

Shalom Bayis Newsletter Issue 36

Dig a bit deeper

Chazal tell us that when Klal Yisrael were fulfilling the *ratzon* of Hashem, the *keruvim* in the *kodesh kadashim* would be locked in an embrace.



“See how your endearment before the Almighty,” the *kohanim* would announce to the masses of Jews who came for *aliyah l’regel*, “is like the endearment of a female to a male.”

The sexual reference was not alluded to; it was expressed clearly in a straightforward manner.

No *chiddush* there. After all, *Shir HaShirim* is chock full of passionate expressions of sexual desire that represent the depth of the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish People.

No-one bat an eyelash at the public display of the embracing cherubs. And why should they? It’s so self understood that there is nothing lewd being shown, and that it represents and expresses something so beautiful, so special, and so infinitely meaningful.

Indeed, the Torah outlook on sexuality is anything but vulgar. On the one hand, of course, there is passion, lust, and intense physical drive. But there is also so much more. That passion, lust, and intense physical drive is the vehicle of connection, unity, and wholeness.

But the marauding destroyers of the *Beis HaMikdash* saw something entirely different when they despoiled the holiest of all places.

“What?!” they exclaimed, “these Jews whose blessings are blessings and curses are curses should be involved with things *like this*?!” They then went on to parade the embracing *keruvim* in the marketplace.

Those pagans saw the embracing *keruvim* as nothing more than a pornographic display. And that speaks volumes about how they must have viewed sexuality in general. To them it was not about genuine connection that involved a mutually enjoyable give and take, it was about take and take and take...

They reduced sexuality to nothing more than seeing the other as a piece of meat.

The reality that sexuality is comprised of an exquisite complexity of multiple layers is also reflected in contemporary scientific findings which have identified that desire and arousal are not singular events but largely emergent states arising from the ongoing interaction between intricate physiological processes and profound social context.

Research has further demonstrated that there is a delicate balance between excitatory signals and inhibitory signals (known as the Dual Control model). Hormones such as testosterone and dopamine help prime the system, while their effects are strongly modulated by neurological sensitivity to stress, perceived safety, and relationship quality.

Accordingly, desire is often *not* spontaneous but responsive, emerging after the nervous system experiences sufficient safety and low cognitive burden. Arousal is therefore less a mechanical on-off switch than an entire biopsychosocial ecosystem, involving reduced threat activation alongside engagement of reward and motivational systems through sensory stimulation and emotional connection.

Understanding that sexuality has multiple layers of depth is crucial, I believe, for addressing struggles that couples face in this realm.

Case in point (all identifying details changed): A number of years ago, I was consulted by a couple who was having a very difficult time because the wife was consistently unable to become aroused. She was having a very hard time feeling any desire to engage her husband in intimate relations.

They told me that a *rav* (whom they did not name) had made the following suggestion to her: Try to recall sex scenes from movies that you watched when you were younger to help you get aroused. Personally, I find it very hard to understand what the halachik basis for such a thing could be; but let's put that question aside for a moment and just ask what is the likelihood that such an approach will actually help?

Well, as it turned out, very little.

Did it succeed in stimulating sexual arousal within her? Sure, to a certain degree. But it came nowhere near to addressing the problem. Their intimate life was at an all-time low when they reached out to me.

After ascertaining that the wife finds her husband to be an attractive man, I helped them to explore more deeply what the real issues may be.

To be clear: without a doubt, surface issues (e.g. technique) can often play a big role in intimacy struggles, and under no circumstances should one ignore that aspect of the equation. Equally, though, it is a terrible error to ignore the possibility that something in the deeper layers of sexuality may be what is throwing a monkey wrench in the system.

One of the most telling points of that particular consultation was this: every now and then, the husband and wife would have certain everyday interactions that would immediately trigger in her tremendous desire to be intimate with her husband.

The problem was, those types of everyday interactions were very few and far between.

What eventually emerged is that the wife was struggling with a significant emotional issue which was having a sweeping negative impact on their entire relationship.

They could not connect because they could not connect!

If there is trouble connecting on the outermost physical level, it is often because there is trouble connecting on the deeper emotional levels.

After all, when the Jews were shown the sexual embrace of the *keruvim*, no-one bat an eyelash. Because everyone knew, with the most simple intuitive understanding that sexuality is not vulgarity, it is the vehicle and expression of the greatest depth of connection.

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