

The Laws of Marital Relations - Part 1

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"BE HOLY!"

It is written in the Torah:

"Speak to the entire community of Israel, and say to them, Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Vayikra, 19:2). The meaning of "Be holy" in this verse is to separate oneself from forbidden sexual relationships (See Rashi, there).

A person is not only to separate himself from the forbidden sexual relations set forth in the Torah, but also from things that, while permitted, can lead a lust-filled person to immoral behavior, as if with the approval of the Torah. The Torah commands us to "Be holy"; not only to guard against immorality, but also so that in sanctifying ourselves in these matters, a person will merit to cleave to Hashem, "For I the Lord your God am holy."

Even though this reaching this level may seem very difficult, the Torah promises everyone in the nation that if they strive to sanctify themselves in this earthly world, the Holy One Blessed Be He will bestow upon them sanctity from Above, "For I the Lord your God am holy."

If a person should wonder: after Hashem commanded a man to cleave to his wife, as it says, "and he shall cleave to his wife and become one flesh" (Bereshit, 2:25), and to be fruitful and multiply, how then can a person be expected to overcome the lusts that are a natural part of his being, a lust so strong that it dominates a person's willpower? How can a person sanctify such a powerful passion?

For this reason, the Torah says, "Be holy"; So that a person will not engage in this matter to satisfy personal lust. Rather, he will engage in the marital relations in purity and holiness, just as a person wraps himself in a tallit and puts tefillin on his arm and head.

And if one should say: How is it possible to deny the natural physical feeling that everyone experiences during intimacy with his wife, a physical sensation that awakens all the senses and consumes one's thoughts? Therefore the Torah says, "For I the Lord your God am holy," meaning that the Divine Name rests on anyone who performs a mitzvah, so that if a person undertakes a mitzvah with a holy intention, then the Holy One Blessed Be He assists by enveloping the entire act in a holy light. So too regarding this mitzvah — a person who has marital relations for the sake of the mitzvah, no evil matter will evolve from the act, and there is nothing improper with the natural arousal that comes while engaged in the mitzvah — on the contrary, this is included in the mitzvah, since he is not performing the act to satiate his personal lust, rather he is doing it to carry out the Creator's command to multiply, or the command not to withhold from one's wife her conjugal rights (See "Or HaChaim HaKadosh" on the Torah, at the beginning of Parshat Kedoshim). When the act is undertaken in this manner, there is sanctity in the arousal that follows. Thus, when a man joins with his wife in holiness, the Shechinah (Divine Presence) rests upon them. The Torah promises that this level of holiness can be achieved by all the congregation of the Nation of Israel, in its exhortation, "Be holy";

However, to reach this level, a person must elevate himself slowly up the ladder of kedushah (holiness) and be careful not to become a saint through the adoption of practices of "Hasidut" (saintliness) and separation, which is an optional choice, while nullifying the performance of commandments which he is obligated to perform by the Torah (such as having children and satisfying his wife's conjugal rights). He must also be careful that his separation does not lead him to spilling seed in vain, which is an extremely serious transgression (Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer, 23).

In this regard, it is written that an ignorant person cannot be a saint (Avot, 2:5). It is a mitzvah to keep away from a person like this, lest one learn from his erring ways (Shabbat 63, Rashi).

A man has the fundamental commandment of "Love your fellow as thyself," which is written in the Torah portion, "Kedoshim," and which particularly applies to one's behavior towards one wife (Vayikra, 19:18; Talmud, Kiddushin 31A). The holy "Arizal" stated that if a husband loves his wife as himself then he is fulfilling the commandment of loving one's fellow as oneself, a mitzvah which encompasses all the Torah ("Likutim of the Arizal," Parshat Ekev).

The Importance of Pleasing One's Wife

A man is obligated to make his wife happy in the mitzvah of marital relations, on the night of her ritual immersion, and even at other permitted times when she so desires (Pesachim 72B, Rashi). This obligation is from the Torah (Shemot, 21:10). A husband who withholds himself from conducting relations with his wife to deliberately cause her anguish is transgressing the Torah (Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer, 76:11). Furthermore, there are Torah authorities who state that even if he does not intend to cause his wife anguish (but does so to comply with his idea of saintliness) he still is transgressing the Torah ("Beer Haitev" there). In any event, everyone agrees that he is violating an injunction of the Rabbis, for she cannot obtain satisfaction in this matter from anyone else.

During the first year of marriage there is an extra obligation to make one's wife happy, as it is written, "He shall be free to devote himself to his house a complete year and to make the wife whom he has taken happy" (Devarim, 24:5).

A husband who seeks to ascend the ladder of holiness, must do so in the manner set forth by our Sages, in a step by step way, without withholding from his wife the basic obligations he has towards her. Rewarded is he who leaves this world without having caused chagrin to his loved ones. The Talmud relates how serious this matter is by telling about Rav Richumi, who would study Torah all year with Rava, and come home on the eve of Yom Kippur. One time, he prolonged his learning as Yom Kippur approached. With great expectation, his wife anxiously awaited his arrival, thinking "For sure, he's on the way" each moment. When he delayed in coming home, she felt so sorrowful that she wept. Rav Richumi was sitting in the upper gallery of the study hall, and when his wife shed her tear, the floor under him collapsed and he fell to his death (Ketubot 62B).

Thus, a man should take precaution to rise up the ladder of holiness together with his wife, so that both of them will be happy and ascend together, and not separate himself from the world with his own personal sanctity at the expense of his spouse.

Overcoming Lust

When a man properly sanctifies himself, it not only exalts him with a holy status, it also has a direct influence on the character and disposition of his children (See the "Letter of Holiness" of the Ramban). The Talmud relates: "It was asked of Ema Shalom, the wife of Rabbi Eliezer, the sister of Rabban Gamliel, "How is it that your children are extraordinarily handsome?" She answered, "My husband doesn't converse with me (engage in marital relations) early in the evening and not at the end of the night, but at midnight (so that he shouldn't hear the voice of another woman and think about her, and not concentrate exclusively on his wife). And when he converses (engages in marital relations), he does so with great modesty, reverence, and fear, owing to the grandeur of the hour, at the time when the creation of a child begins" (Nedarim 20B).

The "Raavad" wrote: "It must be clarified what is the proper thought that a man should have in mind during marital relations. After study and research into the matter, I discovered that there are four categories:"

First, that he is performing the mitzvah of "Ona" (his wife's conjugal rights) and also the mitzvah of reproduction. This is the most proper intention, whereby he is performing two positive commandments of the Torah.

Second, (if the case may be) that he is fulfilling the mitzvah of "Ona" in the final months of his wife's pregnancy when marital relations have a beneficial influence on the fetus (Niddah 31A).

Third: That he is performing the mitzvah of "Ona" when his wife hints to him that she would like marital relations, by flirting with him, or dressing in a manner that draws his attention to her, and the like. Also when he sets off on a journey, and she gives him signs, he is performing the Torah mitzvah of "Ona."

Fourth, if he has relations with his wife because his lust overcomes him, and he does so to keep himself from sinning by not fantasizing about other women (or to not spill semen in vain). In this case, there is also reward, but not like the first three cases, for it would have been better if he had overcome his lust, as it says, "A man has a small organ – when it abstains, it is satisfied, and when it is fed, it is hungry" (Sukkah 52B, see the Maharasha there). If the intention of such a man is to quiet his passion through what is permitted him, and not be consumed by forbidden lusts, this is a worthwhile intention, as it says, "The righteous man (tzaddik) eats to satisfy his soul" (Proverbs, 13:25. See the "Baale Nefesh," Gate of Holiness, of the "Raavad").

However, someone who does not need to engage in marital relations, and passion is not overcoming him, yet he arouses his lust and brings himself to sexual yearning and a state of erection in order to satisfy his desire and to fill himself with the physical lusts of this world, there is no mitzvah in this deed. On the contrary, this comes from the counsel of the evil inclination. From what is permitted (engaging in marital relations with his wife) he comes to the forbidden. On this, our Sages stated: "Anyone who consciously brings himself to having an erection brings a state of banishment upon himself" (Niddah 13B).

He is like a man who is satiated from a meal, yet continues to stuff himself with food and drink until he becomes inebriated and vomits. Referring to this, our Sages commented: "Someone who smashes his vessels in his anger should be in your eyes like someone who worship idols" (Shabbat 105B), for he submits himself to his evil inclination – today it says to him, do this, and tomorrow, do that, until it says, go and worship idols.

Therefore, a person must strengthen himself, be valorous, and save himself from ruin by battling against his passion, so that he guards his soul from descending to the level of an animal which has no inhibitions in gratifying its lusts.

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