

Sexual Choices

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Sexual depravity, like violence, was the natural state of the pagan world, with temple prostitution and human sacrifice going hand-in-hand. Even in the Bible, some of the greatest of men allowed their sexual urges to make fools and sinners of them. The Israelites, fresh out of Sinai, were seduced by Moabite purveyors of sex. The Mishna states unequivocally that lust is one of three things that can destroy a person.

In spite of all that, in Judaism sex is regarded as something wonderful, positive, and a gift of God. Provided of course one accepts the limitations and disciplines that the Torah teaches are necessary to fully appreciate its sanctity. Indeed according to the majority opinion in Jewish law nothing is forbidden sexually between consenting and permitted partners.

But we live in a world where sex has become a pervasive, trivial release of human urges, no more significant than a sneeze. Sex has always been misused. But in our world we have reached new lows. Women and children are abused sexually in the most barbaric and inconceivable ways. And I am not talking about those parts of the world still suffering from oppressive male religious hypocrisy. Even in the strictest of religions, the tendency to exploit and sexually abuse women has time and again proved to be more powerful than the strongest of taboos. The availability of pornography at the click of a Google search is a blight on civilization. It is the strongest argument for parental control of the internet.

If someone enjoys sadomasochism that is a private affair, and if consenting adults do whatever they feel like that is also a matter of privacy. Similarly, Christians and Muslims are free to try to convert me, and I am free to tell them to get lost. I know I am constantly being bombarded by adverts, overt and subliminal, all trying to manipulate me to buy something. But if I am mature enough I can withstand such pressures religious or profane.

When society seems to be losing its sense of sexual values, it is natural that some, religious or not, want to hold the line somewhere and preserve a comfort zone. All societies go through cycles of permissiveness, followed by repression, followed by relaxation. Often the way they do this is by falling back on standards that they believe once worked (even if they did not, or the circumstances were entirely different).

Many moderns look at Jewish laws that forbid sex during a woman's period and give her time to recover as both primitive and unrealistic. But tradition can argue that, on the contrary, a voluntary form of abstinence enhances a relationship. Of course sexuality and how one treats it very subjective and personal, and no system works for everyone. But in my opinion, and as I have experienced it, it respects the right of the woman to decide how her body measures its rhythms. It respects her space. Again I stress that my

experience tells me that periodic abstinence helps maintain the excitement of intimacy, which in too many relationships becomes mundane, loses its passion, and withers. There is a lot to be said in favor of self-discipline.

I should stress that I have no idea if this is why we have these laws, but I do know I can see the benefits, whether intended or not. We live in an era of self-indulgence. The more spoiled you are the less you appreciate physical pleasure. You take it for granted, and the more addicted you are to instant gratification, the more you run the risk of needing constant stimulation. It's like any addiction.

Traditional communities struggle to maintain values that they believe enhance life while in the world around them they are accused of being old fashioned. In a liberal society we believe in choices and freedoms. But the same rights must be extended to those who make other choices provided of course they do not interfere with others.

Currently a Conservative synagogue in Los Angeles, with a large Persian membership, is the center of a storm over the issue of gay and lesbian marriage. Most of the community embraces the decision of its rabbi to perform religious marriages for same-sex couples. A traditional minority has balked. It wants to adhere to traditional Jewish attitudes which insist that Kiddushin, the religious sanctification of a union, should conform to traditional requirements. You cannot say "According to Law of Moses and Israel" if it is not.

The Ashkenazi world has been split into different denominations with their own definitions of Jewish identity and attitudes towards Jewish law. The gaps are sometimes as wide as between Protestants and Catholics. The result is a very clear demarcation between those who accept traditional halacha and those who do not. The Orthodox position has tended to be "my way or the highway". The non-Orthodox position is been more negotiable. The Sefardi world, never having had Reform, accommodated every degree of commitment to Judaism under its broad umbrella without asking awkward questions, and its rabbinate tended to be more accommodating. Sadly, even they are increasingly being eroded as the Sefardi world is being dragged to the right.

Many Persian Jews, when they came to America, like generations of immigrants before them, found Conservative Jewry more to their liking, a bridge between modernity and tradition. Now the chickens have come to roost, and they will have to choose. Because there is always a tipping point. You simply cannot have your cake and eat it too forever.

Orthodoxy has come a long way in recent years in modulating its stance on different sexual standards and preferences. Its policy has been to welcome individuals rather than to change its value system, and to avoid invading privacy on a range of issues. It has tried to adapt to civil society without sacrificing tradition. Instead of changing the law, it preserves it as principle but in principle if not always in practice, deals caringly with those who choose to make their own decisions. Others choose instead to change the law. Two models. Two choices. Those who fear that society has permitted too much are still subject in public to the law of the land. But they are

fortunate in a free society that they can religiously preserve their own standards. The traditionalists of Los Angeles, indeed anyone who feels uncomfortable with the way their church or synagogue is going, can simply walk. There are options. I am not sure we should be framing this in terms of right or wrong, but rather in terms of preferences.

My community ([the Persian Jewish Center](#)) welcomes everyone. It does not apply religious tests. Everyone knows that the majority has compromised in one way or another. We only ask that our standards be respected. We adhere to traditional Jewish law even if our membership fails to live up to it. If the weight of halachic opinion changes, we will go with the flow. But until it does, we stand for caution and traditional values. It's like being caught up in a moral tsunami. When in doubt, as the torrent rages around you, hold on. Some may say that that is a cop-out. I would argue that sometimes "discretion is the better part of valor".