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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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SPIRITUALITY, SEXUALITY AND THE SCIENCE OF DESIRE

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There is as yet no science of desire. Aphrodisiac technology may well have progressed, but we have no biochemical or neurological understanding of the difference between love and lust, and limited if any capacity to demonstrate the objective existence of that difference.

Recognizing the limits of our knowledge, as opposed to our descriptions and commitments, has significant implications for the religious treatment of sexuality.

Many years ago, Rav Moshe Feinstein wrote (*Igrot Mosheh* OC 4:115):

למשכב זכור ליכא שום תאוה מצד הבריה

וכל התאוה לזה הוא רק תועה מהטבע לדרך אחר

אשר גם רשעים בעלי תאוה שלא נמנעין מצד חטא ועון אין הולכין לשם

שיצר הרע זה אינו אלא מחמת שהוא דבר אסור

שהוא כמו להכעיס ה"ו

for gay male sex there is no appetite stemming from Creation, and all appetite for this is only straying from nature to another path, one avoided even by even wicked 'people of appetite' who do not hold back from any sin or violation, because this evil inclination is caused only by it being forbidden, and it is as if intended to anger G-d, G-d forbid.

Rav Moshe believed that he was articulating a psychological truth deeply and broadly rooted in Jewish tradition, but this view is now largely regarded as false even within Orthodoxy. The textual evidence he cited now seems forced or partial.

This shift has occurred in highly significant part because of the deep and powerful exposure of Orthodoxy to the personal narratives of gay family, friends, and patients. Personal narratives are properly the raw material for evaluating current psycho-spiritual reality; we really have little other access to other people's souls.

At the same time, we should also not allow ourselves to become fundamentalists – either way! – about the extent to which these narratives connect to underlying neurological or neurochemical realities, let alone to claims about what is objectively necessary for individual human fulfillment in any and all human societies. Nor should we abandon the notion that our tradition has valuable things to

say about the relationship of love and lust, or about the origins of desire. In that spirit, I offer this brief, preliminary, and tentative treatment of an enduring rabbinic locus of reflection on heterosexual desire. *Shemot* 28:8 tells us that the *Mishkan's* water-reservoir, or *keiyor*, was made of copper:

במראת הצבאת

אשר צבאו פתח אהל מועד

via the mar'ot of the tzov'ot

who tzav'u at the entrance to Ohel Moed.

Rabbinic tradition generally translates that the copper came from mirrors (*mar'ot*) donated by women-who-gathered-in-hosts (*tzav'ot*, *tzav'u*) at the Tabernacle. There seem to be two very different interpretations behind this common translation, however.

1) The women donated their mirrors to express their *abandonment* of sexuality for spirituality. In Ibn Ezra's words:

נשים באות תמיד להתפלל אל מקום האהל,

ועזבו כל תאות העולם,

על כן נתנו מראותן

Women who continually came to pray toward the place of the Tent, and abandoned all worldly desires – therefore they gave their mirrors

Seforno – to my mind compellingly – sees the women as seeking to study rather than to pray, to:

bear the words of the Living G-d,

as Scripture writes:

'So any seeker after G-d would go out toward Ohel Moed (=Mosheh's tent, not the Mishkan).

2) The women donate their mirrors, which they had brought out from Egypt, to *commemorate* their persistent sexuality under oppression. By seducing their exhausted husbands, they produced the hosts/*tzav'ot* of the Exodus, and perhaps their efforts were both generated by and generated Divine visions/*mar'ot*. (According to Baal HaTurim, *Ohel Moed* = Tent of Meeting is a *tzannua* allusion to the places where they met their husbands.) These interpretations can be seen as

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complementary. Their fullest integration is found in the *Derashot* of R. Yehoshua ibn Shuaib (1280-1340; student of Rashba).

אותן הנשים ששלטו ביצרן והיו מתפללות יומם ולילה הביאו מראיהן נדבה,
שמתחלה היו רואו' בהן והיו מתקשטות
והיו פרות ורבות ומעמידות צבאות רבות,
ועתה, כשפרשו מתאוות העולם, הביאום אל משה,
ומשה היו מואס בהם

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: קבל מהם, כי הם סבכו להעמי' צבאו'
בישראל,

אותה שעה קבל משה על פי הדבר

ועש' מהם הכיור הנכבד שמטיל שלום בין איש לאשתו.

*Those women who ruled over their evil inclinations and prayed and night
donated their mirrors.*

*Originally they would look in them and adorn themselves
and thus be fruitful and multiply and raise up many hosts*

*but now, when they separated from worldly desires, they brought them to
Mosheb.*

But Mosheb was disgusted by them.

The Holy Blessed One said to Mosheb:

'Receive these from them, since they caused the raising up of hosts in Israel'.

*At that moment Mosheb accepted them on the basis of the Divine Imperative
and made of them the honored kiyor, which spreads peace between man and
wife.*

There are all sorts of wonderful subtexts here, for example: (a) Mosheb, who separated from Tziporah, failing to recognize the value of sexuality; and (b) the *sotah*-ritual as a symbol of marital harmony rather than of unhealthy jealousy.

Each of these reverberates down the Tradition, and I hope we'll have occasion to explore them elsewhere. But for now my questions are: What changed? Why was it proper for these women now to give up their mirrors? Why didn't G-d, with deepest appreciation, tell Mosheb to give them back for use in producing the next generation?

One might suggest that the women in question were post-menopausal; that ibn Shuaib saw no value in non-procreative sexuality; and moreover, that he did not believe that post-menopausal women experience sexual desire. But the first of these premises is unfounded; the second contradicts *Halakhab*; and the third contradicts reality. So this would be simplistic rather than simple, and in any case would be a distortion of ibn Shuaib's sources.

Instead, rooted in Akeidat Yitzchak's understanding of the difference between the names *Chavah* and *Ishah* in Genesis, we can say that in Egypt women had no choice but to prioritize procreation over study or prayer, whereas in the desert they were given both the practical and religious option. At the same time, the mirrors were turned into a source of marital harmony and fertility to emphasize that Talmud Torah must always in some real sense be מביא לידי מעשה = a cause of virtuous action, and that those who choose to focus on

cognitive or meditative paths to spirituality must not denigrate those who choose practical paths.

Now the phrase *tzov'ot petach Ohel Moed* also appears in I Samuel 2:22:

ועלי זקן מאד

ושמע את כל אשר יעשון בניו לכל ישראל

ואת אשר ישכבון את הנשים הצבאות פתח אהל מועד:

Eli was very elderly

and had heard all that his children did to all Israel

*and that they lay with the women-who-gathered-in-hosts at the entrance to the
Tabernacle.*

Rabbinic tradition suggests that Eli's sons merely delayed bringing the sacrifices that women brought after childbirth, and thus kept these women from their husbands and delayed their next pregnancies. But Meshekh Chokhmah takes "lay with" literally, and Malbim as at least reflecting an underlying sexual intent. I think Malbim is fundamentally correct, and there is no ignoring the implication that women were sexually vulnerable when they came to the Tabernacle in Shiloh. And Shmuel's use of the same phrase as Exodus suggests that this was true at Sinai as well.

Why, if these *tzov'ot* were the ones "who continually came to pray toward the place of the Tent, and abandoned all worldly desires"? Perhaps, very perhaps, noting again the spiritual and epistemological risks of suggesting anything in this area, the argument is that—at least with regard to women—heterosexual desire and spiritual yearning are closely related, and can be deflected toward each other by manipulative men. The Marc Gafni story should not have been surprising, and we need to stop being surprised by its ilk.

Such an understanding can lead to profound suspicion of female spirituality, and/or to a profound sanctification of female sexuality. Mosheb expresses the first when he seeks to refuse the mirrors; the Holy Blessed One expresses the second when He commands Mosheb to accept them. Halakhic tradition does not see the issue as settled. Some *poskim* suggest G-d overruled Mosheb only in this specific case, as a *hora'at sba'ah* (and therefore, perhaps a formerly-mirrored vanity should not become a Torah-reading *bimah*.) We are still searching for a fully mature way to acknowledge both sides of the tension.

Yes, sexuality can be modestly veiled spirituality, and spirituality can be cleverly disguised sexuality. No, we cannot reliably distinguish which is which, or guarantee that one will not become the other. There is no science of desire.

The dispute for the sake of Heaven between Mosheb and G-d endures as the subtext of many contemporary Orthodox conversations. But I suggest the following as a useful metaphor and precedent with regard to women's access to the texts of the *Mesorah* and the physical environs of the Sanctuary. Even Mosheb, who tried to reject the mirrors, never discouraged women from gathering-in-hosts for prayer or study at the entrance to *Ohel Moed*. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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