

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**THE ADAPTATION OF ORTHODOX WOMEN TO
SEXUALITY AFTER MARRIAGE**

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ABSTRACT

Very little was ever written in literature or research about the conformance of ultra-orthodox women to their sexuality following their wedding. Most of the researches that do discuss this subject focus on family life educational programs among the religious public or on guidance literature.

The present research proclaims- for the first time- the voice of the ultra-orthodox women on the issues of sexuality and body. The research examines how ultra-orthodox women adapt to sexuality following their wedding and also, how the educational process which they went through at school and at the 'bridal counseling' prior to the wedding, prepares them for the adaptation to the new post-wedding situation.

Apparently, due to their education for modesty and following the Jewish Rabbinical Laws of family purity, no research was found which expresses the voice of the ultra-orthodox women regarding sexuality following the wedding. There is only a meager number of researches discussing the first sexual experiencing in the religious society and especially in the more ultra-orthodox one.

The literature review in this research, indicates the perception of the sexual experience among women in general and the ultra-orthodox women in particular, while examining the connection between the sexual experience and the quality of the married life, the connection between the couple and their mental health. In addition, it examines the perception of sexuality according to Judaism, the laws of family purity, the ultra-orthodox education as preparation for life as a couple, the guidance possibilities among ultra-orthodox youth and the role of guidance to brides as practical, religious preparation.

The goal of the present research is to introduce the voices, the experiences, the difficulties and the dilemmas of the ultra-orthodox women and to attempt to examine the ultra-orthodox women's experience regarding sexuality in view of the education according to which they were brought up. The two major questions of the research derive from this goal: how do women from the ultra-orthodox sector adapt to sexuality following the wedding? How does the educational process that the ultra-orthodox

women went through at school, at bridal guidance and professional consultation, qualify them to adapt to the intimacy of life as a couple after the wedding?

An important variable revealed through the findings is the position of the guidance, consultation and earlier knowledge about intimate life after the wedding- particularly the position of the mother who affects the manner in which the young woman adapts to married life in general and to the conjugality in particular.

The findings of the research indicate that the mother-daughter conflict carries intricate forms in the modern era. In addition, an impression surfaced according to which there is a block surrounding the dialogue between mother and daughter regarding the intimacy in married life.

Many women describe sensation of loneliness in their inability to share that issue, which in turn, directly affects the quality of the communication with the spouse. The reason for the lack of communication stems from the modesty norms of the Jewish culture in general and that of the ultra-orthodox one in particular. Thus, the complexed conflict of mother-daughter relationship, as it is viewed by the Jewish tradition, is bi-directional. Therefore, all the variables that affect the meaning of the sexual experience on the young woman, should be examined.

The difficulty with intimate life seems to be the result of the young married woman's emotional difficulty as well as due to personal data. These may include: traits, personal history and life's data- all of which have great impact on the meaning and the quality of the intimate experience between the couple as negative or positive experience.

Interviewees with confident self-image and the more liberated behavior patterns which include extroversion of emotions, believe that they get that which is suitable for them. Beyond that, their early age at marriage is yet another emotional difficulty which the women must cope with: both regarding the sensation of missing their childhood as well as regarding the experience of having to process the intricate intimate life.

The research points out the existence of the crucial contact between the processing of the sexual relations by the young woman, the quality of her sexuality's self-perception and the quality of her first sexual experience. Negative quality of the first sexual intercourse, negative self-perception and negative perception of the spouse were found

to impact the negative aspect of the current sexual relations experience and the young woman's negative self-perception.

Beyond that, the perception that conjugality is a *Mitzvah* (commandment) that forms the bond and testifies about the connection between souls, relaxes and enables the connection, perceives the experience as enjoyable and pleasurable. Nevertheless, it sees in sanctity a spiritual dimension that grants purpose to the actions. The relaxing contact sensation is absent especially when there is a feeling that this concerns a latent act which is not modest.

Another aspect that evolved through the findings is the treatment of distancing-namely. The Jewish Laws that oblige the couple to retire from each other as soon as the woman is menstruating until she has the ritual bath – the *Mikveh*. Various interviewees believe that the distance lead to passion and contribute to the experiencing of intimacy.

Still, the common wish among the interviewees is to reach a profound physical contact that emerges through the internal bond when two souls are united. This echoes the educational perception which regards marriage as a sacred value and the Mitzva's as one of the major duties which the husband commits himself to his wife in the *Ktubah* (Jewish Marriage Contract). That complete outlook is not copied in the guidance about family life.

The research revealed the difficulty of couples who are repeatedly trying to get pregnant and their wish is not fulfilled. Those who regard sexuality only as a means, may reach deep frustration which is intensified much more than the frustration of the couple who regards sexuality as a sacred value per se.

The crucial weight due to the lack of effective knowledge among the ultra-orthodox women during their first sexual experience, was also indicated as well as the repercussions of that lack of knowledge. The women reported their lack of acquaintance with their body as well as not knowing whether they will or will not enjoy it.

They also pointed out that the knowledge, presented to them on issues concerning sexuality, is usually given to them at an early stage when they are still not mature

enough to absorb or comprehend its meaning. Other indicated that the information and guidance suggested to them shortly before their marriage do not meet their needs. In their opinion, the guidance should relate to the emotional-psychological aspects of the process and the absence of these was most conspicuous in the preparation process of the interviewees who claimed that this was the focal point of their adaptation difficulties. Their major complaint was about the technical guidance (mainly the one concerning the Jewish Religious Laws) while the quality of the required guidance should be one that enables asking and talking which in turn may decrease the apprehension and not intensify it.

The difficulty of the ultra-orthodox women to adapt to sexuality following their wedding is not a direct product of the Jewish outlook but rather the difficulty with the exposure of the thin red line between the clear, detailed and unequivocal instructions and the subtlety of the dialogue about this theme. The more the parameters for the drawing of that thin line are defined unequivocally, the more it will facilitate on the brides' guides – who are suitable for the role regarding their personality- to build the most successful guidance and facilitate the conformance of the 'novice' bride to build her home. Nevertheless, the meaningful religious component that projects directly at the perception of the sexual experience is the perception of the role of marriage and the intimate life as its derivative. The more the couple during their first year of marriage experience their sexual bond as sacred or sanctified in the eyes of God, the more they believe that the couple's unit includes within it the presence and the love of God, thus they preserved their satisfaction with the sexual life and their frequency and a year later reported more intimacy and satisfaction from their relationship.

The research clarified the perception that conjugality is a *Mitzva* which forms the bond and testifies that there is a connection between the souls. That perception is relaxing and it enables the bond, it perceives the experience as enjoyable and pleasurable, yet it also sees the sacredness as a spiritual dimension that grants meaning to actions. The interviewees regard marriage as sacred and sublime thing: the perception they gained about life as full of purpose, in addition to the material, substantial and physical one. Thus, even though they are focused in their answers on the physical experience they do

perceive the discovery of the body as a Mitzvah. Their habit of living life according to the values and education they were given, makes it easier for them, to accept the process.

The practical readiness to turn to consultation or therapy is still in its initial stages due to the natural sense of shame among these women to admit to their difficulties in such a sensitive area. However, in principle, high awareness is discerned for the need and possibilities to fill this gap. On the other hand, the present research negates other findings according to which the ultra-orthodox society does not see the difference between an ultra-orthodox therapist and the one who is not ultra-orthodox. The interviewees who had the courage to turn to therapy, pointed out their reservations about a therapist who does not belong to the ultra-orthodox sector, is not aware of their needs, their sensitivities or the emotional world which adheres tightly to the religious Jewish outlook.