

Gender Differences in Messages about Sexuality in Religious Education

Naomi Marmon Grumet



Naomi Marmon Grumet interviewed men and women, and discovered striking differences in the implicit messages they receive regarding sexuality.

In 2005-2006 I conducted nearly fifty in-depth interviews with men and women in Israel self-identified as Modern Orthodox (or its Israeli equivalent, Nationalist Religious). The interviews focused on the practice of the laws of *niddah* (mandating sexual abstinence and physical separation between husbands and wives during the menstrual cycle and for a week thereafter) and its experiential impact on their marital lives and identities (religious, personal, sexual, etc.). While these interviews were conducted in Israel, many of the interviewees had their formative educational experiences in North American schools.

In the course of those interviews one issue with long-range implications repeatedly arose which reflects on the differences between men's and women's educational experiences in the realm of sexuality.

The female interviewees often reported that throughout their schooling, and particularly in the high schools years, there were many negative messages about sexuality, including notions that physical closeness or desire were not appropriate for (young) religious girls, it was something that would defile them, and that it was immodest to think or speak about such matters. Touching boys was absolutely forbidden, and there was a deep social stigma attached to any girl who crossed those forbidden lines. The messages were both explicitly delivered by teachers, and implicitly conveyed through the culture. Girls were not supposed to speak, or even think about matters related to sexuality, let alone familiarize themselves with their bodies. The topic of

the need for separation between men and women was ever-present, so that anyone whose internal constitution was not in synch with the pervasive tone, felt "dirty." And the image presented of the "truly religious" girl was one for whom sexuality had been exorcised from her being.

One great irony is that the moment these same girls graduated high school, they were encouraged to begin the dating process and marry. Classes they took post-high school / pre-marriage highlighted the beauty and sanctity of the sexual relationship. The transition was jarring.

Here are Zara Harmony's (all the names cited are pseudonyms) comments (in translation):

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Messages about Sexuality in Religious Education

I think that there is something social which causes Ulpana (religious high school) girls to be afraid [of sexuality]. I think that there was something in the education that told us that if we were not afraid there was something wrong. It wasn't formal, but it was definitely there... That it was immodest not be afraid. ... And it wasn't necessarily only from the teachers, the dynamic amongst the girls said that "good girls" were afraid...

I went to a co-ed school so there was a lot of, if you touch guys then [you're not religious]. It was everywhere; it was from friends, it was from the school, it was, you know, youth groups, everything. That was what we talked about when we were teenagers, you know, because every one else in the world was doing it and I went to secular college and *everyone else* in the world was doing it and you weren't. So it was something that you had to come to terms with. But, because you're exposed,

afterward generated for many of the interviewees a sense of trauma – a trauma which some reported as lasting with them for many years. Jacky tells the following:

Even now, six years [after getting married], I still feel, you know, those voices of forbidden. Like right after you have a baby and you can't touch for five weeks and then you do touch again that's a, like that whole transition comes back to you. When we were engaged I complained to one of my friends that

The combination of the stark "No" messages received in high school and the dramatically different one received afterward generated for many of the interviewees a sense of trauma

In fact, the atmosphere was so strong that I'm sure that there were girls who did not feel afraid but they said that they did, because that was defined as an important element of their religious identity... Nobody ever felt comfortable saying that they were interested [in being sexually active].

Another interviewee, Jacky David, raised in North America but living with her husband and three children in a small community outside of Jerusalem, reports a similar, albeit somewhat different, experience:

you grow up in this very secular, I mean, in the eighties all anyone talked about was sex, right? It was in every song and everything and you know it's forbidden. And then all of a sudden you get married and all of a sudden it's okay and you still have the mentality of forbidden and it's very hard to ease into it when suddenly from *forbidden* it's like a *mitzvah* (!) and an *obligation* (!). It's very hard to ease into it over night and to forget everything that you have learned.

The combination of the stark "No" messages received in high school and the dramatically different one received

it's wasn't fair that you can't touch and she said: 'I'm married to my husband and I can't touch him every month, so get used to it'. And that made in impact. And that's true, we re-live that cycle every month.

An Israeli interviewee who has been married for four years, Sara Greenberg, describes this powerfully:

To suddenly make this sharp mental switch from "don't touch, don't touch, all boys think about all day is sex, you have to dress in ways so that boys shouldn't look at you like that ..." to "it's so



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beautiful, it reflects wonderfully on your partnership ,... you are permitted to enjoy it..." is so drastic that it is simply criminal. ... Those messages definitely came from the Ulpana. "If you touch [boys] you'll be opening up the gates of Hell." ... In the beginning [of marriage], I suffered a lot, a lot, from this, and was unable to really engage in sexual relations. ... I felt that it was some sort of animalistic behavior, really, like an animal ... I still feel like I am succumbing to some lower, base, desire, and only do it because without it there wouldn't be any children.

Rachel Efraim, who has been married for three years, cried for a significant portion of the interview. She was deeply affected by notions she was taught and is still not willing to seek professional guidance, look in books, or find other resources on sexuality, because it's *a busha* (disgraceful).

I blame the environment in the religious education... [which taught me] that sexuality is forbidden, something to be avoided, something not to be discussed ... Even my pre-marital classes (which focus on the laws of *niddah* and thus govern sexual relations during marriage –NMG) never really addressed sexuality ... and I still feel like I would like some sort of guidance, but won't ask for it ...because it's a disgraceful thing to do ... to ask for help on something forbidden ... What, you think I would go into a store and buy a book on the topic? It's just not done [in our circles].

We see that even many years into marriage, the "no" messages of their education are still emphasized for them through the *niddah* restrictions, reviving the messages they heard in school in a constant refrain. This results in difficulties with engaging in and enjoying the sexual relationship.

In contrast, amongst the men interviewed, including these women's husbands (each of whom attended religious institutions parallel to those of their wives), none reported the same kinds of powerful messages in high school, and consequently, none of the dramatic, traumatic effects of a radical educational shift. While the men were surely discouraged from fulfilling

sexual drives, the implicit message was that those drives were normal and healthy, just that they were not to be fulfilled outside the context of marriage. The sense of social stigma or deep guilt for having desires or wanting to partake of sexuality (found with the women) was absent in the men.

Zara Harmony's husband, Adam, described that, "Of course we discussed these things amongst ourselves. But I don't think that religious girls think about it, and they certainly don't speak about it."

Jacky David's husband, Erez, did describe a difficult transition, but that lasted only about three weeks. In his case, the difficulty emerged not from the attention that sexuality was given in his education, but from the lack of attention it was given.

I mean, in a way, I'll tell you, in a way I think it is a failing of the education, you're kind of expected somehow to pick up these things. On the one hand, you're not supposed to watch dirty movies or anything like that. On the other hand Yeshiva doesn't, by nature, discuss the way things work openly, you know. And even the Rabbi with whom I had a relationship, you know, it's kind of, you know, and I could actually broach a lot of issues with him in pre-marital classes but specifically the act you know, of what happens, kind of you know, you're kind of expected to know or look at a medical text book kind of thing for that... It took time for these kind of, for, you know, for these kinds of things to, for the most intimate act to be realized and for the inhibitions, I guess, to be shirked... I think it is a problem of education in my opinion. But, in any event, then from that moment on it was fine. You know, once you do it once that's it, no problems.

Likewise, Benjamin Efraim, an educator himself and a graduate of a post-high school yeshiva program, spoke neither of a difficult transition nor a shift in messages. On the contrary, his education constantly emphasized the marital situation as the correct and appropriate forum for dealing with the ever-present desires that males experience. Taught only that sexual self-satisfaction is prohibited

and that marriage is the right way to get satisfaction, his major difficulty in transition was dealing with the reality of a wife who was the product of the system described above.

Moish Shekel, originally a New Yorker, who met his American-born wife while they were both attending Bar Ilan University, describes that in his schooling (an American Orthodox Day School), sexuality wasn't discussed other than the Rabbis telling him that his desires couldn't be fulfilled prior to marriage. Beyond that, it was sort of expected that the boys would learn about these things from the general culture they lived in – movies, television, books, etc.

It appears that the educational messages, and the experiences they inform, are powerfully different for men and women in the religious educational system. This was true both for interviewees who studied in Israel and those from North America, but, interestingly, was also true for students who attended co-ed schools.

The significance of the difference in educational approaches between men and women is not only relevant in a theoretical sense, but in the impact these differences have on the relative religious and experiential realities that these men and women later have to deal with in marriage. Even more, the varying messages delivered to the genders can add an additional layer of tension between marriage partners, each struggling to adjust to the divergent expectations and attitudes generated by their educational experiences. As Benjamin Efraim described, coping with a wife who feels "dirtied" by the sexual encounter adds a significant element of anxiety.

The exact ways in which these different messages were transmitted in the interviewees' educational environments is not yet clear, nor do we as yet understand why these gender differences exist. Further research is needed to help answer these questions, along with those such as whether these issues are unique to Jewish education, or to Orthodox education. What is important, however, is to be aware of the phenomena, and the impact it has on the lives of both men and women in the Jewish community.