Rabbi Moshe Feinstein on Spilling Semen in Vain

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Sometimes, people say that this website is misleading in its emphasis on Kabbalah, and that its fire and brimstone warnings and strict interpretations are not justified, and that publishing these teachings is potentially injurious, since realizing the weight of the transgression could bring a person to depression and despair, causing him to abandon Judaism altogether, G-d forbid. Especially, they claim, because masturbation, or spilling semen in vain, are not prohibited by the Torah.

Therefore, to clarify this matter, here are a few abridged Responsas that the Halachic authority, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, of blessed memory, wrote about the subject. In one letter, he states that it is proper to alert yeshiva students about the severity of spilling semen in vain. In the next letter, he states that the spilling of semen in vain is a clear Torah prohibition. In the third letter, he says that while ordinary repentance is enough for a baal tshuva who never knew about the sin of masturbation, a course of light fasting is certainly praiseworthy, fasting five times each year during short winter days for a period of eight years.

Educating Regarding Shmirat HaBrit

Certainly, it is a very proper thing that the Gaon, HaRav HaTzaddik Moskolin, shlita, has brought to light that yeshiva mashgiachs (the rabbis in charge of managing the daily needs of the students) must oversee this matter (of Shmirat HaBrit) with special attention, and they should speak with students who are suspected in this regard, especially in yeshivot with dormitories. And concerning those who are suspected in this matter, G-d forbid, it is very worthwhile to give them the booklet “Kol Korai” for the youth of Israel by the Gaon, HaRav HaTzaddik Moskolin, shlita, which is written in an excellent fashion in making known the severity of this transgression. (Igrot Hashkafah 8:5)

Spilling Semen in Vain

In another response, Rabbi Feinstein was asked if a man unable to produce offspring was permissible to masturbate in order to obtain a sample of semen that could be used by doctors to help find a treatment that could cure his problem.

Rabbi Feinstein answered that since it was for medical reasons, obtaining the semen would not be considered spilling semen in vain, but that if it were obtained my masturbation, it would be a violation of the prohibition not to spill semen with one’s hand (ÜÐ êàÐã ÑÙÓ). The best solution was for the husband and wife to have marital relations in their home and then to go to the doctor to have some semen removed. If the doctor insisted that a condom be used to obtain a clean sample, while the use of a condom is otherwise forbidden as being spilling semen in vain, since, in this case, it is for medical purposes, it is not consider in vain, and it also would not violate the prohibition of ÜÐ êàÐã ÑÙÓ. Also, while beginning to have relations with one’s wife, then withdrawing to spill the semen outside, is forbidden as spilling semen in vain, in this case of medical necessity, it would be permitted to withdraw from the wife and discharge the semen into a bottle for the medical procedure, for the purpose of having children. This also is not a violation of ,ÜÐ êàÐã ÑÙÓ unlike masturbation with one’s hand, which Rabbi Feinstein does not permit even if for the purpose of having children.

Disagreeing with the questioner’s opinion that spilling semen in vain is only a prohibition of the Rabbis, and not one of the negative commandments of the Torah, Rabbi Feinstein states: “This is a mistake, for spilling semen in vain is indeed a prohibition of the Torah, for which the violator is punishable with death by Heavenly Decree as Rabbi Yochanan states in the tractate Niddah, folio 13, and it is a severe transgression, so much so that the Shulchan Aruch states that this sin is more severe than all other transgressions in the Torah, even if this is not necessarily the case, as the Beit Shmuel writes that adultery and Niddah are worse (Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer 23:1). In any event, the use of this type of language is not relevant over a Rabbinic prohibition. Furthermore, the Torah transgression of forbidden thoughts that “You shall guard yourselves from every evil thing” (Devarim, 23:10-11), as Rabbi Pincus ben Yair explains in Ketubot 46, is so that a person not come to make himself impure at night (by an incident of spilling semen in vain – keri), this is a straight reference from the Torah (drusha) and not a comparison (asmakta), as the

Tosefot states in Avodah Zara, folio 20….” (Igrot Moshe, Even HaEzer, 14)

Response Regarding Repentance over Masturbation

“Concerning the youth who learns Torah with serious dedication, and who also, with the help of G-d, is succeeding in his learning, and who has now come to realize that he frequently transgressed the prohibition of spilling semen in vain when he was younger, and that he has, with G-d’s help, returned in tshuva and wants to make amends to the measure that he sinned, which is fasting four times for each time he transgressed, behold, G-d forbid that he do this because the principle thing in repentance is the giving up of the transgression, remorse over the past, and the commitment not to repeat the sin in the future, as the Rambam explains in the Laws of Repentance 2:2; and also he is commanded to express his repentance verbally (vidui), as is stated there. There is no requirement to do more than this, neither from the Torah nor from the Rabbis, and even fasting, which is a high level of repentance, as is stated in the Prophets, ‘Return to Me with all of your hearts and with fasting’ (Joel, 2:12), also we have not found proscribed for someone who sins and returns, even for a single day, only during the Tens Days of Repentance is it mentioned (581:2) for those who are strict in fasting for Clal Yisrael, which is also considered praying, and this also is not an obligation but rather a custom of the strictly pious, and on the eve of Rosh HaShana for everyone. Nevertheless, certainly there is a great benefit in fasting in broadening one’s mind in the service of G-d.”

Rabbi Feinstein goes on to explain that, at the time of the Baale HaTosfot, the Halachic authority, the Baal HaRokaach established an equivalent measure of fasts per transgression, but he did not obligate baale tshuva (penitents who returned to Torah worship) to undertake these fasts, since the Sages of the Talmud did not see fit to be strict with baale tshuva (Gittin 58A), stating that fasts that were decreed over transgressions were not meant for everyone, rather for the physically healthy who knew that excessive fasting wouldn’t cause them to neglect their Torah learning, or to avoid repenting. To these, the Rokaach gave advice on how to do equivalent penitence for their sins, but to those less hardy in nature, and for those whose learning would be damaged, and those who would turn away from repenting because of this, he not only did not advice them, but prohibited them from accepting suffering upon themselves. Also, in my humble opinion, even transgressions whose punishments are excision (like spilling semen in vain) or death by court decree, which are not atoned for by repentance alone, nor by repentance and the Day of Atonement, but rather with these and also sufferings (Yoma 76A), this does not refer to self-inflicted sufferings, just like killing oneself does not bring about atonement, but rather by sufferings that Hashem, may He be praised, brings upon a person, and not by sufferings that a person brings upon himself, there is no atonement in this.

Rabbi Feinstein concludes:

“Therefore, in practice, it is forbidden for this youth to undertake a strict course of equivalent tshuva, and not even to fast often, for this would cause him illness and the neglect of Torah, both in the quantity and quality of his learning – rather his Torah study will be his atonement even much more than fasting. However, even though it is clear and simple that his repentance and Yom Kippur make amends, like with all negative commandments, it is still beneficial to fast five times during the short winter days of Kislev, Tevet, and Shevat, doing so without an oath, for a period of eight years (40 fasts), for this method of fasting over a duration of time is a great adjunct to repentance because it keeps the transgression in mind, since even though repentance and Yom Kippur provide atonement, he will be fulfilling King David’s instruction, “My sins are always before me” (Tehillim 51:5; Yoma 86B), and the five fasts during the short winter days won’t harm him, and won’t cause a neglect in his Torah studies. And there is also great benefit in encouraging the youth to marry during the course of this year, and he will be saved from impure thoughts and temptations, G-d forbid, and certainly G-d will accept his repentance, and he will be blessed to grow in Torah and good deeds” (Igrot Moshe, Vol 9, Orach Haim 40).