

“Set me as a seal upon
your arm, for love is as
strong as death.”

Song of Songs 8:6

The Greatest Blessing

Does God belong in the bedroom? How about under the wedding canopy? In this class, we'll learn what Judaism has to say about love, marriage, and intimacy.

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This Too is Torah ...

Rav Kahana was a student of Rav. One evening, he came and hid under his bed. He observed how Rav conversed with his wife, made her laugh, and then started to have sex with her. Rav Kahana cried out, and Rav was startled.

“Kahana, are you here?! Get out — you don’t belong here!” said the teacher.

Rav Kahana answered: “This, too, is Torah, and I must learn it.”

Babylonian Talmud, Brakhot 62a



How do you react to this (admittedly disturbing) text?

What does Rav Kahana mean when he says “This, too, is Torah?”

Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex but Were Afraid to Ask (a Rabbi)



by Rabbi Elliot Dorff

Chairperson, Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly and author of "This is My Beloved, This is My Friend: A Rabbinic Letter on Intimate Relations."

How does Judaism approach sexuality in general?

Judaism has a distinctly positive view toward sexuality as the gift of God, and it articulates values and rules that make sex the pleasurable, yet holy, activity it was meant to be. The sexual aspects of our being — physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual — are not base or obscene; they are part of the entire human being that God termed “very good” after creating us ([Genesis 1:31](#)).

We must use our sexual faculties, like all other elements of our being, for good purpose, as defined by Jewish law and tradition to activate their potential for divinity; and we have not only the ability, but the duty, to do that. Intimate relations, then, are not seen with-

in Judaism as simply physical release or the product of base, animalistic lust; they are, when carried out in the proper context, no less than an expression of the divine image within us.

What are some key Jewish values in guiding our sexual decision making?

Modesty: Judaism not only prescribes that sexual activity be confined to private quarters, it also demands the converse, that sex should not be flaunted in public. We may dress in accord with the styles of the times, but never should our apparel accentuate the sexually arousing parts of our bodies. Similarly, our speech patterns should manifest respect for our bodies as creations of God, and this includes the generative parts of our bodies. In public, it is appropriate to hug or kiss, but anything beyond that should be reserved for private quarters. This is not to demean sex as something sordid that one must hide; quite the contrary, it is to sanctify it as the intense, intimate, mutual expression of love that it should be.

Respect: While at any given time one partner may want to engage in sexual activities more than the other, and while partners may acquiesce to each other to please one another as part of a long-term relationship, sex should never be a mere usage of the other person for physical release. There is nothing wrong — and, indeed, everything right — with enjoying sex; that sex involves physical pleasure is one of the great gifts that God has given us by creating us as we are. The goal of sexual pleasure, though, may never override mutual respect.

Honesty: People involved in dating should not deceive each other with regard to their intentions. One can and should be tactful, but if one really does not want to continue a relationship, the honest — and, ultimately, the kind — thing to do is to say so. Similarly, people should not pretend to be romantically involved to gain sexual favors. Furthermore, part of what it means to love someone is to be faithful to that person. Because of the intensity and intimacy involved, romantic relationships, unlike friendships, involve exclusivity. I am the only lover of my spouse and, therefore, am willing to be as open and intimate with her or him as I am. We need that kind of security to expose ourselves to the extent that we do in love relationships.

Safety: In response to the Jewish demand that we preserve our health and avoid undue risks, if a person is going to have sex outside of marriage — particularly with multiple partners — then the Jewish imperative exists that one take whatever precautions one can to make one's sexual activity as safe as possible. Protection against HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases must be part of any sexual decision.

What does Judaism teach about sex within marriage?

Sex is one of the ways in which the companionship between spouses is expressed. While contemporary Westerners might take it for granted that women as well as men have rights to sex within marriage, other societies in the ancient world — and, for that matter, in the medieval and the modern worlds as well — assumed that only men have sexual appetites. Women tolerate the sexual advances of their husbands, according to this view, because they want children and economic security. In contrast, the

Torah and the Rabbis who later interpret it, in recognition of the couple's mutual desires, structure the laws of marriage such that both spouses have rights to sex with regularity within marriage. Moreover, within the bounds of modesty, Jewish law permits couples to have sex in any way they want. The Torah and the Rabbis thus went quite far to affirm the rights of both members of the couple to the pleasures of each other's sexual company.

What does Judaism say about pre-marital sex?

Judaism posits marriage as the preferred context for sexual relations. Casual and promiscuous sexual encounters, while not as egregious as incest and adultery, should be avoided since they involve little or no love or commitment and substantial health risks. However, non-marital sex can provide companionship as well as physical pleasure, and, especially in the context of a long-term relationship, those are definite goods. Moreover, sometimes people would like to get married but cannot for any number of reasons. While the Jewish tradition very much supports sexual plea-

sure and companionship as goods, it condemns some settings where those are obtained — namely, adultery and incest — and, on the other end of the spectrum, it sanctifies marriage. Non-marital, consensual sex falls somewhere in between. Jewish norms with regard to sex, like Jewish norms with regard to everything else, are not all-or-nothing. Thus, while marriage is the Jewish ideal, mature singles who engage in sexual activities can and should strive to conduct their sexual lives according to the Jewish ideals and norms described above.

What does Judaism say about same-sex relationships?

People in same-sex relationships should be treated in our communities just as people in different sex relationships are, enjoying the same rights and bearing the same responsibilities. This means, among other things, that LGBTQ Jews should endeavor to incorporate the same concepts and values discussed above in their sexual activities, as Jewish heterosexuals should: Careful

attention should be paid to ensuring health and safety, monogamous commitment encouraged, and respect for the other must be manifested in the relationship. I believe that society must provide LGBTQ people with the same social support and legal recognition for long-term, monogamous relationships that we afford to straight couples.

What does Judaism say about contraception?

If couples are going to use contraceptives, Jewish law prefers those forms that prevent conception in the first place over those that abort an already fertilized egg. This is because, Jewish law forbids abortion, in many cases, unless the pregnancy poses a threat to the woman's life or health — either physical or mental. Most rabbis interpret Jewish law to permit an abortion when there is evidence that the child will be born with significant birth defects or afflicted with a genetic disease, or when the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest.

From the point of view of Jewish law, the most favored form of contraception is either a diaphragm or contraceptive pill or implant, if those are not contraindicated by a woman's health status. Since Jewish law places the responsibility for procreation on the male, it has traditionally forbidden male contraception; however, condoms must be used if unprotected sexual intercourse poses an STD risk, for the duty to maintain health and life supersedes the positive duty of the male to propagate.

A final word on kosher sex:

Sex is one of the gifts God has given us by creating us as we are. Like all of our faculties, we can use it for good or for bad, and Judaism provides us with instruction (Torah) for channeling our sexual energies toward good purpose. Judaism has much to teach all of us about how we should think about sex and how we should behave sexually — whether a person is single or married, LGBTQ or straight.

May each of us enjoy God's gift of our sexuality within the guidelines of Judaism so that our sexual activities can bring not only pleasure and companionship, but also wholeness and holiness; and may each of us be able to say of someone special what the lover says in the Bible, "This is my beloved, this is my friend" (Song of Songs 5:16).

I and Thou

Martin Buber (1878-1965) was an Austrian-born Jewish philosopher. His most famous book, *I and Thou* was published in 1923, and lays out a theology of dialogue and relationship. Since his philosophic writing is quite dense and difficult, below is a summary of his major premises by the American rabbi, Michael Comins.

People are always relating to the world in one of two ways — I-It or I-Thou.

A case of I-It: I approach a teller at a bank. We exchange pleasantries while my transactions are conducted, and then I leave. I have just spoken to a human being, but I might as well have been speaking to an ATM.

A case of I-Thou: A parent listening intently to discern the needs of a newborn infant. Or touching your partner and knowing that you are in love. Or listening deeply to another's words, talking through differences, and coming to a deeper understanding. Or looking into another's eyes and feeling their pain as your own.

In I-It mode, my exchanges with the world serve some purpose. I analyze a problem to come up with a solution. I speak to the teller in order to conduct a transaction. I follow the traffic lights in order to avoid an accident. This the world of subjects and objects, of means and ends.

In a moment of I-Thou, rather than imposing my agenda, I am listening to the Other. I have no expectations as to what is supposed to happen; I have no idea where this encounter will take me; preconceptions and prejudices are left behind. Yet I know that this is critical. This is where the real and true me will emerge. This is the world of relation.

Buber knew that for the most part we have to live in the world of I-It. He claimed, however, that the quality of our lives is determined by how we respond to moments of I-Thou.

Rabbi Michael Comins

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Living Waters

Rabbi Sara Brandes

As human beings, we are reborn again and again. The body with which we enter the world changes shape so many times, such that who we once were is barely recognizable in light of who we are now. We are soft, then hard, then soft again; curled, then erect, then curled again. And our physical evolution pales in comparison to the way we evolve emotionally. Our loyalties shift. Our passions wax and wane. We are moved by life, by love, by loss.

The ancient Jewish ritual of immersion in living waters, *mikveh*, is the vehicle by which we acknowledge and bless our ever-changing selves. Born of the living waters of the womb, the Torah teaches that as human beings face life, death and rebirth, we return again to these living waters.

While the first instance of the word “*mikveh*” is found in the opening verses of the Torah — “and the gathering of the waters, God called seas” (Genesis 1:10) — the command to immerse is found in Leviticus 15:13: “He shall wash himself in living waters and become clean.” Through exegesis, the rabbis develop these biblical instructions, making immersion in a *mikveh* a core feature of conversion, sexual intimacy, and death. In contemporary times, progressive Jewish communities have expanded uses of *mikveh*, encouraging immersion to mark other significant life transitions and to invoke healing.

The convert knows the transformative power of *mikveh* best, as it is she who enters its waters with the intent to emerge anew, with an identity she did not yet fully possess. But in truth, all human beings crave this sacred opportunity for rebirth, to set our sights on an aspect of ourselves we are only just becoming, to immerse and emerge changed.

Nowhere is this need more potent than in the sphere of intimacy, which is physical and visceral by nature. To truly face our partner, craving to be held and loved, we must show up entirely. We must do so as we occupy our changing bodies, our shifting passions. It is here, in this most cherished, most sacred relationship, that Jewish tradition offers *mikveh* as a tool, a vehicle for preparation and transformation. A life without intimacy is a life not fully lived. A life without passion, including sexual passion, feels weighty and dim. And so, the Torah calls us back to the living *mikveh* waters monthly, in preparation for physical intimacy, so that we can bless our body as it is today, prepare to face our partner with present-mindedness, and open ourselves to the union that follows. Just as the *mikveh* waters are “living,” we too must feel alive.

Like the living waters, we embrace our nature as ever-changing beings, merging then separating, cresting then falling, pulsing always with life.



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Wedding Terms

Mikvah

Ketubah

Aufruf

Bedeken

Chuppah

Kiddushin

Sheva Brachot

Breaking a Glass

Yichud

Get

So, You're Going to a Jewish Wedding



Where do I go?

Jewish weddings can take place in many places. Some are conducted in a synagogue, but they may also take place in a secular location like a hotel or restaurant or outdoors. During the ceremony, the couple will stand under a *chuppah* (canopy) and seats for guests will be arranged facing the *chuppah*.

HOW LONG DOES IT LAST?

The actual wedding ceremony itself takes around 30 minutes, though some may be slightly shorter or longer. However, the celebration may be extended over several days. On the Shabbat before the wedding, the couple may be called up to the Torah for a special honor called an *aufruf*, and some couples will host informal celebrations in the evening for up to a week following the wedding ceremony, parties that are referred to as *Sheva Brachot*, from the name of the collection of wedding blessings.

WHAT DO I WEAR?

Weddings range from very formal to quite casual, depending on the preference of the couple. Israeli weddings are often extremely informal. Kippot will usually be provided for guests.

WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN?

Ketubah Signing

The *ketubah* (Jewish marriage contract) will usually be signed before the wedding ceremony with a smaller group of family and close friends in attendance.

Gathering Under the Chuppah

After the procession down the aisle, the bride traditionally circles the groom seven times. Seven is a significant number in Jewish tradition, and here it evokes the seven days of creation and the seven marriage blessings.

Kiddushin (Betrothal)

The Rabbi will recite blessings over a cup of wine, which the couple will share. Then they will exchange rings and make a declaration:

Harei at mekudeshet li b'tabaat zo k'dat Moshe v'Yisrael

Behold you are consecrated unto me with this ring, in accordance with the laws of Moses and the People of Israel.

In an Orthodox wedding ceremony, only the groom gives a ring. In more progressive ceremonies, both parties give rings and make declarations to one another.

Reading of the Ketubah

The ketubah is read aloud and shown so that everyone can see. This is often the time when the Rabbi will give a short (*we hope*) speech and blessing to the couple.

Sheva Brachot

The *sheva brachot* (seven marriage blessings) will be recited over a second cup of wine. Each blessing is recited in Hebrew and English, by either the Rabbi or by honored guests.

Breaking the Glass

Jewish weddings end with a bang, as the groom smashes a glass underfoot. The broken glass is a reminder of the destruction of the Temple and that, although the wedding has provided a taste of redemption, the world is still broken and requires our care. The couple kisses and we all yell: "*Mazal tov!*"

Yichud

Immediately following the ceremony, the couple will spend some time in a private room where they will enjoy their first moments as husband and wife alone.

WHEN DO WE EAT?

After the ceremony, it is customary to have a celebratory meal.

DOES JUDAISM PERMIT SAME-SEX WEDDINGS?

In the Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist denominations, same-sex weddings are celebrated. Orthodox Judaism does not permit same-sex weddings.

DOES JUDAISM PERMIT INTERFAITH WEDDINGS?

Some Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis will officiate an interfaith wedding. Conservative and Orthodox Judaism does not permit interfaith weddings.

Sheva Brachot

These are the Seven Blessings from the Talmud (Ketubot 8a) that are recited to a couple during their wedding. The words speak about the primordial love between the first two human beings in the Garden of Eden and of the love of a world redeemed with the coming of the Messiah.

Blessing 1 בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגֶּפֶן

Praised are You, Adonai our God, who rules the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

Blessing 2 בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַכֹּל בְּרָא לְכַבוֹדוֹ

Praised are You, Adonai our God, who rules the universe, Whose majesty is evident in all creation.

Blessing 3 בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, יוֹצֵר הָאָדָם

Praised are You, Adonai our God, who rules the universe, Creator of human beings.

Blessing 4 בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצַלְמֵ דְמוֹת תְּבַנִּיתוֹ, וְהִתְקִין לוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ בְּנֵי עַדֵי עַד. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, יוֹצֵר הָאָדָם

Praised are You, Adonai our God, who rules the universe, Who made us in the divine image, so that together we might perpetuate life. Praised are You, Adonai, Creator of human beings.

שׁוֹשׁ תְּשׁוּשׁ וְתִגַּל הָעֵקֶרָה, בְּקִבוּץ בְּנֵיהָ לְתוֹכָהּ
בְּשִׂמְחָה. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, מְשַׂמֵּחַ צִיּוֹן בְּבִנְיָהּ

Blessing 5

May Zion rejoice as her children return to her in joy. Praised are You, Adonai, Who causes Zion to rejoice with her children.

שִׂמְחַת תְּשִׂמַּח רְעִים הָאֱהוּבִים, כְּשִׂמְחַת יִצְרָחַד בְּגֵן עֵדֶן
מִקֶּדֶם. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, מְשַׂמֵּחַ חַתָּן וְכֻלָּה

Blessing 6

Grant perfect joy to these loving companions, as You did for the first couple in the Garden of Eden. Praised are You, Adonai, Who creates the joy of bride and groom.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא שְׂשׁוֹן
וְשִׂמְחָה, חַתָּן וְכֻלָּה, גִּילָה, רִנָּה, דִּיצָה וְחִדּוּה, אֶהְבָּה
וְאַחֻוָה וְשָׁלוֹם וְרַעוּת. מְהֵרָה, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יִשְׁמַע בְּעָרֵי
יְהוּדָה וּבְחֻצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם, קוֹל שְׂשׁוֹן וְקוֹל שִׂמְחָה, קוֹל
חַתָּן וְקוֹל כֻּלָּה, קוֹל מְצַהֲלוֹת חַתָּנִים מְחַפְּתִים וְנִעָרִים
מְמֻשְׁתֵּה נְגִינָתָם. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, מְשַׂמֵּחַ חַתָּן עִם הַכֻּלָּה

Blessing 7

Praised are You, Adonai our God, who rules the universe, Who creates joy and gladness, bride and groom, pleasure, song, delight, laughter, love and harmony, peace and companionship. Adonai our God, may there always be heard in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem voices of joy and gladness, of happiness, voices of brides and grooms, the jubilant voices of those joined in marriage under the chuppah, the voices of young people feasting and singing. Praised are You, Adonai, Who causes groom and bride to rejoice together.

Reflection on Chapter 13



Something we discussed in class today that I appreciated:

Something we discussed in class today that challenged me:

Something we discussed in class today that I would like to know more about:

Additional Readings

Books

- Anita Diamant, *The New Jewish Wedding*
An in-depth, accessible introduction to the key rituals, traditions, and things to consider when planning a Jewish wedding. If you are looking for one book to help you plan your own Jewish wedding, or the wedding of someone you love, this is a great start.
- Danya Ruttenberg, *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*
A collection of groundbreaking essays addressing a wide range of topics, including gender, sexuality, identity and relationships.
- Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men*
Written by the first openly gay Orthodox rabbi, Greenberg addresses how Jewish tradition has understood humanity, gender, gender identity, sexuality, and same-sex relations. Makes a compelling case for the inclusion of same-sex relationships within the framework of Jewish law.
- Perry Netter, *Divorce is a Mitzvah*
A compassionate guide to the emotional, religious, ritual, spiritual, and some of the practical considerations when going through a divorce.

Websites

- *Keshet* (keshetonline.org)
A comprehensive resource, leadership, education, and advocacy center for LGBTQ Jews and allies.