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ON INTIMACY, LOVE, *KEDUSHAH* AND SEXUALITY:
REFLECTIONS ON THE 5TH ANNUAL
YCT RABBINICAL SCHOOL/COMMUNITY YOM IYYUN
IN CONJUNCTION WITH
CONGREGATION OHAB ZEDEK*

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INTRODUCTION

This unique *yom iyyun* was created in partnership between YCT Rabbinical School and Congregation Ohab Zedek. The title itself conveys a great deal about the ambitious agenda—we chose very specific words, and we encourage you, the reader, just as we encouraged the participants on December 26, to think about them, to pause and reflect on what they mean to you: “Intimacy, Love, *Kedushah* and Sexuality.”

For me, these are words for powerful and different states of feeling and experience that may or may not be experienced at the same time. However the words resonate for each individual, the operative word for the *yom iyyun* and this summary is *kedushah*, translated as “sanctity” and which should be accompanied by respect and modesty. In that spirit, we understand that it is not only possible, but necessary, to discuss these feelings and experiences associated with intimacy, love and sexuality using clear and direct language.

OVERVIEW

We understand that attitudes, values and behaviors are fundamentally rooted in the home. Children who come from loving homes where physicality is discussed

* This event took place at Congregation Ohab Zedek in New York City on December 26, 2005.

have the best chance of themselves constructing emotionally and sexually healthy relationships in marriage. At the same time, no matter the home, education in schools and in other vehicles, such as *hatan/kallah* preparation classes, plays a crucial role.

The *yom iyyun* takes a closer look at these opportunities. Rabbi Allen Schwartz framed our inquiry in a Torah context. Our two panels of experts considered the broad topics of education and intimacy in marriage. For the first panel, Dr. Chaya Gorsetman, Professor of Education at Stern College, addressed the development of trust—the necessary precursor to intimacy—and sexuality in young children. She was followed by Rabbi Mark Gottlieb, Head of School at Yeshiva University High School for Boys and Dr. Jerry Zeitchik, Director of Guidance at the Ramaz Upper School, who explored issues of sexuality and education in the yeshiva high school setting. In the second panel, Rabbi Yosef Blau, *Mashgiach Ruhani* at Yeshiva University drew from his many years of experience in framing his remarks about contemporary challenges in sexuality and marriage. Shuli Sandler, an instructor at Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, and, together with her husband Ben, a *hatan/kallah* educator, presented an overview of their unique co-ed marriage preparation class. My own presentation was an overview of points drawn from a recent data study I did with several colleagues on the sexual life of observant Jewish women.

OBSERVATIONS DRAWN FROM “SEXUAL LIFE AND OBSERVANT WOMEN” STUDY

Besides chairing the department of pastoral counseling at YCT Rabbinical School, I also practice psychiatry on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Clinical involvement with observant Jews over the past 25 years in conjunction with a 1999 national secular report on sexual behavior led several colleagues and me to conduct a questionnaire based study that explored emotional and sexual experience of religiously observant Jewish women. We collected data from over 400 women in the United States and Israel and analyzed this material using statistical methodology. We also encouraged respondents to write narrative accounts that further enriched our research. The material in our study came from women who scrupulously adhered to *niddah* laws. We look forward to publishing a full description of our findings in the near future. Here are a few key observations relevant to the *yom iyyun* inquiry:

1) EDUCATION

- **Women are not in the main learning about the basics of sex from their mothers or other family members.** More than 70% of our respondents learned about sex from friends their own age,

not generally the best source of accurate or appropriate information.

- While 90% of the women in our study took a *kallah* class prior to marriage, most felt that this instruction did not adequately prepare them for marital sexual life. They describe that their teachers' emphasis was to insure that students not commit halakhic errors, Teachers in general did not offer basic instruction that women felt would have been very helpful. Topics that the women repeatedly mentioned in which they wished they had instruction were the differences between male and female sexuality, couple communication, and basics of sexual practice.
- Women also described difficulty making the transition from *niddah* to non-*niddah* (i.e. sexually available) times. We found that when they do have sexual difficulties after marriage, they almost never ask their *kallah* teachers for help.

2) IMPACT OF NIDDAH ON SEXUAL AND EMOTIONAL LIFE.

- Our respondents strongly advocated for the positive impact of a two week separation period in terms of reducing sexual boredom and increasing desire. However, only a minority felt that *niddah* observance improved their emotional relationship. Many women described feeling estranged from their husbands when physical touch was not available.

3) COMMUNICATION

- We found that one of the most significant predictors of sexual satisfaction in marriage was evenness of communication about sex. Responses of women who felt that they could initiate sex or express their preference for and response to specific activity was highly correlated with positive ratings about their intimate marital life.
- Husbands' sexual dysfunction also significantly contributes to marital sexual dissatisfaction. Here, as well, communication between the couple figures importantly. People are more likely to get help if they can first acknowledge that they have a problem.

4) SEXUAL ABUSE IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

- Sadly, we found the same statistics for sexual molestation and abuse of girls and teens as in the secular population. One quarter of our respondents reported sexual molestation as girls or teens. While patterns of molestation varied somewhat from secular stud-

ies, we must face up to the fact that, contrary to popular belief, traditional religious life does not guarantee protection for girls and teens in this arena.

5) DENOMINATIONAL AFFILIATION

- Whether a woman affiliates as *Hassidic*, *Yeshivish/Agudah* or Modern Orthodox turned out to be statistically unimportant in terms of marital sexual satisfaction. However, whether she is a *ba'alat teshuvah* vs. being raised religious (*frum* from birth) is significant.
- Women who became religious reported better marital sexual satisfaction. Likely explanations for this are multi-faceted and will be explored in our longer paper, but we suspect that less inhibited attitudes towards sexuality among women who were not raised religious play a major role.

6) RELIGIOUS GUIDANCE IN SEXUAL LIFE

- We found that while over 90% of our respondents ask rabbis questions about *Kashrut* and Shabbat, a much smaller percentage ask questions about sexual practice. This was not for lack of curiosity—half of our respondents had such questions, but very few ask for rabbinic guidance. Similarly, while the majority of women answering the questionnaire used birth control at some point, less than half reported asking for rabbinic guidance in making those contraceptive decisions.

These findings leave the observant community with much to think about. Since we are committed to the principle of *kedushah* guiding all major realms of life, we must wonder why significant areas of sexual life seem to be hovering on the outskirts of religious consciousness. We need to re-evaluate the place of relationship, intimacy and sexuality education in the yeshiva day school system as well as the curriculum and format of pre-marital preparation programs. Lastly, we must educate our future rabbis and religious teachers so that they are knowledgeable in and comfortable with this basic area of life. Only when these leaders model appropriately modest yet clear familiarity with issues of sexual life, will the community move forward in this regard.