

Rav Shagar (1949-2007) established Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak in 1996 and headed it until his untimely death. He was among the first to introduce the study of academic Talmud, Hasidut, Kabbala, and postmodernism into Israeli yeshivot, and the ongoing publication of his voluminous writings has earned him a large audience in Israel.

LOVE, ROMANCE, AND COVENANT

Questions and Sources of Distress

A while back, I ran into a friend who serves as a rabbi in a Jerusalem synagogue. He related to me three questions that he is often asked by young couples who are about to get married. The first, most difficult question relates to family planning, namely using contraceptives to put off having children. The reasons for such a move are many: academic studies; a desire to strengthen the bond between husband and wife; and even fear that they are incompatible, leading to a desire to see how the relationship will unfold before the arrival of children who could complicate a breakup. The second question, which pertains to the wedding ceremony, was whether the bride and groom could place a ring on one another's fingers. The third relates to the days of ritual impurity during and after the menstrual period – the rules governing the separation between husband and wife and to what extent those rules can be bent. These are, of course, the questions of couples who have already decided to tie the knot; the most difficult questions of all are the ones raised by singles: How does a couple decide to marry? What expectations are legitimate and what are not? What is the determining factor – one's emotions or one's intellect? What is the procedure – should one compromise? And finally, why is it so hard to find a suitable partner?

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I will not endeavor here to answer these weighty questions, some of which I have addressed elsewhere. Rather, in this chapter I will attempt to get at the root of the questions – the conflict between Jewish family life, the conception of family, and the ethos of the Jewish family, as constructed by halakha (or the spirit of halakha), and the conception of family in the modern world, which instills us with fantasies and expectations of our romantic partner.

The young religious men and women who ask such questions are motivated by a certain conception of romantic love. This conception is a relatively recent “invention,” a system of expectations regarding one’s future family that, as noted, derives largely from one’s cultural milieu. The idea that the relationship between husband and wife is shaped independently of our social and cultural surroundings is incorrect.¹

Halakha, meanwhile, shapes the marital relationship via its own values and conceptions, which differ significantly from those of romantic love. People for whom halakha is not the be-all and end-all may feel alienated by it and have trouble fulfilling its dictates. Hence the resistance – or, at the very least, the lack of identification and understanding – that arises in many young men and women in response to the halakhot governing married life. For better or worse, we are citizens of multiple worlds. We are immersed in an environment, and partake of a lifestyle, whose values are often quite distant from those of Judaism. This state of affairs gives rise to many conflicts, and causes people to feel trapped and sometimes experience harsh disappointments.

Thus, the questions with which I opened emerge from a profound dissonance between Western-modern conceptions and the thrust of halakha. The question of the ring, for instance, is the question of equality. “If he can, then why can’t I?” the bride asks. The desire for equality also underlies the second question, that of family planning. As opposed to the traditional wife, the modern bride does not see raising children and caring for her family as her sole purpose. She, too, wishes to pursue self-actualization through higher education and a career. Yet halakha – ostensibly at least – considers procreation and the raising of children to be the purpose of the family and the goal of sexual relations, and thus poses difficulties for those who wish to lead a marital life that defers childrearing.²

¹ See, for example, Yoram Yovel, *Is It Love?* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Keshet, 2004).

² For more, see the essay “The Mitsva of *Ona*,” in *Nehalekh be-Ragesh*, 17–58. Of course, a man may also defer having children in order to pursue self-actualization.

The problem is not just the changes in lifestyle and the challenge of raising children while studying and developing a career, but also the conflict – no less acute than the one mentioned above – between intimacy and family life. Let us look to Passover for an example. The Jewish festivals are family affairs, not romantic ones. They are not about seclusion in nature or honeymooning in a hotel room, but rather about the family hubbub: uncles and cousins, their spouses and grandchildren. What is a young couple to do if they seek solitude in the vineyards or wish to graze among the lilies, as described in the Song of Solomon, which we read during Passover? I sense strongly that there is something deeply Jewish about the holiday hubbub and commotion.

What will happen when, even absent the extended family, the couple is surrounded by children? The Torah considers children a blessing, the more the merrier: “Your wife shall be as a fruitful vine in the innermost parts of your house; your children like olive plants around your table” (Ps. 128:3). Are we willing to forgo this blessing? But what if its price is intimacy, not only between husband and wife, but between parents and children?

Naturally, the question of intimacy yields further questions: What of entertaining guests? One question I am occasionally asked by newlyweds is whether they should invite guests for their Shabbat eve meals or spend them together, alone, in the cozy quietude of their homes.

The question of intimacy also touches on the third question: that of ritual impurity. Do the various prohibitions imposed on the couple while the wife is forbidden to her husband disrupt and impair their intimacy?

This issue raises another conflict that puts the tension between romance and halakha in sharp relief: the sexual urge, which *Hazal* termed *yetser ha-arayot*, and which we will refer to by its modern designation – eros. Whenever *Hazal* spoke of a *yetser*, or “urge,” without elaboration, they referred to the sexual drive. According to one widely known tale, the Men of the Great Assembly even tried to eradicate it.³ But *Hazal* did not doubt its indispensability: “Come, let us render gratitude to our forebears, for had they not sinned, we should not have come into the world,” Resh Lakish asserted.⁴ They also maintained that one must worship God with “two impulses, the evil impulse as well as the good impulse.”⁵ The attempt by the Great Assembly to destroy the urge was doomed:

³ *Sanhedrin* 64a.

⁴ *Avoda Zara* 5a.

⁵ *Mishna Berakhot* 9:5.

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Then they said, “Since the time is propitious, let us pray that the tempter of sin [may be delivered into our hands].” So they prayed, and it was delivered into their hands. They imprisoned it for three days; after that they sought a new-laid egg for an invalid in the whole of the Land of Israel and could not find one. Then they said, “What shall we do? Shall we pray that its power be but partially destroyed? Heaven will not grant it.” So they blinded it with rouge. This was so effective that one does not lust for his relatives.

The sages were well aware of the necessity of the sexual urge, embodied in the image of an egg used as medicine. Sexual vitality was apparently seen as an antidote for the patient’s weakness, perhaps for all weakness. But why did Heaven not grant their request to curtail its power? It turns out that it is incumbent upon man to tell right from wrong; the divine totality often brooks no compromise.

So how did the sages contend with the threat? Even though they conceded the indispensability of the sexual urge, they still sought to harness it to good works – the mitsvot of procreation and marital relations – and through them to justify it. Nothing is further from their point of view than the prevailing conceptions of romantic love in our society. We are hostages to romantic concepts of eros, and many couples object when told that its sole justification is that it is a mitstva. On the halakhic level, therein lies the problem with family planning: *Hazal* made sexuality subservient to the mitstva of procreation, and the distinction between the two raises a variety of issues. As noted, in this chapter I do not discuss halakhic questions but instead examine ideas of romantic love and possible Jewish alternatives to it. In the final section of the essay, I will attempt to demonstrate that the postmodern criticism of romantic love, of all things, posits an exciting point of view that could be quite compatible with Jewish conceptions of couplehood.

Romance and Judaism: Chaos and Rectification

What is evil about the libido, and why did the sages refer to it as the “evil urge”?

Let us discuss romance in modern culture and the contrast between it and marriage. We will begin with a passage from the Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz:

But as the centrality of religion declined during the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, romantic love was inevitably carried along by the new wave of secularization. Themes of

selflessness, sacrifice, and idealism were more and more brushed aside. Romantic love ceased being presented in the terms of religious discourse [as it had been before, during the Victorian era]....⁶

Illouz quotes the historian Karen Lystra:

Especially during courtship, it can be shown that romantic love contributed to the displacement of God by the lover as the central symbol of ultimate significance.... [Lovers] were making deities of each other in the new theology of romantic love.⁷

Indeed, over time romantic love has practically taken on the status of a religion all its own.

Our conceptions of romance are an outgrowth of the major characteristics of mid-twentieth-century American culture: individualism, self-expression, a new ethics of pleasure, consumerism, leisure, and so on. The catalyst for these conceptions was the cinema. The boundaries between film and real life were blurred, and men and women constructed entire fantastical worlds based on what they saw at the movies. The romantic expected the love of his life to make herself known to him as if in a mystical vision. Yet, according to Illouz's description, romance deviated from the norms of morality, as it certainly did not sanctify such principles as loyalty, stability, and generosity. Thus, romantic love became a force that threatened the social and moral order while acquiring, precisely due to its menacing nature, the aura of a supreme value. It served as a utopian model of the individual's sovereignty and, as such, was perceived as conflicting with society. "It stood for such values as disinterestedness, irrationality, and indifference to riches. Ironically, however, in popular literature, love was supposed to magically bring economic security, and abundance."⁸

One can detect powerful reverberations of this idea in the allegories of Freud (and even more so among his rebel students), who considered sexual restraint detrimental to the autonomy of the individual. Several of his contemporaries agreed, including the philosopher Bertrand Russell, who opined that "love is an anarchic force which, if it is left free, will not remain within any bounds set by law or custom."⁹

⁶ Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1997), 29.

⁷ Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 8.

⁸ Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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It is precisely this modern conception of romantic love, and of the eros at its core, that can lead us back to the world of the Jewish sages, for whom libido was *the* quintessential evil urge.

The sexual urge is indeed a power, negative and boundary-breaking, a force of chaos – that is its nature and thence its appeal. There is an inherent contradiction between it and culture. Put in the terminology of Hasidism, it represents a clash between the world of *tohu*, or chaos, and the world of *tikkun*, or rectification, which is also the world of Torah. Only through negation can the infinite be represented, as Maimonides taught.¹⁰ Indeed, one can say that that is the deep source of the world of chaos. The conflict between libido and culture can thus be conceived as a conflict between infinite, spontaneous freedom and deliberate suppression. Hence Freud's pessimistic conclusion regarding chronic dissatisfaction and "the uneasiness of culture."¹¹

Therein is the root of the romantic assault on the institution of marriage. Wedlock is often portrayed in American popular culture as the enemy of love and a threat to the thrill of passion. Sartre referred to it as a prison. Even if one willingly enters into this problematic institution, one must often revitalize one's marital relationship with all manner of contrivances and, especially, thrilling experiences.

The affectionate bourgeois marriage, it is claimed, is a myth, hypocrisy, the product of convenience rather than feeling. The convergence of romantic love and marriage generates a contradiction between the values engendered by that love (fervent feeling, idealization of the beloved, selfless emotion) and those required for a successful marriage (day-to-day partnership, dealing with a less than perfect spouse, the juggling of love with familial and professional responsibilities).

Freud's conception of the conflict between culture, which he considered an expression of the superego, and the id, the instinctual forces of the subconscious, as well as the conception of sexuality as a negative, boundary-breaking force, is synonymous with *Hazal's* identification of the sexual urge with the evil urge. The argument between Freud and the romantics in this regard is thus a dispute over the status of culture, on the one hand, and the value of boundary-breaking romanticism, on the other, echoing the prophets' age-old battle against sexual, idolatrous wantonness. The pagan temple was the abode of the sacred prostitute, and pagan festivals and rites called for debauchery and the suspension of

¹⁰ *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:58–60.

¹¹ This is the literal translation of *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, the German title of Freud's famous work *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

everyday sexual mores. Contrast that with the Jewish holidays, where the family takes center stage.

Marriage would thus appear to be a feature of the constricting, oppressive world of rectification (*tikkun*). But is that indeed the case? Did the sages, who also perceived a conflict between the sexual urge and Torah (the world of rectification), indeed see this opposition as inherent? Did Freud in fact echo them in positing pessimistically that “culture” is intrinsically repressive and discontenting? The Freudian point of view is seemingly foreshadowed in the words of the *Amora* R. Yitzhak: “Since the destruction of the Temple, sexual pleasure has been taken [from those who experience it lawfully] and given to sinners, as it is written, ‘Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant’ (Prov. 9:17).”¹²

Even R. Isaac, who does not ignore the conflict between libido and law, and the dissatisfaction that is the lot of the law-abider, considers the situation temporary. The conflict is not intrinsic and necessary; it is merely one consequence of the destruction of the Temple. In any event, rather than content themselves with fighting wantonness and suppressing it in the name of the law, the prophets and sages created an alternative, a re-channeling of the sexual urge, an eros that, instead of effacing the tension and suppressing desire, would raise them to a place of holiness. Here is a passage by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik that can help us elucidate at least one aspect of *Hazal*’s struggle with the issue:

The third level of sexual life, *redeemed sexual activity*...spells a new relationship between man and woman. It places sexuality on a new plane.... This eternal quest of the unique, lonely individual to flee his solitude and to share his personal existence with others finds fulfillment via the carnal medium. God, somehow, employs the flesh as an instrument of His will.... “*Veha’adam yada et Hava ishto*, Adam knew his wife Eve” (Gen. 4:1); “*vayeda Adam od et ishto*, Adam knew his wife again” (4:25). The Hebrew term *vayeda* in its sense of knowing each other sexually connotes the metaphysical element involved in the sexual function. The term *vayeda* points toward an act of cognition or recognition. The I recognizes the personal existence of the you.... If you should inquire as to the essence and meaning of the institution of marriage, I would say that through marriage the miraculous transition from the I-it contact to the I-you relationship occurs. Marriage personalizes sexuality as the joint

¹² *Sanhedrin* 75a.

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experience of the I and the you.... Basically the same drive that brings man to God makes him quest for his companion.¹³

The preceding statements stem, of course, from a modernist worldview that does not separate romanticism from sexuality or identify sexuality with the evil urge. Yet, as opposed to the romantics, not only does R. Soloveitchik not see a conflict between sexuality and marriage, but he believes that the redemption of sexuality is attained through marriage, through the raising of the relationship from I-it to I-you. Thus, he identifies the marital relationship with the ancient conception of covenant.¹⁴

Employing terms from dialogic philosophy, R. Soloveitchik describes sexuality not only as a force that does not conflict with intimacy, but as intimacy's actualization. Although he allows for the existence of a conflict between sexuality and culture, he limits it to "the life of the flesh" (Lev. 17:11). To use hasidic and kabbalistic terminology, this is the grand mystery depicted as the sweetening of the *gevurot*, the *dinim* or severities, associated with the left side, by incorporating them within the *hasadim*, or kindnesses, of the right side. Untempered *gevurot*, manifest as passion, are *tohu*, chaos, and thus shatter the vessels. Hence the disappointment, emptiness, and discontent so often inseparable from the sexual experience: Pleasure becomes pain. Denial cannot exist on its own. Only when the relationship encompasses body and soul, when each partner acknowledges the presence of the other through the encounter and the gaze, can sexuality become presence, reality, and redemption from loneliness. Otherwise, it yields nothing but frustration and exponentially deepens each partner's solitude.

Let us revisit the meaning of *Hazal's* move to define sexual relations as a mitsva. Rabbi Soloveitchik dealt with this issue at length elsewhere in his writings. On numerous occasions he described the overcoming of the sexual urge, through the laws of family purity, as an injection of holiness into the relationship between husband and wife.¹⁵ Halakha's role is to shape a different order of relations. It seeks to redeem the relationship from banality and secularization, and mold it into a system of purification and festive invitation; to recast sexuality as a sacred instrument of excitement and pleasure. If one fails to recognize that these are two distinct approaches to sexuality, and attempts to approach halakha using the

¹³ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed* (Jersey City: Ktav, 2002), 94–95.

¹⁴ For more, see "Modesty and Shame," in *Nehalekh be-Ragesh*, 261–70.

¹⁵ See, for example, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Catharsis," *Tradition* 17, no. 2 (1978): 38–54; reprinted in Rabbi Soloveitchik, *Confrontation and Other Essays* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015) 41–61.

terminology of Western eroticism, he will be unable to cope with these laws, and will perceive them as oppressive. The restraining of the urge, and the ensuing sense of alienation, is what sanctifies and safeguards one's libido. I wish to dwell on this point.

Does the fact that the Torah presents fecundity as the purpose of marriage, and places the raising and educating of children at the center of its conception of the family, preclude intimacy in the Jewish family? On the contrary. When they coined the blessings of the marriage ceremony, the sages imprinted their views about the family in the halakhic currency of prayer. What is the import of the blessings uttered under the wedding canopy, which often go unnoticed by us? What promise do they hold? To what do they aspire? "Blessed are You, Lord our God...who created joy and gladness, groom and bride, mirth, song, delight, and rejoicing, love and harmony and peace and companionship." Happiness and friendship are clearly crucial; yet "companionship" here is nothing like that of Western romantic love.

In this context, I like to quote the Slovenian postmodernist thinker Slavoj Žižek:

The way – the only way – to have an intense and fulfilling personal (sexual) relationship is not for the couple to look into each other's eyes, forgetting about the world around them, but, while holding hands, to look together outside, at a third point (the Cause for which both are fighting, to which both are committed).¹⁶

The blessings of the wedding speak to the companionship and solidarity generated by two companions in faith. Our primary objective is to overcome nihilism (which feeds and perpetuates our negative image of sexuality) and open up to faith in the other, which is also faith in God.

The romantic metaphor for intimacy is one of self-discovery. But the self cannot be grasped, and neither can the other, the object of love. At best, the self will briefly flicker into view, always through its attributes, which may bear the imprint of the other's uniqueness. Like the hidden God who reveals Himself only through His actions – "You cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live" (Ex. 33:20) – so too the self. The very attempt to grasp something obstructs intimacy. Paradoxically, only through distraction can the self be discovered. It flutters in the corner of the eye, it peers through the lattice, and its presence is rarely if ever enduring and direct. It cannot be a goal, and therein is the pitfall of

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Boston: MIT Press, 2005), 85.

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romance: In becoming an object, it thwarts itself, as with all strivings of the ego. That is how one should understand the deeper intention of the sages in portraying the mitzva as the objective, fecundity as the goal, and family life as the purpose. It is also how one can overcome the sexual urge's innate flaw and the attendant disappointment, about which R. Yohanan said in the Talmud: "There is a small organ in man which satisfies him in his hunger but makes him hunger when satisfied."¹⁷ Although it is a goal, the mitzva is not an achievement to be pursued. Rather, it is a state of mind that yields an action, the medium through which solidarity and companionship are manifest. Its purpose is to reveal through distraction, through the paradox of modesty, which exposes by concealing.

This is a vastly different ideal of marriage from the romantic conception that places eros at its core. Its objective is to sweeten desire and maintain it with gladness and friendship.

But can husband and wife be friends, too? This may seem like a strange question. Isn't there friendship between them? Yet with time, relationships become increasingly complicated and onerous, grudges accrue, passion makes way for hostility, and friendship fades. The intimacy posited by the Jewish approach offers relief from marital anguish.

The Jewish model of intimacy can be characterized as standing next to, rather than face-to-face with, the other. But we must not conflate this shared outward gaze with ideas that co-opt the family in order to fulfill common goals, a view prevalent among certain rabbis. It is not about mere functionality, for a shared vocation does not imply a shared function. It is about a partnership in carrying out the mitzva itself, in its most profound sense – its faith. A faith partnership engenders the deepest of intimacies, the only intimacy, in fact, that possesses the power to deliver us from solitude. Romantic intimacy, at bottom an intimacy of ego and sexuality, cannot effect such a transformation. This may be the meaning of holiness in this context, where it plays a central part.

Thus, *Hazal's* subsuming of sexuality in fecundity emphasizes an immanent aspect of sexuality itself. The only way to maintain it is by not turning it into a goal, for that distorts it. Sexuality is dispelled among those who pursue it or are enticed by it.

In the postmodernist context, one prominent author offers the following description:

It is not chance that Umberto Eco chose love to define the postmodern:
"I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very

¹⁷ *Sanhedrin* 107a.

cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, ‘I love you madly,’ because he knows that she knows (and she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by [the popular romance author] Barbara Cartland. [He] loves her in an age of a lost innocence.” In other words, the postmodern romantic condition is characterized by the ironic perception that one can only repeat what has already been said and that one can only act as an actor in an anonymous and stereotypical play.¹⁸

Here we see how our desire to grasp the other causes the other to elude us, not only in the personal, private context, but also in the general sense: The world of romance, as a whole, has lost its charm.

When we evoke the power of the directive, the shared gaze at a third point, we encounter the full power of the inherent gap between the self and the other, a chasm that appears to dissolve the dream of attaining intimacy. Can I forge an inner bond with an other whose very otherness is what sets him or her out as a stranger; who stands facing me and blocks my path; whose gaze ensnares me, keeping me from forgetting myself and attaining sweet abstraction, objectifying me with its abrasive, crushing scrutiny? One is reminded of Kierkegaard, who left his beloved fiancée – in order to love her. Only in her absence could he love her, only through abandonment. In yearning, one invokes the absent beloved, so that the yearning is greater even than one’s love. Rabbi Nahman of Breslov taught that this dynamic also characterizes the relationship with God, that longing is the essence because of its piercing infinitude.¹⁹ Corporeality, by definition, entails imprisonment and diminishment. Therefore, there is no hope for love, and that the path of longing and self-denial is the only viable mode of existence. This, by the way, is the difference between the doctrine of *hitbodedut*, the positive practice of self-seclusion, and loneliness.²⁰ By virtue of its absence, a Hasid’s self-seclusion is a presence and a fullness. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi interpreted the Hebrew word for “bride,” *kalla*, as connoting both *kilayon*, or “yearning,” and *keleh*, “prison.”²¹ Longing is the only alternative to the limitedness of physical reality.

One may dismiss this Kierkegaardian progression as an attempt to replace reality with unreality, the existing world with a spectral one. But the truth is not nearly so straightforward. Yes, the self-deniers and ascetics

¹⁸ Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, 179.

¹⁹ See, for instance, “The Parable of the Heart and the Spring,” in Aryeh Kaplan, trans., *Rabbi Nachman’s Stories* (New York: Breslov Research Institute, 1983), 359.

²⁰ For example, see *Kuzari* III, opening.

²¹ *Likkutei Torah*, Song of Songs 1a.

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do not live in “this world.” Yes, the Hasid who escapes to the desert and lives a life apart from humanity is indeed in a state of self-imposed aloneness. But he is not lonely; his life may be a life of the World to Come, yet it has a presence and tangibility that often surpass those of reality. In this context, I like to quote the distinction drawn by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan between the Real and reality, which are not necessarily identical. Plato already taught us that matter is but a fleeting shade of an idea.

Yet the mitsva drags the Hasid back into the community and makes him marry. But the marriage is not effected only through coercion. The deeper secret is that the mitsva becomes an environment that engenders the meeting between selves, and profound solidarity and intimacy. It is the way out of the Kierkegaardian conundrum.

Here is Freud:

It can easily be shown that the psychical value of erotic needs is reduced as soon as their satisfaction becomes easy. An obstacle is required in order to heighten libido; and when natural resistances to satisfaction have not been sufficient men have at all times erected conventional ones so as to be able to enjoy love.²²

R. Meir made a similar point regarding the laws of family purity:

R. Meir used to say, “Why did the Torah ordain that the uncleanness of menstruation continue for seven days? Because being in constant contact with his wife, [a husband might] develop a loathing toward her. The Torah therefore ordained: Let her be unclean for seven days in order that she shall be beloved by her husband as at the time of her first entry into the bridal chamber.”²³

As I have elaborated elsewhere, the sexual urge cannot be fully actualized, because seizing it robs it of its pleasure.²⁴

Casting fecundity as the goal of the relationship is different, however. It does not create an obstacle with the purpose of heightening libido; neither is it a “paradoxical intention,”²⁵ whose purpose is to create a spontaneous immediacy by diverting the intention. This point harks back to the words of R. Soloveitchik: It is a practice that establishes an I-you

²² Sigmund Freud, *On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love* (Worcestershire, England: Read Books, 2013), 16.

²³ *Nidda* 31b.

²⁴ See “Modesty and Shame.”

²⁵ This term was developed by Viktor Frankl in his *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006) and elsewhere.

relationship – one that cannot relapse into an I-it relationship – by tuning both parties to a common ideal that envelops them (this idea ties in to the kabbalistic concept of *or makif*, or “surrounding light”) and bestows upon the I-you relationship an element of eternity. The process is one of Hegelian “sublation.” The chaos of sexuality, which first appears as the antithesis of marriage, as something to be suppressed by marriage, is ultimately synthesized with it, raising it up so that the relationship becomes an intimate partnership of body and soul.

I wish to end this section with a note. You may have noticed that *Hazal's* approach to sexuality differs from R. Soloveitchik's. *Hazal*, as we pointed out, enlist sexuality in the service of the mitsva. These days, that outlook is prevalent mostly in the ultra-Orthodox world. It is not about self-imposed solitude, but rather about the bustle and gladness of the mitsva. Conversely, R. Soloveitchik's treatment – which applies a modern I-you intimacy, which did not exist in the time of the sages, to the man of faith, who is redeemed through the relationship – is clearly an attempt to incorporate modern sexuality and intimacy into the Jewish world. I would characterize this progression as Hegelian: Chaotic sexuality is retroactively made an essential part of the mitsva. In this context, the mitsva may inhibit and suppress, casting romantic intimacy as its antithesis. Yet the latter, too, is bound for failure. The synthesis is the third stage, where romantic intimacy is subsumed in the mitsva, which in turn becomes a medium for engendering intimacy, as in R. Soloveitchik's description.

To my mind, despite the conflicts plaguing it, the religious Zionist movement is currently at this sensitive juncture – perhaps only fleetingly. I think the movement has forged a unique synthesis between sexuality and holiness, intimacy and the religious imperative. A nonreligious friend used to say he envied religious Zionist youth, the young men and women who had not lost their grace (and had largely retained their innocence as well), as opposed to, on the one hand, the gruffness and alienation prevalent in the ultra-Orthodox world, and, on the other, the promiscuity of the secular world, which in effect eradicates grace.

The Postmodern Condition: Marriage as “Nonliteral *Tsimtsum*”

The postmodernist takes an overtly ironic stance on modern conceptions of romance. As in other areas, romantic love undergoes a process of privatization – a passage from the general to the private and specific, from the enduring to the fleeting. It is no longer about a big love, a love of one's life, but rather about brief, passing pulses, flashes of intimacy. Even the “value” of permissiveness has changed, no longer founded on the

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expectation that it can make one happy. People have learned that permissiveness has broken its promise; no viable alternative to the family has been invented. The postmodern conception of happiness is ironic, a denial of any eternal, solid model, of the grand narrative. Wherever there is no truth, everyone is right. The demand for equality is founded not on everyone's equal rights, but rather on the idea that in a place devoid of a certain right, no individual can demand that right, claiming priority over another. Permissiveness, as an objective, is not about the grand, romantic freedom so much as it is about a small, "hip" freedom. There is no expectation of redemption.

The glamour of Hollywood is perceived as inflated, insipid, and saccharine. I have childhood memories of a female cousin voraciously reading pulp romances, thrilled by the expectation that she, too, would one day find the love of her life. These days, who still reads such *passé* literature?

The question is whether postmodernism is too cynical to be compatible with the covenant. To my mind, not only is there an interesting confluence in this area between the postmodernist and the Hasid, but Jewish family life is in fact easier in a postmodern atmosphere.

"Soft postmodernism," as I have explained elsewhere, is not cynical. It allows for an encounter, if one that is specific, haphazard, unpretentious. The postmodernist does not discount the role of chance in the world and in his life by linking them to a metaphysics. On the contrary, he accepts randomness and, forgoing the need for security, guarantees, justifications, and rationalizations, accepts the singularity of the encounter. The question of whether things "could have gone differently," which keeps the modernist (and us) awake at night, is of no consequence to him. It is a metaphysical "nonsense" question, and he, like Wittgenstein, answers it with a shrug.

What, then, is the guiding principle of postmodernism? It is, in fact, an absence of guiding principles; it is randomness. The critical question, however, is whether that absence, that emptiness, must persist. Does randomness necessitate arbitrariness? This is the question that separates hard postmodernism from soft. The hard postmodernist barricades himself in a position of absence and denial before sliding into meaninglessness and nihilism, truthlessness and relativism, flattening reality and then shattering it to bits. He deconstructs the subject, denies its unity, and turns the subjective point of view into a crossroads in the game of power discourses, which itself lacks any center or overarching intelligence.

The soft postmodernist, meanwhile, translates nothingness into equality, freedom, and even virtue. This is not to say that he speaks of

equality out of a belief in the exalted value of all things, or that he believes in a freedom whose purpose is to facilitate the actualization of that which is absolute in every individual. His motives are not moral in nature. The values of equality and freedom are, to him, nothing but a reflection of the ancients' stoicism. To couch the idea in hasidic terms, it correlates with the divine perspective of *sovev kol almin*,²⁶ or "surrounding all worlds," where the light of God encircles all things equally. The divine point of view sees no difference between up and down, or between light and dark – "the darkness is even as the light," according to the hasidic interpretation of the verse "For I the Lord change not" (Mal. 3:6). In comparison to the divine infinitude, everything is equally valueless, which is the exact claim of the postmodernist. Freedom, for instance, is a rule of fair play in a world where no absolute value can be invoked to foist something upon me.

Soft postmodernism distinguishes between randomness and arbitrariness; the former doesn't entail the latter. This type of postmodernism requires a willingness to forgo *the* truth in favor of a local truth, a specific justice, and a comportment that does not reach beyond itself. It is a two-fold concession: Not only does the soft postmodernist surrender the truth; he also relinquishes the very need for it. For example, what happens when we accept ourselves, in an act of renunciation; when we accept our rootedness and contingency as total and definite? Again, it is a two-fold concession: We surrender both absoluteness and the need for it. The second concession, which does not make a big fuss over the first one, marks the moment of release from angst. It is then that ecstasy sets in.²⁷ This is not an ecstasy of truth, but rather an ecstasy of life itself. It reflects precisely the truth of life, the joy of life, infiniteness itself, and it is made possible by surrendering the need to seize, to justify, to call out infinity by name. To be precise, the truth is a manifestation of life – not a prerequisite for it.

Postmodernism accepts life as is. This equanimity is also apparent in its approach to the family: The postmodernist will accept his wife in the same vein. Paradoxically, this equanimity is identical to that in Hasidism:

²⁶ [Ed. note: According to Kabbala and *Hasidut*, the divine revelation includes two modes: *Memalei kol almin* (filling all worlds) is the Divine Presence enlivening every creature. It is revelation that we can grasp and understand. *Sovev kol almin* (surrounding all worlds), on the other hand, is a light too sublime to enter the world, and thus incomprehensible. Nevertheless, it hovers above the world, so we can intuit it occasionally].

²⁷ See Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, *Toward Diasporic Education* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2006), 198 and elsewhere; and Carlo Strenger, *The Designed Self* (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 2005), 151–52.

TRADITION

Every individual life, in and of itself, encompasses the fullness of life. Every woman is *the* woman, and every man *the* man. This marvelous paradox necessarily casts the betrothed woman as *the* woman, preserving her uniqueness. The same is true for the man, of course.

Against this backdrop of randomness there is an encounter, but it is the opposite of the arbitrariness generally associated with randomness: an encounter, a friendship, and even gladness and ecstasy over the experience of life in itself.

The irony of soft postmodernism can deliver us from the sexual urge, because it possesses the capacity to ironize the libido without seeking to deny it. The urge exists, just like everything else, so the postmodernist will not stoke it and strengthen it by denying it; hence the preference for friendship over romance. In such a context, romance will be perceived as an obscene metaphysical urge. That is why it has become a religion with adherents and clergy, an expression of a quest for the absolute.

The postmodernist can enter a covenant, but of a different sort. It is not a metaphysical covenant but rather an adult one, between two who are destined, and who have decided, to walk together. The lack of pretense is precisely the thing that can breed – out of freedom, tenderness, and deep mutual caring – love, companionship, and friendship. Specificity, and the release from overarching need, leads to acceptance of oneself and of the other as fleeting rather than absolute beings, and facilitates a mature, affectionate friendship, “love and harmony and peace and companionship.”

The question is whether such is a covenant of the elderly, passionless and devoid of youth’s ardor. It only takes a small nudge for atheistic ecstasy to morph into profound religious fervor, into faith and cleaving, on the condition that it retains its humbleness and equanimity. My faith and love spring from equanimity, from accepting my life as is, without preconditions. It is a faith that does not try to vault over itself, a security that arises from devotion that grasps at nothing.

Such a love will refrain from hurting the other, and will uphold the covenant. I often tell young couples contemplating marriage that they must accept each other as they are, without either partner trying to change the other. The self-sacrifice of accepting and respecting the other as is – that is the covenant, and the only thing that lends totality to a marriage. A wise man once said that marriage begins at the moment we discover that the person we married is not the person we thought we married.

Another hasidic term that can be applied to these ideas is *tsimtsum*, “constriction” or “contraction.” In Kabbala and Hasidism, *tsimtsum* refers to the original divine action, in which *ein sof*, or the divine infinitude, evacuated a space within Himself in which to create the cosmos. But did

He really constrict Himself? Did He truly detract from His infiniteness, imprison part of Himself, and recede, leaving behind the vacuum known as the *halal ha-panui* (literally, the “empty space,” or void)? Hasidism explains that the doctrine of *tsimtsum* should not be taken literally, because it is inherently paradoxical. God is at once present within the *halal ha-panui* and absent from it: As Maimonides wrote in *Guide of the Perplexed*, “He exists, but not through an existence other than His essence.”²⁸ His infinitude enables Him to seem finite, with a finitude that is itself infinite. The *tsimtsum*, too, the process of creating a particular cosmos, can give hidden expression (and Hasidism indeed interprets the doctrine of *tsimtsum* as a description of the hiddenness of God) to the infinite absoluteness that determined that universe’s identity. It is this process that differentiates a prison from a home. The walls of my home are not barriers that bear down on me, imprisoning and limiting me; rather, they are my identity; they delineate the place of my intimacy, my covenant. They do not make me finite; they are me; I am that I am, finite-infinite.

Marriage can thus be described as a nonliteral *tsimtsum*, and it is there, in the ability to sustain a paradox, that we can find an antidote to our aversion to commitment, brought on by the Sartrean position, which sees the *kalla*, or bride, as a *keleh*, a prison, and denies the possibility of covenant. If we succeed in seeing the specific, our choice, as an expression of the infinite, it will no longer constrict us. The discovery of the Divine Presence in a marriage can recast our calculated, principled choice of a partner as an expression of the infinite through randomness (as in Purim).²⁹

I would like to see marriage as the true avant-garde of our era, the coming together through a simple covenant, “according to the law of Moses and Israel.” The true rebellion is the Orthodox one, to be a gull in a world where no one consents to being duped, to commit when everyone avoids commitment. It is an act of self-sacrifice, but so is every covenant.

²⁸ *Guide of the Perplexed* I:57.

²⁹ See Rav Shagar, *Chance and Providence: Discourses on the Inner Meaning of Purim*, trans. N. Moses (Efrat: Yeshivat Siah Yitzhak, 2005).