

Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 34

Doing vs Being PART 1

When a couple is struggling with issues of arousal and pleasure, the discussion often goes to familiar places: technique, hormones, pressure, anxiety, maybe a therapist, maybe a kallah teacher, maybe another shiur or sefer...



Without a doubt, all of that matters a lot and is, in fact, often what needs to be addressed.

But sometimes none of it touches what is really going on. Because some people are not struggling with “What am I allowed to do?” or “What do I need to do?” Deep down, perhaps even subconsciously, what they’re really struggling with is “Who am I allowed to be?”

Now, that might sound abstract, and that’s fair enough. But, sometimes, it is precisely the most abstract question that determines everything else.

When “Doing” Is Mutar but “Being” Still Feels Assur

A person can spend years hearing that certain behaviors are mutar. They can know it intellectually. And maybe they even incorporate them into their repertoire (or at least attempt to do so). Yet, deep inside, there might be sitting an axiom that was never challenged:

“Fine. It’s mutar to do _____.
But that’s not who I am.
I’m not that kind of person.”
So a split develops.

On paper in the intellectual mind everything is fine. In the heart, though, something really important is sealed off. It's no surprise, then, that intimacy can feel effortful, confusing, or even painful. Not because the physiology is broken, but because the self was never allowed to fully enter the room.

A Mashal From Sleep

For a long time, sleep was understood as a simple nighttime activity. You're awake all day, then at night you go to sleep, recharge your battery, and move on.

But modern sleep science paints a very different picture.

Sleeping is not an isolated act of recharging the system. It is an overt endpoint of an entire system. And that system that regulates sleep runs *continuously*, day and night.

Case in point: the circadian rhythm organizes hormones, alertness, mood, reactivity, and cognition across the entire 24-hour cycle.

Alongside it, sleep-homeostasis exerts pressure that quietly builds the longer a person is awake, subtly shaping focus, emotional regulation, and self-control long before anyone lies down in bed.

So even when a person is fully awake, the "sleep system" is not off. Although not expressing itself through its most obvious manifestation of sleep, it is nevertheless fully online.

In other words, it's not that a person sometimes engages in the act of sleep when the need arises. It's that sleep, as a system, is built into and plays an integral role in the entirety of human physiology. All the time.

We can recognize this pattern in other systems:

- **Digestive system:** even when you aren't eating, your metabolism is running, your insulin levels are fluctuating, afferent signals are being sent via the vagus nerve... Through its many processes, including interaction with cortisol and stress hormones, the digestive system has a direct influence on one's baseline emotional tone of mood, arousal, and threat perception.
- **Immune system:** even without an infection, white blood cells are patrolling tissues, memory cells are actively maintaining a database of past threats, tissue repair and cellular waste removal are being managed... If the immune system is overactive or underactive, it affects overall energy, mood, and even cognitive clarity.
- **Attachment system:** even when you are alone or busy with work, there is a continuous regulatory loop that sets the baseline for how safe you feel in the world. So, for example, if your attachment system is "anxious," your brain may be constantly scanning for signs of rejection in neutral emails or facial expressions.
- **Language processing system:** even when you are not talking or reading, your brain is constantly perceiving and categorizing the world by using linguistic labels. You see the world through the categories your language provides.

And sexuality is no different. It is not simply that people engage in sexual activity when the need arises. Rather, sexuality reflects a continuous biological and social system that shapes the totality of the person.

Baseline sex-hormone signaling modulates pain tolerance, stress responsiveness, and nervous-system resilience. Through its integration with neuroendocrine and social-bonding circuits, the sexuality system also influences patterns of attention,

motivation, and certain cognitive functions, including aspects of memory and executive regulation.

Sexuality is inextricably bound to the broader systems of bonding, attachment, and closeness. Even in the absence of sexual stimulation or arousal, these integrated processes shape how closeness and connection are experienced throughout daily life.

Furthermore, the physiological and neuropsychological systems that underlie sexuality — including sex hormones, motivation circuitry, autonomic regulation, and attachment processes — modulate neuroplasticity, stress physiology, and metabolic signaling in ways that support energy, motivation, and drive.

Sexuality and vitality are deeply intertwined.

In Part 2, we'll turn to Torah sources and see how the Torah itself frames this very idea — not sexuality as something we merely do, but as something we are meant to integrate into who we are.



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Shalom Bayis, Chinuch, & Personal Safety

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