

“On Chesil Beach”

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Ian McEwan is one of Britain's most successful novelists. I have to say that he is not one of my favorites. Rather like Jane Austen, he is preoccupied with the prissy, boring English middle classes, a species I do not find either particularly attractive or instructive. That's why I find Russian novels much more interesting. When it comes to reading modern novels I'm rarely satisfied, so I turned to [On Chesil Beach](#), Ian McEwan's latest, with a sense of obligation and foreboding. Obligation because, as it won prizes and was acclaimed, I felt I ought to, and foreboding because I was sure I would be disappointed. I wasn't. And I suspect this is because the book resonated with my background, my era, and some of my concerns.

I could criticize [On Chesil Beach](#) on several counts, but I'd rather focus on what impressed me. I delighted in its setting, the sights, smells, and beauties of the Oxfordshire countryside and its towns, which reminded me of my balmy youth. But what really resonated was the central theme—a young couple brought up in a repressed English social environment with the mores of respectability and the gentility that required presenting an exterior of normality and sanity, while beneath the surface raw emotions roil, struggling to release themselves. They fall in love and decide to get married without really understanding each other. They are not prepared for the intimacy that comes with marriage or the “permission”, indeed expectation, to have intercourse. They have no inkling of the complexities of genuine communication between the sexes. This is such familiar territory to me brought up in the repressed fifties. Only the rich, it seemed, or the very poor, could enjoy themselves, whereas the middle classes amongst whom I was brought up were constrained by convention.

This reminded me of the very Orthodox world I have lived in for most of my life. A young couple is brought up with virtually no experience of interaction with the opposite sex, neither coeducation nor socializing. Touching is taboo. Then a couple meet, usually by arrangement. They go out on a few very correct dates and agree to get married. They both believe, innocently, that this will create a state of Heaven on Earth. Immediately after the religious ceremony, in one leap, they go from no touching at all to complete sexual intimacy. For many (not all), if there is inadequate preparation, this can lead to trauma. Yet this process happens each year to hundreds of thousands of couples in all forms of orthodoxies. Why, I wonder, is there no preparation, no training, no courses in communication and understanding for such a momentous moment in human life? How much emotional damage and pain must be caused?

And yet, the fact is that somehow or other so many do seem to cope and go on to achieve sexual compatibility, love, and happy marriages for the rest of their lives. Is this a miracle or what, when the only advice most girls get is to hold on tight and things will happen automatically? No wonder a doctor I know had to deal with a couple who thought intercourse took place via the

bellybutton!

That is one extreme. On the other hand, with easy accessibility of all the explicit publications available in any newsagent's and on the internet, with all the pressure and availability of so much sexual experience, and all the freedoms of modern life, for all the years of physical intimacy of living together and having sex, still, so many more marriages fall apart. Clearly, sexual experience is no guarantee, or even condition, of success at all. In the end, marriage is based on accommodation, adjustment, and the will, desire, and commitment to make it work. In most Orthodox communities there is an emotional, financial, and social support structure that, while on occasion can be oppressive, can also be so helpful and positive in providing the glue that ultimately may hold families together.

There is no single answer. That's why the Talmud says some marriages are made in Heaven and others by humans. Life is a challenge and a struggle. Marriage is a challenge and struggle. And like all struggles and challenges, it is only by persevering that the benefits and the results come. On the other hand, some unions are mistakes, physically or emotionally. And when this happens, separation and the possibility of new beginnings are blessings that hold out hope for recuperation. If love fails once, it might succeed a second time. It would be terrible to have to give up the hope of ever experiencing it.

As with every human system, marriage has its advantages and disadvantages, and having a religious structure can help a lot. Where religion fails is when it does not allow for exceptions or for those who cannot follow the norms. That is where education, psychology, and healing are required even more.

I do strongly believe that we are not adequately preparing our children for marriage, and the results in the modern world we live in may prove to be a serious time bomb that could explode in our faces. I was delighted to read recently of a [joint venture](#) in the USA between various moderate Orthodox organisations to address this issue: the admirable [Yeshivat Chovevei Torah](#), which was established to train a new generation of well prepared US rabbis unhampered by rightist pressures, [Drisha](#), which is a remarkable institute for teaching women Torah at the highest levels, and [JOFA](#), which campaigns for Orthodox women's rights. But the people who need it most, in the farthest reaches of the Orthodox world, are still getting nothing. And they are unlikely to read [On Chesil Beach](#).