

Gender Relationships In Marriage and Out

EDITED BY
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THE ORTHODOX FORUM

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Contents

Contributors	viii
Series Editor's Preface <i>Robert S. Hirt</i>	xi
Preface <i>Rivkah Blau</i>	xiii
Introduction: The Past and the Future of the Forum on "Gender Relations" <i>Jennie Rosenfeld</i>	xv
1. Of Marriage: Relationship and Relations <i>Aharon Lichtenstein</i>	1
2. Marriage, Sexuality, and Holiness: The Anti-Ascetic Legacy of Talmudic Judaism <i>Adiel Schremer</i>	35
3. How Jewish Society Adapted to Change in Male/Female Relationships in 19 th / early 20 th Century Eastern Europe <i>Shaul Stampfer</i>	65
4. Sanctity, Sanity and Connectedness: Struggles For Commitment Among Orthodox Jewish Singles <i>Daniel Rothenberg</i>	85
5. Perfect Person Singular: Unmarried Adults in Contemporary Orthodox American Jewish Communities <i>Sylvia Barack Fishman</i>	91

6. Observations on <i>Perfect Person Singular</i> <i>Shmuel Goldin</i>	115
7. Excerpts from Interviews with Orthodox Singles <i>Koby Frances and Jennie Rosenfeld</i>	121
8. Premarital Guidance Literature in the Internet Age <i>Yuval Cherlow</i>	131
9. Thoughts on Teaching Taharat HaMishpahah: The Role of the Teacher Today <i>Abby Lerner</i>	173
10. Preparing Modern Orthodox <i>Kallot</i> and <i>Hatanim</i> for Marriage <i>Devorah Zlochower</i>	207
11. “So She Can Be as Dear to Him as on Their Wedding Day”? Modern Concerns with <i>Hilkhot Niddah</i> as Demonstrated by Anonymous Email Questions <i>Deena R. Zimmerman</i>	225
12. Life Values and Intimacy Education: Methods and Messages <i>Yocheved Debow and Anna C. Woloski-Wruble</i>	243
Orthodox Forum Seventeenth Conference <i>List of Participants</i>	293
Index	297

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2

Marriage, Sexuality, and Holiness: The Anti-Ascetic Legacy of Talmudic Judaism

Adiel Schremer

INTRODUCTION

The quest for models in the classical rabbinic literature for relationships between men and women may follow different paths. The first, very common one is to search after explicit statements in Talmudic literature pertaining to the issue under discussion, with the hope of finding what we are looking for.¹ Pursuing this line of inquiry is not as easy as it is usually assumed; however, neither is it methodologically unproblematic and simple as it is frequently presented. Talmudic literature is vast and, more importantly, diverse, so there would virtually never be found one, single opinion in the Talmudic

sources on any important issue. And this raises the question, how would we know the weight and significance of any given dictum in the system as a whole? What measures should be employed in order to avoid distortion through too selective and biased readings?

One could therefore pursue a different line of inquiry by posing the above question to the Talmud itself. That is, we could ask, how have the Sages read *their* “classical” sources – that is, the Bible – when searching for models for relationships between men and women. Were we to follow this path, we would have immediately observed that the rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud did not see themselves bound by the plain sense of any given verse in Scripture, had that meaning contradicted what they believed to be the proper way of life, as we are taught by the following *baraita*:

‘*Ve-hadava be-nidata*’ (Lev. 15:33) – the early Sages used to say: [This means that] she shall maintain her [state of] *niddah*. She should not put on eye-makeup or rouge until she immerses in water. Until Rabbi Aqiva came and taught: The matter comes to enmity and he [the husband] will want to divorce her! How, then, shall I interpret ‘*Ve-hadava be-nidata*’? She shall remain in her state of *niddah* until she immerses in water.²

The older opinion – and apparently also the older norm – that which is attributed to *zeqenim ha-rishonim*, understood the Biblical precept as commanding a *niddah* to actively be aloof from her husband, by actively maintaining a hideous appearance, which is most probably also the plain meaning of the Biblical text itself.³ Rabbi Aqiva’s claim is not that this understanding of the words of the *Torah* is textually incorrect. Rather, he introduces a moral consideration and argues that *regardless of the correct meaning of the words of the Torah the traditional norm cannot be sustained*, because the possible consequences are dangerous and unacceptable.⁴ He then re-interprets the Biblical precept in a manner that would fit his view of the proper conduct between spouses in marriage.

This rabbinic stance in respect to older norms and prevalent

interpretations of Biblical material may also be used as a model. For, if we want to discuss gender relations in light of various positions found in *halakhic* literature of previous generations, one can use the Talmudic precedent as an important guiding principle.

In spite of the popularity of the first path, and despite the temptation to follow the second, in the present paper I shall follow a third one. I am not so much interested in what the Sages *explicitly* say about marriage and sexuality; neither shall I discuss the Sages' treatment of their received traditions. Rather, I will try to uncover the *hidden assumptions* that stand at the basis of their sayings concerning marriage. My argument is that the rabbinic praise of marriage should be read on the backdrop of other approaches, with which the Sages were acquainted, and which they apparently rejected. These other approaches viewed human sexuality in the most negative terms, and their rejection by *Hazal* is the model that I wish to highlight.

I. IN PRAISE OF MARRIAGE

In a famous *sugya* in Bavli Qiddushin, 29b, the Talmud contrasts the duty of *talmud torah* with that of marriage and asks which of the two has priority over the other. It informs us that already a *baraita* – that is, a *Tannaitic* source,⁵ which is considered by the Talmud as authoritative – had raised the question, and that a controversy over this issue persisted up to the days of the *Amoraim*: while the Palestinian *Amora*, Rabbi Yohanan, maintained that *talmud torah* has precedence over marriage, Shmuel, the Babylonian, held the opposite view that marriage should come first. Regardless of the precise manner by which we shall interpret the Talmud's discussion of this disagreement,⁶ one aspect clearly emerges from this *sugya*, that is, its placement of marriage on an equal level to that of *talmud torah*.

This is not an obvious stance. In a rabbinic society that states in a very clear voice “*gadol ha-talmud*,”⁷ and “*ve-talmud torah ke-neged kullam*,”⁸ thereby declaring unequivocally that the study of Torah is its highest value, to allow for the possibility that another *mitzvah* would be considered as equal in its religious importance to *talmud torah* – let alone as surpassing it – is not a commonplace that should pass unnoticed.

Moreover, this ideological stance is not confined to this *sugya* alone. Throughout rabbinic literature we see that our rabbis of blessed memory express their esteem for the institution of marriage, both in the realm of *halakhic* discourse and in that of *agaddah*. In the realm of *halakhic* discourse, we find the Talmud permitting certain acts, which are usually forbidden, only for the sake of marriage or the study of Torah, thereby revealing the rabbis' view that marriage, again, is equal to *talmud torah* and therefore one of the highest *halakhic* obligations. Thus, for example, in Bavli Megila, 27a, we are told that 'One may not sell a scroll of Torah but for the purpose of marriage or *talmud torah*.'⁹ Similarly, in Tosefta, Moed Qatan 1:12, we are told that a *kohen*, who is usually forbidden to defile himself, is permitted to do so for the sake of *talmud torah* or marriage.¹⁰ In one place in the Palestinian Talmud we are taught that one who has no wife is permitted to marry even during the thirty days of mourning.¹¹ And according to another *baraita* in the Yerushalmi a *kohen* is prohibited from leaving the land of Israel, but this prohibition does not apply in a case where he wishes to go out of the country in order to marry a woman.¹²

All these examples prove the high value that marriage obtained within the talmudic *halakhic* system. Numerous *midrashic* sources exemplify its place within the rabbinic *aggadic* discourse as well. The most famous one is the story of Rabbi Yossi's discussion with a Roman noblewoman, who asked him what God normally does since the days He had created the world. Rabbi Yossi's reply was, as it is well known, that the Holy One, blessed be He, devotes much of his time to matchmaking between men and women.¹³

This famous story is by no means the only *aggadic* source expressing such a notion. According to Rav Yehuda in the name of Shmuel, 'Every day a *heavenly voice* comes forth and declares "the daughter of *plony* shall be [the wife] of *plony*."¹⁴ In the same place in the Talmud we find Rav's saying, in the name of Rabbi Reuven, that 'From the Torah, from the Prophets, as well as from the Hagiographa [*ktuvim*], [one may deduce that] the matching between men and women is done by God.'¹⁵ Moreover, according to the *midrash* on Psalms, 49:2, 'From the Torah, from the Prophets, as well as from

the Hagiographa, [one may deduce that] the Holy One, blessed be He, specifies His name upon coupling.¹⁶

By ascribing the bringing together of man and woman for the sake of marriage to God himself, the rabbis endow this institution with great esteem. For if the Holy One, blessed be He, devotes much of his time to matchmaking, surely it is because He considers marriage as something which is of prime importance. And if the rabbis attribute such a view *to God*, surely it is because *they* view marriage in that manner. Moreover, since Biblical narratives were not seen by the Sages simply as stories about the past, but functioned as metaphors and paradigms for the manner by which one ought to live,¹⁷ it emerges that the Sages viewed marriage as fundamental to human existence.

The placement of marriage on such a high level in the religious system, equal to, and perhaps even surpassing that of *talmud torah*, calls for an explanation. How are we to account for this ideological stance? Why have the rabbis of the Talmud valued marriage so much? One may begin answering this question by referring to the bold statement of Mishnah, Gittin 4:5, according to which one is forced to release one's "half-slave" so that he may marry, because the world was created first and foremost for the sake of procreation (*'lo nivra ha-olam ela le-pirya ve-rivya*'). The taken-for-granted connection between procreation and marriage, implied by this Mishnah, suggests that marriage was considered so important because it was seen as the chief legitimate path leading to procreation.

Indeed, numerous rabbinic sources reveal the significance of the duty of procreation in rabbinic thought.¹⁸ All these sources, however, do not provide an explanation for this position, that is, *why* was procreation so significant in the eyes of our rabbis of blessed memory? Following a famous *baraita* in the Tosefta and the Bavli, one may be tempted to suggest that procreation itself was considered by the rabbis so important because it was perceived theurgically. That is, it was seen as a way to "empower," to "increase," so to speak, God Himself. According to that *baraita*, 'Any one who does not engage in procreative activity, lo, such a one diminishes the divine image.'¹⁹ A simple logical inference (*mikhlah lav ata shomea hen*) would lead

us to the conclusion that if one does procreate one “contributes” and “enlarges,” so to speak, Him who spoke and the world came into being.²⁰ Without any doubt, one who embraces such thoughts would view marriage as a *major* religious duty.

Other Talmudic sources indicate that marriage was considered so important because it was seen as a shield and protector against sexual sin. One of the famous statements reflecting this view is that of Rabbi Hiya, who justified his gratefulness to his wife – despite her evil deeds to him – arguing that ‘it is sufficient that they [the wives] raise our children and protect us from sin.’²¹ Similarly, in the *sugya* in Bavli Qiddushin, 29b, referred to above, we find Rav Hisda’s famous saying, that had he been married at the age of thirteen he would have been able to mock the devil and tell him: *gyra be-eynach*, ‘An arrow [was shot] into your eyes.’ That is, marriage is a good guardian against sexual temptations, from which a married person is shielded.²²

All this is fairly well known. What is less recognized is that there is a third view within Talmudic literature, one that values marriage not because it sees it as a means for another end, but rather because it considers marriage as good for its own sake. Thus, for example, according to the Babylonian Amora Shmuel even if one does have children and therefore has already fulfilled the *mitzvah* of *pru u-revu*, one must not remain single, because Scripture says ‘It is not good for a man to be alone.’²³ Despite the style in which Shmuel’s statement is expressed the formulation of the verse quoted in support of his position indicates that Shmuel viewed marriage as good for its own sake – that is as the proper state of living for a human being. The Talmudic *sugya* (bYev. 61b), moreover, views Shmuel’s ruling as standing in tension with that of the Mishnah (mYev. 6:6), which prohibits one from refraining from engaging in procreative sexual activity as long as one has not produced offspring. The obvious rationale for marriage underlying the Mishnah’s rule is the duty of procreation, so the juxtaposition of Shmuel and the Mishnah indicates that the Talmud understood that Shmuel has a somewhat different conception of marriage than the one embedded in the Mishnah. While the latter puts emphasis on procreation as the core

of marriage, the former goes a step further and sees the very state of conjugality as its heart.

An even clearer contrast between these two approaches is evident in the following *midrashic* text:

There we have taught: 'If a man married a woman and remained with her for ten years and had no children, he is not permitted to refrain from procreation. If he had divorced her, she is permitted to marry another, and the other is permitted to remain with her for ten years. If she had a miscarriage, one counts from the time of the miscarriage. The man bears the religious duty of engaging in procreation, but the woman does not. Rabbi Yohanan ben Beroqah says: [The religious duty pertains to both of them for] concerning both of them it is said "And God blessed them" (Gen. 1:28).

There was a case in Sidon of one who married a woman and remained with her for ten years while she did not give birth. They came before Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai to be divorced. He said to her, 'Anything precious that I have in my house you may take and go to your father's house.' Said Rabbi Shimon to them, 'Just as you got married in eating and drinking, so too you should separate from one another in eating and drinking.' What did she do? She made a splendid meal and gave her husband too much wine to drink, and she gave a sign to her slaves and said to them, 'Take him to my father's house.' At the middle of the night he woke up. He said to them, 'Where am I?' She said to him, 'Didn't you tell me, "anything precious that I have in my house you may take and go to your father's house"?! This is indeed so; I have nothing more precious than you.' Immediately as Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai heard this he prayed for them, and they were blessed [with pregnancy].²⁴

This is a well-crafted *midrash* that intentionally contrasts the *halakhic*

demand for procreation with an alternative conception of marriage which sees its core value in the companionship and mutual love between spouses. From a purely and “cold” *halakhic* point of view, this marriage was unsuccessful because the couple was unable to bear children, and therefore it needed to be terminated, as the couple themselves – *halakhically*-oriented Jews – realized. This is, after all, the ruling of the Mishnah which the author of the *midrash* cites right at the outset. The story, however, argues that the man and the woman loved each other, and clearly wishes us to view the *halakhic* demand that they divorce as problematic. It argues that the mutual love existing between husband and wife is more important than the strict *halakhic* demand for procreation, and should be seen as the foundation upon which marriage rests.

Apparently, this is the meaning of the *baraita* that declares that, ‘Whoever lives without a wife lives without happiness, without goodness, without blessing.’²⁵ Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Hiya bar Gumadi go even a step further; they argue that “Whoever does not have a wife is not considered a full person, for Scripture says ‘Male and female He created them and He called them *Adam*’” (Gen. 5:2).²⁶ Since the Scriptural verse upon which this view rests makes no mention of procreation it must be concluded that in this saying a whole different conception of marriage is expressed. Marriage, the state of living with a spouse, is the fulfillment of one’s human essence, certainly not solely a means for procreation.

As much as pursuing this line of inquiry – that is, searching after the rationales the Talmudic sources offer for the institution of marriage – may be instructive, I wish to follow a different path. Rather than asking ‘*why* have the rabbis considered marriage so religiously important?’, I wish to contemplate the *meaning* of this rabbinic attitude towards marriage. I therefore wish to ask, what does the *halakhic* elevation of marriage teach us about the rabbis’ view not only of marriage itself, but of the relations between men and women in general, and of sexuality in particular?

When compared to other cultural paths which were available on the shelves of Late Antiquity’s ideas market, the Talmudic insistence on the highly positive religious meaning of marriage is a bold

statement that reveals the rabbis' attitude to some wider issues of religiosity, sexuality and, as I shall argue, *qedushah*, holiness, as well. Reading the Talmudic material against the backdrop of some of these non-rabbinic sources is therefore imperative if one is to achieve a fuller and deeper understanding of the rabbinic stance itself.

II. AGAINST MARRIAGE

Unlike the fundamental praise of marriage typical of classical rabbinic literature, a preference for celibacy can be found already in the earliest strata of Christian writings. Thus, in his first letter to the Corinthians, the *locus classicus* for these matters, Paul says very explicitly that "It is well for a man not to touch a woman."²⁷ Furthermore, he address the unmarried and tells them that "it is well for them to remain single as I do."²⁸ Only as a concession he allows for marriage: "But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion."²⁹ In Paul's view celibacy is certainly the preferred religious way of life:

I think that in view of the impending distress it is well for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage ... I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.³⁰

The abundance of early Christian interpretations to these verses, as well as the vast number of scholarly discussions devoted to that entire chapter in the letter to the Corinthians,³¹ demonstrate

the centrality of these sentences for the development of Christian tradition concerning marriage. As noted by Elizabeth Clark, the Patristic interpretations of these verses varied quite considerably from those who emphasized the opening verse of the chapter, in which Paul says in an unequivocal manner that remaining unmarried is the ideal, to those who preferred to lay emphasis on the verses in which Paul, in a way of concession, allows for marriage, regardless of the precise reasons he gives.³² I incline to side with the former approach, but even if one prefers the latter to say that Paul did not view marriage very favorably would be an understatement, and his preference for celibacy cannot be denied.

A similar stance is attributed by the author of the Gospel of Matthew to Jesus. In Matt. 19:12 Jesus, after arguing against the permissibility of divorce and remarriage, and having been confronted by his disciples with the understandable conclusion that “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry [at all],” replies and says:

Not all men can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this let him receive it.³³

Like Paul this text reveals an inner tension with respect to marriage. It is not entirely condemned, because it is acknowledged as an existing human institution. On the other hand it can hardly be regarded as *the* religious ideal.³⁴

These texts inspired much of the Christian tradition. To claim, therefore, that early Christian tradition had never seen marriage very favorably, and to argue that Christianity displays an ascetic tendency is to claim no novelty. However, a close analysis of the discourse of marriage and sexuality in the writings of the early Church Fathers, and its rhetoric, reveals a much deeper stance, governed by

concepts and feeling of disgust, which are not fully recognized and appreciated.

Despite their fundamental preference for celibacy, the tone in which both Paul and the author of the Gospel of Matthew express their view is mild. Neither Paul, nor Matthew *condemns* marriage; neither of them says that marriage is a *curse*. Many of their followers, however, have taken their position to a more extreme place. Let us look at some of them.

Ephrem the Syrian, who flourished in the fourth century, speaks of the ‘*curse of human marriage*’.³⁵ In his seventh hymn, ‘On Paradise,’ he writes that “The virgin who rejected the marriage crown ... rejected the *works of darkness*.”³⁶ This very much resembles Saturninus of Antioch, a second-century Syrian Gnostic, who declares that “marriage and procreation are of Satan.”³⁷ The late fourth-century Church Father, Jerome, who lived in Bethlehem in Palestine, studied Hebrew with a Jewish teacher and composed numerous commentaries on the various books of the Hebrew Bible, uses an even stronger language. In his work *Adversus Jovinianum* Jerome writes that “In view of the purity of body of Christ all sexual intercourse is *unclean*.”³⁸ Furthermore, in another place in that same work he writes that “Even the blood of martyrdom cannot wash away the *dirt of marriage*!”³⁹ Similarly, in the early third-century Christian work, *The Acts of Judah Thomas*, which was composed originally in Syriac, we read of Jesus revealing himself to a just-wedded couple and trying to persuade them to avoid the consummation of their conjugal bond, telling them that “if you refrain from this *filthy* intercourse you become temples holy and pure, being released from afflictions and troubles, known and unknown.”⁴⁰

Without any doubt these statements may seem excessive, but it is important to bear in mind that they are by no means exceptional in Christian literature of late antiquity. Quite to the contrary; as has been shown by Peter Brown, Elizabeth Clark, Andrew Jacobs and others, similar notions are found in many other Christian texts of the first few centuries of the common era.⁴¹ And it would not be out of place to note that the existence of numerous ancient translations

and manuscripts to books like that of *The Acts of Judah Thomas* indicates that its message won great popularity.

To be sure, not all of the Church Fathers followed this path. Some, like Clement of Alexandria and John Chrisostom, thought that marriage is a blessing and that one, after all, has to marry. They, admittedly, remained celibate, but they did not advocate celibacy in a way of *rejecting* marriage. The fifth-century Persian Catholicos, Barsauma of Nisibis, even went a step further, and recommended marriage for clergy. If the early records of Eastern Christianity are to be believed, he himself married a woman.⁴² Nevertheless, approaches such as expressed by Jerome and the author of the *Acts of Judah Thomas*, were not unpopular among many of the Christians of Late Antiquity. Many, apparently, viewed marriage in the most negative terms; they saw marriage and sexuality as, basically, a disgusting matter.

Surprisingly, or not, such a notion is found, albeit rarely, in Jewish sources as well. Thus, for example, we read in *Seder Eliyahu Zutta*:

There was a case with one of the students of Rabbi Aqiva, who was sitting at the head of twenty-four thousand students. Once he went out to the place of the prostitutes, and he saw there a harlot and he desired her. When he came to her she said to him, ‘My son, for what reason are you losing the life of the world to come for one hour in this world?’ His mind was not satisfied until she said to him, ‘My son, the place you desire is dirty and filthy more than all other members. [It is a vessel full of filth and garbage], and no creature can scent its smell.’ But his mind did not cool down until she seized him in his nose and placed it on that grave. Once he smelled its smell it became disgusting for him, and he never married a woman. Thereupon a heavenly voice came fourth saying, ‘A certain man and a certain woman are welcome to the world to come.’⁴³

As was noted by Meir Friedman, the editor of this text, the expression describing the female genitals as a “vessel full of filth” (*hemet male*

zoa') is borrowed from the *baraita* in bShabbat 152a which states that "A woman is a vessel full of filth, yet all run after her."⁴⁴ That *baraita* expresses surprise at men's nature to crave that which they are expected to abhor. The story in *Seder Eliyahu* reaches the practical conclusion from that astonishment: the young man, after realizing the "nature" of the female's genitals, indeed refrained from marriage for his entire life.⁴⁵

III. THE HUMAN BODY

What are the *emotional* and *psychological* predispositions that are embedded in such an anti-familial and anti-sexual approach? And, by inference, what is the emotional stance towards sex expressed in the opposite view, that which views marriage very positively? Consequently, what kind of approach towards sex does the positive view *construct* and promulgate?

It has been suggested that the anti-familial approach is but one aspect of ascetic attitude in general, which was nourished by the Hellenistic negative view of the body in general and of sexuality in particular.⁴⁶ In Greek-Hellenistic intellectual circles – in which many Jewish writers in Antiquity saw themselves as participating – there was a widely held distinction between "body" and "soul," "outer" and "inner," form and essence. The former was seen only as a habitat for the latter, and at times the body was seen even worse, that is, as a prison in which the soul is captivated, and from which, ideally, it wishes to escape. Philo is representative in writing that:

The chief cause of ignorance is the flesh and our affinity for it. Moses himself affirms this when he says 'because they are flesh' the divine spirit cannot abide. Marriage, indeed, and the rearing of children, the provision of necessities, the ill repute that comes in the wake of poverty, business both private and public, and a host of other things wilt the flower of wisdom before it blooms. Nothing, however, so thwarts its growth as our fleshly nature.⁴⁷

If "the chief cause of ignorance is the flesh and our affinity for

it,” as Philo asserts, and if “our fleshly nature” is an obstacle for wisdom, surely one who sees oneself a lover of wisdom, literally “a philosopher,” would adopt an anti-bodily stance. In other words, a dualistic conception of “the human being” can easily result in a basic aversion to the body and to any bodily thing. This was indeed the cultural situation in the late second and third centuries – that is, the heart of the rabbinic period. As noted by E.R. Dodds, in that period “contempt for the human condition and hatred of the body was a disease endemic in the entire culture.”⁴⁸

In a *religious* setting the obstacle the body imposes on one’s mind would be conceptualized as a barrier between the individual and God. Therefore, to become closer to God meant to become alienated from one’s body and bodily functions – first and foremost from the sexual drive. As a result, the abstinence from sex was regarded by this intellectual and emotional stance as leading to a more perfect human state and to closeness to God.

As we have seen, Paul expresses this view quite explicitly; therefore we would not be surprised to find the second-century Church Father Athenagoras, in his *Plea to the Christians*, writing that “You would find many among us, both men and women, growing old unmarried, in the hope of living in close communion with God. [For] remaining in virginity and in the state of eunuch *brings one nearer to God.*”⁴⁹

The fourth-century Persian Church Father Aphrahat, who composed his ceremonies in Mehoza, the capital city of the Sasanian Empire, where the Babylonian Amora Rava had established his *yeshivah*, makes a similar claim:

We have learned from the Torah, that ‘a man should leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh’ (Gen. 2:24). This is indeed a true prophecy, great and honorable. For, he who marries a wife leaves his father and mother. This is the explanation: when a person has not yet married a woman, he loves and honors God, his Father, and the Holy Spirit, his Mother. And he has no other love. But when a man marries a woman he

leaves his father and his mother, those who are above mentioned,⁵⁰ and his mind becomes one with this world. And his mind, his heart, and his thought are turned away from God to this world. And he loves and likes it, in the same way that a man loves his wife of youth, and his love turns away from his father and mother. And [Scripture further] said that 'they both shall become one flesh' (Gen 2:24). And this is true, for in the same way that a man and a woman become one flesh and one mind, and his mind turns away from his father and his mother, so too the husband of a wife: while he was still unmarried, and lived as a single, he was in one spirit and one mind with his Father.⁵¹

Avoidance of marriage, then, is a prerequisite for maintaining one's intimate relations with God, that is, in religious language, holiness. Engaging in sexual activity, on the other hand, leads in the opposite direction: it distances one from God, and may even be considered close to sin. Indeed, as noted by Peter Brown, in various religious circles there grew "a general sense that intercourse in itself [...] excluded the Holy Spirit."⁵²

In contrast to this Hellenistic view of humanity, rabbinic Judaism "defined the human being as an animated body and not as a soul trapped or even housed or clothed in a body."⁵³ Therefore it did not advance a negative and pessimistic view of the body. Quite to the contrary; as suggested by Daniel Boyarin, the benediction we recite after urinating or defecating, *Asher Yatzar*, indicates that Talmudic Judaism has accepted the human fleshiness "in its most material and lower-body forms as the embodiment of God's wisdom."⁵⁴

As a result of its basic approach rabbinic Judaism did not develop a view of marriage and sexuality as distancing one from God, but rather as bestowing holiness on one's life. This, we are told by Aphrahat, was the Jewish view against which he composed his entire demonstration on marriage.⁵⁵ In his above-quoted text Aphrahat admits that his argument was motivated precisely by the Jewish critique of the Christian sexual ethic, which viewed celibacy as better than marriage:

I have written to you, my beloved, concerning virginity and holiness because I heard about a Jewish man who has reviled one of our brethren, the members of the church. He [the Jew] said to him [i.e. to the Christian monk], ‘You are impure for you don’t take wives, but we are holy and more virtuous for we bear children and multiply seed in the world.’⁵⁶

The Jew’s claim against the Christian was that since they, the Christians, don’t marry they are therefore *impure*, and that the Jews themselves, precisely because they do marry and bear children, are *holy*! For Aphrahat’s Jew, to live marital life meant *to be holy*, which is obviously in complete opposition to the Christian stance.

The Jewish stance, as echoed by the Jew’s argument, differs from the Christian one in its very understanding and use of the concept of *qeddusha*, holiness. The Christian conception apparently has a basically negative view of this world, hence holiness is perceived in terms of detaching from this world and getting closer to Him who is *out* of the world. The Jewish conception of holiness (at least that which is given expression in Aphrahat’s Jew’s assertion), in contrast, appears to be affirmative of the world, and for that reason it views the engagement in mundane activities, such as sexual intercourse, as *holy*.⁵⁷

IV. TALMUDIC POLEMIC

It is in light of this cultural atmosphere, which became characteristic of most of Christian ascetic writings, that Talmudic teachings concerning marriage should be understood. The latter should be read polemically, as the following story from bQidd. 81b, clearly demonstrates:

Rav Hiya Bar Ashi each time that he fell on his face he was in the habit of saying: ‘The Merciful One save me from the evil inclination.’ One day his wife heard him. She said, ‘But it is already some years that he is separate from me, so what is the point of this?’ One day he was studying

in his garden. She decorated herself, disappeared and came before him. He said to her: 'Who are you?' She said to him: 'I am a *Herutah* who is returning from her day (work).' He desired her. She said to him, 'Bring me that pomegranate that is at the top of the branch.' He jumped up and brought it to her. When he came home his wife was stoking the oven. He got up and sat in it. She said to him, 'What's this?' He said to her: The tale goes thus and thus. She said to him, 'It was me.' He said to her, 'In any case I intended to do the forbidden.'

This is a story about a great rabbi, who was deeply troubled by his sexuality. He prays every day to "The Merciful One" to save him from the evil inclination, that is from his sexual desires, and has abstained from sexual relations with his wife for several years. However, upon seeing once a beautiful woman he was unable to resist her and indeed sinned with her. The story's message, then, is about the impossibility of sexual renunciation.

What are the religious foundations upon which such a conduct as Rav Hiya bar Ashi's rests? Why was he praying to be able to overcome the Evil Inclination? Obviously, he prayed because he wished to achieve a higher religious degree, one of *qeddusha*. This is, after all, the motivation behind all late antique ascetic phenomena. *Qeddusha*, according to this stance, is assumed to imply the distancing, as much as possible, from sex, and our story is designed to reject this assumption.

In a recently published paper Shlomo Naeh has shown that the woman's name, *Herutah*, is in fact a loan word from Syriac Christian literature, where its cultural meaning is a woman who abstains from sexual activity.⁵⁸ The Talmud's use of this unique word indicates that the story makes a reference to the Christian value of virginity and abstinence (with which the Babylonian Sages were apparently familiar), in order to mock it. In other words, the story is a polemic against a view which the rabbis of the Talmud wish to repudiate.

The argument here submitted, therefore, is that when the rabbis advocate marriage and procreation it is not only that they view marriage positively and deny the legitimacy of celibacy, but much

further: their stance should be seen as a rejection of the *emotional foundation* upon which the ascetic position rests. That is, the promarital stance of rabbinic Judaism indicates that the Sages repudiate the anti-bodily emotional stance, which was so deeply rooted in the culture of their time. For the rabbis of the Talmud the body was not ‘inferior’ to the soul, and there was nothing essentially problematic with the human body. For that reason, in contrast to their Christian contemporaries they did not perceive sexuality as inherently associated with sin.

Quite to the contrary: not only do the Sages see marriage as religiously obligatory, they, as noted above, ascribe its institution to God Himself. As has been shown by Garry Anderson, in contrast to early Christian interpretations of the Biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden, rabbinic exegesis portrayed Adam and Eve as married by God already while *in* the Garden, and having sexual relations therein. While the Christian tradition sees humanity’s fall as the result of the first sin, the rabbis see that which the Christians call “sin” (i.e. sexual intercourse) as God’s plan and as a great blessing.⁵⁹

To be sure, an association of sexual activity, as such, with sin was not unheard of in *Jewish* circles of the Second Temple era.⁶⁰ Nor can one argue that such a view is totally absent from Talmudic literature. It may be further argued that traces of such a view can be found already in the Bible. Psalm 51:7, “Indeed I was born with iniquity; with sin my mother conceived me,” may be understood – as indeed it was interpreted by many commentators⁶¹ – as referring to the very act of sexual intercourse, thus expressing a deep view of sexuality as sin.⁶²

In rabbinic literature too one finds various statements that may be taken to reflect a view of sexuality as sin. To begin with, the *midrash* on that very verse in Psalms seems to express this notion: “Indeed I was born with iniquity; with sin my mother conceived me’ – said Rabbi Aha, ‘*Be-Avon* is written fully (i.e. with two *vav*-im). [This teaches that] even the most pious person amongst the pious cannot be with at least one element of abomination.’”⁶³ Clearly, Rabbi Aha interpreted the “iniquity” mentioned in that verse as

referring to the pleasure of the sexual act itself, thus revealing his own understanding of the Biblical verse as expressing the notion of sexual intercourse as sin. Another place where this notion surfaces is the *Tannaitic midrash* on the words “To youth and maiden alike” of Deuteronomy 32:25. The Sifre (ad loc.) assumes that the entire verse refers in fact to males only, and suggests that the words “maiden alike” (*gam betulah*) mean that “they were clear of sin like a virgin who had never tasted the taste of sin in her life.”⁶⁴ The Sifre does not say that sexual intercourse is wrong, but its language discloses, *en passant*, its view that sexual intercourse is sin.

One possible implication such a view may carry is a *halakhic* tendency to delegitimize sexual intercourse and as a result to maximally restrict it – if it is acknowledged at all – to the procreative function. Apparently, this was indeed quite a common *halakhic* position among Palestinian Jews of the late Second Temple period. Thus, for example, Josephus, in *Against Apion*, writes:

What are our marriage laws? The Torah recognizes no sexual connections, except the natural union of man and wife, and that *only for the procreation of children*.⁶⁵

A similar *halakhic* norm is ascribed by Josephus to that branch among the Essenes who did not refrain from marriage altogether; unlike those Essenes who were celibate, these Essenes did marry, but abstained from sexual relations with their wives during their pregnancy or when they became old and consequently unable to bear children.⁶⁶ Needless to say, neither Josephus nor the Essenes are of any *halakhic* value, but one cannot deny their value as historical evidence concerning the *halakhic* norm prevailing among various Jewish groups in the late Second Temple period.

Rabbinic *halakha*, in contrast, not only allows but even demands sexual relations between husband and wife on a regular basis, in a manner that indicates beyond any doubt that the justification for marital intercourse was not its contribution to procreation. Thus we read in the Mishnah:

The sexual duty of which the Torah speaks: those without work – every day; workers – twice a week; ass drivers – once a week; camel drivers – once in thirty days; sailor – once in six months.⁶⁷

The contrast between this rabbinic *halakhah* and the Jewish stance reported by Josephus (or, for that matter, the norm prevailing among the Essenes), is sharp. It indicates that the rabbis did *not* see sexual activity as legitimate only because it leads to procreation. Quite to the contrary; for our Mishnah, even when sexual relations between husband and wife have no potential of resulting in pregnancy they are still *obligatory*. And this *halakhic* position, obviously, cannot go hand in hand with a view that sees sexuality as “dirty” and sinful.⁶⁸ Hence, one must conclude that for our rabbis of blessed memory – at least in their *halakhic* discourse – sex, as such, was not perceived as sin.

The astonishing *midrash* on the words “And it was very good” (*ve-hine tov meod*) that describe God’s satisfaction with His creation at the end of the sixth day (Gen. 1:31), expresses this view very explicitly:

‘[And God saw all that He had made and found it very good (Gen. 1:31)]’ – Nahman in the name of Rabbi Shmuel [said]: ‘good,’ this refers to the Good Inclination; ‘very good,’ this refers to the Evil Inclination.⁶⁹

This is an amazing *midrashic* statement indeed: the Evil Inclination, the *yetzer ha-ra*, is treated here as ‘very good’! In fact, the *midrash* itself expresses its astonishment at this view by raising immediately the question: “But is the Evil Inclination indeed very good?!” And the *midrash* answers: “[Yes, indeed so], for without the Evil Inclination one would not build a house, marry a woman, and beget children.”⁷⁰

This is a subversive *midrash*. It uses the popular concept of *yetzer ha-ra* as if it accepts it, but cunningly it uproots it by claiming that Scripture refers to the Evil Inclination as “very good,” and by

noting that the existence of the entire world depends upon that “very good” which people so often tend to view as “evil.” In that manner, the “Evil Inclination” cannot remain evil any longer, and thus it is ultimately nullified as a concept.

The same happens in the famous story in bYoma 69b, where the Sages are depicted as trying to extirpate the *yetzer ha-ra*. As it is well known, the story says that the rabbis had the will, the ability and the authority to overcome the power of the *yetzer ha-ra* and to practically abolish it, but once they succeeded in doing so they realized the consequences of its absence, that is, the termination of procreative activity in the world. This, we are told, led them to give up their first will, so that the legitimate and even positive function of the *yetzer* is re-established and acknowledged.

V. RABBINIC SOBRIETY

The fundamental stance regarding sexuality that governs the *halakhic* discourse of the rabbis of the Talmud is sober. It is not governed by deep – although, to be sure, unconscious – feelings of disgust, or by a deep and unconscious emotional view of sexuality as basically licentious. Our rabbis of blessed memory, as we know them from Talmudic literature, do not seem to be especially frantic or hysterical in matters relating to sexuality any more than other aspects of human behavior. The following *baraita* in the Yerushalmi can serve as a good example to support this contention:

At first, they [the Romans] decreed a destruction (*shmad*) in Judaea (*Yehudah*) because they had a tradition from their forefathers that Yehudah killed Esau, as it is written: ‘Your hands shall be on the neck of your enemies’ (Gen. 49:8). And they [the Romans] were enslaving them [the Judaeans] and raping their daughters. And they decreed that an officer⁷¹ shall penetrate first. They [the Sages] enacted that her groom have sex with her while she is still in her father’s house ... Although the destruction was annulled, the custom was not canceled. Rabbi Hoshaya’s daughter-in-law entered [into the *huppah*] pregnant.⁷²

This *baraita* is brought by the Palestinian Talmud in order to illuminate the Mishnah's ruling that "One who eats a meal in his father-in-law's house in Judaea cannot later make a 'claim of virginity'" (mKet. 1:5). Implied by this Mishnah is a prevalent social norm in Judaea, whereby young men and women have had sexual relations prior to their marriage. The Yerushalmi brings the "historical account" of the *baraita* as an explanation for the origins of that social norm. It adds, however, that despite the vanishing of the concrete historical circumstances that gave place to the emergence of that norm (and allowed it), the norm itself has not changed. That is, men and women have continued to have sexual relations before they married each other. The Yerushalmi designates that norm as a *minhag*, and supports its approach by a concrete case, that of none other than the great Rabbi Hoshaya, whose daughter-in-law was pregnant when she entered her *huppah*.

To be sure, the halakhic situation dealt with in these *Tannaitic* sources is not one and the same as the one we have in mind when speaking of pre-marital sexual relations. The men and women of whom both the Mishnah and the *baraita* speak are *betrothed*, that is, in Talmudic times, *halakhically* husband and wife. Nevertheless, from a sociological point of view, this young couple are not yet husband and wife, and the Mishnah and the *baraita* describe a norm of a young man and woman who have sex before they have the "social permission" to do so, that is, before they actually marry and live in their own house.

Yet, the rabbinic discussion of that norm reveals no signs of astonishment what-so-ever. The Yerushalmi is not shocked at all;⁷³ it even calls that norm a *minhag*, and supports its persistence by alluding to a concrete case that shows its existence among the rabbis and their families. Surely, underlying such an approach is an ideological and emotional stance towards sexual matters that does not view sex as a special domain of human behavior that needs to be treated differently from other kinds of non-*halakhic* behavior.

NOTES

1. I say “with a hope” because of the relative paucity of explicit statements pertaining to relations between husband and wife in Talmudic literature. Of those aspects of marital life which were not considered obligatory, our sources have relatively little to say, as if the Sages’ position in these issues was guided by the principle *hakol ke-minhag ha-medinah*, and therefore need not be addressed.
2. Sifra, *Zavim*, end. Compare yGitt., 9:11, 50d; bShab. 64b. Interestingly a tradition preserved in *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan* (Version B, chap. 3 [ed. Schechter, 6b; Version A, chap. 2 [ed. Schechter, 4b]) still follows the ancient, stricter *halakhah*. This indicates either that Rabbi Aqiva’s innovation was unable to uproot the previous established norm, or that in later generations the pendulum turned back to a more rigid stance in these matters. The latter possibility is corroborated by various sources that reveal the rise of stricter *halakhic* norms in the land of Israel during the Byzantine period. Cf. Y. Dinari, “The Impurity Customs of the Menstruate Woman – Sources and Development.” *Tarbiz* 49 (1980): 302–324 (Hebrew).
3. See, most recently, M. Kahana, *Sifre Zutta to Deuteronomy* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2003), 372, n. 24 (Hebrew).
4. M. Halbertal’s, *Interpretive Reforms in the Making* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1993 [Hebrew]), is essential in this context.
5. Cf. tBekh. 6:10 (ed. M.S. Zuckerman [Jerusalem: Wharman Books, 1970²], 541).
6. I shall not attempt to discuss the *sugya* at length here. It would suffice to note that Rashi and Rabenu Tam have opposing views concerning the precise manner by which to interpret the Talmud’s suggestion ‘*ha lan ve-ha le-ho*’. Cf. A. Schremer, *Male and Female He Created Them: Jewish Marriage in the Late Second Temple, Mishnah and Talmud Periods* (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2003), 91–94 (Hebrew).
7. Sifre to Deuteronomy, 41 (ed. L. Finkelstein [New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969], 85); bQidd. 40b.
8. MPea, 1:1–2. On this fundamental rabbinic stance see E.E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. I. Abrahams (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 603–620.
9. Compare yBik. 3:7, 65d
10. tMQ. 1:12 (ed. S. Lieberman [New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962], 368). Compare the parallel tradition in bEruv. 47a.
11. yYev. 4:11, 6b. Compare bMQ. 23a.
12. yBer. 3:1, 6a (= yNaz. 7:1, 56a). Compare tAZ., 1:8–9 (ed. Zuckerman, 461); bEruv. 47a, bAZ. 13a.
13. Leviticus Rabbah 8:1 (ed. M. Margulies [Jerusalem: The Ministry of Education and Culture, 1953], 1.164–167); Psikta de-Rav Kahana, *Ki Tisa*, 4 (ed. B. Mandelbaum [New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987], 1.18–19); *Midrash Shmuel*, 5:13 (ed. S. Buber [Krakow: Joseph Fischer, 1893], 31b), and in several places in *Midrash Tanhuma* (e.g. *Va-Yishlach*, 10; *Ki Tisa*, 5; and more). Cf. Schremer, *Male*

- and Female*, 43-46. The first example is Adam and Eve. Many *midrashim* portray God as bringing them together in marriage; preparing the wedding for them; adorning Eve for Adam, etc. On this theme see G. Anderson, "Celibacy or Consummation in the Garden: Reflections on Early Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Garden of Eden," *HTR* 82 (1989): 121-148.
14. BMQ 18b. Compare bSot. 2a; bSan. 22a.
 15. BMQ. *Ibid.*
 16. *Midrash Psalms* 59:2 (ed. S. Buber [Vilna: Rom, 1891], 302).
 17. Cf. M.D. Herr, "Tfifat Ha-Historia Etzel Hazal," in *Studies in Jewish History in the Mishna and Talmud Period*, ed. I.M. Gafni (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 1994), 350-363.
 18. According to Rabbi Avin, "The Holy One, blessed be He, cherishes procreation even more than the [building of the] Temple" (yKet. 5:8, 30b). The building of the Temple, it must be recalled, was considered by the rabbis even more precious in the eyes of God than the entire world, "For when He came to create the world He created it with His one hand ... but when He built the Temple He built it with His two hands" (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *Shirta*, 10 [ed. Horovitz-Rabin, repr. Jerusalem: Wharman, 1970], 150). On the duty of procreation in Talmudic literature see: Schremer, *Male and Female*, 37-41; 304-308.
 19. TYev., 8:7 (ed. Lieberman, 26); bYev. 63b; Genesis Rabbah. 34:6 (ed. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck [Jerusalem: Wharman, 1965²], 1.326). Cf. Lieberman's discussion of the text in his *Tosefta Ki-Fshuta* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1955-1988), 6.75.
 20. In this manner the baraita is interpreted by Y. Lorberbaum, *Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadah* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2004), 386-397 (Hebrew). One must not exclude, of course, the possibility that the text is hyperbolic, as in many other cases in classical rabbinic literature, where similar formulas are found. Cf. Schremer *Male and Female*, 40, n. 24.
 21. BKet. 63a-b.
 22. Cf. Schremer, *Male and Female*, 308-310.
 23. BYev., 61b. At face value Shmuel *prohibits* one to remain single. The verse he quotes as support of his claim, however, does not seem to bear this strong meaning. Cf. M.A. Friedman, "Tamar, a Symbol of Life: The 'Killer Wife' Superstition in the Bible and Jewish Tradition," *AJS Review* 15 (1985): 36; A. Liss (ed.), *The Babylonian Talmud with Variant Readings, Tractate Yebamoth (II)*, (Jerusalem: Institute for the Complete Israeli Talmud, 1986), 381, n. 80; Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshuta* 6.67-68.
 24. Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, *Sos Asis*, 2 (ed. Mandelbaum, 1.327). Compare Songs Rabbah. 1:4 (ed. S. Donski [Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1980], 28). Cf. D. Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley - Los Angeles - Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), 54-55; Schremer, *Male and Female*, 316-318.
 25. Genesis Rabbah 17:2 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 151-152); Qohelet Rabbah, 9:9; Midrash Psalms, 59:2 (ed. Buber, 302). A similar *baraita* is brought in bYev. 62b, in the name of Rabbi Tanchum bar Hanilai, a Palestinian sage of mid-third century. On the

- relation between the Babylonian version and the Palestinian one see Schremer, *Male and Female*, 315, n. 50.
26. Genesis Rabbah 17:2 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 152); Qohelet Rabbah, 9:9, in the name of Rabbi Hiya bar Gumadi, and in bYev. 64a in the name of Rabbi Elazar.
 27. I Cor. 7:1.
 28. I Cor. 7:8.
 29. I Cor. 7:9.
 30. I Cor. 7:26–34.
 31. The scholarly literature on these verses is vast and need not be rehearsed here. For two recent intensive treatments see: W. Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); E.A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 259–329.
 32. Cf. Clark, *ibid.*
 33. A detailed discussion (with vast bibliography) of this passage is found in W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 3.24–25.
 34. On the patristic interpretations to this verse in Matthew see: Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 90–92.
 35. *Ibid.*, 152.
 36. S. Brock (ed. and trans.) *St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise* (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 124.
 37. Cited by Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.24.2. See: A.C. Coxe (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, (The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1980), 349.
 38. *Adversus Jovinianum*, 1.20. Cf. Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 218.
 39. *Adversus Jovinianum* 1.26. Cf. P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 397.
 40. Cf. J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 452. This is an English translation of the Greek text of the *Acts of Judah Thomas*. For a translation of the Syriac text see W. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1871), 2.155–156; A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, Commentary (Supplements to Novum Testamentum, v)* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 69–72. The author uses the same term, “filthy intercourse,” in another place (Elliot, *ibid.*, 468), where he appears to be referring to 1 Cor. 6:9. In that text, however, Paul speaks of adultery, while the author of the *Acts of Thomas* speaks of any kind of intercourse as “filthy.” As to the “afflictions and troubles” mentioned by the author, he speaks primarily of the raising of children. On this theme in other early Christian works see M. Barnes, “‘The Burden of Marriage’ and Other Notes on Gregory of Nyssa’s *On Virginity*,” *Studia Patristica* 37 (2001): 12–19.
 41. Brown, *The Body and Society*, *passim*; E.A. Clark, “Antifamilial Tendencies in

- Ancient Christianity,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1995), pp. 356–380; *idem.*, *Reading Renunciation*, 196–203; R. Valantasis, “The Nuptial Chamber Revisited: The Acts of Thomas and Cultural Intertextuality,” *Semina*, 80 (1997): 271–273; A.S. Jacobs, “A Family Affair: Marriage, Class and Ethics in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 7 (1999): 127–136.
42. Cf. S. Gero, *Barsauma of Nisibis and Persian Christianity in the Fifth Century* (CSCO, 426; Louvain: Peeters, 1981), 79–88. As noted by Murray, the pro-marital stance has become the prevalent one in Syrian Christianity from the fourth century onwards. See: R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 11–12; Brown, *Body and Society*, 321–338. On the possible Persian influence in this respect on Eastern Christianity, see S. Gero, “Die Antiasketische Bewegung im persischen Christentum: Einfluss zoroastrischer Ethik?” R. Lavenant (ed.), *III Symposium Syriacum* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1983), 187–191.
 43. See *Pseudo-Seder Eliahu Zuta*, 22 (ed. M. Friedman [Wien, Achiasaf: 1904], 39).
 44. *Ibid.*, n. 32. The *baraita* is introduced by the term *tanna*, which indicates that it is a Babylonian *baraita*, not an early Palestinian source. Cf. J.N. Epstein, *Introduction to the Text of the Mishnah* (Jerusalem: Magnes 1964), 1294; *idem*, *Introduction to Amoraitic Literature* (Jerusalem: Magnes and Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1963), 91; 316; Ch. Albeck, *Studies in Baraita and Tosefta* (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1944), 53–60.
 45. Arguably, this view is far remote from that of mainstream Talmudic Judaism. However, it is precisely this contrast, I submit, that should draw our attention to see sharply the uniqueness of the standard rabbinic stance and to raise the question, what is the meaning of the Talmudic choice.
 46. Cf. D. Biale, *Eros and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 37–40 (and concerning the “this-wordly” approach of the rabbis, mentioned by Biale there, see also: I. Knohl, “A Parasha Concerned with Accepting the Kingdom of Heaven,” *Tarbiz* 53 [1983]: 21–26); Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 31–42. The classical discussion of asceticism as a theoretical concept and emotional stance, with respect to rabbinic literature, is that of E.E. Urbach, “Asceticism and Suffering in Talmudic and Midrashic Sources” in *Yitzhak F. Baer Jubilee Volume*, eds. S.W. Baron, B. Dinnur, S. Ettinger, and I. Halpern (Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel, 1960), 48–68 (Hebrew). See also: S. Fraade, “Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism,” in *Jewish Spirituality From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. A. Green (New York: Crossroads, 1987), 253–288, and recently M. Satlow, “‘And On the Earth You Shall Sleep’: *Talmud Torah* and Rabbinic Asceticism,” *Journal of Religion* 83 (2003): 204–225. My debt to these studies is great, but I will emphasize an aspect which, to the best of my judgment, has received relatively little attention.
 47. Cf. D. Winston (ed. and trans.) *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, the Giants, and Selections* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 65.
 48. E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 35.

49. See *Athenagoras: A Plea for the Christians*, 33 (ed. M. Marcovich, *Athenagoras Legation Pro Christianis* [Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter, 1990], 104–105). Cf. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 66.
50. I.e. one's father is "the Father," and one's mother is "the Holy Spirit."
51. W. Wright (ed.), *The Homilies of Aphraates the Persian Sage* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1869), 354–355. For an English translation of the Syriac text see J. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth Century Iran* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 82.
52. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 146.
53. Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 33.
54. *Ibid.*, 34.
55. A major part of Aphrahat's argument is devoted to the proof from the case of Moses, who refrained from sexual relations with his wife since the day God was revealed to him (Wright, *Homilies of Aphraates*, 348–349; Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, 79). It is interesting to note that this argument, which is found already in Philo, *Moses*, 2.68–69, is found also in rabbinic literature (cf. bShab. 87a; bYev. 62a; Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Version A, Chapter 2 [ed. S. Schechter, Wien 1887], 5b; *Midrash Psalms*, 146:4 [ed. Buber, 535]). It is possible, though, that several *midrashic* sources should be read as a refutation of specifically this argument. Cf. Schremer, *Male and Female*, 62–64, and recently N. Koltun-From, "Zipporah's Complaint: Moses is Not Conscientious in the Deed! Exegetical Traditions of Moses' Celibacy," in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. A.H. Becker and A. Yoshiko Reed (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 2003), 283–306.
56. Wright, *Homilies of Aphraates*, 355. This passage comes right after the former one (cited above), that is, it is presented as its logical continuation. On this passage, and the polemic on this issue in general, see N. Koltun, *Jewish-Christian Polemics in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversation* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 1995), 100–131.
57. This view is related to the concept of God as dwelling amongst His people. Cf. Knohl, "Accepting the Kingdom of Heaven," 21–26. Cf. also E. Berkovits, "The Concept of Holiness," in idem, *Essential Essays on Judaism*, ed. D. Hazony (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2002), 247–314.
58. See Shlomo Naeh, "Freedom and Celibacy: A Talmudic Variation on Tales of Temptation and Fall in Genesis and Its Syrian Background," in *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation (Traditio Exegetica Graeca, 5)*, eds. J. Frishman and L. van Rompay (Louvain: Peeters, 1997), 73–89.
59. Anderson, "Celibacy or Consummation in the Garden."
60. Cf. Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 69–70; idem, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 1994), 159–160.
61. Cf. D.M. Feldman, *Birth Control in Jewish Law* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 87.

62. Admittedly a different, existential interpretation of this verse is possible too, but for the purposes of the present study such a reading will not interest us here.
63. Leviticus Rabbah., 14:5 (ed. Margulies, 308), following the reading of ms Munich 117 and *Sefer Ha-Aruch* (see the *vareae lectiones*, ad loc.). Feldman, *Birth Control*, 98, quotes our *midrash*, but for some reason obscures its “scandalous” statement by means of the citation of a nineteenth-century commentary that refuses to let the *midrash* stand as it is. As noted by Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 246, n. 59, “This unhistorical procedure is characteristic of much of the scholarship on sexuality [in Talmudic literature].”
64. Sifre to Deuteronomy, 321 (ed. Finkelstein, 370).
65. Josephus, Ap. 2.199 (ed. H.St.J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1926], 373).
66. Josephus, JW 2.160–161 (ed. H.St.J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927], 385). Cf. J.M. Baumgarten, ‘The Qumran-Essene Restraints on Marriage’, in *Archaeology and History in the Dead Sea Scrolls (Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series, 8)*, ed. L.H. Schiffman (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1990), 13–24; E. Qimron, “Celibacy in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the two Kinds of Sectarians,” in *The Madrid Qumran Congress*, eds. J.T. Barrera and L.V. Montaner (Leiden – New York – Koln: Brill, 1992), 1.287–294. Menahem Kister suggested that a fragmentary *halakhic* text from Qumran (4Q267) is best understood with the assumption that the members of the Dead Sea sect too, although not entirely prohibiting marriage, prohibited sexual relations between husband and wife in cases where there was no potential for pregnancy – such as during a woman’s pregnancy or in old age. See: M. Kister, “Notes on Some New Texts from Qumran,” *JJS*, 44 (1993): 280–281.
67. MKet. 5:8. These rules come right after the Mishnah’s statement that “He who takes a vow not to have sexual relations with his wife” may not allow this situation to continue more than a certain period of time: “The school of Shammai say: two weeks; the school of Hillel say: one week.” And here there comes an *expansion*: “The disciples *who* go (*ha-yotzim*) out for study without asking for their wives’ permission – for thirty days.” Thus reads ms Kaufman (which is the best text-witness of the Mishnah), and several other witnesses, among which are two Genizah fragments. See: A. Liss (ed.), *The Babylonian Talmud with Variant Readings*, Tractate Kethuboth (11), (Jerusalem: Institute for the Complete Israeli Talmud, 1977), 65. According to this reading, the Mishnah does not say that the students are *allowed* to go out of their homes for thirty days (as the reading in the vulgate printed editions of the Mishnah [*ha-talmidim yotzim*] implies); it says only that students who go out of their homes without asking for their wives’ permission are allowed to continue a vow of continence for thirty days. Presumably, the permission for such students to extend the period of avoidance of sexual activity is based on the assumption that students were absent from home, normally, for considerable periods of time. This assumption is confirmed, at least for Babylonia, by the testimony of Rava in bKet. 62b.

68. Perhaps in a similar manner we should understand Rav Huna's *halakhic* stance, according to which "Whoever stipulates that the sexual act be conducted while he is with his dress on and she too clothes hers, must divorce her and pay her *ktubah*" (bKet. 48b). This view, however, was not the only one among the rabbis of the Talmud; Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, for example, maintains that God does not approve of making love nakedly, and that he himself hates it (Leviticus Rabbah. 21:8 [ed. Margulies, 486]). Similarly in bBer. 8b, Rabban Gamliel approves of making love with one's clothes on. See also bNed. 20b, Rabbi Eliezer's wife (and the author of the *sugya* as well?) praises him for making love with his clothes on (*megale tefach u-mechase tefach*). Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 48–49, tends to see this as a Palestinian-Babylonian debate.
69. Genesis Rabbah. 9:7 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 71–72).
70. *Ibid.*
71. The Yerushalmi has here *istratiot*, which is a Greek loanword that may refer to soldier in general, but also to an officer. Cf. S. Krauss, *Griechische und Lateinische Lehnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1899), 2.84. The latter seems to fit the context better in this case, and this rendering is supported by the reading *hegmon* found in a Gaonic responsum (cf. Z. Teubesch, *Otzar ha-Geonim to Tractate Sanhedrin* [Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1966], 305), and in the *Sefer Ravva*, l.192 (ed. V. Aptowitz [Jerusalem: Harry Fischel Institute, 1964], l.221), although this reading, as such, may be influenced by the version in bKet. 3b. Compare: Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshuta*, 6.187, n. 6.
72. YKet. 1:5, 25c. The words "into the *huppah*" in the concluding sentence, which are found in the Vilna edition of the Palestinian Talmud are missing from MS Leiden. A different tradition appears at tKet. 1:1 (ed. Lieberman, 56), on which see Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshuta*, 6.186–187.
73. There are other examples where the authors of Talmudic stories do not express any astonishment at the sexual misconduct of rabbis or their disciples. See, for example, Sifre to Numbers. 115 (ed. Horovitz, 128–129 [= bMen. 44a]). In fact, the rabbis assume that it is extremely rare to find a young man who lives in a town and does not "sin," that is, having sexual relations with women (married or not we are not told). See bPes. 113b; Tanhuma, *Va-Yeshev*, 5. This is not to say that the rabbis approve of this reality, of course, but it does reveal the rabbinic general attitude to such matters.