his own pleasure without regard to her physical or emotional state.*

*Tz'niyut is also an issue because he seems dangerously close to reducing Sarah to an object for his own pleasure.*

*Another blaring absence is the core value of B'tzelem Elohim. There is no mention of consensuality or mutuality for this couple. There does not seem to be a value that both partners are equal.*

***How do the values that are present, in your opinion, reflect on the potential sexuality and intimacy between the two people?***

*David and Sarah could potentially build a relationship that includes even more of the values than they exhibit currently. However, it seems that the values presented do not involve mutuality; for example, he is honest-but only because he has needs. She may be falling in love with him, but there is no sense that he feels the same way.*

***Do the values conflict and if so how do they conflict?***

*It seems that the value of **B'ri-ut** comes into conflict with itself. David displays **Emet**, and is honest about his feelings and sexual desire, but at the same time his own perceived **B'ri-ut** or healthy sexual needs conflicts with Sarah's **B'ri-ut**-her need to rest in order to become healthy and regain her emotional health. **Tz'niyut** is also important because she is more than an object that can fulfill her boyfriend's needs.*

**An Ethical Decision-Making Process:**

The following is an outline of an ethical decision-making process that can be practiced and utilized on real scenarios. An outline without italicized examples is available in Appendix B. The process below is examined using the above scenario number 1.

**Step One:**

First, determine who are the people involved in the decision or what are the elements of the choice

- *Sarah is involved-should she have sex with David?*
- *David is involved-can he have sex with his girlfriend without kissing her?*

**Step Two:**

Next, explore which values are involved.

- **Emet** *David is honest about what he wants*
- **B'ri-ut** *David has sexual needs and wants to fulfill them. Sarah is sick and David worries that kissing could put him at risk for getting sick. Sarah's health is also important, she may not be well enough for any activity. There could also be an emotional toll for Sarah, and according to the value of B'ri-ut, "we must act upon the knowledge that our sexual behavior is linked to our physical health."*
- **Tz'niyut** *Sarah could potentially become an object of David's needs*

### Step Two (A):

Make a list of the values involved in the choice

- i. Emet
- ii. B'ri-ut
- iii. Tz'niyut

### Step Two (B):

Circle the values that are most important for dealing with the situation, then choose the value that emerges as the most central to the conflict. **B'ri-ut** emerges as the ethical value to utilize in the model. Refer back to definition in order to continue.

### Step Three:

Honoring the value of **B'ri-ut**, consider multiple options, in other words, brainstorm the possibilities of ways of responding to the situation, utilizing the value but try thinking out of the box. **Brainstorming options** will help the final response emerge. The final response may be a combination of some of the responses or one of the options considered.

### Brainstorming Options:

- Taking the time to call a doctor or nurse to learn about mononucleosis to find out its point of contagion and what is healthy for each of them.
- As **B'ri-ut** teaches, *"We have a duty to engage only in those sexual behaviors that do not put others or ourselves at risk."* What types of sexual activity could allow both parties to be healthy that will not put either at risk, Sarah of being hurt emotionally and David of getting sick physically? Some examples could include "Outercourse"<sup>47</sup> as explicated by Planned Parenthood, cuddling/holding each other, mutual masturbation, talking intimately/explicitly (arousing each other with words). We are given the gift of a physical body and the gift of wisdom. In balancing the values of **B'ri-ut** and **Emet**, is therefore upon us to learn how our bodies work and how to use them responsibly.

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<sup>47</sup> (From Planned Parenthood) "Outercourse": Alternatives to Intercourse. Including kissing, masturbation, fantasy etc. (explicated in appendix)



- *"Reform Judaism encourages adults of all ages and physical and mental capabilities to develop expressions of their sexuality that are both responsible and joyful. The abuse of human sexuality can be destructive to our emotional, spiritual and physical health."* What options does Sarah have so that she is responsible and joyful and that will not be at the expense of her emotional health since she feels she is falling in love with David? Some include abstaining from sex until she feels well enough or reminding David that their relationship is about mutuality and that waiting until they both feel healthy means that they will both enjoy sharing sex.

### **Scenarios continued:**

#### **Scenario Number 2**

Jenny and Josh have noticed each other in their history seminar at Homestead High School. A lot of their friends know each other but the two of them have never hung out together alone. Jenny really misses the affection and stimulation of an exclusive sexual relationship-she recently broke up with her older boyfriend who graduated.

Josh invited a bunch of friends over for a late night barbeque, and he personally asked Jenny to come. He was starting to feel that she might be interested in getting to know him at the party. Josh has a good reputation and usually only gets involved with girls to have an ongoing relationship.

Jenny realized that this was her first chance in many months since the break up to "hook-up" (sexual contact, not necessarily involving intercourse) with someone who was nice and attractive. It didn't need to mean anything special. She started to wonder if she would have sex with him, even though she did not know him very well.

### **Scenario Number 3**

Brooke always wanted to be more popular. She had finally started hanging out with Shayna and Gayle-the two most popular girls (according to the girls and guys) and was eager to do what it would take to remain friends with them. Shayna had recently been talking about getting to know Kevin better, and she seemed interested in him. Shayna was busy one night and Gayle and Brooke went to a party together without her. Brooke was so excited to have a chance to be with Gayle alone. The party was mellow until one of the hosts popped in a DVD of pornography. After about 10 minutes, the group of 12 friends started daring each other to kiss, first it was a girl and a guy. Then Brooke was dared to kiss Gayle-which she did. And then she started to wonder if she would be dared to kiss Kevin or maybe even perform oral sex. She started to get excited about the attention she would get from Kevin, or any of the other guys, if she acted upon this dare.

### **Using a Taxonomy for Further Analysis**

Breaking down a relationship or dilemma by exploring values is one way to examine sexual decision-making. Another way to analyze sexual decisions is to look at the relationship as a whole and determine how it is classified on a scale. As stated earlier, "Toward a Taxonomy for Reform Jews to Evaluate Sexual Behavior"<sup>48</sup>, a classification of relationships between people in a range from healthy to unhealthy and holy to forbidden emerged out of his work as chair of

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<sup>48</sup> (contained in full in Appendix C of this chapter)

the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Values. The two documents, the Jewish values and the taxonomy, will be used together in order to explicate the complexity of sexual decision-making for teenagers and in order to help them analyze their own relationships. Below is an excerpt from the Taxonomy, the full text is found in Appendix B of this chapter:

A suggestion for a working model of a taxonomy for Reform Jews to evaluate sexual relationships and behaviors<sup>21</sup> follows. Sexual behaviors could be evaluated as falling into one of six categories:

*Qadosh* ("holy"): a relationship/behavior that is both ritually sanctified and in consonance with the Reform Jewish sexual values as articulated by the CCAR Ad Hoc Committee on Human Sexuality. Examples: heterosexual and homosexual couples who have undergone a marriage or commitment ceremony and who also conduct their sex lives in accordance with these Reform Jewish sexual values.

*Musar* ("ethical"): a relationship/behavior that is in consonance with Reform Jewish sexual values or that exhibits commitment to specific aspects of those values but that has not been ritually sanctified. Examples: couples who live together without undergoing marriage or commitment ceremonies and who conduct their sex lives in ways that exemplify the ideals put forth in the Reform Jewish Sexual Values, the practice of safe sex, masturbation by people infected with HIV.<sup>22</sup>

*Mutar* ("tolerable")<sup>23</sup> a relationship/behavior that does not violate Reform Jewish sexual values and that includes emotional involvement but not yet a permanent commitment and/or behavior that may be preferable to other sexual outlets. Examples: masturbation, mutually consensual sex within a monogamous and developing relationship.

*Lo Kasher* ("not proper")<sup>24</sup> a behavior/relationship that does not exhibit Reform Jewish sexual values but that is performed between two consenting adults.<sup>25</sup> Examples: consensual sex between people who are not in the process of developing a committed relationship, sexually suggestive dress that does not fulfill the value of *tz'niyut* ("modesty").

*Patur* ("sinful") or *assur* ("prohibited"): a behavior/relationship that violates or contradicts the Reform Jewish sexual values. Examples: adultery, promiscuity.

*To'evah* ("abhorrent"): a behavior/relationship that is *Patur* or *assur* and also abusive, violent, or coercive, or violates certain historic Jewish and human societal norms.<sup>26</sup> Examples: rape, sexual abuse, pedophilia, incest, bestiality, exploitation.<sup>27</sup>

The taxonomy can be used as a model for investigating decisions made (self-narratives or invented narrative scenarios) or for considering relationship decisions in the future. Reflecting back on past relationships or on decisions made in a current relationship can help a person grow and learn about themselves and their partner. Reflective behavior challenges a person to think about whether the person is different now than the time of the past relationship. This process can be part of a healing process for someone who has been involved in a damaging relationship, or it could be a goal toward which a relationship can grow. Another reason to utilize this taxonomy is as a substitute for less thoughtful or meaningful categorizations which already exist. Friends or others may talk about one relationship as "friends with privileges" or "hook-up buddies" or they may describe other relationships as "dating" "boyfriend/girlfriend". While these are each a type of relationship, they do not give any indication as to the nature of the relationship involved. The taxonomy categorizes relationships in a way that highlights aspects of a relationship that can grow and change.

#### **Applied Ethics:**

The taxonomy is a thorough document because it places relationships on a range of definition. It further divides "good" and "bad" relationships into categories that deal with mind, body and soul. I think it is especially valuable for

teenagers because they expect teachers to teach them to abstain. The taxonomy challenges them particularly if they are sexually active, to reflect upon their relationship and consider their commitment to each other and how to make that relationship holy.

Two questions can guide the use of the Taxonomy into an application for the above scenarios or for self-narratives:

- Where do the relationships from the scenarios fit on the taxonomy?
- How do I think about decisions I have already made or hope to make based on an understanding of the Taxonomy? In other words, how can the Taxonomy help me reflect on relationships I have had and project positive opportunities into relationships I hope to have?

Jonathan Stein recognizes the strengths and potential weaknesses of a taxonomy to evaluate behavior. First he writes that even formulating a taxonomy is fraught with controversy because people will inevitably disagree on how to evaluate specific sexual behaviors or that any attempt to judge sexual behaviors is problematic. He explains various terms considered as the titles for different categories.

Stein identifies four strengths of using a taxonomy in order to discuss sexuality. These are included in full below:

(1) the advantage of any taxonomy, that is, that behaviors are understood as falling into a range of possible evaluations; (2) the use of traditional Hebrew words and value terms that will be immediately identifiable to Jews conversant in traditional halakhic categories and that help to root the taxonomy in historic

Jewish values; (3) the distinctions between "holy" and "ethical" and also between "forbidden" and "abhorrent," which allow for subtle gradations of evaluation on either end of the taxonomy; (4) the possibility that such a taxonomy might be used as an educational tool for sexual decision-making, and not just for the purpose of abstract evaluation or judgment.

He further writes, "In addition, the use of a taxonomic approach to the evaluation of human sexual activity may afford Reform Judaism the opportunity to respond in a relevant, appropriate, and responsible manner to the contemporary realities of how many Jews, and especially the younger generation, actually live out their sexual lives. A large number of people today have independently reached the conclusion that black and white approaches to issues such as pre- and extramarital sex and homosexuality are too simplistic<sup>49</sup>."

The taxonomy concludes:

"Our tradition has never understood sexuality as a simple or easy set of expectations to follow or behaviors to judge. Thus, a taxonomy by which Reform Jews might evaluate and decide about the morality of sexual activity seems fitting. Our biblical and rabbinic predecessors bequeathed to us the quest for qedushah in all our actions. Qedushah is the highest ideal for sexual behavior offered in this taxonomy. The quest for holiness continues to be a most worthy standard by which we may judge all our actions."

The conclusion reminds the reader that setting a taxonomy creates a framework for discussion and evaluation. This framework is crucial for communication between teachers and teenagers. Often rabbis or other teachers can find the conversations about sexuality extremely awkward. This taxonomy is another tool to give a language for sexual ethics and decision-making to teenagers.

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<sup>49</sup> (Toward a Taxonomy for Reform Jews to Evaluate Sexual Behavior, Stein)

Combined with the CCAR's list of Jewish sexual values, both documents create a usable format for teaching sexual decision-making from a Jewish perspective.

## **Appendix A:**

Outercourse excerpted from Planned Parenthood

**Kissing** — Many people explore different ways of kissing. They may also explore kissing different body parts. **Masturbation** — Many people enjoy masturbating — touching their own sex organs for pleasure. It's the most common way we are sexual. Partners can masturbate alone or together. **Erotic Massage** — Many couples touch and rub each other's sex organs with their hands, bodies, or mouths. **Body-to-body Rubbing/Frottage** — Many couples rub their bodies together — especially their sex organs — for pleasure and orgasm. **Fantasy** — Couples can read or watch sexy stories or pictures together. It can also be exciting to share sexy fantasies. People do it in person, on the phone or Internet, or through e-mail. **Sex Toys** — Vibrators, dildos, and other toys can be used to explore and caress the body. Condoms need to be used if partners share the same toy. Follow the cleaning instructions that come with toys. **Oral Sex Play** — Many people like to use their mouths on each other's sex organs. On a woman it is called cunnilingus. On a man, it's called fellatio. It cannot cause pregnancy. But it can pass infection. Latex or plastic barriers reduce the risks. **Anal Sex Play** — Many people enjoy exploring each other's buttocks, anus, or rectum with their hands, mouths, sex organs, or with toys. Anal sex play cannot cause pregnancy — but it can easily pass infection. Latex or plastic barriers reduce the risks.



## **Appendix B:**

### **An Outline to Use the Process Again: A Restatement of the Process**

The following is an outline of an ethical decision-making process that can be practiced and utilized on real scenarios.

#### **Analysis of the Scenario, The Warm-up to Get Familiar with the Case**

What values are present in each relationship?

Which are absent or ambiguous from the scenario?

How do the values that are present, in your opinion, reflect on the potential sexuality and intimacy between the two people?

Do the values conflict and if so how do they conflict?

#### **Step One:**

First, determine who are the people involved in the decision or what are the elements of the choice.

#### **Step Two:**

Next, explore which values are involved.

#### **Step Two (A):**

Make a list of the values involved in the choice

#### **Step Two (B):**

Circle the values that are most important for dealing with the situation, then choose the value that emerges as the most central to the conflict.

#### **Review the value in order to continue**

#### **Step Three:**

Honoring that value, consider multiple options, in other words, brainstorm the possibilities of ways of responding to the situation, utilizing the value but try thinking out of the box. **Brainstorming options** will help the final response

emerge. The final response may be a combination of some of the responses or one of the options considered.

## Appendix C:

The taxonomy is included in its entirety below:

### Toward a Taxonomy for Reform Jews to Evaluate Sexual Behavior

Jonathan A. Stein

Judaism regards appropriate sexual behavior as a *mitzvah*, a sacred human activity potentially imbued with kedushah<sup>50</sup>. Jewish tradition generally views human sexuality as inherently positive and joyous. Like every human capacity, sexuality is considered a gift from God and is, therefore, a legitimate good, provided that it is exercised in faithful acceptance of a Divine purpose and in reverent awareness of God's presence. Human sexual behavior is understood as both the means to procreation--the fulfillment of the Torah's first mitzvah, "Be fruitful and multiply"<sup>1</sup> --and, in the right context, a way to experience physical delight and pleasure. The proper sexual relationship is one that serves both to express and to further, on an enduring basis, the mutually responsive and responsible love of two people who act in accordance with the teaching that each has been created in God's image.

At the same time, precisely because it is such a primary and central aspect of our existence, human sexuality also contains within it the potential for destructive behavior. Sexuality that is expressed with actions that lack moral values can be hurtful or obscene. The very same physical joy that sexual activity brings contains within it the seeds of temptation to engage in expressions of sexuality that can be unethical and sinful. The rabbinic tradition came to understand this temptation as an aspect of the *yetzer ha-ra'*, the "evil inclination," an innate, natural part of our humanity. According to Solomon Schechter, one of the great passions that the *yetzer ha-ra'* plays upon is the passion of sin known as *y'tzirah d'aveirah*, "the inclination toward sexual immorality."<sup>2</sup> The rabbis understood well that the sexual manifestation of the *yetzer ha-ra'* is an extraordinarily powerful force in human life and is, therefore, potentially dangerous. Judaism has always understood and acknowledged how difficult it is for human beings, created by God with strong sexual desires, to channel their sexual behavior. And so Maimonides writes that "No prohibition in all of the Torah is as difficult to keep as that of forbidden sexual relations."<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, this same *yetzer ha-ra'* also plays a crucial and even critical role in human life and in society. When the midrash examines the verse "And God saw everything that God had made and behold, it was very good,"<sup>4</sup> the rabbis ask the question, "Can even the *yetzer ha-ra'* be considered 'good'?" The famous answer is that "Were it not for the 'evil inclination', no one would build a house, or marry, or have children, or take a job."<sup>5</sup> Thus, our *yetzer ha-ra'* is, like sexuality itself, simultaneously a Divine gift with the potential for blessing, and yet one of our greatest human challenges.

In recent decades, we have increasingly come to recognize that sexual behavior is always imbued with significance, whether morally, psychologically, or both. Our sexual behavior has potential consequences for our self-image and for our relationships with other people. In our age, irresponsible sexual behavior can lead too easily to disease and death. Judaism understands that human sexuality reaches its heights in a faithful, covenantal relationship undergirded by a deep emotional commitment, as the ultimate expression of the most intimate of human bonds between two loving people, and as a deeply spiritual, not merely physical, activity. If our sexuality is expected to reach its potential for personal fulfillment and moral content, its expression should not ever be casual. Such an attitude would be anathema to Jewish values. And so, because of the

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<sup>50</sup> (changed from "qedushah" in the original article for consistency)

many moral and psychological risks that are involved in human sexual behavior, Judaism has historically imposed discipline upon this area of life, setting boundaries and limits that are intended to safeguard from abuse both the people involved and human sexuality itself.

Judaism has set these limits within the framework of the *mitzvot*. Our tradition's way of thinking about life is distinguished from those in other religious systems, in part, by the notion of *mitzvah*. In general, the *mitzvot* are a system of ethical and ritual demands based upon the performance of proper behaviors; proper feelings and intentions are not their primary goal.<sup>6</sup> "Our tradition has generally refused to collapse the moral distinction between harboring impious thoughts and feelings and doing irresponsible deeds. One of the marks of moral dignity is the demonstrated capacity to control one's sexual urges."<sup>7</sup> For example, Jewish thought has refused to blur the distinction between (the apparently normal and universal human) feelings of lust and the transformation of lust into specific sexual activity that might be considered immoral. Sexual fantasies, while perhaps not ideal, are not, in and of themselves, considered sinful unless they are acted upon.

Because our tradition is fundamentally oriented toward proper behavior, Judaism has historically deemed it appropriate and even necessary to evaluate human actions. Judaism is not a value-free system of thought. Thus, sexual behaviors, along with all others, have been subject to judgment.

Yet, Judaism does not treat sinful behaviors, along with their various punishments, as if they were all equal. It seems clear that the various punishments detailed in the Torah for unacceptable sexual behaviors were in response to a perception of varying degrees of sinfulness. For example, certain behaviors mentioned in the Torah (adultery, incest, homosexuality, and bestiality) fall into the category later known as *gillui arayot*.<sup>8</sup> These were capital crimes punishable by death<sup>9</sup> or *karet*, being cut off from the people, a social punishment tantamount to death. In both biblical and rabbinic times, however, other violations of sexual propriety were punishable in lesser ways. For example, a man who raped an unmarried woman paid a fine of fifty shekels to the woman's father as her "bride price" and then she became his wife.<sup>10</sup> Some violations of the *mitzvot* in the area of sexuality were considered prohibited behaviors, but, nonetheless, punishable by lesser means. In the Mishnah, for example, several instances of sexual intercourse that seem incestuous in terms of Torah law (e.g., intercourse with one's sister) were punishable by flogging,<sup>11</sup> whereas certain other types of forbidden intercourse were punishable only by a rebuke. In the case of a *pilegish*, a concubine who had dedicated herself to a particular man with whom she cohabited (in rabbinic terms, without benefit of *kiddushin* or *ketubah*), it is unclear whether a sexual relationship between the two was prohibited or permitted.<sup>12</sup> In either event, intercourse between a man and his *pilegish* was not punished as severely as other extramarital situations.

Another example is that of a (woman) prostitute. Since biblical times, the prostitute was considered a devalued but accepted member of Jewish society. Maimonides said, "Even though it is permitted, one should not engage in sex with a (Jewish) prostitute, because she is likely to ignore the laws of *miqvah* and, therefore, spread ritual impurity."<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Jacob Emden wrote, "If you have sexual relations with a prostitute, you should recite a legal formula that stipulates that the act of intercourse was *bi-ah lo b'kavvanah*, without the intention of it serving as a form of betrothal or marriage and therefore prevent her next relationship being adulterous."<sup>14</sup>

Even with regard to the sanctity of marriage, Judaism has never embraced a simplistic or absolutist moral tradition. Sexuality outside marriage, or not for the purpose of marriage, is acknowledged and dealt with as a deviation from ideal behavior, but not necessarily as a sinful sexual transgression warranting extreme punishment.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Jewish tradition provides rules for extramarital sex. For example, the Torah forbids a (married) man a sexual relationship with a married woman (*eshet ish*),<sup>16</sup> but defines lesser punishments for a relationship with an unmarried woman.

Thus it seems clear that Judaism has historically evaluated sexual behaviors and their punishments on a spectrum that varies from the highest ideal of heterosexual intercourse in the context of a loving marriage, children, and family, to offenses so sinful that they are punishable by death.

In our own day, in Reform Jewish thinking, we often find ourselves struggling to find an appropriate middle ground between the religious and ethical categories of traditional *halakhah*, on the one hand, and the challenge of secular society's moral relativism, on the other. The CCAR Ad Hoc Committee on Human Sexuality, basing itself on the concepts of *Am Brit* and *Da'at*,<sup>17</sup> tried to straddle a position between the received Jewish tradition, with its defined categories of sexual behavior, and the ever-changing demands of contemporary American cultural values. In many ways, Reform Judaism seems to follow Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's famous principle of giving the Jewish tradition a vote but not a veto. Many American Reform Jews seem to give contemporary mores even more than one vote.

One way to mediate this tension is to abandon the assumption that sexual behavior can be judged as simply "right" or "wrong," "moral" or "sinful," always either "good" or "evil." Rather, it may be preferable to evaluate human sexual behavior on a "hierarchical scale" employing a taxonomy<sup>18</sup> of sexual behaviors.<sup>19</sup> It is possible to justify the suggestion of a taxonomy based upon the two arguments already outlined in this paper: the historic Jewish understanding that there are varying degrees of sinfulness attached to sexual activity, and Reform Judaism's struggle to try to find an appropriate balance between the halakhic tradition and modernity. The above review of Judaism's spectrum of consequences and/or punishments for various sexual offenses gives grounding to a taxonomic approach as being organically related to the historic Jewish tradition.<sup>20</sup> Without attempting to detail formally a taxonomy of sexual behaviors, the tradition, in effect, created one. And at its very best, Reform Judaism takes seriously the Jewish tradition, honestly evaluates it in relationship to the needs of contemporary society, and then makes its own unique contribution, adding to and extending the tradition in creative and relevant new directions. This taxonomy is offered in that spirit and, therefore, as *shalshet ha-qabbalah*, "a link in the chain of tradition."

A suggestion for a working model of a taxonomy for Reform Jews to evaluate sexual relationships and behaviors<sup>21</sup> follows. Sexual behaviors could be evaluated as falling into one of six categories:

**Qadosh** ("holy"): a relationship/behavior that is both ritually sanctified and in consonance with the Reform Jewish sexual values as articulated by the CCAR Ad Hoc Committee on Human Sexuality. Examples: heterosexual and homosexual couples who have undergone a marriage or commitment ceremony and who also conduct their sex lives in accordance with these Reform Jewish sexual values.

**Musar** ("ethical"): a relationship/behavior that is in consonance with Reform Jewish sexual values or that exhibits commitment to specific aspects of those values but that has not been ritually sanctified. Examples: couples who live together without undergoing marriage or commitment ceremonies and who conduct their sex lives in ways that exemplify the ideals put forth in the Reform Jewish Sexual Values, the practice of safe sex, masturbation by people infected with HIV.<sup>22</sup>

**Mutar** ("tolerable")<sup>23</sup> a relationship/behavior that does not violate Reform Jewish sexual values and that includes emotional involvement but not yet a permanent commitment and/or behavior that may be preferable to other sexual outlets. Examples: masturbation, mutually consensual sex within a monogamous and developing relationship.

**Lo Kasher** ("not proper")<sup>24</sup> a behavior/relationship that does not exhibit Reform Jewish sexual values but that is performed between two consenting adults.<sup>25</sup> Examples:

consensual sex between people who are not in the process of developing a committed relationship, sexually suggestive dress that does not fulfill the value of *tz'niyut* ("modesty").

*Patur* ("sinful") or *assur* ("prohibited"): a behavior/relationship that violates or contradicts the Reform Jewish sexual values. Examples: adultery, promiscuity.

*To'evah* ("abhorrent"): a behavior/relationship that is *Patur* or *assur* and also abusive, violent, or coercive, or violates certain historic Jewish and human societal norms.<sup>26</sup> Examples: rape, sexual abuse, pedophilia, incest, bestiality, exploitation.<sup>27</sup>

Admittedly this (or any) attempt to formulate such a taxonomy is fraught with potential controversy.<sup>28</sup> Any effort to fit sexual behaviors into a taxonomy involves an attempt to resolve the tension between individual perceptions of universal values and their application in specific situations with their many variables and "gray areas." Therefore, people of good will inevitably disagree on how to evaluate specific sexual behaviors. Others may argue that any attempt to judge (sexual) behaviors is inappropriate because the very act of making judgment itself is problematic.

In addition, it may be impossible to define categories that allow us to evaluate all possible sexual behaviors to the satisfaction of each person's sense of sexual propriety. There may be other categories or nuances of definition that would allow us to better judge specific sexual activities. In this vein, it is worth considering the titling of the fifth category: *Patur* ("sinful") or *assur* ("prohibited"). In our day and age, and especially in view of the public nature of sexual discussion, it may be important to emphasize the theological value term *Patur* ("sin") in relationship to sexual values and specific sexual behaviors. On the other hand, *assur* is an historic Hebrew term used in halakhic discourse. Yet, "since a taxonomy of sin is not the point of this proposal, and *assur* is a category consistent with *mutar*,"<sup>29</sup> the choice is difficult.

In addition, during the development of this taxonomy, consideration was given to defining a seventh category that would translate as "neutral" as distinct from "tolerable." The former word carries no value judgment, while the latter does contain within it the implication, however slight, of toleration and/or acceptance. Perhaps there are sexual behaviors that some people would place in such a category, for example, masturbation. Such a category could fall between *mutar* ("tolerable") and *lo kasher* ("not proper").

Perhaps the Hebrew term *patur* would fit. However, there seems to be no historic Jewish way of thinking about sexual behavior that opens up such a possibility. In addition, if it is true, as noted above, that "sexual behavior is always imbued with significance, whether morally, psychologically or both," then, perhaps, such a category would not fit into any taxonomy for evaluating sexual behaviors. We should also note that *patur* "sometimes also understood as 'free', is certainly a value-laden concept in our world, because modern Western civilization values personal autonomy and freedom so much. The moment we give designation to such a category, ethically we may unwittingly be providing support for those who would argue in favor of seeing such a category as actually preferable, and the most fitting with modernity."<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, this suggested taxonomy for Reform Jews to evaluate sexual behaviors may contain a number of strengths that will merit its consideration. These include (1) the advantage of any taxonomy, that is, that behaviors are understood as falling into a range of possible evaluations; (2) the use of traditional Hebrew words and value terms that will be immediately identifiable to Jews conversant in traditional halakhic categories and that help to root the taxonomy in historic Jewish values; (3) the distinctions between "holy" and "ethical" and also between "forbidden" and "abhorrent," which allow for subtle gradations of evaluation on either

end of the taxonomy; (4) the possibility that such a taxonomy might be used as an educational tool for sexual decision-making, and not just for the purpose of abstract evaluation or judgment.

In addition, the use of a taxonomic approach to the evaluation of human sexual activity may afford Reform Judaism the opportunity to respond in a relevant, appropriate, and responsible manner to the contemporary realities of how many Jews, and especially the younger generation, actually live out their sexual lives. A large number of people today have independently reached the conclusion that black and white approaches to issues such as pre- and extramarital sex and homosexuality are too simplistic.

Making moral judgments concerning human sexual behavior is, at its best, problematic and difficult. This difficulty mirrors the intensity and complexity of human sexuality itself as well as the myriad ways in which individual sexual identity and desire, cultural mores, religious values, and opportunities for sexual activity intersect. In the world of traditional religious thought, sexual behavior is usually understood to be a very clear, all-or-nothing, right-or-wrong judgment. Ever since biblical times, however, Judaism has acknowledged, albeit tacitly and without the growing understanding of human behavior we have today, the complicated nature of human sexuality. Jewish attitudes toward human sexual expression have attempted to uphold fundamental values while simultaneously acknowledging the reality of human weakness and failure, as well as the possibility of *teshuvah*. Our tradition has never understood sexuality as a simple or easy set of expectations to follow or behaviors to judge. Thus, a taxonomy by which Reform Jews might evaluate and decide about the morality of sexual activity seems fitting. Our biblical and rabbinic predecessors bequeathed to us the quest for *qedushah* in all our actions. *Qedushah* is the highest ideal for sexual behavior offered in this taxonomy. The quest for holiness continues to be a most worthy standard by which we may judge all our actions.

#### End Notes

1. Gen 1:28.
2. S. Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972) p. 250.
3. *Hilkhoh Issurei Biyah* 22:18.
4. Gen 1:31.
5. Genesis Rabbah 9:7.
6. There are, of course, exceptions. Exodus 20:14 seemingly prohibits feelings of jealousy and Leviticus 19:17 urges us to deal with anger. The overwhelming majority of *mitzvot*, however, command us to perform specific behaviors regardless of our attitude toward them. They are not commandments to change our emotions.
7. Rabbi Samuel Karff in a January 1999 letter to the author.
8. Lev 18, 20.
9. Those offenses punishable by stoning include incest with a mother, stepmother, or daughter-in-law; those punishable by burning include incest with a stepdaughter, stepgranddaughter, mother-in-law, daughter, or granddaughter.
10. Deut 22:28-29.

11. Makkot 3:1.
12. Lev 19:20.
13. *Sefer Tshuvot* #284.
14. *Responsum* #15.
15. Lev 20:21.
16. Lev 20:10.
17. See Introduction to the CCAR Ad Hoc Committee's Sexual Values statement.
18. In his book *Choosing a Sex Ethic* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), Rabbi Eugene Borowitz actually proposed a taxonomy without calling it by that term. The hierarchy that his argument takes up includes (from "lowest" to "highest") "Healthy Orgasm," "Mutual Consent," "Love," and "Marriage." Although they remain very different, there are certain similarities and parallels to this proposal.
19. I am indebted to Joel Grishaver for the inspiration of this idea. He wrote about it in an article on teenage sexuality in the fall 1993 edition of *Jewish Spectator*, where he credits Rabbi Bradley Shavit Arson for the concept.
20. In chapter 1 of *Mishnah Kelim*, the rabbis clearly outline a hierarchical approach to describe a range of levels of uncleanness and holiness.
21. Some may object to the collapsing of relationships and behaviors together in this argument. This criticism has some validity. It is continued here only for the sake of simplicity.
22. Early in the deliberations of the CCAR Ad Hoc Committee on Human Sexuality, Rabbi Joseph Edelheit offered the insightful suggestion that we might consider masturbation by an HIV+ person as a moral act, in light of the need for especially safe sexual behavior in such a situation.
23. This English rendering of the Hebrew word *mutar* was the subject of lengthy conversation within the Ad Hoc Committee. Other possible translations suggested included: permissible, acceptable, and allowable. The decision to use "tolerable" indicates the committee's desire to indicate its basic disapproval of sexual behavior in this category.
24. Others have suggested using the Yiddish term *pahst nisht* ("unbecoming") for this category.
25. Other ways to phrase this might include: behavior that is unbecoming or unbefitting (a Jew), undignified or potentially degrading. In sociological terms, this would be behavior that is not in keeping with accepted standards of what is right or proper in a society. Some suggest that age and maturity play a crucial role here.
26. Taboo and stigma are especially powerful societal mechanisms for controlling sexual behavior.



27. The categories of *Patur/assur* and *to'evah* are offered against the backdrop of Judaism's insistence on the availability of teshuvah, repentance or atonement, the enduring possibility of human change and growth for the better.

28. The examples given here are not intended to be exhaustive. Many additional sexual activities/behaviors could be evaluated using such a taxonomy. Among others, these may include: abstinence, contraception, procreation, oral sex, public displays of affection, pornography, masochism, sadism, bisexuality, and transvestism.

29. From comments on this paper offered by Rabbi Laurence Elis Milder.

30. Milder, op. cit.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In the course of composing this thesis, the area of sexual ethics quickly became an issue at the forefront of the agenda of the Reform movement. The President of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, delivered a stirring speech at the URJ Biennial in Houston on teen sexuality<sup>51</sup>. He described both the state of sexual activity for teenagers and announced the creation of a new curriculum on sex ethics for Reform adolescents named "Sacred Choices"<sup>52</sup>. These commitments of the movement developed simultaneously to this thesis and confirmed the author's feeling of urgency in teaching and action on these issues.

The goal of this thesis is to examine the Jewish sex ethic and to educate teenagers about it to enable them to make their own ethical decisions about sex. Although some resources already exist, alone they are not adequate. A Modern Reform sex ethic for teenagers can be developed from the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing resources and by building a reproducible model. First and foremost, an exploration of sex ethics needs to teach selections from the vast number and breadth of Jewish texts. This will include texts praising God for the creation of human sexuality and texts with which a teenager might struggle, disagree, or deeply oppose based on their modern perspective. Utilizing texts in a sex ethic affirms that Reform Judaism cannot be understood without reference to the tradition from which it emerged

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<sup>51</sup> (Appendix D)

<sup>52</sup> (Appendix E)

and which continues to serve it as a source of inspiration, definition, and structure<sup>53</sup>.

Text can further be included for the purposes of narrative ethical research. That is to say that values deduced from the classical texts can be applied in order to analyze modern ethical dilemmas of the teenager. A modern voice must be in dialogue with the voices of the past in order for the modern voice to be authentic. The connection with the past is what makes a sex ethic uniquely Jewish and different than what a teenager can learn in public school or from biology textbooks.

A sex ethic for teenagers should be written in language appropriate for a young person; the sexually interested teenager today is younger than the teen of recent decades. Teenagers inquire about their sexuality and act upon their curiosity at younger ages than ever before. Thus a great challenge is that a teacher or a resource guide must speak about this sophisticated topic to a less mature audience. This challenge may also be controversial as people debate the appropriate age to teach about sexuality to teenagers. Acknowledging this, the Reform response cannot use age as an excuse to avoid teaching about sex to younger teenagers. We must confront the changing sexual mores and do so by carefully teaching what is most appropriate to even our youngest teenagers.

It is important for a Reform ethic to be candid about the viewpoints that will be expressed in the ethic so that readers will recognize the particular perspective from which it is written. The Reform movement is liberal and expresses the encounter between an ancient tradition and a modern world. One of the

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<sup>53</sup> (Washofsky, xxi)

strengths of Reform Judaism is the ability to renew and reform interpretations and understandings of even the most ancient of issues. However, the modern Reform voice, in general, is observably left. This means that the values an ethic would teach may be more in line with progressive values rather than traditional or conservative values. It is important for the writer to reveal this perspective so that the reader is aware of the writer's intention.

Paired with openness about the specifically Reform viewpoint, it would be significant if we could find ways to reclaim traditional Jewish concepts within a liberal context. Thus the platform would be rooted in Reform ideas that continuously renew the old. One example of this within the thesis is the value of *Tz'niyut*, modesty. While this language is usually reserved for traditional Jews, it is important for Reform Jews to consider how *Tz'niyut* could apply to their own values. *Tz'niyut* can evolve from the idea that a woman should protect herself from the looks of other men into the value of her own self-confidence unaffected by the judgment of women or men.

As Reform Jews, we are compelled to teach the most current Reform perspectives, and to take an approach to Judaism that reflects a modern outlook on the world<sup>54</sup>. Even within the last five years the movement has made momentous advances in sexual understanding, including issues like homosexuality. This is a milestone and the starting point for great changes within Judaism and the larger society. While this was considered progressive and potentially too quick of a change for the outside world, there are other issues on sexuality that must quickly be brought to the forefront of debate. For example,

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<sup>54</sup> (Washofsky, *ibid*)

it is our responsibility as educators to recognize that the inclusion of the health aspects of sexuality is imperative as people who have the potential to save lives. Teaching physical health and alternatives to sex encourages teenagers to make ethical choices based on complete information. And in so doing we model ethical behavior for our students through honesty or the value of *Emet*.

The ethic should further be constructed in a way that it can adjust to modern situations, thereby embodying the concept articulated in the Pittsburgh Principles, the 1999 Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism<sup>55</sup>, of ongoing revelation. "We cherish the truths revealed in Torah, God's ongoing revelation to our people and the record of our people's ongoing relationship with God<sup>56</sup>." In this example, the construction of a sex ethic through the use of values exemplifies the idea of ongoing revelation because the ethic adapts to multiple situations and it carries through time. This would model the Reform concept that there should be a progressive response for changing times. This includes the great responsibility of bearing criticism over changes that may seem to come too quickly, but also includes the reward of thinking forward.

One unexpected outcome of the thesis was the repetitive idea of the link between mind, body, and soul. The chapter that developed to be the most important in the author's mind was "Our Bodies, Our Souls, Ourselves". This connection speaks to the rationale for a Jewish sex ethic. Since our bodies and our souls are closely entwined, choices that affect one impact the other and vice

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<sup>55</sup> Adopted at the 1999 Pittsburgh Convention Central Conference of American Rabbis May 1999 - Sivan 5759

<sup>56</sup> (ibid)

versa. The powerful conclusion is that a teenager who makes healthy sexual choices recognizes that sexual decisions affect the mind, body, and soul.

In conclusion, a modern Jewish teenage sex ethic should be a model that can be practiced and reapplied. The model will be functional so that a teenager in any type of situation can summon it and work through a sexual question utilizing values to inform the decision. A model that can be applied in different ways can teach through its various applications. The process of decision-making must be practiced in order for a teenager to become fluent in the method to then inspire a course of action. A teacher helps assure that the practice and application breed comfort with the results. With an updated ethical model, the modern teenager can grow into a young adult who is informed and inspired by the Jewish voice in the conversation of sexuality.

## Appendix D: Rabbi Yoffie's Sermon

### Excerpts From the Sermon by Rabbi Eric Yoffie at the Houston Biennial

Union for Reform Judaism  
68th General Assembly  
November 19, 2005 - Houston, TX

In our Torah portion for this week, God sends messengers to Abraham and Sarah to inform them that Sarah will have a child. Sarah, who is old, laughs in disbelief, but God assures her that it is true. The messengers depart. We expect the scene to end at this point, but it does not. God then says, to no one in particular, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" God proceeds to mention the possibility that Sodom and Gomorrah will be destroyed.

Hearing this, Abraham launches into a daring criticism of God's plan. "Will You sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" he asks. But the fate of these cities is not affected by Abraham's challenge because, as God surely knows, there are no righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah. So, why does God involve Abraham at all?

Because, the Rabbis tell us, God sees this as a test. Will Abraham respond to the possibility that innocent people will suffer? God had to be certain that the first Jew would not turn his back on injustice in the world.

What this passage is about, then, is Judaism's greatest gift to Western religious thought: the idea of the defiant man of faith. From the very beginning of recorded history, a Jew is a believer of unshakable faith who is horrified by worldly misery and refuses to accept tragedy and suffering.

It is fitting that this portion should be read in Houston because it is here in recent months that these values have been implemented and affirmed. When the convulsive, unpredictable powers of nature unleashed chaos and death on New Orleans, it was to Houston that some 3,000 members of the Jewish community fled. And the Jews of this city responded with the profound faith and defiant activism that our Torah mandates. They reached out to their fellow Jews, offering them every manner of refuge and support. And they joined in helping the tens of thousands of other Americans who came here in search of comfort and healing.

And not only New Orleans. Many other areas were impacted as well, including our congregations in Lake Charles, Beaumont, and Mobile. And not only Houston offered comfort to the afflicted. Our synagogues in Baton Rouge and Jackson were extraordinary in this regard, as they were in Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio; and in Memphis and Alexandria, Louisiana.

Indeed, every single congregation in our Movement played a role, sheltering the displaced and providing supplies, money and volunteers.

And all of this means that our Biennial Assembly must assume a greater burden this year than in years past. When we arrive here as delegates, we each have our *pekel* of *tsores*—our unique package of concerns. But we have among us this year those who have lost livelihoods and homes, and delegations from our devastated New Orleans congregations. They seek consolation, and we must hear their call. They seek practical help, and we must provide it. As you know, we have created a second disaster fund solely for the purpose of nurturing these congregations as they return to life and sacred work in their shattered city. It is for such purposes that our Movement exists. Let us all do our share.

We were not alone, of course, in the ranks of the first responders. From the very beginning, America's religious community was on the front lines, functioning as a beacon of hope and doing so with a remarkable degree of common purpose. One example: Two elderly Catholic ladies drove a van to our Jacobs' Ladder warehouse in Utica, Mississippi, to pick up supplies donated by our congregations for storm victims. One of the women remarked to one of our staff members: "This is the most ecumenical project I have ever seen. Here we are, a group of Catholics, coming to you, the Jews, for these supplies, which we are dropping off at a Southern Baptist church, which uses Methodist volunteers to assist the needy."

Contrast this to the government response at all levels. This is a story that has been told many times and that I need not repeat.

But it is important that we draw the proper conclusions.

Incredibly, federal officials are using this tragedy to promote so-called faith-based initiatives. The failures of government and the successes of religion are now seen as a reason why churches and synagogues should be state-funded to do what the government has been unable or unwilling to do.

But this is absurd for many reasons. First, we religious people do what we do because it is God's work and it is right. People of faith do not need government handouts to do what God expects of us. The last thing we want is politicians dangling million-dollar grants in front of us with a promise of more if only we will support them. Some may think that religious leaders will somehow be immune to the corrupting influence of power and money, but believe me, we will not.

Second, religious programs can only supplement government programs; they can never replace them. The damage caused by Katrina and Rita was so devastating that years will pass before some areas return to a semblance of normality. In these situations, religious acts of charity, no matter how laudable, can never be enough.

What is required in these cases is a competent, well-financed, and well-prepared government response. So let's be clear: The lesson of Katrina is that religious institutions play a big role in American life, but social service is the job of government and cannot be farmed out.

Now let us return to our portion and examine a second theme. Why is Abraham chosen to be the father of the Jewish people? In this week's *sedra* we read: "For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Eternal...."

God singles out Abraham to be a parent and to pass along to his children the ways of God. This and this alone explains our special status as a chosen people. All of Jewish life revolves around this magnificent obsession. Not everyone can be parents of children, but everyone can support our efforts to teach them diligently.

How then are we doing when it comes to teaching our children?

Our record is mixed.

On the one hand, our congregants take parenting seriously. They know that we have to turn off the television once in a while and share with our children the inherited wisdom of our people.

On the other hand, our parents are overworked and overwhelmed. And because the world they live in is so totally different from the world in which they grew up, they sometimes lose confidence



in themselves. They become reluctant to tell their children too much because they fear that they will steer them in the wrong direction.

The subject of sexuality is a prime example. Our kids desperately need our direction in this area, but too often we do not provide it. Teenagers experimenting with sex is hardly new, of course. And it need not be a source of concern. Most of us who went through the sexual revolution of the '60s grew up to be perfectly respectable citizens.

But what is happening now is radically different.

Today we have the Internet—which means that sexual material is more available to our kids than ever before. Popular culture, meanwhile, continues on its downward spiral, exposing us to ever more sexually explicit images. And in the midst of all this, our kids reach puberty a full two years earlier than they did a century ago.

And what is the result? A growing number of middle school students are sexually active, and oral sex is both prevalent and widely accepted. Most striking of all is a social ethic known as "hooking up" that severs sex from any pretense of a relationship. "Hooking up" can refer to different kinds of physical contact, but it always means a casual, no-strings-attached sexual encounter. It means getting physical without getting emotional. It means never having a healthy relationship and not knowing what's involved in developing one.

In short, we are now witnessing changes that go far beyond sexual experimentation of the past.

Are our kids in our synagogues impacted by these developments? Of course. We see them struggling with these issues in our camps and youth groups, and on our Israel trips.

Our parents are concerned, but many, I suspect, don't have a clue how to be helpful. According to study after study, the communications gap is immense. Kids say that their parents don't talk to them about sex, while the parents say that they do, regularly. And parents who are absolutely certain that their kids are not having sex are wrong about half the time.

But it is not only our parents who are failing. Our youth groups and camps do a pretty good job of policing our kids' behavior, but not a good job at all of teaching the values of our Jewish tradition. And our congregations, with some notable exceptions, are doing no better.

The problem for parents may simply be that these are tough, complicated issues and that they just aren't sure what to say. The problem for our synagogues may be that we are not very good at saying "no" in Reform Judaism. We are the most creative and forward-looking movement in Jewish life, but in the realm of personal behavior, we are reluctant to ever use the word "forbidden." Yet in dealing with kids engaged in destructive behavior, the concept of autonomy leaves us unable to set limits and make sound judgments.

That our kids need our guidance is indisputable, and they are puzzled by our failure to offer it. The following comes from a teenage girl, a member of one of our congregations: "I have the opinion that [my Judaism] should have a lot to say about my relationship with a guy. It's not just whether or not to have sex. What about honesty? What about communication? What about touching? What about respecting and being respected? No one helps you with this. The Torah has all these confusing teachings. Which parts really apply to life today?"

The issue here is not the cold and clinical biological facts, which are generally available. The issue is the ethics of relationship and sexuality, which are not. Our kids want to know how sex

relates to love and a caring relationship; how to deal with fears and temptations; what is permissible and what is not.

The simple truth is this: Our kids are frustrated by the combined failure of their parents and their synagogues to offer them practical help here. More often than not, hookups leave them depressed, confused, and guilty. But very few of them see the synagogue as a place to go for support, or their Judaism as a source of comfort and direction. And they wonder why. Since we have told them again and again that Judaism is an all-embracing way of life, they expect that their tradition will have something to say about matters of such importance.

And they are right. Judaism does have something to say to them.

It tells them that they are created in the image of God, and each and every one of them is unique, of infinite worth, and entitled to respect.

It tells them that the guiding principle of sexuality in the Jewish tradition is *K'doshim tih'yu*—"You shall be holy," which means that sexuality is linked to blessing, commandment, and God.

It tells them that in our tradition, both partners in a sexual relationship must be sensitive to the sexual needs of the other. In Judaism, a woman never exists to be a subordinate vessel to the man.

And it tells them that it is impossible to make love only with your body without dragging in your heart and soul. Judaism teaches that we cannot divide human beings into component parts. Since we are creatures of God and holiness is attained through loving relationships, sex for its own sake leads to exploitation and hurt.

To convey these lessons, the Union has created a six-session course for Bar and bat mitzvah-age students in our religious schools. A second course for incoming high school students will be introduced at the NFTY Convention in February 2007. Both courses draw on the experience of counselors, educators, and youth leaders from our schools and camps, as well as experts in the field of adolescence.

But let us be clear. Our kids will not be satisfied with generalities or platitudes. We can help them only if we speak plainly and apply the insights of our tradition to the real issues that they confront. That is what these courses do.

For example, we do not tell our kids that sex before marriage is forbidden. Since many of them will not marry for fifteen years after the onset of puberty, it is unreasonable to suggest that this traditional standard should be maintained for young people who are adults. Very few of our parents are telling their twenty-five-year-old unmarried children to refrain from having sex. Still, we stress that the Jewish ethical principles that apply inside marriage apply outside of marriage as well.

On the other hand, we say in the clearest possible way that high school students should not be having sexual relations. Our teens are not adults. They are beset by tension with parents, pressure from friends, a desire for approval, and an uncertain sense of self. This means that students in high school are not yet ready for the loving, mutual relationships that make sex an experience of holiness.

We are not naive. We do not promote abstinence from all forms of physical contact. We talk about the kinds of sexual expression that teens who care about each other might consider. But we do take on the issues of oral sex and hooking up. We tell both boys and girls that sex is not

about controlling or servicing the other. And we tell girls in particular that their worth is not defined by what they do for boys. For nearly half a century, the Reform Movement has dedicated itself to promoting the equality of our women and all women. But this is worth nothing if Jewish girls define their worth by how they please boys. A positive approach to sexuality must not rely on casual sexual encounters that leave girls feeling used and degraded and boys ending up numb to feeling.

We also talk to parents. We remind them that kids need parents who know how to listen and who are able to set firm limits that, most of the time, their kids respond to with relief.

There is one other thing that we tell parents: Gay and lesbian children are the children of God just as heterosexual children are, and parents need to be prepared for the possibility that their child is gay. And if that is so, they need to create a home that will allow this child to grow into adulthood more easily than he could without their help. It goes without saying that teens who are gay and lesbian have the duty to live by exactly the same Jewish values as do heterosexuals.

And finally, what do we need from our congregations?

We need them to think about the events they are hosting. No one wants another long, tired discussion about over-the-top bar mitzvah parties, but there's no denying that some of these parties are sexualized, very adult affairs that transmit all the wrong values to thirteen-year-old kids. We may have no control over what happens elsewhere, but we should pay attention to what goes on within our own walls.

And let's start by teaching these classes. Our synagogues, of course, can adapt them to reflect their own approach. But let's let our kids know that they can talk to us about the toughest issues that they face in their lives. Let's tell them that we are not just going to discuss "options," but that Torah has some real answers to offer. Let's let them know that in a media-driven world that too often demeans women and makes a mockery of gentleness, Judaism offers a message of holiness and hope.

My friends, who can deny that we live in difficult times? This is a time when people work harder than ever before and spend far more time alone. Ours is a materialistic, grab-what-you-can culture.

What is the synagogue's task in these times?

To help heal the pain of our deeply fissured society.

To battle messianic escapism and deadly despair, and to offer in their place the wisdom of Torah.

To give our young people love, clear direction, and the guidance of our ancestors. And to show them that we are ready to sacrifice for our Jewish ideals.

To create a synagogue community where rich and poor, old and young, meet in equal dignity; and to make it a place of both believing and belonging—a place that welcomes all, that embraces all, and that softens the rough edges of our abrasive world.

There is nothing easy about this task, but it is not beyond our reach.

For almost 2,000 years, Jews have read these words of Isaiah on the Sabbath of Consolation:

"Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;

but those who hope in the Eternal God will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint."

If, as the prophet has asked, we maintain our hope in the Eternal, we, too, will renew our strength. We, too, will soar on wings like eagles.

And as we do, we will be agents of hope to an eager community.

And we will move this world one step closer to redemption.

*Shabbat shalom.*

## Appendix E: Sacred Choices, 2006 URJ Curriculum

The program consists of three components:

- **Middle School Module** A set of curricular materials for use in congregations and camps, consisting of a facilitator's guide, 6 lessons for adolescents in grades 6–8 and 2 lessons for parents. Available June 2006.
- A Union statement on **guidelines for addressing sexual behavior** at Union-sponsored events (camps, NFTY, Israel) that may be adopted by congregations as well. The guidelines will include corresponding **training materials** that are designed to support youth professionals in the implementation of these guidelines.
- **High School Module** A set of curricular materials for use in congregations and camps, consisting of a facilitator's guide, 4 to 6 lessons for adolescents in grades 9–12 and 1 to 2 lessons for parents.
- Every congregation, regardless of its size, resources, staffing pattern or geographic location, can utilize the complete curricular materials and resources developed by the Union for Reform Judaism. Each of the flexible modules can be adapted to a congregation's unique needs; the incorporated facilitator's guides will help any interested congregant or staff member lead participants through the easily accessible workshops.

*Sacred Choices* is very clear on the Reform Movement's position regarding adolescent sexuality, yet at the same time it is sensitive to the developmental stages of the audience.

**This means several things:**

- The materials will communicate the message that teens should not be having sexual intercourse while they are in middle school or high school.
- Teens and parents both need to talk openly about issues regarding sexuality, such as "hooking up," oral sex and all of the other challenges teens face in the real world, and they need to do so within a Jewish context. These materials provide the tools and skills that will enable these conversations to take place.
- The issue of relationships and Jewish values is central to the learning.
- The materials recognize that our teens come from different family structures and have emerging sexual identities of their own. Scenarios and situations represent both heterosexual and homosexual relationships as valid and normal.

### **Sacred Choices: Adolescent Relationships and Sexual Ethics**

- **Is applicable in a variety of settings** While the Union recognizes that the materials will be primarily used in the congregational school setting, they have been developed so that they can be integrated into other contexts as well, that is, each lesson can be used as a stand-alone program, infused into an existing curriculum, implemented within the youth group setting or adapted for a retreat.
- **Is easy for your congregation to use** It can be taken "off the shelf" and implemented by an interested party who works well with the teens.
- **Is developmentally appropriate** It speaks to adolescents "where they are" within their own growth process and within the family system and recognizes that some teens may have already given significant thought to their own sexuality or may already be sexually active, while others may "just not be there yet."
- **Speaks to a wide audience** It recognizes that families may have different levels of engagement in the congregation and a variety of Judaic backgrounds, family structures and patterns of addressing issues of sex and sexuality with their children.
- **Is different from what families can get elsewhere** It speaks to the issues with a

- uniquely Reform Jewish perspective, which is informed by our tradition.
- **Is grounded in experiential education** It is designed to maintain the interest of the participants, to get them actively involved in the learning and to create a unique way to address the subject matter.

**Curriculum Overview: Middle School Module**  
For Middle School Students and Their Parents  
Available June 2006

**Teen Session # 1 Who Am I? Self-Awareness and Self-Worth**

This session will help adolescents come to appreciate themselves for who they are and for what makes each of them unique and special. They will understand that human sexuality is an aspect of their total personality.

**Teen Session #2 Everyone's Doing It: Addressing Peer Pressure**

This session will help adolescents identify the types of peer pressures they may encounter from both their same-gender peers as well as peers of the opposite sex, especially when it comes to relationships and being sexual. It will challenge adolescents to take responsibility for their own behavior.

**Teen Session #3 Take Action: Communication Skills and Assertiveness**

This session will equip adolescents with some of the skills they need to communicate with their peers and their parents. They will explore such issues as how to be a good friend; how to end a relationship without anger; how to help a friend; and how to avoid unwanted sexual experiences.

**Teen Session #4 The Benefits of Friends or Friends with Benefits?**

Adolescence is a time for developing deeper friendships and relationships with one's peers. This session will explore the dynamics of those friendships and relationships, allowing participants the opportunity to consider the characteristics of the various relationships they have; how relationships differ; how to build healthy relationships; and how to set appropriate boundaries in their relationships.

**Teen Session #5 The Jewish Virtues Game**

There are many Jewish midot (virtues) that teach us how to live a life of holiness. We have chosen four that are especially important for early adolescents to know and apply in their own lives: Emet (Truthfulness), Simchah (Intimacy), Makir et M'komo (Knowing Your Place) and Miyut Ta-anug (Minimizing Pleasure). Through exploration of these virtues, the learners will be able to find guidance to the following questions: What do I do when I want to be sexual but know I shouldn't? Why is everyone concerned about my doing this stuff when it feels so good? Why do I feel bad about doing something that feels good? What do I do if I regret having done something? How do I hear my own voice?

**Teen Session #6 Considering Choices: Food for Thought**

This session will allow the learners to discuss and clarify their own values regarding sexuality and being sexual. They will look at the potentially dangerous consequences of casual sexual relationships as well as the need for tolerance of others who have different values.

**Parent Session #1 Early Adolescents: Becoming Who They Will Be**

This session will educate parents about the nature of early adolescent relationships; what we know about adolescent sexual behavior in middle school years today; and faith development compared with sexual development.

**Parent Session #2 Guiding Our Teenage Children through a World of Choice**

This session will offer parents the opportunity to clarify their own sexual values as well as explore and practice how to be a supportive parent to an adolescent with regard to such areas as setting limits, appropriate supervision and granting permission.

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