

LIFELONG EROTIC SEX IN MARRIAGE: REPLACING INFATUATION WITH INTIMACY

Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

Regardless of the current fashion, whether it's de rigueur to belittle or to champion marriage and family, sociologically they are extraordinarily important institutions. The reason is uncomplicated: marriage and family have formed the foundation of historically productive social life. We see this in the relationship of the micro family to the macro society. Healthy marriages disproportionately produce healthy families, healthy families disproportionately produce healthy communities, and healthy communities disproportionately produce healthy institutions—which ultimately are the bulwarks of healthy society. Certainly there are many forces other than marriage and family that affect the health of society. But when large numbers of marriages and families break up, whatever the reasons, the education and upbringing of children—the coming generation of citizens—suffer dramatically. The upshot is that we begin to see decay of ever-larger communities, and eventually the failure of the institutional underpinnings of society when it all becomes epidemic.¹ As the Talmud teaches (Shabbat 10b), we often discover that in family life when things went wrong, “the matter evolved” (*נתגלה הדבר*) far beyond its innocuous beginnings.²

¹ The origins and implications are described in the comments of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), which are compiled and adapted in the *The Hirsch Haggadah* (Jerusalem & New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1988, pp. 14-15): ‘If one wishes the spirit of ethical integrity to permeate this society, then there is only one way: ‘build houses’ (Yirmeyahu 29:5), for such a spirit can flourish only in the dedicated atmosphere of a home. *There exists no substitute for the home*, and if one is looking elsewhere for the source of peace and prosperity, he is searching in vain. All of a nation’s politics and diplomacy, its theories of national economy and institutions for mass education, its trade and industry, its schools and community centers—none of these will save the people from extinction if they let the parental home become a parody. Are children born for the sake of the state’s false concern instead of the warm love of parents? Does the census show ever-growing numbers of children without parents and parents without children? Does the nation’s high society make a mockery of morality and modesty? If so, then all the palaces it is building are founded on quicksand.’

² For example, “the matter evolved” is an apt description of what happened in the story of Joseph (Bereishit 37:1-Shemot 1:1-22).

Deuteronomy 24:5 provides a clear statement³ of Torah perspective on the *national* importance of marriage and family—to wit: even when war threatens the nation, its national interest in establishing a solid foundation of marriage and family is prioritized over drafting a newlywed to serve in the Army or continue in business. It's an explicit policy confirmation of the critical linkage between marriage, family, community, and nation—that marriage and family are of pivotal importance to the survival and success of the nation.

From a rabbinic pastoral counseling perspective, marriage and family are extraordinarily important because a large number of people we see professionally come to us presenting problems related to marriage and family breakdown, which in turn have highly destructive secondary consequences. And often we're in a position to help people avoid situations of marriage and family life that have a high probability of failure.

Destructive Cultural Ideas

Part of the explanation for the large number of marriage and family breakdowns—certainly why more aren't successfully renewed—may be ascribed to popular cultural ideas about love and sex, and the promotion of those ideas in the secular mass media.

One of the widely promoted misunderstandings about sex and marriage is that passionate lust is an essential quality to maintain in a marriage, that when it dissipates one or both partners are susceptible to someone outside of the marriage who reignites those feelings of intense desire. The implication is that lust is essential for continuously satisfying *erotic* sexual experience, but nothing could be further from the truth. Lust per se is neither a measure nor a predictor of consistently fulfilling erotic sexual experience.

The idea that a primary goal in relationships is to “satisfy (our) passion” (i.e., lust) is inherently problematic on two counts. First, “satisfying passion” is an oxymoron. The nature of such passion is that it cannot be satisfied, because it is an essentially self-serving search for perfect sensual gratification, which by definition is unobtainable. As Rabbi Chaim Navon teaches, it also requires objectifying one's sexual partner merely to

³ The verse reads: When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out in the host [army], neither shall he be charged with any business: he shall be free for his house one year, and shall cheer his wife whom he has taken.

satisfy one's own needs,⁴ which is why engaging in an endless series of unsatisfying short-lived sexual relationships is so common and popular.

Second, it's important to distinguish between lust based on infatuation and passion based on intimacy, a distinction we'll consider in greater detail. Withal, seeking to satisfy one's lust for its own sake is problematic, even for someone who is single, but certainly in marriage and family life, the hallmarks of which are reciprocity.

Another popular idea is that it's difficult or impossible to maintain sexual desire with the same person over decades in a marriage.⁵ The idea is that monogamy is no more natural to humankind than it is to our closest primate relatives. The conclusion is that the challenge to contemporary marriages is not infidelity per se, but our lack of honesty about extra-marital relationships. This point of view has two fundamental flaws, apart from the obvious distinction that human beings are unlike all other primates in that we have the capacity to make free-willed moral choices:

First, it implicitly treats sexual desire apart from sexual experience (which is a hallmark of infatuation), but in fact sexual *desire* continues unabated if one's sexual *experience* is continuously erotically fulfilling. The stumbling block in most marriages is not the loss of desire (or lust), but the lack of a broad spectrum of intimacy needed to sustain erotic experience when making love.

Second, monogamy is not merely an abstract moral principle, but ancient cultural wisdom regarding an essential condition of successful family life. Multiple sexual partners have the insidious effect of dividing and confusing children's loyalties, straining extended family relations that are essential support for nuclear family, and diverting the marriage partners from fully investing themselves in their marriage and family—which may explain why the vast majority of “open marriages” lead quickly to divorce.

The epitome of misguided ideas promoted about long-lived sexual pleasure may be the so-called “gag” book, *Sex After 50*, which contains only blank pages.

⁴ See “Lecture #12: The Woman in Creation,” published online by The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash (<http://vbm-torah.org/archive/bereishit/12bereishit.htm>).

⁵ David S. Blanchflower and Andrew J. Oswald, in “Money, Sex and Happiness: An Empirical Study,” *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 106(3): 393-415 (2004), ask: “How many sexual partners in the last year will maximize a person's happiness?” Based on data from a random sample of 16,000 American men and women, they conclude: “The happiness maximizing number of sexual partners in the previous year is 1.”

Marriages and families are troubled because of *external* social forces that create centripetal pressures on them, and because of *internal* dynamics that can have a centrifugal effect, pulling them apart. We understand and respond to problems of marriages and families in two ways: organizing and lobbying aimed to bring about remedial policies and legislation; and counseling and therapy aimed at individuals, couples, and families. This paper focuses on some of the internal dynamics that pull apart marriages and long-term relationships, particularly the dynamics related to sexual activity.

At the outset when considering marriages and families, there is an aphorism to keep in mind as a pastoral counselor. The counseling goal is to help individuals, couples, and families achieve happy, productive and fulfilled lives of moral spirituality. But as Rabbi Avi Shafran teaches, we need to understand—helping those we serve also to understand—that *true happiness begins with the realization of what does not really make us happy.*⁶ So it's often necessary to help people let go of attitudes and actions that monopolize their time, effort, resources, and spirit, but fail to make them happy—more of which we're about to consider.

Sex-Based Roles & Activity

Successful family life begins to a significant extent with sex-based roles and the sexual activity related to them. And a great deal of that has changed in the last 50 to 100 years in the United States. For example, half a century ago, in the mid-1960s, typically there were two or three women in first-year law school classes. Nowadays, women make up half of first-year law school classes. But even with dramatic changes in women's access to rights, roles, and resources traditionally monopolized by men, some very important aspects of social life have remained largely unchanged: American culture still powerfully conditions females to excel at emotional intimacy rather than exercising power. In contemporary American society, although exceptions are common, females are conditioned from their early years to be capable and comfortable with *expression and*

⁶ See “Sukkah Vision,” published online by Torah.org (<http://www.torah.org/features/holydays/sukkahvision.html>).

acceptance of emotion. Males from their early years are still powerfully conditioned to excel at *exercise and acceptance of power* rather than emotional intimacy.

Given these sex-based differences, there are common patterns when sexual relations of young men and women are dysfunctional or self-destructive. Young women often use sex to exercise power, particularly over young men; young men often use sex to experience emotional intimacy, particularly with young women—but neither works very well. Young men commonly focus on sexual conquests of young women, and young women commonly grant or withhold sexual favors to control young men.

What about the sex itself? We might reasonably think that for most young people, certainly from the late teens into the mid-twenties, the immediate experience of sexual activity is inevitably physical pleasure. But that's far from universally true, which may partially explain the long-term trend of fewer young people engaging in sexual activity, as reported in 2011 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.⁷ The immediate psychological and emotional outcomes of sexual activity for young people are often problematic. Not uncommonly, young women feel cheapened, even degraded or exploited by the experience. Ironically, what may have begun as a way to exercise power and control over their male partners leaves them feeling powerless. Those reactions are often accompanied by a loss of self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence. Not uncommonly, young men feel alienated by the experience. Ironically, what may have begun unwittingly as a way to remedy their emotional intimacy deficit leaves them emotionally alienated from their partners and themselves. These reactions are often accompanied by a sense of greater relationship-isolation, and a need to compensate by promoting intimacy with male friends, typically through close physical contact in sports or by a false intimacy achieved through proclaiming their sexual prowess.

Despite these problematic aspects, such sexual relations often serve as the misguided drivers of long-term relationships, marriages, and families, in chronological as well as psychological and emotional respects. So to a significant extent, socially defined sex-based roles and much of the sexual activity that follows from them do *not* provide a healthy foundation for family life and, instead, are often precursors of marital infidelity.

⁷ See: "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2011," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 61(4), June 8, 2012 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Costs of Sexual Infidelity

The *essential commitment* that accompanies marriage for the vast majority of married couples is “sexual fidelity,” which is not necessarily expected when simply living together “without benefit of clergy,” as cohabiting was once described. And nowadays, young people rarely use the term “adultery,” but their marital expectations nonetheless include sexual fidelity. Yet even so, we estimate that approximately 50 percent of married men and 25 percent of married women commit adultery. So in modern society, since unrestrained sexual license has become commonplace, it’s useful to consider some of the typical consequences of adultery—which include:

- Lying
- Acts of deceit
- Betrayals and violations of promises
- Disease
- Emotional trauma to spouses and children
- Family breakup and divorce
- Compromised long-term support for children
- Violence and, occasionally, murder

Despite these destructive consequences, adultery is not a crime⁸ in more than half the states and rarely prosecuted where it is still against the law; and the majority of Americans concluded long ago that it should not be criminalized. That criminal laws can’t fix many serious social problems tells us that *morality*, potentially, plays a critical role in social stability. And “cheating” on one’s spouse, having extra-marital affairs, although normative and often not illegal, is widely considered to be “immoral”—that is, adultery is understood to be something one *chooses* to do although, as we’ve noted above, it causes great harm, pain and injury. What’s the point of labeling unfaithfulness in marriage as immoral—why should we bother? By labeling extra-marital affairs as immoral, we acknowledge their significant destructive consequences, in contrast to treating them simply as matters of “personal preference” or “lifestyle choice.”

⁸ However, adultery is still punished under Article 134 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. For example, see “Rapid Fall for Army General Accused of Sex Crimes,” *New York Times* (January 4, 2014).

Are extra-marital affairs a *social problem*? The question harkens back to why society labels them as immoral. Consider that extra-marital affairs are significantly correlated with the breakdown of marriages; the breakdown of marriages is significantly correlated with high divorce rates; high divorce rates are significantly correlated with children's various psychological, mental, and emotional problems and, in turn, with juvenile delinquency and adult crime; family disintegration and the dysfunctions that accompany it are significantly correlated with community breakdown, particularly in urban, inner-city areas; and the breakdown of communities in the inner cities is significantly correlated with a general weakening of the nation's institutions.

Infatuation Foundation of Marriage & Family

To understand what can and cannot provide a healthy foundation for marriage and family, it's useful to begin by considering what constitutes a "family." What are the benchmarks of what we call family?

Ordinarily we consider members of a nuclear (in contrast to an extended) family to be related by blood, marriage, or a legal process, and we tend to expect that they're living together in the same household. Nowadays, however, that includes couples that live together for many years, maybe even have children, but aren't married. The "politically correct" definition of family, which corresponds to the interactionist view, is that a family is whatever any group of people say is a family, which obviously is not an adequate definition to qualify for *public* benefits—say, for example, as a surviving "spouse" of a deceased soldier. Administering legislated benefits would become a bureaucratic nightmare if qualifications to receive them were a matter of self-definition. And it's not an adequate definition of family to qualify for *private* benefits—say, for example, membership in a synagogue; religions would not be able to maintain their unique systems of belief, teaching, and practice in the face of myriad self-selected unbelieving, even hostile members. So as a society we recognize that marriage offers advantages over more informal and casual arrangements.

Marriage and the family arrangements it commonly leads to are positively sanctioned by *governmental license* and *religious ritual*. Those two formal sanctions, the license that *legally certifies* marriage and the ritual that *religiously sanctifies* marriage,

have very different functions: The legal document ensures legal rights, roles, and responsibilities, which we acknowledge as beneficial or at least marginally useful. The religious ritual presumably denotes a shared commitment to particular moral and ethical values, principles, and practices for the couple's life together.

Yet what are some of the common reasons that couples actually get married nowadays? Certainly they look for shared interests, common desire regarding children, and economic, educational, and social "compatibility." But the sine qua non of contemporary marriage is having "fallen in love."⁹ As the foundation of marriage and family, what do we mean when we say that people have "fallen in love"? How do we define "falling in love"? Is it that feeling you get when you meet the "right one"? Consciously or unconsciously, most people seem to believe that falling in love is a sensation, based on physical and emotional attraction—one that magically and spontaneously generates when Mr. or Ms. "Right" appears.

Another way to approach the question of falling in love is to ask: What happened to the people who "fell in love" when they fell *out* of love and divorced? We all know such people. Is it the case that, speaking more precisely, initially they became *infatuated* with one another—we've been calling it "falling in love"—without actually knowing one another's personality and character? When we drill down into these commonplace circumstances, we find that most women and many men expect that their marriages will provide a spectrum of special and exclusive intimacy—emotional, intellectual, and spiritual, which not surprisingly is disappointed when their spouse is revealed as unable or unwilling to engage in such intimacy—which was unknown beforehand because the basis of the marriage was infatuation.

And what is "infatuation"? The word infatuation comes from the Latin, meaning: "to be made foolish" or, in effect, to be easily fooled. The effect of infatuation is humorously portrayed in "Binky's Guide to Love":

⁹ Helen Fisher reports that "91 percent of American women and 86 percent of American men would not marry somebody who had every single quality they were looking for in a partner, if they were not in love with that person." See "Why we love, why we cheat," TED2006 ° 23:27 ° Filmed Feb 2006 (online at http://www.ted.com/talks/helen_fisher_tells_us_why_we_love_cheat/transcript#t-865000).

LIFE IN HELL

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When a couple that began with infatuation start to know one another's personality and character, they often find that they were easily fooled, because they don't particularly like what they discover. So falling in love is not a good predictor of a successful marriage—although it certainly feels like “divine ecstasy” for the brief time it lasts. In fact, brain research suggests that, “Love [of the infatuated variety] and obsessive-compulsive

disorder could have a similar chemical profile. Translation: Love and mental illness may be difficult to tell apart.”¹⁰

What many people experience as a uniquely personal loss of excitement in relationships, peculiar to oneself individually, is in fact a widespread phenomenon, one which has been researched, studied, and reported in the social science literature under the rubric of “hedonic adaptation.” The key idea is that the “honeymoon” phase of a relationship—marked by extraordinary preoccupation with one’s partner, ecstasy, optimism, and eudaemonia—cannot be sustained. Hedonic adaptation is such that as we increasingly achieve a desirable objective or object, such as a romantic partner, it becomes increasingly less attractive to us.¹¹

Lyubomirsky notes, “Sexual passion and arousal are particularly prone to hedonic adaptation.”¹² Bao and Lyubomirsky have also noted that, “. . . when adaptation does begin, it may accelerate more rapidly than in less passionate relationships, such as when an individual suddenly gets a clear-eyed view of her partner’s failings. . . . Of course, some will be tempted to reset the adaptation process altogether by swapping their relationship for a newer and more exciting one. . . .”¹³ However, although hedonic adaptation has been described as a “treadmill,” the process does not develop at the same speed or in the same way for every individual.¹⁴

Romance

Often when we say that people fell in love, we have an image of a “romantic relationship.” And for those who imagine they’ll have such a romantic relationship with the one with whom they fall in love, we might ask, what would be the benchmarks of that romantic relationship—what would make it “*romantic*”? One of the major benchmarks of successful marriage is the partners’ *long-lived fulfilling sexual relations*. Imagine that as

¹⁰ See Lauren Slater, “Love,” *National Geographic*, 209(2): 33-49 (February 2006).

¹¹ This effect is a variation on the psychological process of deprivation-satiation and the sociological process of declining marginal utility—that is, the less we have of something, the more we value it; and the more we have of something, the less we value it.

¹² See Sonja Lyubomirsky, “New Love: A Short Shelf Life,” *New York Times* (December 1, 2012).

¹³ See Katherine Jacobs Bao and Sonja Lyubomirsky (in press), “Making It Last: Combating Hedonic Adaptation in Romantic Relationships,” *Journal of Positive Psychology*.

¹⁴ See Ed Diener, Richard E. Lucas, and Christie Napa Scollon, “Beyond the Hedonic Treadmill: Revising the Adaptation Theory of Well-Being,” *American Psychologist*, 61(4): 305-14 (May-June 2006).

a pastoral counselor you have a congregant who looks forward to finding a romantic partner and having a “romantic relationship.” It’s *not* likely that any of the following potentially long-lived conditions correspond to your congregant’s ideas of *romance*:

- That the fulfilling quality of making love lasts not for a year or even a decade, but for a *lifetime*—literally, into one’s old age;
- That when making love, one almost always feels safe, secure, and satisfied—before, during, and after—again, for a *lifetime*; and
- That making love is part and parcel of continuous *lifelong* intimacy—emotional, intellectual, and spiritual—with one’s partner.

This group of characteristics does *not* correspond to what we usually think of as “romance.” In a similar vein, we might ask a congregant we’re counseling, which of the following two situations would be preferable?

- First, that you become sexually aroused by the thought of your partner’s physical attributes, or the thought of some kind of physical contact between you and your partner?
- Or second, that you become sexually aroused when you are physically close and *not* thinking about anything physical, but instead thinking and possibly talking about why and how you love your partner?

What’s the difference between the two situations, and why might we prefer one more than the other? Obviously, the first situation reflects not having fallen in love, but having “fallen in lust” or sexual desire. It’s a virtual certainty that infatuation with the *physical* aspects of one’s partner will diminish sharply in a relatively short period of time. As Magidah Khulda says in this respect, “Romance is a blind alley.” The second situation reflects having come to love another person, which is based on *authentic intimacy* in the relationship—that is, on a spectrum of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual intimacy—and on the *character* of the partners that’s revealed in their day-to-day life together.¹⁵ It’s likely that, based on such authentic intimacy and admirable character, the *erotic* aspects

¹⁵ Rabbi Avraham Peretz Friedman reminds us that, “The Torah’s objective is to maximize intimacy—emotional, spiritual, and psychological intimacy. The term for this most intimate relationship between a couple is ‘*devek*’ (lit., union, attachment),” in *Marital Intimacy: A Traditional Jewish Approach* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), p. 56.

of the relationship will be durable and deepen over time. The commonplace experience of young people is that infatuation-driven sex begins marked by sexual excitement but becomes increasingly boring over a relatively short period of time; while sex based on growing intimacy commonly begins unremarkably but increasingly becomes erotically satisfying over time.

One of the major complaints in relationship breakups is “sexual incompatibility.” One or both partners say they are perpetually dissatisfied with their sexual relations, and they regard this condition as a relationship deal-breaker. Obviously, there are many potential reasons why two people may find it difficult or impossible to achieve sexual pleasure and fulfillment together, including:

- If the *couple* has serious unresolved psychological or emotional baggage, they’re likely to be frustrated sexually;
- If one or both partners as *individuals* have serious psychological or emotional baggage, the prospects for fulfilling sex are substantially diminished;
- If one or both partners have serious physical health problems, sexual activity is likely to be negatively influenced;
- If the couple or family system is under severe financial or other pressure, the potential for satisfying sex is severely limited; and
- If the couple is living in a place and time of natural catastrophe, war, or other cataclysmic events, opportunities for any kind of sex may be nonexistent.

But even if none of the foregoing reasons apply, successfully making love may be virtually impossible because of what we might call “communication failures.” For example, many people find it difficult to tell their sex-partner, “I want to love you when and in the ways that are pleasurable for you. Please tell me what you would like me to do and not do.” And many people find it difficult to be open and frank about what pleases them and does not please them sexually. We may feel awkward and self-conscious, even embarrassed proposing that we’re entirely committed to someone else’s sexual pleasure, or responding to such proposals with an itemized list of our own sexual preferences. Clearly, however, two people who are committed to satisfying one another to the extent that they would explicitly propose to do so, and respond to their partner’s proposal,

would be more likely to have a fulfilling sexual relationship.

What makes it possible for us to be completely free in giving and receiving sexual pleasure? Sexual pleasure can't simply be the result of "mechanical" technique, a matter of instinctively having the right physical moves, like a dog or cat, because we humans recognize and respond to ideas of right and wrong in one another, no two of us are alike, and any individual human's preferences change according to a variety of circumstances and conditions. However, consistently achieving such pleasure requires unselfconscious, open, truthful communication.

Authentic Intimacy

What enables us to feel entirely free to communicate that we want to please our partner, or communicate to our partner what pleases us? The uncomplicated answer is authentic intimacy. It is only when we have established the trust that accompanies the broad spectrum of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual intimacy that we can begin to truly understand and relate to the personality and character of someone with whom we "make love," not just have sex. The wonder is that, unlike infatuation-driven sex, such completely free giving and receiving is not short-lived. It doesn't dissipate in weeks or months or a year or two, since it's not based on infatuation. As long as two people maintain their health—emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical—it can last a lifetime. Every other kind of "sex" is a pale imitation, both in longevity and erotic fulfillment.

What are the building blocks of authentic intimacy? We can rule out the popular beliefs about achieving intimacy—that it's the result of enjoying the same activities together, sharing a sense of humor, learning and growing together, common intellectual interests, and the like—all of which are sources of relationship pleasure, even fulfillment, but not the kind of authentic intimacy that sustains lifelong erotic sexual fulfillment. Fostering authentic intimacy requires *vulnerability*, a willingness to reveal one's deepest beliefs, feelings, fears, hopes, and faith, with an unalloyed expectation that one's partner will not reject, ridicule, revile, lie, deceive, or attempt to manipulate us with what we have shared of ourselves. As Dr. Stephen A. Mitchell (d. 2000) has argued, "... ultimately, the emotional meshing and vulnerability of committed relationship can

become the most rewarding source of eros.”¹⁶

Although achieving intimacy entails vulnerability, it’s essential to recognize that authentic intimacy is the outcome of a *learning* process, not the result of a decision made at a moment in time regarding one’s willingness to be vulnerable. As we struggle in relationships with the inescapable demands of sacrifice, responsibility, duty, and partnership, we come to apply ourselves and learn how to meet the practical challenges of *maintaining* intimacy over an extended period of time.¹⁷

Despite being largely out of fashion, it is a couple’s shared *moral code and vision*—their agreed-upon values, principles, and practices—for their life together that enables the vulnerability and learning that sustains authentic intimacy. It is their common commitment to a moral framework for their relationship—one that demands truth, an absence of deceit and violations of trust, unreserved kindness, unstinting justice in their treatment of one another, and exclusive commitment to one another—which ultimately enables risk-taking intimacy. We recognize that, “Wherever there is unity of thought, purpose, and commitment, there is also personalistic unity.”¹⁸ Thus it’s crucial that partners have a commitment to *shared moral values and principles*. This understanding accords with the traditional Jewish view of sexual pleasure.¹⁹

But values and principles of long-lived marital intimacy mean not simply that we love and live with another person, not even that we’re “committed” to that person, but that we have *cast our fate with their fate*. In effect, the two fates become one: the *common fate* is accepted in that, whatever the character and actions of one’s partner, the consequences are shared with him or her, and vice versa: “To love means to share an identity, one common destiny.”²⁰ Once marriage is viewed in this way, the *moral*

¹⁶ As cited in Daniel Bergner, “Unexcited? There May Be a Pill for That,” *New York Times* (May 22, 2013).

¹⁷ For a contemporary yet traditional illustration, see Josh Tapper’s film review, “Haredi filmmaker aims lens inward in acclaimed ‘Fill the Void’,” *Jweekly.com* (November 15, 2012) [online at <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/67009/haredi-filmmaker-aims-lens-inward-in-acclaimed-fill-the-void/>].

¹⁸ From “Torah and Humility,” Virtual Beit Midrash divrei Torah (online at <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/humility.htm>), based on a lecture by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt”l, originally delivered in 1971, and adapted by Rav Ezra Bick.

¹⁹ Rabbi Friedman teaches that, “. . . Pleasure is a happy and not unwelcome by-product that accompanies and results from the proper observance and fulfillment of many of our God-given obligations,” in *Marital Intimacy: A Traditional Jewish Approach*, p. 16.

²⁰ From “Torah and Humility.”

character and personality of one’s “intended” become the paramount considerations in the choice and decision before the fateful step to join one’s life with that of another person.

Marriage in the absence of a shared moral code is both visionless and “lawless,” one in which anything can happen and probably will—which explains why so many marriages are devoid of authentic intimacy, ultimately unfulfilling, destroyed by infidelity, and end in divorce.

Boring sex, the absence of erotic experience, reflects a failure of intimacy, not lust, and its root cause is a lack of a shared moral spiritual vision by the partners. Withal, it’s possible to suffer in ignorance, deprived of pleasure, joy, and fulfillment without knowing it, because one has never learned the essential requirements to achieve these outcomes.

Intimacy & Sexual Relations

These considerations bring to mind an issue that illustrates the importance of intimacy to achieving fulfilling sexual relations. We know that in many marriages and relationships, pornography has become a problem. There is tension or open conflict in the relationship because men regularly view pornography in the absence of their partners, which is opposed by their partners.

Is regular viewing of pornography by men in relationships a problem that we should think about as pastoral counselors and, if so, why is it a problem? The short answer is that pornography “despiritualizes” sex. Viewing pornography repeatedly over time effectively reinforces in the viewer the idea that the pleasure of sex is mostly physical. However, the commonplace lesson learned by personal sexual experience is that the “hot” guy or girl who was initially attractive, very quickly turns out *not* to be a source of continuing erotic sexual fulfillment. There is very little connection between initial attraction and consistently fulfilling sex over an extended period of time. Typically, in a relatively short period of time, we discover that the “hot” person has unattractive character and personality traits, or at least traits that don’t mesh well with our own, and they have the effect of poisoning the “sexual atmosphere” between us. Often this occurs

in a matter of days or weeks, but rarely takes longer than a few months.²¹

The explanation is simple: The wellsprings of consistent erotic sexual pleasure are the psychological, emotional, and spiritual conditions that foster intimacy—not physicality. It's a matter of having a common “spirit” with another person in terms of our thinking and feeling, and pornography inculcates an entirely contrary understanding. So thinking that pornography is not healthy or constructive is not a matter of prudishness, but insight into what makes for *long-lasting erotic sexual fulfillment* in a relationship.

There's a postscript to this subject on a slightly different but related theme. When counseling young people, we suggest to them, “You might ask yourself: ‘Do I want others to want me mostly for my body—that is, my physical attributes—or mostly for my personality and character?’ If it's the former, then you should dress and act in a sexually provocative way, and attract others who want you for your body or physical attributes. But if you want to be wanted for your personality and character, then you should dress in a way that doesn't distract from those things.” Many come to understand that they can always reveal the physical part of themselves later to potential partners who have shown that they want them for the parts of themselves that really matter.

The importance of intimacy in sexual relationships is also suggested by young adults who are discombobulated and even revolted by the thought of their parents engaging in sexual activity. Some have told us they imagine unattractive aging bodies engaged in sex, which they find repulsive. In other words, when younger we find erotic stimulation primarily in the *physical appearance* of the object of our sexual desire. We're unfamiliar with the more mature experience of consistent, completely fulfilling erotic sexual pleasure as largely the consequence of psychological, emotional, and spiritual considerations. That experience reflects the presence of authentic intimacy between the partners, and mature love based on that intimacy.

The irony in this picture, as we said earlier, is that what we initially regard as “hot” in a potential sex object—primarily physical attractiveness and seductiveness—has

²¹ This outcome accords well with the typical consequences of sexual objectification, “representing or treating another person like a sex object, one that serves another’s sexual pleasure,” which include: depression, eating disorders, body shame, depressed cognitive functioning, sexual dysfunction, and lower sex-esteem. See “The Sexy Lie” (online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMS4VJKekW8>) by Dr. Caroline Heldman.

little or nothing to do with the degree of sexual pleasure we experience over time. Of course, initial infatuation—allowing ourselves to be fooled—may mislead us for a very brief period, but that dissipates amazingly fast as the personality and character of the “sex object” overcome the infatuating effects of physical attractiveness. This should not be surprising, because with infatuation feelings lead thinking—often in self-deluded directions; with mature love, thinking leads feelings—so feelings are grounded in genuine knowledge and practical realities.

Foundations of Successful Marital Intimacy

Most of our ideas of “romance” are relatively superficial. There’s nothing quite as pathetic as a husband or wife whose marriage is falling apart and who seeks counseling to “renew the *romance*” they first experienced. This individual wants to recreate the state of infatuation that existed at the outset of the relationship, to enjoy the feelings that existed before the partners really knew one another’s character and personality.

Where do we get most of our ideas about “romance”? We are of course bombarded by every kind of commercialized media—the Internet, newspapers, magazines, books, television, films, billboards, and more—aimed to convince us that romance is achieved with flowers and candy, sexy apparel, candlelight dinners, diamond rings and gold jewelry, perfectly clear skin or white teeth, a movie star’s body, walks on the beach in the moonlight, and so on. While all these commercial “messages” are obviously designed only to sell products, they nonetheless work their way into the popular culture, camouflaging infatuation as “true love,” and becoming de rigueur relationship expectations.

When we consider whether and why marriages are successful or not, we find that mature love, in contrast to infatuation, is *not a prerequisite* for marriage. As Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb teaches, mature love is a “consequence of marriage based upon a common [moral] vision and goal of life,” and based on the perception that the partners are well suited to achieving that goal together.²² Marriages that don’t end in divorce typically begin with the partners sharing a vision and goal for their life together—undergirded

²² See “The ‘We’ Relationship,” published online by Torah.org (<http://www.torah.org/features/par-kids/werltnshp.html>).

moral values, principles, and practices—which provides the basis for coming to love one another over time as they work together to realize their vision of that life.

If successful marriage is based in part on love, what should we regard as *mature* love that might last for a lifetime? Suppose we believe that, given our thoughts and feelings, we love someone. To test whether what we think and feel is mature love, or something else, like infatuation, we should ask ourselves: What am I willing to sacrifice for the other person's benefit? The question of loving is not *what* do we love about the other person, but *how* do we love that person—that is, what is it about our *giving* to that person (in contrast to *getting*) that fulfills us and makes our life worthwhile?²³

Rabbi Maurice Lamm teaches that, “A man *takes* a wife and begins a life of *giving*. Only in the intimacy of marriage can one reach the higher levels of the ethical life, levels at which one can rejoice in supporting, helping, and strengthening others without expectation of reward. The *taking in marriage cannot survive without the commitment to give*. This ‘taking-giving’ moral lesson is best described by Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, a twentieth-century ethicist. ‘Is the giving a consequence of love, or is perhaps the reverse true: the love a result of giving? We usually think it is love which causes giving. But the truth is that giving often brings about love, for the same reason that a person loves what he himself created or nurtured: he recognizes it as part of himself. . . . On this basis, we can understand yet another remarkable fact. Why do we find so often that this husband-wife affection does not seem to last? . . . People generally are “takers” not “givers.” . . . Each begins to demand from the other the fulfillment of his or her obligations. When demand begins, love departs.’”²⁴

The question we might ask ourselves about “love” is this: What does my love and its object bring out in *me*? What does it reveal to me about my character and qualities? Does it reveal in practical ways my giving, selfless side, or does it reveal my taking, selfish side? And which part of myself do I most want to develop and experience? If it’s not obvious, this conception of love entails giving oneself up to the other—not by

²³ “Intimacy for its own sake (solely for the producing and enjoyment of the incomparable physical pleasure it affords, without thought or intention of achieving greater marital bonding) is frowned upon by the Torah and does *not* enjoy the Torah’s encouragement. This type of hedonism and/or selfishness in sexual indulgence runs contrary to the Torah’s entire conception of sexual enjoyment . . . ,” in *Marital Intimacy: A Traditional Jewish Approach*, p. 57.

²⁴ Excerpted from Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Love & Marriage* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 159-60.

subordination of one's will or principles, but by devoting one's "gifts" to the other, sacrificing something for the sake of the other. But why should *sacrifice* be the measure of mature love? Sacrifice is essential because *love is rooted in reciprocity*—mutual giving between two people. And this reciprocity enables the risk-taking essential to achieving authentic intimacy.

What kind of sacrifice might one make for the sake of loved one? One might sacrifice one's *popularity* for a loved one's health or well being. One might sacrifice one's *impatience* to allow a loved one to express what's important to him or her. One might sacrifice *personal preferences* for a sport or hobby to enable mutuality of activities with a loved one. One might sacrifice one's "*face*"—that is, endure embarrassment—for the sake of enabling a loved one to hear the truth. One might sacrifice one's *bad mood* to show kindness to a loved one. One might sacrifice that which *uplifts or sustains the life of the other*, including even one's own life. All of these examples are nothing but love translated into words and deeds. All of these sacrifices amount to devotion to bring the loved one near, to foster intimacy. If you doubt they would have that effect, imagine how you would think and feel about someone who was making such sacrifices on your behalf.

One of the principles derived from these understandings is that before we find the right person, we have to become the right person—a giver instead of a taker.

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches that love without sacrifice of physical desires is a vain (i.e., empty) pretense.²⁵ Research at the University of Virginia's National Marriage Project seems to confirm this understanding. Researchers studied the role of "generosity" in the marriages of 2,870 men and women. Generosity was defined as "the virtue of giving good things to one's spouse freely and abundantly"—such as making coffee for the spouse in the morning; regularly expressing affection; and showing a willingness to forgive. Generosity is defined as going above the usual expectation to do one's fair share of housework, childcare, and being faithful—small acts of service and making an extra effort to be kind and affectionate when there is no obligation to do so.

Men and women with the highest scores on the generosity scale were far more likely to report that they were "very happy" in their marriages, which almost certainly included their sexual relations. The director of the research project stated: "Living that

²⁵ See Hirsch commentary on Deuteronomy 6:5.

spirit of generosity in a marriage does foster a virtuous cycle that leads to both spouses on average being happier in the marriage.”²⁶

Epilog

We conclude our consideration of authentic intimacy and mature love in contrast to infatuation and commercialized romance—giving versus getting—with the findings of a recent study that suggest a motivational key to happiness in relationships.²⁷ The study surveyed 80 adults to determine whether they relied mainly on hedonic sources of well-being, by consuming things; or instead relied on eudaimonic sources of well-being, by “striving toward . . . noble purpose beyond simple self-gratification.”

Individuals who indicated higher levels of hedonic sources of happiness had markedly higher levels of inflammatory-producing gene expression than individuals who had higher levels of eudaimonic sources of happiness. Inflammatory-producing gene expression has been linked to diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease, and greater susceptibility to infection.

Thus it’s in our self-interest to act selflessly in relationships, emphasizing giving over getting, to improve our own prospects for avoiding the morbidity and mortality associated with chronic disease. As the rabbis teach: lust, strong sexual drive sharply focused on one’s own sensual gratification, drives us out of the world of the living.²⁸

²⁶ Reported by Tara Parker-Pope, “The Generous Marriage,” *New York Times Magazine* (December 11, 2011).

²⁷ See Barbara L. Fredrickson, et al., “A functional genomic perspective on human well-being,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 110(33): 13684-13689 (August 13, 2013).

²⁸ See Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), 4:21.