

REPRESSION VS SEXPRESSION

BY RABBI SHMULEY

The Catholic Church was once untouchable. As one of the oldest religious institutions in the world, its word was Godly. Yet, in the past few years, its pristine reputation has been mired by terrible accusations pedophilia and subsequent cover-up of the crimes.

But other religious sects have also been shaken by similar scandal, including the Jewish community. When the Catholic Church went through these allegations from hell, which continue till this day, it sparked a debate as to whether clerical celibacy played any role in the pedophilia scandals. But Judaism is totally opposed to celibacy and considers it a sin. For Jews, marriage is not a sacrament but an obligation. So why are there are so many sexual scandals involving children breaking in our community?

I don't know the answer and it's probably a combination of factors. But what I do know is that sexual repression is alive and well in our community as well, and it can't be helping the situation.

Sex is not a privilege. It is not a luxury and it is not an extravagance. It is a human necessity and has always been seen as such by the Bible. Hence, the denial of sex on the part of either spouse is immediate grounds for divorce. The sexual bond between husband and wife is both sacred and essential. Everything else in the marriage is secondary.

Still, there are those in our community who don't get it. We either get the extremes of debauched single men who prey on vulnerable females for sex because they have no respect for women, or we get men who absolutely believe in sex's sanctity but not its necessity. Many Rabbis and religious leaders of our community fall into the latter category. They don't emphasize the need for sexual passion in marriage even as they safeguard sexuality's sacred nature.

My lecture agent once forwarded an email to me from a Synagogue in an Jewish community that wanted me to speak but could not move forward because they had received complaints from neighboring synagogues who objected to the titles of some of my books like *Kosher Sex* and *The Kosher Sutra*.

That's fair enough. These subjects are not everyone's cup of tea. But what made the email fascinating was that this community was recently rocked with several high-profile allegations of sexual misconduct involving children. Now, you'd think that in the wake of those awful stories they would want to, at least, confront the issue rather than just sweep it under the carpet.

But if it's not learned from Jewish sources, where are people supposed to learn about sexuality from? Hugh Hefner?

Judaism has never believed in sexual repression. The outlook of Judaism, let alone a century of medical and psychological research, is that stifling our innate sexuality is at best, mistaken and at worst, dangerous. Now none of this is a license for the hookup culture that reduces sex to a cheap, hormonal impulse, akin to scratching an itch. There are few things in life more slovenly than men who reduce women to masturbatory material.

But, as I argue in my book, just as there is illicit lust there is also Kosher Lust. Covetousness in marriage is seen as a beautiful and sacred gift from on high, intended to be used in our lives to make the world a holier place. Erotic love is not something to be unduly restrained but to enjoy with a partner grafted on to us in the holy bond of matrimony.

Indeed, whereas other religions emphasize human love for God, the very heart of the Kabbalah is that the soul seeks unrequited ecstasy in its emphatic lust for God.

The Tenth Commandment is clear: "Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's wife," which means, by direct implication, you ought to be coveting your own. About 80 percent of husbands who cheat on their wives claim to love them. But lust for another woman has trumped that love. Lust, it seems, is stronger than love.

So why aren't we using this powerful tool in our marriages, letting it serve as a reinforcement for couples who are deeply committed to each other? Why do so many well-meaning religious teachers mislead the public into believing lustful tendencies are a force that should be denied rather than channeled to our spouse?

I maintain that Jewish observances of periodic distance and marital sinfulness – the idea that one's spouse becomes forbidden for a period each month – are specifically designed to increase a man's sexual appetite for his wife and a wife's craving for her man. To live in a marriage without strong desire is to be locked in a prison. Lust is enhanced through an inability to attain the object of one's longing. It's where passion is magnified by the failure to satiate one's yearning.

And it's the reason why the Torah makes a wife sexually unavailable to her husband every month (laws of Niddah) so that sexual hunger can intensify.

But it's also true of every other area of life. The fare in every fast-food restaurant always tastes bad. The reason: nobody makes you wait for it. But in an upscale restaurant they purposely delay your food, even if you ordered the ready-made special of the day, because appetite is enhanced through denial.

Furthermore, lust is enhanced in darkness and shadows. Ironically, the more the body is covered the more one lusts after it. The most boring place on earth is a nudist colony, because it leaves nothing to the imagination.

Once a woman is overexposed, men lose interest. The element of modesty in a relationship is crucial because it acts as an electrifying mechanism of mystery.

Many complain that Judaism creates prudish, sexual taboos in relationships. But sexual taboos ironically increase lust. The success of applying the Torah's laws of lust to one's marriage and sex life leads to a relationship suffused with life, passion and erotic excitement.

The Synagogue described above, as well as other religious institutions that do not teach a holy perspective on marital intimacy, are doing their congregants a disservice in leaving them to learn about sex from the internet rather than the wisdom of ancient Jewish texts.