

Getting to Know College. . . In the Biblical Sense

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR ORDINATION

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION

SPRING 2015

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There are so many different ways to look at the Torah and I found a niche that I felt wasn't being addressed in their interpretation of the Torah: college students. College is a time for growth, self-discovery, learning, and religious exploration. For many college students, the Torah is spelled with a capital T, far off somewhere looming over them, almost synonymous with God. The goal of this capstone is to present, in a non-academic framework, a way for college students to connect to the Torah and other Jewish texts by encouraging a continuation of the exploration of the text itself and the commentary that accompanies it.

The texts used were not originally for college students and neither were most of the interpretations cited. Instead, this project evolved by looking at the text in a modern day, college student's perspective. I remained as loyal as possible to the texts, to previous interpretations, and to the life of college students. I have been able to build upon the commentators' understandings of texts to make them more relevant to the demographic of college students.

The topics I highlight in the three chapters are a direct reflection of issues facing college students today. In "Disrespect, Embarrassing and Bullying," I focus on two chapters in Leviticus in order to encourage the college student to have the opportunity to make sense of what the Torah is saying in a different light. The chapter "Gossip" continues to examine the theme of respect, but delves into a specific type of action and the Jewish views of it from various texts and contexts. "Relationships and Sex" focuses on premarital sex, interdating, and interfaith marriages by providing facts and texts for college students to make their own informed decisions on these issues.

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Introduction

The Torah may be something we know a lot about or something we know nothing about. Regardless of which area on the spectrum each person falls, there is something in the Torah that we can relate to. . . as long as we look. Not just once, but many times. In Pirkei Avot, we read:

בן בגבג אומר, הפוך בה והפך בה, והגי בה דכולא בה, ובה תחזי, סיב ובלי בה; ומינה
לא תזוז, שאין לך מידה טובה יותר ממנה

“Ben (son of) Bag Bag said: Turn the Torah over and over for everything is in it. Look into it, grow old and worn over it, and never move away from it, for you will find no better portion than it.”¹

This guy knows what he is talking about. He hits home that we are to reinterpret the Torah for ourselves today. But whose interpretation is right? How do we know what the truth really is? How do we make sure that the Torah, both in its oral form and its written form, is relatable to us today? So much has changed in our world as evidenced by the fact that this is being typed up on a computer, while the internet is up in the background with peoples’ opinions on this matter.

There are many ways to interpret the Torah, specifically when using the PaRDeS method. This method includes four different ways of understanding the Biblical text. The idea is that each level will divulge a deeper meaning that will lead the interpreters to a more fulfilled comprehension of the text. The four levels are: *p’shat*, *remez*, *drash*, and *sod*. While each is distinct, there are many times in which the interpretation may

¹ Pirkei Avot 5:26

overlap. We know so much about this method because it has been in existence and extensive use for many, many years. Many commentators from the medieval time all the way to the present are interpreting *p'shat*, the literal understanding of Torah. Some examples of the medieval commentators are Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Rashbam. With *remez*, there are interpreters who find meaning in the tiny bits looking for those clues which will help them understand the Torah better. An example of this would be *Gematria*. *Drash* gives commentators the opportunity to use *p'shat* and *remez* to create teachings and applications in order for others to understand a specific section of the Torah. This approach may create a new meaning for those who learn from the *drash*. It may use *p'shat* in a new way by looking at the *p'shat* of related verses that do not come in consecutive order. *Sod* is the study of the secrets hidden in the Torah that only certain people know about. Those who choose to interpret the Torah this way, try to hide the deeper meaning, so that only certain people will have access to the secrets. Maimonides tried to do this with his *Guide for the Perplexed* and Kabbalists tried to do this all the time, as seen in *The Zohar*. These works serve as examples that intended to keep the "secrets;" however, those texts are more widely understood now.

There are so many different ways to look at the Torah and to explore it that the process of interpretation becomes overwhelming. In more recent years, this has been combatted by commentators and interpreters who focus their work on a certain subject. Their focus gives them a specific lens to work from. For example, there are interpretations for specific groups: women, men, teens, little children, LGBTQ community, etc. Then there are those commentaries that focus on a specific subject

through which to interpret the Torah: for example, leadership, medicine, ways to console people, sex in the texts, etc. These two kinds of interpretations, writing for specific communities or on specific topics, seem to be a more recent way of going about this process. Without this type of division, interpretations can become a commentary on top of a commentary on top of a commentary unless one can find a new group or angle to emphasize. It is not to say that these specific foci do not use other commentaries to back up their material, but the authors pick and choose which ones actually relate to the subject and then use only those. This is also what I am doing.

With all of this being said, I found a niche that I felt wasn't being addressed in their interpretation of the Torah: college students. College is a time for growth, self-discovery, learning, and religious exploration. For many college students, the Torah is spelled with a capital T, far off somewhere looming over them, almost synonymous with God. Something that is there and is supposed to matter, but is not readily tangible. As soon as someone says, "As the Torah said. . ." eyes glaze over. It doesn't feel relatable. Why should it even matter? No one in the Torah went to college. No one in the Torah had to turn in papers or do homework. These are all things I have heard from my students at Hillel at Miami University. For some, the Torah has an inherent meaning in their lives, whether they know what that meaning is or not. For many, the Torah is what you read from on holidays and at a B'nei Mitzvah and that's all they really know or pay attention to.

However, I think there is untapped potential for understanding Torah through the eyes of Jewish college students. Who cares? College students will, probably, most

likely, find something relatable at some point. Why now? What does college life have to do with Torah that it needs to be interpreted for a college student? Let's look at Talmud Bavli, Sefer Moed, Masechet Shabbat, 88b.

א"ר יוחנן מאי דכתיב {תהילים סח-יב} ה' יתן אומר המבשרות צבא רב כל דיבור
ודיבור שיצא מפי הגבורה נחלק לשבעים לשונות תני דבי ר' ישמעאל {ירמיה כג-כט}
וכפטיש יפוצץ סלע מה פטיש זה נחלק לכמה ניצוצות אף כל דיבור ודיבור שיצא מפי
הקב"ה נחלק לשבעים לשונות

R. Johanan said: What is meant by the verse, The Lord giveth the word: They that publish the tidings are a great host? 7 — Every single word that went forth from the Omnipotent was split up into seventy languages. 8 The School of R. Ishmael taught: And like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces., 9 just as a hammer is divided into many sparks, 10 so every single word that went forth from the Holy One, blessed be He, split up into seventy languages. 11

(7) Ps. LXVIII, 12.

(8) The traditional number of the languages of man, i.e., the Torah was given to all humanity. Cf. M. Joseph, *Judaism as Creed and Life*, pp. 157 seq.

(9) Jer. XXIII, ag.

(10) Perhaps referring to the sparks that fly off when it beats the anvil.

(11) Commentators differ as to the exact point of the comparison; v. Sanh., Sonc. Ed., p. 214, n. 9.²

In other words, the text is saying that every word of the Torah is broken up into seventy languages. It gives the metaphor of a hammer hitting a stone. Instead of the hammer, chipping, like we might think, the stone instead breaks into pieces. If we are to understand the hammer as God and the world as the rock, each part of the rock symbolizes each language. Each language represents each one of us. The hammer emitting sparks shows an element of power and creation. The hammer hitting the rock

² Epstein, I. (1990). *Soncino Hebrew/English Babylonian Talmud*. Bloch Pub Co.

only signifies an action which we as people of the world receive the results. God as the hammer shows that each word of God (Torah) is multilingual and multifaceted.

However, footnote number 11 highlights a discrepancy in this understanding. In Sanhedrin 34a, it says,

מקרא אחד יוצא לכמה טעמים ואין טעם אחד יוצא מכמה מקראות דבי ר' ישמעאל תנא
{ ירמיה כג-כט } וכפטיש יפוצץ סלע מה פטיש זה מתחלק לכמה ניצוצות אף מקרא
אחד יוצא לכמה טעמים

One Biblical verse may convey several teachings, but a single teaching cannot be deduced from different Scriptural verses. In R. Ishmael's School it was taught: And like in hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces: 26 i.e., just as [the rock] is split into many splinters, 27 so also may one Biblical verse convey many teachings.”

(26) Jer. XXIII, 29.

(27) The text contains a grammatical difficulty. Literally translated, it is, Just as the hammer is split, etc.; whereas for the present translation, the text must read מחלק instead of מתחלק, and some commentators emend the text accordingly. R. Tam, however, on the basis of Ekah R. IV, 7, retains the present text and its literal translation, as above, and explains, Just as the hammer, when it smites an extraordinary hard object, may itself be split, — so may the Biblical verse, when subjected to the scrutiny of a very keen intellect, split up into different meanings.³

Rabbeinu Tam, Rashi's grandson and well-known Tosafist, helps explain the discrepancy.

The confusion is twofold. What do the hammer and rock represent and also, which one breaks? In footnote 27 above, it explains the latter as a Hebrew issue. Changing the letters of the Hebrew in Jeremiah 23:29, there are different meanings as to which shatters: the hammer or the rock. To understand the representations of the hammer and the rock, Rashi explains that the hammer is God and the rock is the world. His

³ Ibid.

grandson, however, flips it and says that the hammer represents the human and the rock represents the Rock of Israel, namely, God. As Allen Maller explains in an article in the *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, each human's encounter with God is authentic, even if they are completely different from one person to another.⁴ Both of these explanations of Jeremiah 23:29 are correct.

Since we do not speak seventy languages, know all seventy interpretations of the Torah, nor have seventy reactions to God all at once, we do not get the full picture of God's words. We do not know what God actually meant to say since fragments are the only thing available to us. This allows us to focus on what we do have and try to understand it, hoping it is one of the seventy ways. Thus, it becomes apparent that what we see as an interpretation on one day may not be the same one the next. This is why it is said that Torah has seventy faces.

The PaRDeS model above only provides 4 ways to understand God's words, but with the overlap between them and the multiple interpretations in each category, the searching of each face never ends. In Chaim ben Moshe ibn Attar's Torah commentary *Or HaChaim*, he uses the PaRDeS model to show the seventy faces of Torah, but also highlights another aspect.

דע כי רשות לנו נתונה לפרש משמעות הכתובים בנתיבות העיון ויישוב הדעת הגם
שקדמונו ראשונים ויישבו באופן אחר כי ע' פנים לתורה ואין אנו מוזהרים שלא לנטות
מדברי הראשונים אלא בפירושים שישתנה הדין לפיהן, ולזה תמצא שהאמוראים אין
כח בהם לחלוק על התנאים במשפטי ה' אבל ביישוב הכתובים ובמשמעותן מצינו להם
בכמה מקומות שיפרשו באופן אחר

⁴ Maller, A. S. (2013). A Torah with 70 Different Faces. *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 41(1).

You should know that we have permission to explain the implication of the verses after careful study – even though our conclusions differ from the explanation of our Sages. That is because there are 70 faces to the Torah. There is no prohibition against differing from the words of our Sages except if it changes the Halacha. Similarly, we find that even though the Amoraim did not have the right to disagree with the Tannaim in halachic matters – but we find that they offered alternative explanations to verses.⁵

The main change here is the idea that we may not have the same conclusions as our Sages and that alternative explanations can be provided.

This is wonderful news all around! We can interpret Torah. In fact, it is encouraged. But why do we do it? Why are we even looking past what has been said before? Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler had many similar questions in his *Michtav M'Eliyahu*. He explains, “I think that they offer these alternative explanations for the sake of the confused people. In other words, these Rishonim want to show that there are many different aspects even in the simple understanding of the verses and that it is permissible for a person to create new interpretations according to what makes sense to him.”⁶ While I may not be providing alternate explanations for “confused people,” I am trying “to create new interpretations according to what makes sense to” college students. In the following pages, I focus on topics of gossip, bullying, and relationships. Each one of these has many facets and I bring forth just a few of them. The idea is that these interpretations build a connection between the college student and the Torah. The bridges erected as part of a conversation about Torah are constantly built upon by each student during their time in college and outside.

⁵ Rabbi Chaim Ibn Attar (1696-1743), *Or HaChayim Bereishit 1:1*

⁶ Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (1892-1953), *Michtav M'Eliyahu Vol. 4 p. 355*

No matter what, young adult conversations about the Torah need to continue. They can be with me, with other scholars, with friends, with family – it doesn't matter as long as the discussion keeps flowing. In Bava Batra, Raba is concerned that decisions made previously could be ignored if they are no longer relevant or if there is a disagreement about them. In order to avoid this, it is said:

רבא לרב פפא ולרב הונא בריה דרב יהושע כי אתי פסקא דדינא ידידי לקמייכו וחזיתו
 ביה פירכא לא תקרעוהו עד דאתיתו לקמאי אי אית לי טעמא אמינא לכו ואי לא הדרנא
 בי לאחר מיתה לא מיקרע תקרעוהו ומגמר נמי לא תגמרו מיניה לא מיקרע תקרעיניה
 דאי הואי התם דלמא הוה אמינא לכו טעמא

מגמר נמי לא תגמרו מיניה דאין לדיין אלא מה שענינו רואות

Raba said to R. Papa and to R. Huna the son of R. Joshua: 'When a legal decision of mine comes before you [in a written form], and you see any objection to it, do not tear it up before you have seen me. 22 If I have a [valid] reason [for my decision] I will tell [it to] you; and if not, I will withdraw.

After my death, you shall neither tear it up nor infer [any law] from it. "You shall neither tear it up" since, had I been there, it is possible that I might have told you the reason;

(22) Lit., 'until you come before me'.

Talmud - Mas. Baba Bathra 131a

"nor infer [any law] from it" — because a judge must be guided only by that which his eyes see.⁷

This text has become a large part of scholars' defense of their understandings and interpretations. While texts may formulate a problem for us, the various interpretations are allowed. The condition is, however, that the commentators must remain loyal to the process. It seems that even if the text seems irrelevant or incoherent or even, just

⁷ Epstein, I. (1990). *Soncino Hebrew/English Babylonian Talmud*. Bloch Pub Co.

too darn difficult, it cannot be overlooked and tossed aside. As we arrive at the text, it should be explored and talked about. This approach encourages a continuation of the exploration of the text itself and the commentary that accompanies it. Exploration of the text is a process that evolves continuously.

This is true of the material found in this capstone. The texts used were not originally for college students and neither were most of the interpretations cited. Instead, this project evolved by looking at the text in a modern day, college student's perspective. This means that the focus was on a student at a four-year university who lives on campus or in housing with other students. The material focuses on a modern day student as one who has accessibility of technology at their fingertips and one who experiences social media all around them. While I may not be an undergraduate student anymore, I remained as loyal as possible to the texts, to previous interpretations, and to the life of college students. I have been able to build upon the commentators' understandings of texts to make them more relevant to the demographic of college students. With this focus, I have created a new, legitimate type of textual interpretation within a certain group.

The topics I highlight in the following chapters are a direct reflection of issues facing college students today. By beginning with "Disrespect, Embarrassing and Bullying," I begin the capstone with a bang of a tough, but important and relevant issue. My focus is on two chapters in Leviticus and my interpretation goes line-by-line, examining specific Hebrew nuances. While this may seem to be something college students may want to shy away from, the intent is to throw in specific connections for

the college student in order to make sense of what the Torah is saying in a different light.

The second chapter, “Gossip,” continues the theme of respect found in the first chapter, but delves into a specific type of action and the Jewish views of it from Leviticus 14-15:33; the Chofetz Chaim, a Rabbi who dedicated himself to teaching about gossip; and a slew of Talmudic and Biblical references. The repercussions, “rules,” and views of gossip vary from Biblical to modern times, and I explore the implications. Many of the readers have probably been a victim of gossip and/or one who helps spread it. I am not here to admonish them, because that seems counterproductive and even, in some cases, hypocritical. Instead, the focus is on seeing what actually can happen as a result of gossip and connecting it to experiences the students may have heard about or experienced themselves as a college student.

The title of the third chapter, “Relationships and Sex,” is almost self-explanatory. We all know that romantic relationships and sex are key topics in college. Within this chapter, three different issues are addressed: premarital sex, interdating, and interfaith marriages. I have had many students ask me what the Jewish views are about premarital sex, and I have to admit that I was surprised to find out what is actually said in biblical and rabbinic texts. As for interdating and intermarriage, there is a lot of discussion and I find it to be relevant to college students, even if they aren’t ready to get married tomorrow. These three issues were found in texts from Genesis and Deuteronomy, Responsa from different Jewish movements, and research studies. This chapter was difficult for me because I did not want to sound preachy or impose views

on any of the readers. Instead, I strove to give the facts and connect them to college life and Judaism so that the students could make their own informed decision.

All in all, the goal of this capstone is to present, in a non-academic framework, a way for college students to connect to the Torah and other Jewish texts. The three chapters found in this capstone highlight three issues that are on the minds of college students. During the course of this capstone, I spoke with the students at Hillel at Miami University to gauge their interest in the subject matter. The decisions of which chapters and themes to focus on stemmed largely from their interest and requests for programming about the material. The way I approached the text in order to make it relevant for the students was in my voice as much as possible so that the reader was not bogged down in the academic nature that can accompany Biblical exegesis. I also wanted to pick the material to focus on so that it was different from other Torah commentaries that students have seen in that this project did not go *Parasha* by *Parasha* or completely line-by-line.

I hope that in the future, I would be able to expand on this material by adding more chapters and more themes, some of which I have already begun to develop. The longer work I envision, a “Torah Commentary for College Students,” would be divided into three parts entitled “Community Relationships,” “Intrapersonal Relationships,” and “Legacy.” The first part, “Community Relationships,” would include the three chapters in this capstone along with three additional sections. The first of these additional sections would focus on responsibility for others. I would highlight themes such as being a good host/hostess, standing up for what you believe in, taking care of others, supporting

others, what it means to include a stranger, our responsibility to nature, and using our past to inform our future. The second section would focus on non-romantic relationships. In this section I would discuss inter-personal boundaries, maintaining relationships, communication, finding supportive friends, the importance of community, and the relationship with parents. In the last section of “Community Relationships,” I would focus on the transitions that occur between home and school, particularly in the time of leaving home to attend college and in the back and forth of returning home over breaks.

The second part of my commentary, entitled “Intrapersonal relationships,” would include a section on leaving for college with a focus on Jewish geographic movement, a student’s past, and understanding the “scouting” process for a “good fit.” Another section would focus on understanding consequences for actions with a specific focus on drugs, sex, and alcohol. Another section would be “keep going through the tough stuff” and the idea of being tested. The last, and most definitely not least, section of this part would be focusing on self-care. In one sub-section the theme would be the importance of resting and what that means as students and as Jews. Another sub-section would be about getting adjusted and maintaining personal space. While this would focus on boundaries and personal time, it would also highlight rituals, religious practice, and comfort levels. The third sub-section would be about staying grounded and being aware of yourself. This sub-section has a lot of complex issues in it including honesty, inspiration, stress, and depression. The final sub-section of “Self-care,” is maintaining cleanliness both in a living situation and in one’s own body.

The third part of my commentary would be entitled “Legacy” and would focus on the end of the undergraduate career. The first section would highlight graduation requirements in the sense of fulfilling a covenant and finishing what was started. The second section would be about looking forward, discussing questions such as: How do the consequences of my actions affect me now? What are my hopes and dreams? How can I look at my hopes and dreams with humor and positivity? How can I use my past as a guide for my future? The final section would be about legacy and what we each leave behind to and for others in terms of teaching others, physical elements, and emotional ones.

Once all of the pieces of my envisioned “Torah Commentary for College Students” come together, it could be a very useful tool for Jewish college students all over the world. This may be a lifetime of work, but in the end, I think it would be worth it.

Disrespect, Embarrassing, and Bullying

These are issues that we deal with every day, in and out of college. One place we might not think to look to for help with these issues is Leviticus. STOP! WAIT! Don't just let your eyes roll and jump somewhere else because I mentioned Leviticus.

Leviticus is like that Jewish mother who we love to get annoyed with, because she constantly tells us "Don't do that! Don't do THAT! For goodness sake, DO that!" Like the mother, Leviticus gets monotonous, nudgy, and annoying, but let's try looking at Leviticus differently. EUREKA! We have discovered that Leviticus holds the Golden Rule. Okay, fine, we didn't discover it, and people have noticed it there for a long time. Take Hillel for example, who explained, on one foot, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation of this—go and study it!"⁸ As the other foot drops, we realize that what our Jewish mother told us makes sense after all and we should abide by the Golden Rule no matter what.

College is a time when students are thrown into situations with many people they don't know. It spans from the larger community on campus to the smaller community in an academic department or in a residence hall to a very intimate group of roommates. Even if we choose our roommates or housemates, there are people in our hallway, on our floor, down our street that we don't know or may not have chosen to live near. Leviticus addresses a similar situation. The Israelites are thrown together as a community based on their beliefs and socioeconomic status. They are made to live

⁸ Talmud, Shabbat 31a

together and travel together. They suffer together. The laws set forth in the Torah, especially in Leviticus, serve as regulations of the community. The laws intend to keep the integrity of the individual and at the same time create a more moral and cohesive group. In college, we grow as individuals but still must abide by social norms. Did you have any idea that college and Leviticus were so closely connected before this?!

So, at the beginning of Leviticus 17, God discusses the rules for sacrifices and how they are to be made. While it seems that it is quite outdated, because . . . well . . . it is, there are some hidden gems. Honestly, we might have jumped over a lot of them if we were reading the English translation, getting bored with all of the sacrifice rules. It doesn't feel relevant and the details are a little . . . gory. God asks Moses to tell the Israelites about the commandments regarding sacrifices, focusing on the people of the community, not just the priests. In changing the audience, God is recognizing that sacrifices should be a part of everyday life for the Israelites. God explains that while it might be tempting to kill an ox, a lamb, or a goat, those are the sacrificial animals that are God's. God wants to make sure that by reiterating the sacrificial laws, the priests would be taken care of, the slaughter of the animal would be done correctly (with pretty explicit details about what to do with the blood of these animals), and that there would not be confusion between this ritual and pagan slaughter rituals. After this is laid out, God then explains that any other type of sacrifice besides the peace offerings is not to be consumed and must be sacrificed to God by the priests at the tent of meeting. This, again, would ensure that the sacrifices were done correctly as the priests could make sure.

Then, comes verses 10-11:

וְאִישׁ אִישׁ מִבֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִן־הַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם אֲשֶׁר יֹאכַל כָּל־דָּם וְנָתַתִּי פָנַי בְּנֶפֶשׁ
הָאֹכֶלֶת אֶת־הַדָּם וְהִכְרַתִּי אֹתָהּ מִקֶּרֶב עַמָּהּ: כִּי נֶפֶשׁ הַבָּשָׂר בַּדָּם הִוא וְאֲנִי נֹתְתִיו לָכֶם
עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְכַפֵּר עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם כִּי־הֵךְ הִוא בְּנֶפֶשׁ יִכְפֹּר:

And if anyone from the house of Israel or from the strangers who reside among them eats any blood, I will set My face against the person who eats blood, and I will cut him off from his kin. For the soul of a person is in his blood, and I gave it to you to atone for your souls on the altar; since it is the blood that atones for the soul.⁹

In verse 11, we see: “כִּי נֶפֶשׁ הַבָּשָׂר, בַּדָּם הִוא” There are plenty of ways that this has been translated, but we will focus on: “For the soul of a person is in his blood.” We took some liberties with the word הַבָּשָׂר, as it is typically understood to be flesh. However, a person is made up of flesh, so this can relate to a person, an animal, anything with flesh. This is based on many other translations of הַבָּשָׂר, which follow this as well.¹⁰ The other word we take liberties with is נֶפֶשׁ. This one is a little more complicated because there are about a million and a half different definitions. In many cases it is understood as a soul, but sometimes as life, a living being, a person, passion, desire, and so many more. Soul stands out as it brings about a different spiritual idea. Webster’s has many definitions of soul:

- 1: the immaterial essence, animating principle, or actuating cause of an individual life
- 2 **a** : the spiritual principle embodied in human beings, all rational and spiritual beings, or the universe
- b** *capitalized Christian Science* : [GOD](#) 1b

⁹ My translation

¹⁰ For example, almost every time כָּל־בָּשָׂר is seen in the Torah, it is translated as living creature. This is based on the *New English Translation Bible*, Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. 1996, specifically when looking at Genesis 6:12, 13, 17, 19; 7: 16, 21; 8:17; 9:11, 15, 16, 17.

3: a person's total self

4 **a :** an active or essential part

b : a moving spirit : **LEADER**

5

a : the moral and emotional nature of human beings

b : the quality that arouses emotion and sentiment

c : spiritual or moral force : **FERVOR**

6: **PERSON** <not a *soul* in sight>

7: **PERSONIFICATION** <she is the *soul* of integrity>¹¹

That isn't even all of the definitions listed! Numbers 1 through 5 above are really why soul is chosen for this definition. It brings about this extra aspect that moves beyond just a simple understanding of skin or flesh. The soul holds a person's spirit.

"For the soul of a person is in his blood." A soul courses through a person's veins like blood, reaching to every little part of them. It becomes the essence of who they are. It is something inescapable. It is with them at all times and helps make them who they are. We cannot live without blood, and it is almost as if a soul is what makes that blood keep flowing and essentially keeps us alive. The physical life that we get from blood is what fuels our spiritual life from the soul that resides within it.

If we were to take the other definitions of נִפְשׁ a similar translation can be found. For example, "For the passion of flesh is found in its blood." It still says the same thing; all people's souls and passions are found coursing through their bodies like blood. Over

¹¹ "Soul." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 14 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/soul>>.

the course of the years we have learned many different views about blood and how it is formulated, designed, its components, and its complicated nature.¹²

Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (Part 3, Ch. 46), highlights different cultures' uses and understandings of blood, in order to explain why the author(s) of the Torah emphasized blood in Leviticus. He explains that there were two groups of people who believed that spirit resided in blood. One group felt that blood was impure, but they ate it anyway to become closer to spirits who may give them insight into the future. The second group didn't want to eat blood because they didn't like it, but kept the blood in a jar where they were eating meat, so that the spirits could effectively join them in a meal, which would eventually lead to them telling secrets about the future in the meat eaters' dreams. Maimonides continues to explain that the Torah, on the other hand,

forbade the eating of blood, and emphasized the prohibition in exactly the same terms as it emphasizes idolatry. . . . There is, besides idolatry and eating blood, no other sin in reference to which [the words "I will set My face against . . ."]¹³ are used. For the eating of blood leads to a kind of idolatry, to the worship of spirits. Our Torah declared the blood as pure.

The bottom line that we take from the translation of נֶפֶשׁ as flesh which contains blood, is that it doesn't matter what our skin color, religious background, or sexual orientation might be; our passion, our desires, and our soul course through us, just as blood does through our bodies. Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann states this in a much more succinct way. "This does not mean that the actual substance of the blood constitutes

¹² "Red Gold. Blood History Timeline. 2500 BCE-999 BCE | PBS." N.p., n.d. Web. 14 Nov. 2014.

¹³ Leviticus 17:10, 20:5.

life, but rather that the blood harbors the breath of life and that jointly they are the seat of vitality (דָּמוֹ בְּנִפְשׁוֹ). The blood is the instrument of the soul through which it carries out its activities.”¹⁴

Many people use Leviticus as a way to show what is being done wrong and right to point out bad habits, inappropriate behavior, and unethical dealings. However, כִּי נִפְשׁ הַבָּשָׂר, בְּדָם הִוא, the soul of a person is in his blood, means that we all have blood and the soul courses through the blood into the rest of our bodies. Even in verse 10 we see this sentiment as this law does not only apply to the Israelites, but also applies to the strangers that live among them. Blood and soul may vary based on the individual that houses them, but it is still the same blood in a universal, material sense. This connects each person to one another, since we all have blood and are living beings with a soul (regardless of potential comments we might have about the nature of specific people’s souls!). It is incredible to find that in Leviticus, a place where many find the opposite sentiment¹⁵, this is right there. Plain as day.

Sure, contextually, כִּי נִפְשׁ הַבָּשָׂר, בְּדָם הִוא, talks about different rules for sacrifices. Since a soul is found in the flesh, we can’t drink blood. Blood being sacrificed allows for reparations for the one that brings the sacrifice. These ideas come from

¹⁴ Hoffmann, Rabbi David Zvi. *Commentary on Sefer Vayikra, Leviticus, 2 Volume Set*. Mossad Harav Kook, 1963. Vol. I., 328.

¹⁵ Examples of “the opposite sentiment” can be found in Leviticus 13:1-14:32, 15:1-31, 18:22, 21:1-22:16. These is not a complete list but more of a suggestion of the themes that can be found in these passages. While I have highlighted them, it is important to note that these can be interpreted differently. Just as I have interpreted much of the text differently than others have, it is possible that someone could find a meaning in these verses that show how people are connected by the fact that they are humans, regardless of their physical qualities that make them unique.

many places, but Abravanel, a Biblical commentator from the 15th century, points out reasons for “why God chose the fat and blood to be offered on the altar, and why they may not be eaten.” One reason he states is that fat and blood symbolize sin, and burning them on the altar “exemplif[ies] man’s duty to eliminate his lustful desires.” Another reason Abravanel gives is that the sacrifice of both blood and fat show man’s ability to confess sins and find forgiveness from God.¹⁶

Clearly, it must have been a SUPER important thing to say because verse 14 says it again. “כִּי-נֶפֶשׁ כָּל-בָּשָׂר, דָּמּוֹ בְּנִפְשׁוֹ הוּא” which can be translated as, “For the soul of all people, its blood is its soul”. The life of every person is found in their blood; their soul truly resides there. It might be different Hebrew and changed around a little bit, but it has quite the same meaning. In fact, it even adds more of an emphasis of the idea that each person has their own soul. One is not “more important” than the other. It is a fact; each of us has our own soul. It is stated right there: each soul flows through a person like blood through the veins.

¹⁶ The full quote is found in Nehama Leibowitz’s *New Studies in Vayikra* (1993, Volume I, page 90), as she translates Don Isaac Abravanel’s comments on this practice.

Abravanel offers several reasons for this prohibition. We quote two of these:

Several explanations have been given why God chose the fat and blood to be offered on the altar, and why they may not be eaten...

The fourth reason: Sturdiness and elegance breed sin. Whereas blood induces sturdiness, fat makes the body look good. Indeed, hot-blooded passion leads to sin. Fat also fosters sin as it is written: “But Yeshurun grew fat and kicked” (Deut. 32:15).

Accordingly God commanded these two physical carriers of sin to be burned on the altar, to exemplify man’s duty to eliminate his lustful desires-...Furthermore I offer a sixth reason: Red symbolizes sin, while white represents forgiveness as stated by the Prophet: “Though your sin be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Is. 1:8).

Hence God commanded that man offer up blood as a token of the confession of sin, as the Psalmist states: “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord” (32:5). We are likewise required to sacrifice the fat which represents pardon, as if to say “there is forgiveness with thee” (Ps. 130:4).

What else can we uncover that isn't just about sacrifices and laws? It takes a few verses¹⁷, but there is more material that help us see how passionate Leviticus is in its understanding of the importance of the human and its soul. In chapter 18 we begin to see a theme of “לְגִלוֹת עֶרְוָה”, to uncover someone's nakedness. From verse 6 to 19, God explains all the people that we shouldn't see naked; our parents, our siblings, our grandchildren, our aunts and uncles, our in-laws, etc. Some seem pretty obvious because they are just plain awkward and uncomfortable. Okay, more than “seem.” Do we really want to uncover any of our family's nakedness? If the answer is yes, seek help from a medical professional. Most of us would yell “NO!” with a look of pure horror and disgust, sometimes accompanied by a shudder. Alright, fine, most of the time accompanied by a shudder.

It seems like a weird thing to put in the Torah, but it makes sense since nakedness happens. For example, in college there are some people who like to strip down to their skivvies and run around, because they think they are awesome or because they are under the influence of something and not aware of their actions or surroundings. Either way, it's embarrassing. For them and for us. For the person running around wearing nothing (or close to nothing), they will, most likely, hear about it the next day and be quite embarrassed. For those of us who witness it, it gets awkward. We might giggle because everyone around us is giggling. We might make a face and think “Thank goodness that is not me!” or even judge and say “Oy veyzmeir!

¹⁷ 17:15-16 focuses on purity after eating what has died. 18:1-5 is God telling Moses what to say to the Israelites. He tells the Israelites that He is God and that all of His rules should be followed.

Look at what a fool they are making of themselves! They need to get their act together!”

Torah recognizes this and understands the embarrassment.

Is being naked in and of itself shameful? No. It is, instead, a part of life. Bodies are beautiful in each individual way. We all have our perceived flaws, the things we don't like. Insert some cheesy quote about how our flaws make us who we are, and that everything is wonderful. But really, flaws keep life interesting. There are plenty of times in life when I felt my flaws protrude (not just physically). During college, I felt like there was spotlight on every single one of them. Any imperfection in my work, in my behavior, in my actions, in my outfits, in my participation in organizations – it was all recognized and commented on by others. Physically, my body fluctuated plenty during college. I think I moved towards the “Freshman 30 or 40”, instead of the “Freshman 15.” It happens. However, I tried to embrace my body changes, learning about them as they happened quite frequently. I was fairly comfortable with my body and my nakedness, but only when I uncovered it or when I let it be uncovered.

That's the key. Nowhere in Leviticus 18:6-19 does it say we shouldn't happen to chance upon a naked person. It doesn't say we are horrible people when we happen to see someone drop trou before the shower. It doesn't say we can't get naked in the comfort of our own home or room. It doesn't say that when someone's buddy happens to pants them in public and we see their nakedness that we are horrible. Instead, it says we shouldn't be the one to actually DO the uncovering. The one who pulls down someone else's pants is the one who is at fault. The verb “לְגַלּוֹת” is active. Leviticus says

don't actively cause someone to be naked by uncovering them. That would mean purposefully causing them to be naked. There was no permission given. There is not even a question being asked. The actual verses don't even give a reason as to why we shouldn't uncover someone's nakedness. They just repeat it over and over again. For example, verse 14 says "עֲרוֹת אָחִי-אֲבִיךָ לֹא תִגְלֶה אֶל-אִשְׁתּוֹ לֹא תִקְרַב דְּדֹתְךָ הִוא" which means "The nakedness of your father's brother, don't uncover it. Towards his wife, don't get close to her, since she is your aunt." There is no explanation except for the definition of familial relation. There is no need for an explanation. By uncovering someone's nakedness it is embarrassing them. It is shaming them. It is causing them to feel uncomfortable.

There is another meaning of this whole "uncovering nakedness" section. What do we do with those who choose to uncover their nakedness themselves? We didn't do it, so we aren't in trouble. We didn't do it so we have no responsibility. We didn't do it so we can walk away. Nope. If the Torah keeps repeating this whole nakedness thing, it must not be that easy for us to just get up and walk away, leaving someone naked. Instead, it becomes our responsibility to clothe them. This isn't to say we should give them our best, most comfortable, most sentimental hoodie, but encourage them to get dressed in a gentle manner, cover them with a blanket, call a friend for them, etc. There are many options that would allow *us* to stop their embarrassment. We should try to stop embarrassment from happening to people, and if we don't then it is almost like we are aiding in the action of "לְגִלוֹת," uncovering their nakedness. It is just one more place where Leviticus teaches us to care about each person. They are not just flesh, בָּשָׂר, and

that blood, דם, that courses through them is not just material, it is their נִפְשָׁם, their soul, what makes them who they are. We have the obligation to step in and take care of our neighbor. We are to respect every person and not embarrass them.

After all of these prohibitions concerning uncovering another person's nakedness, the text commands that you may not have sex with another person's wife. What's the connection? Is it just that being naked leads to sex or that sex requires being naked? No. As we concluded, not uncovering a person's nakedness means respecting them. The same thing goes for this case as laying with another person's wife is cheating, which shows disrespect and causes embarrassment. Verse 20¹⁸ says “וְאֵל אִשְׁתּוֹ עִמִּיתָּהּ” וְלֹא תִתֵּן שְׁכִבְתָּהּ לְזָרָע לְטִמְאַחַּ בָּהּ, which can be translated as, “Don't have sexual intercourse (in which offspring could be potentially produced) with the wife of your fellow/buddy, to make yourself unclean.” Again Leviticus shows the importance of respect for one another. The end of the verse talks about how cheating makes us unclean, meaning impure. It makes us unclean not just from a purity standpoint, but also that cheating tarnishes every situation. Yet, cheating happens more often than it should. College life is a difficult time for relationships and so cheating can definitely happen. Many times, college students try long distance relationships. They can sometimes end in disaster, with cheating being the cause. It doesn't always happen like this, but sometimes it does. In college, with personal growth, emotional growth, and

¹⁸ Verses 15-19 are a continuation of familial relationships and who you should not uncover. Verse 19 is the only one that varies slightly by discussing not uncovering a menstruating woman's nakedness since her menstrual cycle makes her impure.

mental growth, there is the addition of meeting lots of new people, and...alcohol. New people and alcohol is not always the best mixture for relationships. Leviticus recognizes that sometimes we might think someone's significant other is a "hottie," but we still don't go after them. This is another way that the Torah recognizes the importance of respecting others. If we have sexual relations with a friend's partner, then people will lose respect for us and the partner. It also shows the lack of respect that we have for our so-called "buddy."

"Buddy" is one way of translating "עֲמִיתָהּ". The word עֲמִית, is defined as a fellow or a comrade.¹⁹ עֲמִיתָהּ means your עֲמִית. When starting with עַם, there are a few definitions. "(A whole) people (emphasis on internal ethnic solidarity)... fellow-countrymen...oft. not a whole people but a portion: people, inhabitants... citizens (w. full civil rights)...." is one way²⁰ Another way is "people, plebian, common man...tribe...a nation"²¹. All of these definitions reflect a connotation of a countryman, a fellow, or a neighbor. "Buddy" may not give the exact connotation of a citizen or a group that has an "internal ethnic solidarity," but it shows some kind of solidarity. It really shows the whole idea of not wanting to upset our friend. Until the whole sleeping with his wife thing. . . .

Many people who have been on the other side of things, who have been cheated on, see respect disappear immediately. Not only do they stop respecting their

¹⁹ Holladay, William L. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1972)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Brown, Driver, and Briggs. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1994) page 766.

significant other and their “friend” for doing something so harmful to them, there is another type of loss: self-respect. Many times those who are cheated on lose their confidence, thinking they did something wrong. Regardless of whether or not they did something wrong, it doesn’t matter. Cheating is not okay. For Leviticus to put this in such blatant words, shows how crucial it is to point out how cheating can embarrass and disrespect others. Leviticus 18:6-20 focus on the themes of respect and not embarrassing one another.

Then we move to verse 22²², one that is quoted everywhere. It is usually quoted as a way to show how homosexuality is an abomination. “וְאֵת זָכָר לֹא תִשְׁכַּב מִשְׁכָּבִי וְעֵבְיָהּ הִוא” or “You shall not lie with a man as you would lie with a woman as it is an abomination.” As Rabbi Karen Bender points out, “There is...value in noting that the authors of Torah could not have imagined what we would today consider to be constitutional homosexuality. . . .had they understood that homosexuality is natural for a certain segment of the population.”²³ This is quite true as the norms of society change with every generation.

If reading verse 22 quickly, it may seem that it states that homosexuality is a disgrace; however let’s look at it differently. Men and women are different. Men and women have different plumbing, just in case we weren’t clear on that. So it seems fairly reasonable to say we wouldn’t have sex with them in the same way. Men and women

²²²² Verse 21 discusses a “heathen god to whom infants were sacrificed” (Plaut, 791). I didn’t feel that it directly pertained to the topic at hand so I stepped over it.

²³ Grushcow, Lisa J., ed. *The Sacred Encounter: Jewish Perspectives on Sexuality*. New York: CCAR Press, 2014. 63.

have different sexual needs – actually, every individual person has their own sexual desires and needs. Sure, there is an outcome, but there are different ways to get there and different ways that this outcome can be defined. In all reality, the outcome can be an ejaculation, an orgasm, or just needing sleep and be done with having sex. There are definite variations. So one way we could understand this is that it is an abomination to treat people the same way sexually. It could be said that it would be an abomination to treat men and women the same way sexually, but each person may desire something different, whether they are a man or a woman.

In the late twelfth century, “Iggeret HaKodesh” or “The Holy Letter” was written. This letter is basically a book that discusses sexual relations in marriage and the holiness that accompanies the act and relationship. Since it was believed that children’s righteousness would be determined by their parents’ sexual behavior, this letter served as a warning. The author, mainly thought to be Nachmanides²⁴, has it correctly:

We the possessors of the Holy Torah believe that God, may He be praised, created all, as His wisdom decreed, and did not create anything ugly or shameful. For if sexual intercourse were repulsive, then the reproductive organs are also repulsive...If the reproductive organs are repulsive, how did the Creator fashion something blemished? If that were so, we should find that His deeds were not perfect.

It’s definitely an intense statement. We are not blemished, just made differently. We are not repulsive, just made differently. Each one of us is unique and so we are not be

²⁴ This has been a long standing debate. Many different authors have been attributed to this work, but Nachmanides has been the top choice for many people. To read about the history of this debate, see <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/iggeret-ha-kodesh>.

repulsed by actions or bodies (internal or external pieces of the body) when we recognize that God made us this way and allows us to differ from one another.

Let's look at verse 22 in another way. It can be interpreted as don't treat someone in a demeaning way, or in a way they wouldn't want to be treated. While there are some people who are transgender or who may cross-dress, there are others who want to be treated as their own gender. But, let's take a step back. Forget sex. (Don't panic: just for the moment, not for eternity!) Each person wants to be who they are and treated as such. That is the underlying message in this verse. It is an abomination for someone to treat someone in a way they wouldn't want to be treated. It says we shouldn't humiliate or embarrass others. We should treat people with respect.

Now, let's go back to sex. (You're welcome!) For many people, college is a time when we figure out who we are, sexually and otherwise. Once we figure out who we are, we shouldn't let anyone take it away from us. Ever. We each need to take the time to figure out what we want and who we want. At the same time, we should allow others to be who they are. That means not humiliating or embarrassing anyone else. However, the bottom line is that we need to watch over ourselves. We may encounter (as a victim or as an observer) abusive relationships, date rape, and coercive sex, to name a few. While we hope this never happens to anyone we know, it is an inevitability in our world today.²⁵

²⁵ I hope to talk about how the Bible talks about this in the chapter on sex.

Verses 24 – 30²⁶ talk about how God will kick us out for breaking any of the rules given before this. This is a zero-tolerance policy at its best. Basically it says that if we do anything mentioned earlier that would humiliate or embarrass someone, ultimately diminishing respect for a person, then our covenant with God is going to be caput. That's it. Done. The covenant with God allows for people to build trust and respect for each other and God. It helps them establish a community with set rules for everyone to adhere. It gives clear boundaries. Many colleges have zero-tolerance policies about many things: plagiarism, drugs, alcohol, failing classes, etc. It is the exact same thing that is happening here. We break or breach a contract and that is it. We are reprimanded fairly harshly and potentially kicked out of a dorm, an institution, or in Leviticus' case, the land. There is quite a similarity there that should be recognized.

Let's continue on with 19:3²⁷, where it says “אִישׁ אֶל אָבִיו וְאֶל אִמּוֹ ... אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם”²⁷, “Each person should be in awe of their mother and their father...I am the LORD your God”. Sometimes this may be difficult or downright impossible; however, take a step back. Sefer Hachinuch says, “One of the Ten Commandments is, ‘Honor your father and mother.’ How are we to do that? By expressing gratitude to our parents for bringing

²⁶ Verse 23 talks about bestiality. While it refers to another type of sexual behavior that can be brought up under a theme of disrespect and embarrassment, it does not relate to the majority of humans. However, it is worth noting that there are some who say Genesis 2:18-20 points to God wanting humans to mate with animals and when Adam didn't like any of them, then Eve was created. According to the Plaut translation (23-24), Genesis 2:18-20 is as follows: “18 Then God Eternal considered, ‘It is not good that the man be alone—I will make him a helpmate.’ 19 So God Eternal formed the wild animals and the birds of the sky out of the soil, and brought the man to see what he would call each one; and whatever the man called it, that became the creature's name. 20 The man gave names to every domestic animal and to the birds of the sky, and to all the wild animals, but for [himself] Adam found no helpmate.”

²⁷ Verses 1 and 2 set up God talking to Moses and telling him to pass on the following to the community. It said 19:3a, because only the first part of the verse is being dealt with above. The rest of the verse will be discussed in a later chapter that specifically focuses on holidays and observance.

us into the world.”²⁸ We are alive. We are in college. We got there. We might have done it ourselves. Our parents might be helping us out. Regardless, we are alive because of them.

We have been influenced by our parents, for better or for worse. The “worse” direction would be to translate “תִּירָאוּ” as “fear”, in that we all should fear our parents. We hope that a child’s relationship with their parents would follow a normative vision of loving, supportive, non-abusive parents, and that God wouldn’t want us to be afraid of them. God understands the parental role—whatever shape it might take in a family. So, תִּירָאוּ should be about being in awe or revering our parents. Not every day can be a day in which we revere our parents. Some of us have parents who are abusive, neglectful, selfish, unsupportive, ill (physically, emotionally, or mentally), no longer living, and/or specifically hold their children back from college. Thus, there may never be a time when these parents are revered by their children. However, there are some adult role models in our lives, who may or may not take on the role of parent, who we revere. It doesn’t need to be a biological mother and father for everyone.

Being in college is tough for so many reasons, but being away from family and those whom you consider family, is a large change for many people. My guess is that it is hard on parents²⁹ too. I am not a parent, but I heard from my parents how hard it is. Skype and video chats make it so much easier, and with all of the technology that

²⁸ Sefer Hachinuch (13th century) – quoted from Alan Morinis’s book *Every Day, Holy Day*.

²⁹ Parents here could also be considered the mentors or role models of those whom do not have a relationships with their biological parents.

Now, of course, most college students don't have a farm that they harvest, but take a step back and look at the underlying point. Leviticus shows the importance of doing something good for others, allowing them to sustain themselves without having to admit to others what is wrong and what they might need. It lets those who are afflicted, poor, or humble (three different definitions found for עָנִי) still continue to survive and thrive. We might decide to participate in some sort of social action work as a volunteer at a Boys and Girls club or Big Brothers, Big Sisters. We might volunteer at a food pantry or homeless shelter. There are a million different ways to give to others what they might need without them feeling as if it is a handout. This is what Leviticus says. It highlights the importance of every person doing things for others that allow them to maintain their dignity and still survive.

It seems ironic then that the next verse says “לֹא תִגְנוּבוּ וְלֹא תִכְזֹּבּוּ וְלֹא תִשָּׁקְכוּ” or “Don't steal, don't deceive, and don't deal falsely with one another.” The irony comes from the juxtaposition of verses 9-10 and verse 11. Verses 9 and 10 talk about how one can do something wonderful for someone else in need. Verse 11 points out that people steal and that people shouldn't do it. While they are both “thou shalt not” commands and benefit the person who gets food or is not stolen from, there is a different tone between the two. Verse 11 focuses on the act, not on who it benefits.

Let's take verse 11 bit by bit, starting with “don't steal from one another.” This seems like it should be quite clear and obvious to everyone; however, stealing still

happens. In a college setting, it happens more often than it should. Stealing of bikes, of computers, of work, of clothes from the laundry room, etc. It stinks. It's not fun and is devastating—going through the work of police reports, feeling unsafe, feeling violated and disrespected. It is something that we hope never happens to us, but it might. So, we should take measures to protect ourselves from these situations.

One situation to avoid is getting a computer stolen. Purchase a computer lock for a dorm room or apartment, and have the computer locked up whenever anyone leaves, even if it is just a quick bathroom trip. It seems silly, but my brother experienced computer theft in his dorm. A student he knew walked into his room without knocking. As soon as he saw my brother in the room, he said he wasn't paying attention and had gone into the wrong room. My brother thought it was weird, but brushed it off. The next day, my brother heard that the student stole multiple computers from rooms whose doors were unlocked as he went from room to room checking. My brother was disappointed in the student's behavior and in disbelief since he knew him and didn't think he would do something so inconsiderate. Not only did this hurt my brother's image of the student, but the student was eventually caught and lost his athletic scholarship, was kicked off the team, and inevitably transferred. In this incident, the stealing hurt all of the people involved. There are many incidents of stealing, and a computer is only one of them. This probably sounds much scarier than it is, but Leviticus sees all of these things happening and needs to state this law.

The second part of verse 11 focuses on not dealing deceitfully with others. It follows the pattern we have been exploring and accentuates that we should remain

respectful and truthful to everyone we come in contact with on a daily basis. Verse 12 also follows this as it says, “וְלֹא־תִשָּׁבַעוּ בִשְׁמִי לִשְׁקֹר וְחִלַּלְתָּ אֶת־שֵׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה”, “You shall not swear falsely in My name, profaning the name of your God. I am the LORD.”

“לֹא־תִשָּׁבַעוּ” means “no swearing.” It might be specifically about not taking God’s name in vain, but it is really saying, don’t swear. Okay, we can stop rolling our eyes because it sounds like Leviticus is telling us to stop swearing because it is really bad. Honestly, most people swear. However, the difference is *how* we swear. Not in terms of what language or what obscene gestures might be used: the way we swear in situations. If we stub our toe and it really hurts and we make some exclamations that would include asterisks and other symbols, then that is fairly acceptable. Swearing becomes inappropriate when directed towards someone, whether it is at them or about them. That is when it crosses a line. That’s when it turns into “חִלַּלְתָּ”, “you are profaning or polluting.” Swearing pollutes a relationship and profanes the person we are swearing at or about. There are many ways to express our feelings that don’t need to include swearing. Swearing is pretty darn common in college, especially with independence from family and knowing there won’t be any reprimands by family. Now we are living on our own and doing what we want to do. This means that each one of us has to strive to change our swearing habits.

All of the above verses lead to verse 14 in particular for the theme of respect, not embarrassing others, and not bullying. “לֹא תִקְלֹל חֵרֶשׁ תִּתֵּן מִכְשָׁל וְיִרְאֶתָּ מֵאֲלֹהֶיךָ” or “אֲנִי יְהוָה וְלִפְנֵי עֵגֹר לֹא” or “Don’t curse a deaf person and don’t set a hindrance before a

blind person. Thus you fear your God: I am the LORD". This is the epitome of Leviticus telling us not to bully others. The verse gives direct reference to those people who have different abilities³¹. The Torah references acts that specifically hurt a person when they don't know what is coming, stating that we need to be respectful of others and not embarrass them. Think about it, if someone placed a "stumbling block", a "מִכְשֹׁל" in front of a blind person, that person could potentially fall and be injured. Not only could they injure themselves physically, but be emotionally injured since the situation embarrassed them.

It might be surprising that so much of Leviticus has so much to do with college life. The words and their modern application to life spell out the themes of respecting others, dispelling bullying, and dissipating the embarrassment of others. These themes apply to everyday life, no matter where we are, but can relate especially to college students. Finding the connections between the biblical material and college life may come easy and it may not. Regardless, looking at the material in a different light allows each person to engage with the text, with the history, and with their life. It is important to remember, "כִּי נַפְשׁ הַבָּשָׂר, בַּדָּם הוּא", the soul of a person is in their blood. Each person is unique and should be treated with awe and respect. Our souls define us, and since we all have blood (despite the whole vampire craze right now), we should treat each other appropriately. Leviticus sums up this idea for us in a beautiful way.

³¹ Notice I don't use the word disability because I have met many people who are deaf and/or blind who have many, many abilities. They might differ from those that people with hearing or sight have, but are not, in any way, disabilities.

Gossip

Gossip is an issue that plagues people all over the world and has for years.

Gossip has a long history. The Oxford English Dictionary says that 1014 is the first time that the word gossip was recorded. However, the meaning then is not what we think of it today. Then gossip was a godfather or godmother, stemming from “god-sib”, showing how the relationship between the child and their godparent is like siblings in god. Eventually, gossip took on a new form in the seventeenth century as a gossip was a female attendant in labor and delivery. Since this relationship proved to be quite intimate, the conversations could easily turn towards talking about other women and marital issues. This seventeenth century understanding led to our current definition of gossip: “casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as being true.”³²

Gossip is also found in the Torah. “לֹא תִלְךָ רִכִּיל בְּעַמֶּךָ לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל דַּם רֵעֶךָ אָנֹכִי יְהוָה. Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people; neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:16). The word רִכִּיל is, in many cases, defined as gossip or a slanderer. This is the only time the word is found in the Torah, but it is found five other times in the TaNaKh (Proverbs 11:13, Proverbs 20:19, Jeremiah 6:28, Jeremiah 9:3, and Ezekiel 22:9). In each of these

³² Oxford Dictionary definition as found on http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/gossip

cases the word leaves a sour taste in the reader's mouth. They state that a רכיל is a person we should avoid and stay away from.

Just because רכיל is not found again in the Torah does not mean that the theme of gossip cannot be found in the Torah. One of the most popular places to find the theme of gossip is in the *Parasha Metzora* (Leviticus 14:1-15:33). This is the part of the Torah in which Miriam gets leprosy. This story seems like it might be unrelated to gossip, but many commentators show how Miriam gossiping about Moses causes her to get leprosy (Numbers 12:1-16). While leprosy may seem like an extreme punishment, as a visible condition, getting leprosy symbolizes that when we gossip, it will eventually surface and people will know what happened. *Lashon ha-ra*, literally, "the evil tongue," is not taken lightly.

The Rabbis understood that *lashon ha-ra* could cause so many problems and so they believed that the human body was made in order to have a person refrain from it. It is said, "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to the tongue, all the limbs of man are erect but you are horizontal; they are all outside the body but you are inside. More than that, I have surrounded you with two walls, one of bone and the other of flesh."³³ Well now. That just sums it right up, doesn't it? The tongue is surrounded by teeth and lips so that in order for evil to emerge, it must go through two boundaries. What about the horizontal versus vertical argument? GENIOUS! But wait, there's more! It is said also that the design of our bodies also tries to minimize our speech since humans have two

³³ Arachin 15b

eyes, two ears, and two nostrils, but only one mouth. It is even said that the reason humans have earlobes is so that they can be used as earplugs when *lashon ha-ra* is being spoken!³⁴ While some of us may have earlobes that won't reach, there is another solution! "Why are the fingers tapered like pegs? So that if one hears anything improper he can insert them in his ears."³⁵

It kind of seems like we are doomed to be gossipers if our bodies were designed to prevent speaking or hearing gossip. While the Rabbis understood gossip as an inevitability, they still feel that it can be controlled. "Six organs serve the human being: three are under his control and three are not. The latter are the eye, ear, and nose. He sees what he does not wish to see, hears what he does not wish to hear, and smells what he does not wish to smell. Under his control are the mouth, hand, and foot. If he so desires, he reads in the Torah, or uses bad language or blasphemes. As for the hand, if he so desires, it performs good deeds or steals or murders. As for the foot, if he so desires, it walks to theatres and circuses, or to places of worship and study."³⁶ We should be able to control our mouth and what is said. However, this is easier said than done. It must be a conscious decision. In order to remind ourselves, we find the words in our liturgy. Three times a day at the end of the *Amidah*, we pray "O God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceit."

³⁴ Ketubot 5b

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Genesis Rabbah 67, 3

But what happens if we do gossip? Then what? A Chasidic tale vividly illustrates the danger of improper speech: A man went about the community telling malicious lies about the rabbi. Later, he realized the wrong he had done, and began to feel remorse. He went to the rabbi and begged his forgiveness, saying he would do anything he could to make amends. The rabbi told the man, "Take a feather pillow, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the winds." The man thought this was a strange request, but it was a simple enough task, and he did it gladly. When he returned to tell the rabbi that he had done it, the rabbi said, "Now, go and gather the feathers. Because you can no more make amends for the damage your words have done than you can recollect the feathers."³⁷ This is a classic story told in many different ways, but the ending message is still the same. We can't get our words back.

In a college setting this is definitely true and with the growing use of technology, the problem seems to have gotten worse. Whatever is put out there will always be there. Take the Facebook policies, for example, where they actually keep everything you post, even if you delete it. Then there's cyber bullying: a way for people to attack others behind a wall of technology. Cyber bullying could be through text messages, emails, Facebook, Twitter, etc. and can be in the form of pictures, videos, fake profiles, and, of course, words. None of that ever goes away.

There are entire websites and phone apps dedicated to college gossip with an anonymous bulletin board where there is no filter. Anyone can write anything about

³⁷ Elswit, S. (2012). *The Jewish story finder: a guide to 668 tales listing subjects and sources*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.

anyone. Some of the information may be trivial, especially when a person's name is not specified. As soon as a piece of gossip is said about a person directly, it can become harmful in an instant. The websites are not taken down since they are legal as per the first amendment for free speech. Some sites, such as the original college gossip site, JuicyCampus.com, were shut down for a lack of revenue.³⁸ Even though that one was shut down, more have arisen and gained popularity. Yik Yak, an app and website, allows a user to see posts from people within a ten mile radius. The posts can then be voted on to move them up or down in the feed. Within a ten mile radius of a campus, an app like Yik Yak can turn harmful as students post about each other, organizations, and professors. It has become such a controversial application, which allows for the continuation of gossip and an increase in cyberbullying that many high schools have banned the app. The college community has not ignored Yik Yak as some have also banned it and there have been pleas of having colleges everywhere get rid of it.³⁹

So these are all words, but what about gossip that utilizes pictures? Snapchat is one of the biggest photo apps today. It is unique in that pictures disappear after a designated time set by the sender. Unless a screenshot is taken by the recipient or the sender downloaded the original, it is gone forever. Or is it? On October 12, 2014, about 98,000 files comprised of videos and photos were leaked to the internet. While Snapchat was not hacked to receive the files, third party sites saved the data and then

³⁸ The Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth...? - Home. (n.d.). Retrieved January 1, 2015, from <http://collegegossipanarchy.weebly.com/index.html>

³⁹ Mach, R. C. (2014, October 3). Why Your College Campus Should Ban Yik Yak. Retrieved January 1, 2015, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ryan-chapin-mach/why-your-college-campus-should-ban-yik-yak_b_5924352.html

shared it with the world. While the contents ranged from nude photos (many which can be considered child pornography) to silly faces, the usernames were also associated with the images and videos. This breaches the confidentiality even more as people can then find these users.

Snapchat also has been utilized similarly to Yik Yak except with pictures and videos. At University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana campus a Snapchat account surfaced and interview was conducted with the anonymous user. The interview in *The Odyssey Online*, an online publication reporting on conversations in local communities, explained that this Snapchat account “is a constant feed of life around the University of Illinois, with everything from proposals at the ice-skating rink to fraternity parties. However, many have come to quickly criticize the account for its vulgarity in featuring many naked men and women, genitalia galore, drug use and underage drinking, amongst many other illegal activities.”⁴⁰ While this campus is not the only one with accounts like this, it has become an invasion of peoples’ privacy, especially since many do not know they are being captured.

While the use of Snapchat and similar apps and websites may not be an actual use of our tongues, it is still *lashon ha-ra*. As Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, better known as the Chofetz Chaim, explains, “The prohibition against communicating lashon hara applies whether one conveys the information verbally or in writing.”⁴¹ The Chofetz

⁴⁰ Who is Cham_Bana? (n.d.). Retrieved January 1, 2015, from <http://theodysseyonline.com/illinois/who-cham-bana/80137>

⁴¹ Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hilchot Lashon Hara 1:8

Chaim really knows what he is talking about since he dedicated his life to teaching about gossip and slander from the Bible and other works.

Some of the works that the Chofetz Chaim refers to are Talmudic. The Rabbis explain that *lashon ha-ra* has five different categories that highlight the ways words can be weapons. The first relates to Leviticus 19:16 and the word רכיל as we explored before. This type of *lashon ha-ra* is considered speech that causes disputes in that it is a “he said, she said” type of talk and can cause confusion. The second category of *lashon ha-ra* is speech that is harmful or derogatory. This kind of speech is harmful all around. As it is said, *lashon ha-ra* “slays three persons: the speaker, the spoken to, and the spoken of.”⁴² The third category of *lashon ha-ra* is similar to the previous category, except that it is specifically untrue derogatory speech. The fourth category is disproving the saying “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” This type of *lashon ha-ra* actually causes pain – emotionally, physically, and financially. The last category is one that is not specifically referenced in the Torah, but is added by the Rabbis and focuses on words that are close to actual *lashon ha-ra*. This encompasses a few different examples. By implying something negative about a person or about the speaker, it is close to *lashon ha-ra*. The speaker is jokingly saying something that might be construed as *lashon ha-ra* or pretending that they didn’t realize they were speaking *lashon ha-ra* also fit into this fifth category.

⁴² Arachin 15b

We could think of examples for each of these categories and understand how all of them are related to *lashon ha-ra*. The examples could probably come from each of our own experiences, not just general ideas. College life can bring about many of these examples. Think about an organization that has elections, or worse, slating. This is almost a breeding ground for *lashon ha-ra*, even if it is directed in the best possible way. The way candidates are spoken about puts their character and ability into question and if the candidate was in the room, they would probably be hurt by what was being said about them. How about competing student groups? Whether they are competing for members or have conflicting views and are competing for their voice to be heard over the others, it still can be construed as *lashon ha-ra*.

What about those times where it seems necessary to engage in *lashon ha-ra*? For example, what if an employer asks if they should hire a friend of yours? You love your friend and think they would be a great fit, but you heard how a project failed significantly because of your friend. What do you do? The Chofetz Chaim states seven conditions for someone to be able to share negative information about another party.

If one saw a person wronging someone else, through theft, deceit or any other form of harm... and one knows with certainty that no amends were made... one may tell this information to others in order to help the victim, or to publicize how unacceptable these acts are. He must, however, make sure that the following seven conditions are met:

1. [The speaker of the negative information] must have witnessed the incident, and not heard about it from someone else, unless he is able to verify its truthfulness.
2. He must calmly think over whether or not the incident actually constitutes a theft, damage or wrongdoing, examining the issue from all sides and not coming to hasty conclusions.

3. He must first attempt to approach the offender himself, if that is possible, gently rebuke him for his misdeed and urge him to set things right.
4. He must not exaggerate in his account of what transpired.
5. His intent must be only for the sake of achieving justice, and not God forbid, enjoying the negative light in which he is casting his fellow. Nor may he speak out of hatred that he already harbors for the subject.
6. If there is any way in which he can achieve the same results without having to resort to relating the negative information, he is required to take that course of action.
7. It must be clear that the consequences that the offender will suffer will be no more severe than those he would face were he to be brought to the Beit Din [Jewish court of law].⁴³

These conditions allow us to see that Judaism places protecting the innocent over not speaking *lashon ha-ra*.

Okay, so that's a specific example, but what about those awesome Facebook pages and Twitter accounts called "Overheard at X Campus" or "Overheard in X Location" or "X Problems" which could be about a school, a group of people, or even a race? Sure, we could not follow them and not contribute to them, but what happens if a friend is looking at it and reads it to us? We can't be blamed for it then, right? It doesn't give a specific person's name though, so maybe it's okay. Well, we can't help what we hear. It's what happens after that makes the difference.

It is prohibited by the Torah to *accept and believe* lashon hara. One who accepts it transgresses the prohibition of, "Do not accept a false report" [Shemot 23:1]...

It is also forbidden to intentionally *listen* to lashon hara *even* if one has no intention of believing it. However, there is a difference between (1) listening versus (2) believing lashon hara.

⁴³ Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hilchot Lashon Hara 10:1-2

1. *Listening* to lashon hara is forbidden if the information does not pertain to him. However, if the information being said might pertain to him in the future, it is permitted to listen in order to be prepared and protect himself [from damage or harm]. It is permitted because his intent is not to hear the derogatory information about the person, but rather to protect himself from harm.

2. However, it is forbidden under all circumstances to *believe* the lashon hara and decide in your heart that the information is true.⁴⁴

It seems that those Facebook pages and Twitter pages do not give material that is relevant to us on an individual level. Sure, it might be amusing, but what if we had something said about us on there? Would we be so amused? Instead of the information protecting us in the future, it might actually harm us. In terms of believing the information, it seems easy to do since there may not be a name attached. However, is it really true?

Not to use a cliché example (oops, too late!), but think of the game Telephone. We all know how it works. Someone comes up with a sentence and whispers it to the person next to them. The listener then has to repeat it to the next person and so on until we reach the end of the group. The last person then says the sentence out loud and, inevitably, it is completely wrong and hilarious. As the words get passed from person to person, they change. How are we to understand what is actually being said? The same thing happens in real life. We can overhear something said about someone else, but how do we actually know if it's true?

⁴⁴ *ibid.* 6:1-2

Rather than go up to the person and ask them directly if what was being said about them is true, Rabbi Avrohom Ehrman gives us a formula for believing rumors.

Rumors [i.e. lashon hara] may not be believed unless they are confirmed. Confirmation takes place when there exists: (1) a number of reports from (2) multiple sources (3) who are impartial.

(1) A number of reports is defined as the subject having been seen engaging in a consistent pattern of behavior over a period of time; one episode does not prove negative character. (2) Reports which originate from only one person are not considered reliable proof. (3) Moreover, if the sources dislike the subject, the reports are never considered reliable. Very often, negative information is widely circulated and accepted, but upon investigation, it is revealed that all the reports originated from a single source or from individuals who dislike the subject and are therefore not reliable, or that only one incident is under discussion [based on Chofetz Chaim, Hilchot Lashon Hara, Chap 7, Be'er Mayim Chayim 8].⁴⁵

This is pretty straightforward. Basically, we will not be able to believe rumors ever.

Think about it. A celebrity is reported to be having an affair. It is reported by 15 different magazines/tabloids/websites. Let's say that this celebrity has been accused of having multiple affairs. So that covers number 1 and 2 with a number of reports from multiple sources. But number 3, is not happening. The tabloids are not impartial. Their goal is to make money. So it doesn't seem that the reports can be believed. While a college student's affairs may not be published in various places, the same logic occurs. It might be easy to find multiple sources, but a pattern of this behavior may not be. In the end, the hardest one to find the truth in is the third condition: impartial reporters.

⁴⁵ Ehrman, A. (2002). *Journey To Virtue: The Laws Of Interpersonal Relationships In Business, Home And Society*. Brooklyn, N.Y: Mesorah Pubns Ltd. 122-123.

As a college student, I was accused of cheating on my boyfriend with a friend of mine. My boyfriend was alerted to the apparent affair while I was with him. His friend had heard through the grapevine that I had cheated. That boyfriend repeated the report to me. I was hurt. Why would someone say something like this? My boyfriend sort of believed it. I was even more hurt. Why would he believe this? I spent all of my time with him so how could it be possible? After calming my boyfriend down, we sought out more information about the rumor. My boyfriend's friend explained who he heard it from and we talked directly to that source. It turns out that this boy made it up because he was mad at my boyfriend and wanted to get back at him. He figured that by making my boyfriend unhappy, it would make them "equal" for not being partners on a class project.

Clearly this classmate maliciously spread *lashon ha-ra* and with the intent of hurting someone—multiple people. That one, tiny rumor falls into four of the five categories of *lashon ha-ra*: it caused disputes, was harmful, was untrue and derogatory, and cause pain. All of those things were exacerbated when the information was heard and then passed on. It is clear that my boyfriend's friend was just trying to protect him and warn him. However, the rumor was not confirmed by any of the three conditions. This was the first time I had been accused of such a thing and I had never cheated before. There was only one source, even though the one who started the rumor said there were multiple people. And, finally, the rumor-starter was most definitely not impartial. I am lucky that the situation was dealt with swiftly and did not involve any violence, but it could have been much worse.

The rumor could have gone viral. Today we use this as a term to explain when videos, articles, music, etc. are seen by nearly everyone. It spreads like wildfire and is unstoppable. It used to be that the term “viral” was used to describe an infection that quickly spread from person to person. You know, like Miriam’s leprosy and the fear of it going viral causing her to be quarantined? The same meaning is behind both understandings of “viral.” However, the latter seems to have a distinctly negative connotation. What if something that “goes viral” today on the internet is untrue? Then that also has a negative connotation. For example, there are plenty of articles and videos about Israel that go viral and have no basis in truth at all. Regardless of whether it is a disease or information going viral, it is out there. “Technology has heightened the power of words. With power comes responsibility... it’s time to take precisely that kind of responsibility.”⁴⁶

Judaism wants us to be responsible when it comes to our words and takes *lashon ha-ra* VERY seriously. Let’s look at a few examples:

- “Regarding anyone who speaks lashon hara, God says: ‘He and I cannot coexist in the same world.’”⁴⁷
- “Which man desires life, who loves days of seeing good? [If you so desire:] Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.”⁴⁸
- “One reason for the severity of the offense of lashon hara is based on the fact that a person’s attitudes have an impact on the higher worlds. The types of attitudes that one has in *this* world causes similar attitudes in the higher worlds. . . When someone speaks lashon hara about another person, he activates accusatory attitudes in the higher worlds against himself and against the Jewish

⁴⁶ Salkin, J. K. (2012). *Text Messages: A Torah Commentary for Teens*. Jewish Lights Publishing. 132.

⁴⁷ Arachin 15b

⁴⁸ Tehillim 34:13-14

people. Through his words he gives power to the Satan to accuse and bring the Jewish People to trial.”⁴⁹

- “The message of Devarim 24:8-9 is: Think about what happened to Miriam, who spoke about her younger brother, for whom she had risked her life to save from the Nile River. And she did not even speak negatively about him, other than to compare him to other prophets. And Moshe himself did not mind that she had spoken about him, as it says, “Now Moshe was extremely humble” [Bamidbar 12:3]. And in spite of all of this, she was still punished with tzara’at (leprosy)! All the more so for other wicked and foolish people who speak all types of haughty and pompous words. It is therefore fitting for anyone who wishes to improve himself to stay away from such people and from speaking with them.”⁵⁰
- “But the [ten] men who had ascended with him said, “We cannot ascend to [the land to drive out] that people for it is too strong for us!” They announced an evil report to the Children of Israel regarding the land that they had spied, saying, ‘The land through which we have passed is a land that devours its inhabitants! All the people that we saw there were huge... we were like grasshoppers in their eyes!’”⁵¹ The spies’ explicit lack of trust in God to protect them and bring them to that land was shared with the rest of the community; encouraging them to also question God. This blatant disregard for God’s promises is what caused them to not be able to enter the land of Israel.
- “This power of speech in man does not only come from the physical organs of speech [but rather, it comes from the soul too]... Therefore, the essence of man is a living being that speaks [for his power of speech combines his physical and soul aspects]... Therefore, someone who speaks lashon hara... sins with his speech, which is his essence. [On the other hand, if he speaks properly] he perfects his essence.”⁵²
- “The tongue is compared to an arrow, as the prophet says, ‘Their tongue is like a drawn arrow, speaking deceit. . .’ [Jeremiah 9:7]. . . How can one fix the consequences of one who speaks lashon hara? . . . There is no remedy. . .”⁵³

Those are just a few examples about how serious Judaism considers *lashon ha-ra*. It is not to be taken lightly. Separation from and abandonment by God, death, badly

⁴⁹ Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, *Shmirat HaLashon*, 1:2, Merkaz HaSefer Edition. 23-24.

⁵⁰ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Tumat Tzara’at 16:10

⁵¹ Numbers 13:31-33

⁵² Arachin 15b

⁵³ Ibid.

influencing the World to Come, leprosy, expulsion, losing one's essence, and never finding a remedy are some pretty intense repercussions. This type of reaction shows how Jews are unique. Speech is at the top of our agenda.

As much as gossip is considered negative in most contexts, it is important to note that there are people who find a benefit in gossip. This benefit is for those receivers of the piece of gossip. For the person who hears gossip, they hear about the action of a person, but can also infer the negativity surrounded by that behavior based on the reactions of those who are telling the story. In "The Virtues of Gossip: Reputational Information Sharing as Prosocial Behavior," a study was conducted in order to more clearly understand the positive aspects of gossip. The conclusion of the study is as follows:

Though gossip is often viewed as trivial or even antisocial, [the results of this study] support a view of gossip as, in fact, prosocial and critical to the reputation systems that help sustain fairness and cooperation in groups. Through the sharing of reputational information, antisocial individuals' reputations can precede them, serving as a warning to others who might otherwise have faced exploitation. A critical factor driving individuals' reputational information sharing is their underlying prosocial motivations, their desires to benefit and help others. As a result of these benevolent motives, individuals can more carefully select their interaction partners, developing mutually beneficial and trusting relationships with others.⁵⁴

This idea of cooperation along with a greater understanding of social norms are the main benefits seen in gossiping.

⁵⁴ Feinberg, M., Willer, R., Stellar, J., & Keltner, D. (2012). The Virtues of Gossip: Reputational Information Sharing as Prosocial Behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(5), 1015–1030.

Even with this information, it seems that most people automatically revert to the negative connotation of gossip. It has become a sore spot and is combined with the behaviors of bullying and spreading rumors. In college life, in Judaism, and in the world today, gossip is an important topic. Judaism offers many insights into various understandings of gossip, its repercussions, and the results of gossiping. It is now up to us to decide about our level of engagement in gossip and what it means. It is not an easy thing to shy away from since it is around us all the time. Sometimes many of us don't even know we are gossiping as we may feel like we are venting or sharing information that is important. No matter what, it is worth it to pause and think about all of the feathers going everywhere and how it is hard to pick them back up.

Relationships and Sex

When we think about college, thoughts about school, graduation, and parties might come to mind. What about our future? There are so many ideas about the future that pop up. Of course, occupation is one that is at the forefront of most people's minds when it comes to talk about college and what comes after. However, relationships play a large role in college life and afterwards. While friendships are definitely a significant part of that, romantic relationships are as well.

It may not be that every single person views their future as the 1950s nuclear family or even the possibility of being married. Marriage has become a controversial institution recently. As the LGBTQ community fights for their right to be legally married in each state, there are many who don't believe in marriage. Everyone has their reasons for wanting or not wanting to get married. With that being said, most people still engage in relationships and many of those can be long term, committed ones.

The romantic relationship may not be "the one" and end in marriage, but it could definitely help define our wants and needs. The norms of today's society push us towards thinking about "forever" and the fairy tale ending. It's a beautiful notion, but is it reality? Potentially, just probably not with the first relationship and maybe not the one from college. Even so, Jim Keen, in his book about his interfaith relationship, he explains that "In college. . . many relationships turn more serious. People consciously or unconsciously look for partners who will fit their notion (and their parents' notion) of

the ideal spouse.”⁵⁵ This point was proven in the story of his college relationship turning into a marriage.

However, whether a person believes in marriage or not, there is a substantial consensus that an important part of a romantic relationship is sex. Yes, this is shocking information, BUT WAIT! It gets better. Jewish texts are riddled with sex; the Torah, the Talmud, commentaries, and even more materials are appearing as sex becomes a more acceptable discussion topic in our culture. God tells us “to be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28), focusing on the importance of procreation, but in order for procreation to happen, there is sex. See? Even in just a short excerpt of a Biblical verse there is sex! There is even an entire curriculum called “Sex in the Texts” that focuses just on sex in Jewish texts to be taught in a religious school setting!⁵⁶ For the most part, sex is a positive thing in these Jewish sources. There are rules which vary from being focused on the woman to the male, from location to time, from amount of sex to which positions, and even about sex with other faiths/groups of people. Seriously, sex is all over Judaism. In fact, in a book dedicated to students asking difficult questions, Daniel Polish, explains this quite well: “No single Jewish view of sex exists. Rather, one could say that our sages have expressed conflicting attitudes—some puritanical, others more permissive.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Keen, J. (2006). *Inside Intermarriage: A Christian Partner’s Perspective on Raising a Jewish Family: 1* (1 edition.). URJ Press. page 9.

⁵⁶ Yedwab, P. (2001). *Sex in the Texts*. (K. Schwartz, Ed.). New York: URJ Press.

⁵⁷ Polish, D. F. (1991). *Drugs, Sex, and Integrity: What Does Judaism Say*. New York, N.Y: URJ Press. page 15.

It has become more common to talk about sex in American culture as well. Not all sex is discussed in a marital context. Of course, there are shows that depict premarital sex and the ways different religious families deal with it, but a lot of times sex is talked about in frameworks outside of marriage. There is even a false notion that the college students today personify *the* hookup culture⁵⁸. There have been many studies on this culture and what has caused it and what students think about it. But what is “this culture”? How is a “hookup” defined? In a review written in the *Review of General Psychology*, a group of psychologists sought to understand what the “hookup culture” actually is today by looking at current literature and discovering what is missing from research about this culture. As the authors sought out a direct definition they explored many different understandings of hookup. The one that was most widely agreed upon was that “The term hookup focuses on the uncommitted nature of a sexual encounter rather than focus on what behaviors ‘count’.”⁵⁹ That is to say that the behaviors can range from kissing all the way to intercourse and the ambiguity is still retained. While there are many definitions of a hookup, the one thing that remains consistent is the idea that those who are hooking up are not interested in or in a committed, monogamous relationship with one another.

⁵⁸ In an article entitled “The Myth of College ‘Hookup Culture’,” Lehmiller explains how college students really aren’t having more casual sex than students in other generation. It uses a study published in the *Journal of Sex Research* as its analysis as it compared data from the General Social Survey of two different eight-year periods. (Lehmiller, J. J. (2014, July 16). The Myth Of College “Hookup Culture” - Relationships - Boston.com. *Boston.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.boston.com/life/relationships/2014/07/16/the-myth-college-hookup-culture/rBdoVnwt71wBIMPG5nIHQM/story.html>)

⁵⁹ Garcia, J. R., Reiber, C., Massey, S. G., & Merriwether, A. M. (2012). Sexual Hookup Culture: A Review. *Review of General Psychology*, 16(2), 161–176.

Whether it is explained as a hookup or not, sex outside of a monogamous relationship falls under the category of premarital sex. Even if the person engaging in intercourse doesn't believe in marriage, it is still in this category. This is definitely true in a Jewish context. Since the Torah and the medieval Rabbis were not familiar with the hookup culture that is seen today, the discussion around sex is focused on a marital context. It is barely addressed in non-marital situations, except for those laws stemming from stories of rape, adultery, and bestiality.

It is important to note that the Torah never specifically outlaws premarital sex. The reason we find this interesting is because there are many other sexual prohibitions listed, but this is not one of them. In fact, the Torah actually allows for one kind of sexual relationship without marriage: concubines. As MyJewishLearning.com, a transdenominational Jewish website explains, "A concubine or *pilgesh* is a woman who, though involved exclusively with one man, does not receive the legal benefits of marriage. In biblical times, concubines were kept in addition to a wife or wives. In recent centuries, Jewish authorities have, for the most part, dismissed the validity of concubinage."⁶⁰ It is important to note that the concubines were noted because of the differences in status for them and their sons as compared to the wives and the wives' sons. While there may be a social standing attributed to women based on their sexual relations and marital status, this type of relationship may not be something that is seen on a daily basis in modern times, but it's not something we can ignore. A concubine is a

⁶⁰ Jewish Views on Premarital Sex - My Jewish Learning. (n.d.). Retrieved December 2, 2014, from http://www.myjewishlearning.com/life/Sex_and_Sexuality/Premarital_Sex.shtml?p=0

definitively different type of relationship in which sex is involved and even considered normal. In the Jewish conversation about premarital sex, most of the focus is not on the concubines in the Torah.

Since it has already been explained what falls under the category of premarital sex, how are we to understand it from a combination of a college students' perspective and Jewish understanding? In an essay from the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at Brandeis University, a specific essay was written by students for Jewish college students on the Jewish views about premarital sex. In it, the author states:

As much as. . . different thinkers may disagree, most share at least one thing in common: they promote the importance of sexual ethics in guiding sexual behavior. Most of my sources, regardless of ideological background, take a strong stance against what they see as a sexually unethical American society, reflected in practices such as one-night stands, uncommitted sexual relationships, sex used to obtain favors, and exhibitionism. Liberal and traditional thinkers alike oppose the commodification and hollowness of relationships based only on sex, and they advocate for building meaningful connections between people in sexual relationships. They disagree on how to build those meaningful connections (whether through marriage or some other kind of commitment), but they do define their particular codes of sexual ethics against the values (or lack thereof) of the dominant culture.⁶¹

The focus shifts from a direct prohibition against premarital sex (in some denominations) to the examination of ethical sexual behavior.

Let's look closer at the sexual encounter of a one-night stand. According to Jewish texts, this is something that is not supposed to happen and can become harmful to those involved. The pain that arises from sexual encounters like one night stands

⁶¹ For Young Jewish Adults | The Feminist Sexual Ethics Project | Brandeis University. (n.d.). Retrieved December 2, 2014, from <http://www.brandeis.edu/projects/fse/judaism/yja.html>

could be physical, emotional, or mental and even a combination. In a situation that I have seen many times in the college environment, one-night stands happen and then someone gets hurt. It could go two ways. The first is a situation where a one-night stand occurs and a friend of one of the participants has a crush on the other participant. For example, in college, my friend, let's call her Susie, had a one-night stand with a guy I had a huge crush on. When I found out about the "night of fun," I was hurt. Why would Susie do that to me when she *knows* that I liked him? It ended up ruining the close bond I had with Susie, eventually moving our friendship to a Facebook acquaintance. It also made me question my feelings for the guy since he engaged in questionable behavior. This is definitely not the only time a situation like this happened to me or people I know.

The second situation in which someone could get hurt is focused around one or both of the people engaged in the sexual activity. To be quite honest and open, I was hurt in an instance of a one-night stand; when I lost my virginity. My former boyfriend decided to come visit me during his college's spring break. We had discussed his visit and expressed that this visit was a visit between friends and nothing else. Our relationship had had many ups and downs during high school and it seemed to be the best decision to keep the visit friendly. Everything was going well, until we both attended a fraternity party. Many of my good friends were members of the fraternity and it was a place where I felt comfortable. Both my former boyfriend and I were intoxicated and had, for some reason, deliberately tried to make each other upset and jealous. With the torrent of emotions that comes from being intoxicated, I ended the

evening crying with my former boyfriend consoling me. I blacked out. The next thing I know, he was on top of me and I was saying “oh my gosh, we’re having sex!” I honestly don’t remember much from the experience, at all. What I do remember is that the next day, I took him to the bus station and we never saw each other again. He refused to talk to me, would not discuss the situation, and ended up stealing some things from me – besides my virginity. I recognize that this is an extreme case of a one-night stand, but it is not the only time something like this has happened. One of the best ways I have ever heard a sexual situation like this described is by Avram Mandell:

The Hebrew word for weapon is *neshek* and the Hebrew word for kiss is *n'shikah*. . . Judaism reminds us that sex can be one of the most beautiful, meaningful, and sacred experiences two people share, or it can cause tremendous damage. With that duality comes the need for respect, reflection, and restraint.⁶²

Losing my virginity should have been a beautiful, meaningful, and sacred experience, but, instead, it caused tremendous damage. In a one-night stand, the latter is typically the result. It may mean nothing and be solely focused on sexual pleasure, but in many ways, it doesn’t matter: it is still harmful.

Situations like mine help make the conversation about premarital sex a controversial and important one. Basically every movement’s official statement tries to discourage premarital sex. From an excerpt of Rabbi Michael Gold’s book *Does God Belong in the Bedroom?*, MyJewishLearning.com explains a general overview of the denominations’ views. “While most Orthodox and Conservative rabbis do consider sex

⁶² Grushcow, L. J. (Ed.). (2014). *The Sacred Encounter: Jewish Perspectives on Sexuality*. New York: CCAR Press. xxxv.

outside marriage inappropriate, most Reform and Reconstructionist (and some Conservative) rabbis are less severe in their language. The official position of the Reform movement is that sex outside of marriage is not ideal, but it is not considered 'forbidden.' Few Reconstructionist rabbis would disapprove of all sex outside marriage."⁶³ This is succinct and helpful, but let's delve more into the reasoning.

In the Orthodox world, premarital sex is considered something that is immoral and improper, even if it is not expressly stated as a sin. In order to prevent acts like this happening, some traditional Jews practice *tzniut*, a way of maintaining modesty in both the way that one dresses and behaves. Part of this is making sure that there are no immoral or sinful sexual acts happening. The idea is that if Jews are covered up and not allowed to commingle unsupervised, then nothing bad could happen. There are various ways that *tzniut* protects Jews from even having a desire for the person of the opposite sex. Some of these include men not walking behind a woman, men and women being separated by a *mechitza*, a wall that cannot be seen through, and even not allowing women to pray or sing aloud.

Not all of us exist in the Orthodox world. In a question posed to the Central Conference of American Rabbis Responsa Committee, it was asked "should long-term relationships between mature adults be discouraged?"⁶⁴ The answer is lengthy and covers the 1979 responsum asking "What is the Jewish attitude toward heterosexual

⁶³ Traditional Sources on Non-marital Sex - My Jewish Learning. (n.d.). Retrieved December 1, 2014, from http://www.myjewishlearning.com/life/Sex_and_Sexuality/Premarital_Sex/Traditional_Sources.shtml?p=0

⁶⁴ CCAR Responsum RR21 no. 5756.10

relations between two consenting adult single individuals?"⁶⁵ Regardless of the time between the two responsa (1979 to 1995), the answer remains the same in that Reform Judaism "consider[s] premarital and extramarital chastity to be our ideal."⁶⁶ However, it is noted in that responsum that

In the years that have elapsed since 1979, however, new attitudes to long-term non-marital relationships have emerged which are significant enough to warrant reviewing the 1979 response. Non-marital sexual relationships were, of course, widespread and nothing new in 1979. But by the 1990s they had become fully accepted--even expected--preludes to, and sometimes substitutes for, marriage. This acceptance has led to a developing view within Reform Judaism that "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."⁶⁷

So, in a way, the idea of long-term committed relationships, engaging in sex without marriage would be okay.

However, the main comment that is said across most liberal Judaism's stance on premarital sex is focused on Jewish ethics and values. For example, Rabbi Jonathan Blake explains:

Sometimes teens ask me, at what age may a person have sex, especially when the couple is in love? I respond, "With sexual relationships, age matters, and maturity matters more. Love matters, but love can not be the only thing that matters. Here's what also matters: health and safety (physical and emotional); trust; modesty and privacy; honest communication; equality; fidelity; responsibility for the risks of sexual activity; a commitment to the relationships' long-term well-being. Love is

⁶⁵ CCAR Responsum ARR 480-483

⁶⁶ CCAR Responsum RR21 no. 5756.10

⁶⁷ Ibid. But the final quote is attributed to the "Mission Statement" (Interim Report of the C.C.A.R. Ad Hoc Committee on Human Sexuality, 1996, p. 5.

not enough. . . at any age! Any healthy sexual relationship should exhibit these Jewish values in order to be a source of joy and holiness."⁶⁸

He also highlights the importance of a long-term relationship, but the focus on Jewish values is what should be explored. This is a long list of things that matter when thinking about premarital sex and maybe we could argue that Rabbi Blake is really trying to convince teens not to engage in it and maybe we could say that Rabbi Blake is simply showing all of the aspects that should be a part of a relationship before sex is in the picture.

While Rabbi Blake details aspects of a relationship that are important before engaging in sexual activity, some would argue that there is an element missing: being of the same faith. What does this have to do with anything? Why is this even important? Do the terms interdating or intermarriage relate at all to the topic of sexual intimacy before marriage or in general? There are some that would say that there is a strong correlation. Some would argue otherwise. Relationships are quite typical as we said before, but interfaith relationships bring forth two different categories. One is interdating and the other is intermarriage. Interdating is understood to be a romantic courtship which includes people of different races, ethnicities, or religious groups. And in many cases, people say that interdating can lead to intermarriage and so interdating is to be discouraged. On interfaithfamily.com, they list 7 tips for talking to your children about interdating.

1. **Use positive, not negative terminology.** We don't believe that telling your children that you don't want them to interdate is likely

⁶⁸ Grushcow, L. J. (Ed.). (2014). *The Sacred Encounter: Jewish Perspectives on Sexuality*. New York: CCAR Press. xxxx.

to be effective. It may even have the opposite of the intended effect on them. Instead, explain to them why you hope that they will want to live a Jewish life.

2. **Explain to them that if they'd like to have a Jewish family and a Jewish life, their chances are greater if they marry someone who is Jewish.** It's certainly possible to have a rich Jewish life in an interfaith family, but it can take more work than in an in-married family.
3. **Explain to them that if they'd like to marry someone Jewish, their best chance for doing so is exclusively dating Jews.** They may say that dating is only dating, but almost all married relationships begin with a date--and very few of those couples thought that the date was going to lead to marriage when they met.
4. **Tell them that you will love them no matter who their partner is.**
5. **Tell them that, in your experience, love does not "conquer all."** If a potential partner currently has a strong conviction about religion that is different than yours, their conviction may grow, not lessen, as time goes on. Change is part of any relationship, but partners are unlikely to change each other's most deeply-held convictions.
6. **Ask them non-judgmental questions about their date, or boyfriend or girlfriend.** Showing genuine interest in all their dates--Jewish or not--will earn you credibility and respect. If you don't have anything nice to say about one of their partners or dates, don't say anything at all. If you establish a mature, non-judgmental relationship with them, you are more likely to have an influence on their decisions down the road.
7. **Using negative reinforcement is a big gamble.** We've heard of parents who don't forbid their children to interdate but will only pay for their children's date with Jews. That kind of strategy may work, but it may also lead to resentment, alienation or rebellion.⁶⁹

Clearly this is a big conversation and potential concern, even for those intermarried couples. While these tips may be controversial for some, an even more controversial discussion has been heating up in the recent news.

⁶⁹ InterfaithFamily. (n.d.). Tips for Talking to Your Children About Interdating - InterfaithFamily. Retrieved January 1, 2015, from http://www.interfaithfamily.com/relationships/interdating/Tips_for_Talking_to_Your_Children_About_Interdating.shtml

As part of United Synagogue Youth's (USY) Constitution, Section Five, Line 2 stated: "It is expected that leaders of the organization will refrain from relationships which can be construed as interdating."⁷⁰ On December 22, 2014, the USY International Convention was convened in Atlanta. During the conference, about 42 leaders "voted to amend its standards of leadership, adding clauses dealing with bullying and *lashon hara* (gossip). . . . [And] the amended language for the clause dealing with interdating."⁷¹ While the conversation is raging on many outlets, these changes in the leadership guidelines are only directly relevant to about 100 youth leaders internationally. Total. Yet, it is a whirlwind of articles, tweets, crazy headlines, and many, many commentaries in various forms. The idea is that these 100 leaders, held to the highest standards, can be the role models for the rest of the youth as they follow the Conservative movement's ideals. The newly amended clause says: "The Officers will strive to model healthy Jewish dating choices. These include recognizing the importance of dating within the Jewish community and treating each person with the recognition that they were created *Betzelem Elohim* (in the image of God)."⁷² The youth leaders voted this new amendment in after hours of discussion on the topic. As the conversation continues, so must ours.

⁷⁰ Wiener, J. (2010, December 7). A Secret Love No More. Retrieved December 24, 2014, from http://www.thejewishweek.com/special_sections/directions/secret_love_no_more.

⁷¹ Borschel-Dan, A. (2014, December 25). Jewish world erupts as USY gives interdating a kinder spin. Retrieved December 25, 2014, from <http://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-world-erupts-as-usy-gives-interdating-a-kinder-spin/>.

⁷² Ibid.

No one can tell who we will fall in love with. No one can tell us how to fall in love. It is up to each one of us. It is our path in life that will bring us forward; whether that path is guided by free will or by God's decree. This is not a place for me to say that interdating should or shouldn't happen because it could or could not lead to intermarriage. This is, most definitely, not a place for me to say that intermarriage is or is not ruining Judaism in America. Instead, each one of us needs to determine our own views on the issue. Because, after all, all of us are *betzelem Elohim*, made in the image of God, and so no matter whom we fall in love with, they are part of us. In the end, what we need to remember is "every marriage is an intermarriage"⁷³ and the same thing goes for dating. No matter what, a relationship will be a compilation of two people with various backgrounds who must learn to be together and learn about each other in order to succeed.

In terms of the ideas of intermarriage and interdating, interfaith relationships don't seem to be the biggest concern for most people. In 2013, the Pew Research Center released a study that shook the Jewish world. The study explored all aspects of modern day American Jewish life. The results sparked many debates and discussions. Some people believed that the results were proof that Judaism as a religious movement was going to fail and fade away. Others believed that the study wasn't showing the Jewish community anything that we didn't know before the survey.⁷⁴ The Pew Study was so controversial that it generated even more studies to explore the information that

⁷³ Spoken by Professor Bruce Phillips in a course entitled "Intermarriage" in Fall 2014.

⁷⁴ Smith, Greg and Alan Cooperman. "What happens when Jews intermarry?" Pew Research Center. November 12, 2013.

people thought was missing. One of those was the 2014 Demographic Survey of American Jewish College Students Survey, which sought to represent the college-aged Jews' views on various topics and their demographics.

In both the 2013 Pew Research Study and the 2014 American Jewish College Students Survey, the information looks at intermarriage and interdating respectively. From the Pew Study, "44% of all currently married Jewish respondents – and 58% of those who have married since 2005 – indicate they are married to a non-Jewish spouse."⁷⁵ For the College Students Survey, the question asked was "Which of the following applies to you regarding your relationships?" The choices were: All my previous boyfriends/girlfriends have been Jewish; my current relationship is my first one and s/he is Jewish; some, but not all, of my previous boyfriends/girlfriends have been Jewish; my current relationship is my first one and s/he is not Jewish; none of my previous boyfriends/girlfriends have been Jewish; I have never been in a relationship; prefer not to say; and don't know. The answers were then divided into male and female percentages. The highest percentage was from the "some, but not all, of my previous boyfriends/girlfriends have been Jewish" response with a tie at 31% of both male and female responses. While the study expands on this by saying "this generation might wish to have Jewish children in the future but currently they are not worried about interdating," the question posed does not seem to allow for the position that this

⁷⁵ A Portrait of Jewish Americans. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>

statement makes.⁷⁶ It does not ask if the students want to have Jewish children or if they are worried about interdating. It only asks about the quantitative details of their dating life. However, it does stick with the same understanding of the Pew Study; intermarriage/interdating is becoming more frequent.

Many people are terrified about the implications of intermarriage and interdating as a potential destruction of the future of Judaism. It is thought that by engaging in interfaith dating, that is automatically a sign that intermarriage could happen. It makes sense, right? If no one dates someone who is not Jewish, then they won't marry someone not Jewish. But is this really the reality we should be striving for? Will keeping people from dating entire groups of people really help stop intermarriage? Some believe that it will. Others have taken a more realistic approach. Alan Dershowitz explains:

In America, and in other nations that separate church from state, one's Jewishness is a matter of self-definition, and anyone who wants to be considered a Jew, or a half-Jew, or a partial Jew, or a person of Jewish heritage, has a right to be so considered. As Isaiah Berlin once put it: A Jew is anyone who wishes to share in the Jewish future. Such an open-ended approach to Judaism will not create conflict; it will recognize – in a positive, constructive, and inclusive way – our current reality and our future situation.⁷⁷

This is a different way to understand our current society, but one that is more realistic in terms of the future of Judaism and what we can do to ensure its survival. In an ELItalks video, Jack Botwinik speaks about his experiences with interdating and how it actually

⁷⁶ Keysar, Ariela and Barry A. Kosmin. "Demographic Survey of American Jewish College Students 2014." Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut.

⁷⁷ Dershowitz, A. M. (1997). *The Vanishing American Jew: In Search of Jewish Identity for the Next Century* (1st edition.). Boston: Little, Brown and Company. 324.

brought him to becoming a more active, educated, informed, and practicing Jew. His experience dating a Chinese woman led him to talk to her about what Jews believe in comparison to her religious ideals. The conversations and the questions she asked sparked the curiosity in Botwinik so much that he sought the answers. Not just the ones that would answer the question and move on, but those that would really fulfill the intellectual and religious depths that come with discovering a religion.⁷⁸

Clearly there are people who see both sides of interdating and that conversation is still happening, so why is intermarriage on the Jewish radar right now? Well. . . not *just* right now. It's been a topic of discussion for a long time. Let's take a look at some of the studies that explore the statistics about intermarriage. In 1990, the National Jewish Population Survey stated that Jewish intermarriage rates are over fifty percent⁷⁹. In 2009, the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life sought to find out what the rates of intermarriage were for each of the different religions in America. Out of the total population surveyed, sixty-three percent marry within their religion.⁸⁰ It sounds like a lot, but what does it actually mean? How does it actually affect the future of Judaism? Is the Jewish mother's pressure for finding a NJB (Nice Jewish Boy) or NJG (Nice Jewish Girl) to marry an actual reality?

⁷⁸ Botwinik, J. (2014, June 3). How Interfaith Dating Reinvigorated My Judaism [Text and Video]. Retrieved January 1, 2015, from <http://elitalks.org/how-interfaith-dating-reinvigorated-my-judaism>

⁷⁹ Anderson, W. L. (2009). The Goy of Sex: A Short Historical Tour of Relations between Jews and Non-Jews. In D. Ruttenberg (Ed.), *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*. New York: New York University Press. page 136.

⁸⁰ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. "Religiously Mixed Couples: Cupid's Arrow Often Hits People of Different Faiths." February 10, 2009. Analysis. Source: Pew Form U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008.

What about the Torah? The Rabbis? In the Torah, there are quite a few references to intermarriage or at least interfaith sexual relations. As early as Genesis 6, we see a little bit of “boundary-crossing sex” even though there was no categorization of Jews and non-Jews at that point in time.

וַיֵּרְאוּ בְנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־בָּנוֹת הָאָדָם כִּי טֹבֹת הֵנָּה וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּחָרוּ:

The sons of God saw the daughters of men since they were desirable so they took wives from the group of them – whichever they chose. (Genesis 6:2)

Then after this encounter, God brings about a flood to get rid of all the bad things happening in the world. It seems that it could be said that one of the reasons God decided he needed to wipe out the world was because of this behavior. However, it did not do the trick as this type of behavior is seen in various places. As Wendy Love Anderson explains in her chapter “The Goy of Sex” in *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*, there are a few Biblical characters⁸¹ who “are explicitly or implicitly described as forming sexual connections with non-Israelites.”⁸² But how could this be allowed? Isn’t this what God tried to stop? The Rabbis were worried about the nature of this behavior and so tried to explain it in other ways – even changing situations from the Bible.⁸³ Some of those situations changed the interfaith relations to incest or adultery. For example, in the case of the Biblical character, Dinah, Jacob’s daughter, the text

⁸¹ Such as Simon, Judah, Joseph, and Dinah.

⁸² Anderson, W. L. (2009). The Goy of Sex: A Short Historical Tour of Relations between Jews and Non-Jews. In D. Ruttenberg (Ed.), *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*. New York: New York University Press. page 137.

⁸³ Ibid.

seems to state that she was raped. However, if we explore deeper in the text, it is said that Shechem speaks to her persuasively and loves her.⁸⁴ Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, kill Shechem stating that it was due to Dinah's rape and Shechem's treatment of her as a whore. As the *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* explains, "sexual intercourse in the ancient world was to create permanent bonding and obligation; but in prostitution, there is no bonding or obligation. By saying that Dinah has become like a prostitute, Simeon and Levi might be suggesting that, from their perspective, Dinah and Shechem's intercourse could never lead to bonding and obligation."⁸⁵ Why would this be? Could it be because it was an interfaith relationship, even if Shechem and the rest of the men in the town agreed to be circumcised and believe in our God?

The Rabbis seemed to feel that intermarriage and interfaith relations were actually the biggest threat to Judaism and its delineation as a holy and chosen people. For example, Wendy Love Anderson explains: "a passage in the minor Talmudic tractate *Derekh Eretz Rabbah* claims to identify a total of fourteen negative biblical commandments being transgressed when a Jewish man has sex with a Gentile woman, including prohibitions against mixing different species of animals (Deut. 22:10), different types of seeds (Deut. 22:9), and different types of cloth (Deut. 22:11). . . Rabbinic Judaism tended. . . to see boundary-crossing sexual relationships as indicative of

⁸⁴ Genesis 34

⁸⁵ Dinah - My Jewish Learning. (n.d.). Retrieved January 13, 2015, from <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Torah/Genesis/Dinah.shtml?p=0>

systemic moral failure.”⁸⁶ While interreligious relationships were being brought forth as worse than adultery, compared to bestiality, and given as the reason for disasters brought upon the Jews, these relationships did not end. The combinations of name calling, the accusations of violating commandments, and being seen as failing the Jewish people would seem like enough for some people to stay away from those interfaith relationships, but it wasn’t.

While discussing the Rabbis, it is interesting to also look at the Jewish marriage ceremony. Within the Talmud, the format of the wedding ceremony is defined. Two parts are laid out: *kiddushin* and *nisuin*. Kiddushin is the first part and is focused on the betrothal. Nisuin is the second part and is the official marriage elevating the couple into true married life as the husband and wife then live together. In the past these two distinct ceremonies were held as much as a year apart, but in today’s society, we see them combined into one ceremony. The Kiddushin stage is the one to look at a little more closely. When a man wants to marry a woman, he “acquires her.”⁸⁷ He can do this in three ways, only needing to do one in order to fulfill the steps towards marriage: money, a contract, or sexual intercourse. In terms of the money, it is typically the wedding ring that counts for this. It’s also worth noting that if the woman was “bought” with money, it is not to be understood as a financial transaction because the amount of money exchanged is small and because the fiancé cannot resell her. Instead, the

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Kiddushin 1,1

woman is seen as accepting her husband when she agrees to the money, contract, or sexual intercourse and without her consent, she is not betrothed to be married.⁸⁸

In the kiddushin ceremony, this acquisition is also understood to be way of blessing the impending marriage and the relationship of the two. For example, if we look at the root of the word kiddushin, קִידּוּשִׁין, we find the word Kadosh, קָדֹשׁ, meaning holy in the sense of making something holy and sanctifying an act. This helps us see how the kiddushin ceremony shows us how each member of the couple is made holy by each other's presence and the promise that has been made to each other. In fact, it separates the couple from everyone else and shows how their relationship is unique and holy in its individuality.

When we talk about the ketubah, the marriage contract, which is presented to the wife from the husband⁸⁹, it involves the roles that each person will fulfill. The ketubah was originally understood as a contract that delineates the husband's obligations to the wife and future children as well as elements which we understand as a prenuptial agreement in today's society. However, the ketubah is more than this. It is not just a contract that legally binds the husband and wife and lays out all possible future scenarios in their lives. It is a sacred covenant between these two people. There is a lot of imagery in that deeper spiritual meaning which stems from Kabbalah. In that imagery, there is a large focus on the covenant made between God and the Jewish

⁸⁸ Kiddushin 2a-b

⁸⁹ That is the traditional way of doing it. Nowadays the couples write them together, use already formatted wording, and/or use other ways of presenting the ketubah.

people. So while the ketubah highlights the sanctity of the covenant built between the couple as they enter into married life, it also represents a marriage of the Jewish people and God. Even more so, this is why many people believe that intermarriages cannot occur since a marriage to a person is continuing that covenant of continuing the Jewish people and their relationship with God.

Why were these relationships still happening then? It can be easily attributed to the commingling that was done at that time with their neighbors. We know this because Anderson explains that “most early examples are individual rather than collective, but an archive or papyri from an Egyptian Jewish colony in the fifth century BCE includes records of several marriages and divorces between Jewish and non-Jewish partners, some with apparent sanction from the Jewish community.”⁹⁰ In the middle ages, more examples came forward and pointed towards the idea that “Jewish-Gentile relationships were more scandalous than unusual.”⁹¹ In a more modern period, there were less governmental legal prohibitions to these relationships. Interfaith relationships became more common as people tended to define themselves by nationality rather than religion. Especially as the 19th and 20th centuries saw so much immigration, the boundaries began to blur as there was more assimilation becoming apparent. The view on intermarriage has changed so drastically that in 2000, the

⁹⁰ Anderson, W. L. (2009). *The Goy of Sex: A Short Historical Tour of Relations between Jews and Non-Jews*. In D. Ruttenberg (Ed.), *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*. New York: New York University Press. page 144.

⁹¹ Ibid. page 145.

American Jewish Committee surveyed Jews and 50% of them “felt that opposition to Jewish intermarriage was ‘racist’.”⁹² Well, that’s quite the drastic shift.

It is important to pause here and explain that throughout all of these surveys and statistics, there are significant statements made from specific denominations. The Orthodox community still believes that intermarriage is forbidden citing passages such as:

וְלֹא תִתְּחַתֵּן בָּם בְּתוּרָה לֹא־תִתֵּן לְבִי וּבִתּוֹ לֹא־תִקַּח לְבִנְךָ: כִּי־יִסִּיר אֶת־בְּנֶךָ
מֵאִתִּי וְעָבְדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְחָרָה אַף־יִהְיֶה בָּכֶם וְהִשְׁמִידְךָ מִהֶרָ:

You shall not marry with them⁹³ and don’t give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will take away your child from Me and have them serve other Gods. Then God’s anger will be kindled against you all and He will quickly exterminate you.
(Deuteronomy 7:3-4)

This passage is also cited as being the source for matrilineal descent; a mother has to be Jewish in order for the child to be considered Jewish. The Reform movement does not use this to show how “mixed marriage is contrary to the Jewish tradition and should be discouraged,”⁹⁴ especially since the movement does not see this citation as a proof-text for matrilineal descent.⁹⁵

The Conservative movement takes it a different way as well.

In the past, intermarriage. . . was viewed as an act of rebellion, a rejection of Judaism. Jews who intermarried were essentially excommunicated. But now, intermarriage is often the result of living in an

⁹² Ibid. page 147.

⁹³ “Them” can be understood to be Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites.

⁹⁴ CCAR Responsum RR21 no. 5756.10

⁹⁵ The Reform Movement believes in Patrilineal Descent, meaning that a child can be considered Jewish when their father is Jewish. See CCAR Responsum CARR 61-68, which can also be found in the 1984 Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis on pages 174-179.

open society. . . If our children end up marrying non-Jews, we should not reject them. We should continue to give our love and by that retain a measure of influence in their lives, Jewishly and otherwise. Life consists of constant growth and our adult children may yet reach a stage when Judaism has new meaning for them. However, the marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew is not a celebration for the Jewish community. . . .⁹⁶

For the most part, as the progressive movements recognize the trend of intermarriage, there is an understanding of its existence and an acceptance, even if it may be reluctant.

For this reason, there have been multiple outreach groups created throughout the Jewish community. The programs are “designed to inspire Jewish identification in those Jews who have become involved with non-Jews.”⁹⁷ While this may be true for some of the organizations, there seems to have been a large push for bringing the non-Jewish spouse or significant into Judaism. This does not mean conversion as the be-all end-all, but it can be an ending destination if the person so chooses. Instead the focus is to make the non-Jewish spouse feel comfortable in their spouse’s religious and cultural community. In a book written for intermarried couples, the preface states:

Many in the Jewish community see interfaith marriage as a crisis, contributing to the demographic changes that threaten the faith’s very survival. We see intermarriage as an *opportunity*—an opportunity to stem the downward spiral of population decline and instead add people to its ranks. We believe that interfaith marriage encourages both partners to confront their feelings about religion in a profound way that often deepens their spiritual commitment. We see interfaith marriage as a relationship between two people, one who happens to be Jewish and one who happens not to be, rather than as numbers in a zero-sum game.

Intermarriage is not a failure of our community or its institutions. Rather, it is a by-product of America’s open society. It presents a challenge for the community to reach out and embrace those who have found their

⁹⁶ *Leadership Council of Conservative Judaism*. “Statement on Intermarriage”, Adopted on 7th March 1995

⁹⁷ Anderson, W. L. (2009). *The Goy of Sex: A Short Historical Tour of Relations between Jews and Non-Jews*. In D. Ruttenberg (Ed.), *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*. New York: New York University Press. page 147.

way into our midst as a result of a loving relationship. It calls on us to create institutions of meaning for all those with a spiritual thirst and hunger, regardless of the path that brought the individual to the Jewish community.⁹⁸

This book was written in 2002 and still this dream of inclusion has not been completely met. In some communities it has and in some it never will.

Another aspect to look at is the offspring of intermarried couples. On one hand, the offspring of intermarriages (one Jewish parent) are significantly more likely to categorize themselves as atheist, agnostic, or nothing than those who were born to two Jewish parents. On the other hand, “the survey suggests that a rising percentage of the children of intermarriages are Jewish in adulthood. Among Americans age 65 and older who say they had one Jewish parent, 25% are Jewish today. By contrast, among adults under 30 with one Jewish parent, 59% are Jewish today. In this sense, intermarriage may be transmitting Jewish identity to a growing number of Americans.”⁹⁹ So it is hard to say if intermarriage is really affecting the offspring in a way that is detrimental to Judaism. However, it seems that a child of an intermarried couple is more likely to be intermarried themselves. Whereas in a family where both parents were Jewish, the child tends to also marry someone Jewish. In looking at multiple generations, the Pew Study compared the children of two Jewish parents or those of intermarried couples. A significantly larger amount of those with two Jewish parents did consider themselves Jewish when those with one Jewish parents were split down the middle of considering

⁹⁸ Olitzky, K. M., & Littman, J. P. (2002). *Making a Successful Jewish Interfaith Marriage: The Jewish Outreach Institute Guide to Opportunities, Challenges and Resources* (1 edition.). Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights. x.

⁹⁹ Smith, Greg and Alan Cooperman. “What happens when Jews intermarry?” Pew Research Center. November 12, 2013.

themselves Jewish by religion or not. To be fair, it is worth it to mention that those who “consider themselves Jewish or partially Jewish aside from religion” are categorized as “Jews of no religion” in the table. It seems then that these results are not truly representative of those who consider themselves Jewish. Many people now have considered themselves to be “culturally Jewish”.

So what does all of this mean for us TODAY? As time has gone on, the strict understandings of sexual ethics and ethnic/religious boundaries have ebbed and flowed. Today, in general as a Jewish people, we are in a period of less stringency in relation to these issues. For example, in Isaac ben Eliakum’s *Sefer Lev Tov*, a - sixteenth century Yiddish ethical text, he explains that “the sin of lying with a Gentile woman is more grievous than adultery with a Jewess, and anyone who finds a man lying with a Gentile woman may freely kill him. Indeed, it is a great *mitzvah* to slay him immediately.”¹⁰⁰ That is harsh. In modern times, adultery is much worse than an interfaith relationship and there are no consequences for the action bound by commandments or law. What about sexual ethics? In Deuteronomy 22:23-24, it is said that a man and an engaged female virgin have sex and are found, they are both to be stoned to death because she didn’t cry out loud enough for people to hear her. This definitely is controversial as it places blame on the woman, but the Mishnah explicitly states this to mean one who has assaulted that woman, placing the blame on him.¹⁰¹ Today, we don’t use stoning as a

¹⁰⁰ Anderson, W. L. (2009). The Goy of Sex: A Short Historical Tour of Relations between Jews and Non-Jews. In D. Ruttenberg (Ed.), *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*. New York: New York University Press. page 140. See note 12.

¹⁰¹ Sanhedrin 53a

punishment and it is widely accepted that victims of rape are not to have blame placed on them.

It is clear to see how the lines between interfaith relationships and sexual ethics can blur in Jewish text as the two can sometimes be discussed in one verse. The same is for this chapter. There is overlap in certain places, but in others there are not. The examples can continue on and on, but we get the idea of how there have been changes to the ways Jews look at both relationships and sex.

The question now is what does this mean for college students? The goal of this chapter was to provide a closer look into the topics of premarital sex and interfaith relationships for Jewish students. This may be the first time we have thought about these things or the zillionth time, but the hope was that the material stated above would allow for discussion and introspection to begin or continue. Neither of these topics are easy and the decisions that each student makes after reading this chapter and discussing opinions will help them discover their own Jewish identity in terms of their relationships. As both of these issues are prevalent in the mind of college students, it was worthwhile to explore their Jewish background and history. Just like the Jewish texts over time, it is probable that students' opinions will ebb and flow over the course of time in their individual lives as well as looking at the demographic of college students when talking about sex and relationships. By providing the history and background from Jewish texts, students are now able to make decisions and be informed.

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