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Traditional Sources on Sexual Pleasure

Some classical Jewish statements about sex might surprise you.

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We often think of religious authorities as prudish, striving to repress all sexual enjoyment. Such is not always the case in Judaism, however, as we shall see in the texts that follow.

Talmud, Ketubot 61b

“The times for conjugal duty prescribed in the Torah are: for men of independent means, every day; for laborers, twice a week; for donkey drivers, once a week; for camel drivers, once in thirty days; for sailors, once in six months.”

So we see that sexual pleasure is a wife’s right and a husband’s obligation.

Isn’t it interesting that the woman’s rights to sexual pleasure are clearly spelled out? This is especially remarkable in light of the following text.

Talmud, Eruvin 100b

“A man is forbidden to compel his wife to have marital relations...Rabbi Joshua ben Levi similarly stated: Whosoever compels his wife to have marital relations will have unworthy children.”

So a man may not compel his wife to fulfill the marital obligation. And yet a wife seems to have the right to compel her husband. It is thus the husband’s obligation to ensure that his wife is sexually fulfilled.

Talmud, Yevamot 62b

“Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Whosoever knows his wife to be a God-fearing woman and does not duly visit her is called a sinner.”

Of course, it could be argued that the above texts are concerned only with a woman’s right to procreation. In the following texts, however, it is clear that it is the sharing of sexual pleasure that is

a husband's obligation to his wife.

Talmud, Eruvin 100b

“Rabbi Yochanan observed: If the Torah had not been given, we could have learned modesty from the cat, honesty from the ant, chastity from the dove, and good manners from the rooster, who first coaxes and then mates.”

Talmud, Ketubot 48a

“There must be close bodily contact during sex. This means that a husband must not treat his wife in the manner of the Persians, who perform their marital duties in their clothes. This provides support for the ruling of Rav Huna who ruled that a husband who says, ‘I will not perform my marital duties unless she wears her clothes and I mine,’ must divorce her and give her also her ketubah settlement [the monetary settlement agreed to in the marriage contract].”

In other words, if a husband refuses to perform his marital obligation in a loving, romantic, and sexually pleasing way, his wife actually has the right to demand a divorce and to receive her ketubah settlement. Since divorce was generally considered to be a husband's prerogative, this is a remarkable statement about the importance of sexual pleasure within a marriage.

We generally think of traditional Judaism as being concerned only with procreation. What do these texts teach us about Judaism's view of sex within marriage?

In his Mishneh Torah, Maimonides takes an even more remarkably progressive view of sexual pleasure.

Mishneh Torah, Laws Concerning Forbidden Relations 21:9

“Since a man's wife is permitted to him, he may act with her in any manner whatsoever. He may have intercourse with her whenever he so desires and kiss any organ of her body he wishes, and he may have intercourse with her naturally or unnaturally [traditionally, this refers to anal and oral sex], provided that he does not expend semen to no purpose. Nevertheless, it is an attribute of piety that a man should not act in this matter with levity and that he should sanctify himself at the time of intercourse.”

The above texts are remarkably progressive; they sound as if they could have been written today. [It should be noted that the above passage is not a statement about a husband's right to demand sex from his wife, but—despite being framed regarding men—about what kinds of sexual expression are permitted in general.] This is not to say, however, that the Rabbis were totally liberated. Consider the following texts.

Talmud, Niddah 17a

“Rav Hisda ruled: A man is forbidden to perform his marital duty in the daytime, for it is said, ‘And

thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself' (Leviticus 19:18). But what is the proof? Abaye replied: He might observe something repulsive in her, and she would thereby become loathsome to him."

Talmud, Gittin 70a

"Three things enfeeble a man's body, namely, to eat standing, to drink standing, and to have marital intercourse in a standing position."

Talmud, Niddah 13b

"It was taught at the school of Rabbi Ishmael, 'Thou shall not commit adultery' implies, Thou shall not practice masturbation either with hand or with foot."



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