

Beloved Sex - Healing Shame and Restoring the Sacred in Sexuality

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[EXT] ‘Kiss me there where pride is glittering
Kiss me where I am ripened and round fruit
Kiss me wherever, however I am supple, bare and flare
(Let the bell be rung as long as I am young:
Let ring and fly like a great bronze wing!)
Until I am shaken from blossom to root.’

‘I’ll kiss you wherever you think you are poor,
Wherever you shudder, feeling striped or barred,
Because you think you are bloodless, skinny or marred:
Until, until
your gaze has been stilled-
Until you are shamed again no more!
I’ll kiss you until your body and soul
the mind in the body being fulfilled-
Suspend their dread and civil war!’
Aria in Kilroy’s Carnival by Delmore Schwartz[/EXT]

From my personal experience, the message was hardcore. Along with “sexual purity” was “emotional purity” and living within certain boundaries so you didn’t give pieces of yourself away by going “too far” physically or even having serious emotional connections, conversations with the opposite sex. You were told to have clear relationship boundaries—but this was never clearly defined and was hard to understand. A lot of the pressure came from my parents, and certain church groups and para-church organizations. This story kind of describes the overall idea and concept that was constantly driven home:

Imagine for a moment one of those huge lollipops, the kind that you buy at an amusement park candy store. Take off the wrapper, and pass it around to ten people. Allow them to

lick as much as they want. The leftover is saved for the husband or wife, the rightful owner of the lollipop.

Yuck! Who would want that?! Imagine being told this—so now you feel dirty, unwanted, yucky and worthless. If I have given anything away even just emotionally, this is how I feel about myself. Here is a quote from a book I was given as a teen, “When we give away pieces of ourselves emotionally and spiritually ... what is left over for the rightful owner? ... Keeping yourself emotionally pure is a gift that should be left and given to the rightful owner—your spouse.”¹ (24 year old female graduate student)

For many like this woman, the ‘no sex before marriage’ discourse expanded in the early 1990’s to include the idea that they must remain “sexually pure” before marriage, which meant no expression of sexual desire was to be entertained (masturbation, kissing, longing, touching, fantasizing, etc). This notion was punctuated by the purity movement that gained popularity in 1993 with the “Love Waits” purity pledge sponsored by LifeWay Christian Resources. Here is the pledge that according to this organization over 2 million adolescents signed: “Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate, and my future children to a lifetime of purity including sexual abstinence from this day until the day I enter a biblical marriage relationship.”² Vague and undefined mandates in this pledge and throughout this literature leave a young person lost in self-condemnation. Desperately wanting to ‘be a good Christian’ earnest adolescents feel damned for developmentally appropriate thoughts and desires.

¹ Paulson, *Emotional Purity*, 52. Approximately 30 books with this ascetic purity message were published between 1995-2005, along with T-shirts, calling cards, bracelets and purity rings. The book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* published in 1997, was frequently mentioned as another book promoting condemnation and shame in interviews with graduate students who were adolescents during this movement.

² Lifeway, “True Love Waits,” <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/true-love-waits>

Phrases such as the following in particular leave no room for normal desires for intimacy or intimate touch: “*understand that purity begins with **what is in your heart and your mind***”, “*A lifetime of purity is contingent upon **setting boundaries** and living within them*”, “*If you have already given in to **physical desire**, pledge today that from this day forward you will remain physically pure.*”³ These phrases disregard that God hard wires each of us for intimacy, connection and pleasure. We see this everyday in the lives of children who in normal play, love, hug, touch and engage in many acts of pure joy-filled pleasure. What is stunning to me is how this “purity message” resembles the most extreme ascetic movements of the early church, where to serve God required renouncing all sexual thoughts and actions. I have heard twenty-somethings say they were told even when they desired someone (real or fantasy), they were impurely “lusting” after them and thus “sinning against themselves, the other, their future mate, and God.” Since desire is as natural as breath, this has left millions of Christian youth isolated, feeling deep shame and condemnation. Inside this dark vault, they persecute themselves with the belief that these wants and desires are evidence of their depravity. The tragedy for many of these earnest young Christians is learning this assault on desire did not lift when they got married. Many, both men and women, develop significant sexual dysfunction and chronic low desire issues persisting well into their marriages.

What is shocking to those who supported the purity movement is the lack of protection this movement provided. Research on the effect of the purity pledge indicated only a slight delay of the onset of sexual activity (12 to 18 months), a **reduced** use of contraception in intercourse, an **increase** in unwanted pregnancy, and a significant increase in shame,

³ Lifeway, “True Love Waits,” <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/true-love-waits>

condemnation, and self-loathing.⁴ In other words, if you are told that something core about yourself, in this case that your emotional, physical, and spiritual desire for intimate and sexual touch is wrong and bad, then it stands that you – your very being – is wrong and bad. Donna Freitas interviewed students at public, Catholic, and evangelical colleges around the United States about their sexual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. She writes the following about students at evangelical colleges, “Of all the students I interviewed at all four types of institutions, the only students who spoke of pregnancy scares and having unprotected sex came from the evangelical colleges. [a student], who also had a pregnancy scare, confirms this tendency, which is supported by statistics about Christian students, who are more likely to delay sex, yes, but when they do engage in sex, they are more likely to have unprotected sex.”⁵

The effect of the purity movement on these students severely hinders healthy young adult development. As Freitas comments, “The idealization of sexual purity is powerful at evangelical colleges and it exacts demands on students that can be severe, debilitating and often unrealistic. The pressures to marry are extreme for women, and college success is often determined by a ring, not a diploma. Because of the strong hold of purity culture, many students learn to practice sexual secrecy, professing chastity in public while keeping their honest feelings and often their actual experiences hidden. Students are aware that officials at evangelical colleges see it as their duty to monitor male-female romantic relationships and to strictly enforce campus rules about visitation in the residence halls.”⁶

⁴ Charles, “Almost Everyone’s Doing It,” 65. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy reveals that of Christian’s 18-29 who are sexually active, 30% have experienced a pregnancy. This is actually 1 percent higher than among those who do not claim an evangelical Christian faith. According to the Guttmacher Institute, nearly half of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unintended with 40% ending in abortion. Of those, 65% self identify as Christian (28% Catholic, 37% Protestant).

⁵ Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 281.

⁶ Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 219.

[EXT]Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the “Beloved.” Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence.⁷

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Shame is the core belief that something is bad or unworthy about me. Shame attributes to the whole self – not to a behavior. When a child or adolescent is condemned for something core to their being, they feel deep and abiding shame. When a person believes they are bad, they learn to hide their core self. Their own self rejection causes them to discount any love received because they believe that if that person *really* knew them, they would reject them. No love in. Not God’s, not others. When a person filled with shame gives love from this false self, they doubt their sincerity which leads to more shame. When we as Christians participate in causing and sustaining shame, we assault the ability to receive the love that would heal or give the love that sustains. Rather than loving like Christ loved the woman at the well, we heap more shame and condemnation on her.

Our created nature – God’s Beloved. No shame. God calls us to love. No doubt.

[A]The effect of these messages on sexual, spiritual, and esteem development

[B]Beliefs versus Actions

From findings collected through the National Survey of Family Growth conducted every few years with approximately 5000 male and female subjects from all over the United States (8 large cities and 25 smaller and rural cities) by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, we know that traditional religious teaching about sexuality changes attitudes, not behaviors; in other words, religious beliefs about sexuality affect the talk more than the walk.⁸ Here are some

⁷ Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, 68.

⁸ Center for Disease Control, *National Survey for Family Growth*.

pertinent statistics: When participants were asked if they think it is okay for an 18 year old to have sex with someone they love, 74% said yes who claimed no religious affiliation, 54% said yes who claimed Catholic affiliations, and 29% said yes who claimed a Fundamentalist Protestant affiliation. But when asked questions about their age at first intercourse, those who claimed no religion on average lost their virginity at 16.4 years old, those with a Catholic affiliation were 17.7 years old and those with a Fundamentalist Protestant affiliation were 16.9 years old. Similar statistics echo in beliefs versus actions pertaining to virginity at marriage. While the vast majority of conservative Christians might believe that sex before marriage is wrong, of those that actually were virgins at marriage, 12% had no religion, 15% were Catholic and 17% were Fundamentalist Protestant. As Freitas explains, “A series of studies have shown that young Christians find it difficult to keep the covenant these [“covenant rings”] symbolize. In many cases, abstinence pledges do little more than postpone sexual intercourse for a few months or turn those who try to keep them in the direction of other sexual activity.”⁹ Further, young adults who believe sex before marriage is wrong, yet still become secretly sexually active, outwardly condemn others and inwardly condemn themselves. This situation creates both a hypercritical and isolating tendency in their social life and a shame filled inner life. As one tearful 18 year old recently said to me, “Adults have no idea how lonely and isolating it is to deal with all the pressures around sex while also trying to figure out what is right for you. It is horrible!”

[B]Nowhere to Turn

In this underground world of sexual activity clothed in pretense and silence, students suffer under their ignorance, isolation, misinformation, and sexual mythology. While abstinence-only education does not lower the incidence of onset of sexual intercourse, it actually *increases*

⁹ Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 77.

the incidence of unwanted pregnancy.¹⁰ Certainly the after-shocks of an unwanted pregnancy can ripple through a family and community for years – if not generations. As Christine Gudorf, a theological ethicist, says, “Children of sexually ignorant or silent parents, in school systems with poor or nonexistent sex education programs, without adequate health resources, will grow up to have sexually ignorant children like themselves.All human activity which causes unnecessary suffering without producing any greater good should be understood as sinful.”¹¹ Through Freitas’ interviews, she learned that evangelical colleges [EXT]...often combine monitoring with legislation about sexual activity on campus (including, in some instances, requiring students to sign agreements that, under penalty of expulsion, they will not have sex during their college years). Such monitoring can create an unfortunate communications breakdown - a campus atmosphere akin to a high school environment that fails to recognize and trust that students are already powerfully bound by the sexual tenets of their faith traditions, particularly in the area of restrictions on premarital sex. As a result of this oversight, many students feel compelled to hide their sexual practices not only from friends but also from all adults with whom they come into contact, including clergy. This stops them from seeking adult advice about sex and helps to create a culture of fear regarding sexual activity and identity on campus.¹²[/EXT]

A chief complaint of students on evangelical campuses is the deafening silence and condemnation leaves them no safe place to turn.¹³ In contrast to this situation, evangelical students need an environment that is informed, grace-filled, encouraging, and compassionate when sharing their stories, their desires and their histories. They need wise guidance to integrate

¹⁰Strayhorn and Strayhorn. *Religiosity*, 6:14.

¹¹ Gudorf, *Body, Sex & Pleasure*, 23.

¹² Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 219.

¹³ Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 10, 222-223.

faith values while navigating the sexual pressures of youth culture, and conversations about God's purpose in sexual desire. These changes to the current culture on evangelical college campuses must happen in order for students to be able to deal with sexuality in a healthy way and affirm their sexual desire as a God-given life force.

[B]Premature Marriage Decisions

Another effect of the purity message is the social and religious pressure to get married prematurely. Not surprisingly, the age of marriage is lower in this population, which then increases the risk of coupling before an adequate understanding of self or other has been obtained. This trend persists in spite of research showing that divorce rates for those who marry prior to age 24 are significantly higher than those who marry after age 25.¹⁴ Another related byproduct of the purity message is halting the developmental teacher that dating or courting has been historically. Freitas finds that students at evangelical colleges exist in a culture that nearly obliterates dating, while at the same time putting extreme pressure to find one's mate before graduation.¹⁵ In my office, I hear students talking about what is referred to as "ring by spring" pressure. One young woman at an evangelical college, while interviewing me for a newspaper article, shared that within a month of dating a person, people begin to ask if they plan to get married.

Patently dating someone provides the time to gather many experiences with a person you are romantically interested. Through dating, you learn about yourself, what kind of person fits well with you, what is important to you in romantic partnership, and what are the habits, beliefs, values and behaviors of another. When dating, the jury stays out. You have *not* decided to marry

¹⁴ Bramlett, Mosher, *First Marriage*, 5.

¹⁵ Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 210.

this person. Dating is a time of discovery with options open to learn and stay, or learn and leave. *This all changes* the minute a person decides formally or informally they will marry the person they are dating. As soon as that happens, even if it is only two months into a relationship, the dynamics of learning and observing change. Now whatever creates serious doubt is either ignored or placed in the category of “things that will change.” When young Christian adults with little to no dating experience prematurely make the decision to marry, they often tend toward an overly romantic and unrealistic choice. Such a decision is made with logic such as, ‘this is my *only* chance to find a suitable spouse’, ‘a wedding would be fun’, ‘he/she seems perfect’, and ‘we want sex!’

[B] Marriage Decisions Driven by a Fear of Sexual Expression Outside of Marriage

Many young Christian men and women learn this formula from religious culture: sex equals intercourse, intercourse is what God cares about, and sex should only happen after you are married. This formula prompts unmarried Christians to separate romance, which is an accepted feeling in their religious culture, from sexual feelings and expression, which is unacceptable. Yet love separated from sex creates a focus on behaviors, instead of on the quality of the relationship.

Prior to a romantic interest, young Christians often think idealistically of being in love, being married and enjoying a great sex life. They often believe if they ‘remain pure’ in thoughts and actions prior to marriage, this dynamic and loving sexual life is a reward of their faithfulness. However as soon as a youth or young adult becomes romantically involved, desires to express those feelings through verbal and physical action become driving desires. Sexual desire and romantic expression are natural drives of attraction, romance and love. It is at this point that adolescents or young adults begin to feel ashamed of their thoughts and desires. They

begin to separate their feelings of love and attraction from their desire to physically and verbally express this love. Since the church has been primarily silent withholding guidance and open conversations of learning, youth are alone and isolated as they experience this shame. While the feelings may be acceptable, the desires to touch and express are not. If a Christian begins to experience mutual romantic attraction at 15, but does not marry until they are 26, they will have eleven years of condemning themselves for sexual desire all the while separating the role a loving relationship can play in cultivating desire.

This pattern of separating sexual desire from the quality of the relationship carries forth into many Christian marriages. For example, a spouse might judge their sex life only on the basis of how often sex –aka intercourse –occurs. “We are not having enough sex” or “You never want sex” or “When did we last have sex?” These comments focus on a behavior, *not* on the quality of the relationship, whether there is trust or connection in the relationship in which sexual expression is taking place. When sexual expression becomes primarily a behavior-centered routine that ends in intercourse, many couples become bored, sexually dissatisfied, or sexually disinterested. There remains a focus on intercourse while ignoring how or if a couple is cultivating a loving relationship. Sexual desire does not exist in a vacuum. Just as in the beginning of a romance, a loving relationship cultivates sexual desire.

With an emphasis on intercourse as the only sex act that matters, young Christian men and women fail to learn that sacred, sexual experiences begin first with a loving bond and can include much more than intercourse. They do not understand the reason God gave men and women desires for sexual intimacy, what being a good lover really means, or how sexual intimacy can help to express and participate in God’s love. They have not been directed to consider how the discipline and desire of loving, sexual touch in a committed relationship can

become one of the most profound ways to practice and experience ourselves as Beloved. And they do not know the ingredients necessary for love-making to be sacred, sustainable, and satisfying.

[B]Men and Women at Sexual Odds

In evangelical Christian circles, young brides often receive the message to abdicate their sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual power to men. The woman then is placed at odds from the man because she doesn't know what kinds of touch she likes, or even that she has the right to want and ask for multiple forms of intimate touch or no touch at all. She likely brings emotional baggage from years of silencing herself and being treated as an object by media and other men. She might find that she judges herself by how pretty she thinks she is and how much she thinks her partner desires her. If sex has been dominated by his sexual desires and the absence of hers, eventually she will likely wonder why her sexual desire has dropped, and he will wonder why she doesn't seem present at intimate moments.

Men are also at a disadvantage because they have been taught that intercourse is the real deal, thus they can feel entitled to intercourse in marriage. They have grown up in a social culture which views sex through a male lens and portrays women as objects for men's pleasure. If men are also taught that their emotional and relational desires are not masculine, they sublimate these desires through sex while failing to learn the nuances of loving expression. This leaves many Christian men feeling isolated and ashamed of their sexual thoughts and actions prior to marriage. In turn, this shame causes men to feel insecure about their abilities as a lover and even more awkward at sexual conversation and romance with their partner. Neither the church nor culture has taught men the art of loving a woman and the difference between women

and men in sexual expression and desire. Further, they have not been given sacred teaching, like the vow of Onah—which I discuss below—to ensure that their wife receives pleasure (which doesn't always mean intercourse), and that pleasurable intimate sex contains more than how often intercourse happens and whether they both had an orgasm.

[A]A Sensual God Who Gives Sexual Desire with Intention and Purpose

*Body and spirit marry in the chapel of the soul. They marry every minute of every day, in all activities and in all inactivity, in all thoughts and in all actions, or they marry not at all. If they don't marry, we do not know sexuality with soul, and therefore our sexuality remains incomplete and insufficiently human. We do not find the soul of sex by spiritualizing the body **but** by coming to appreciate its mysteries and by daring to enter into its sensuousness.*

(Thomas Moore, *The Soul of Sex*)

I believe that God wants us to experience a kind of sexuality that reflects God's own love—extravagant and abundant in pleasure and blessing. To that end, I set out to explore writings on sexuality from the Judeo-Christian tradition that are unknown to the Christian men and women I encounter in my private counseling practice or in my classroom. In particular, I studied Jewish writings on sexuality. While not a Hebrew scholar, after reading books and talking with Hebrew scholars, I found magnificent stories of sexuality that show the depth of God's love and devotion. Here are a few examples from my discoveries.

[A] The Lion of Desire

The Lion of Desire is an ancient mystic Jewish tale that offers a glimpse into the ways in which early Jewish mystics understood the power and purpose of sexual desire and managed their fear of the force inside.¹⁶

The masters of the day were distressed. Adultery was spreading rampant as plague among the people. The authorities were at a loss as to how to curb this powerful drive. Finally, driven to desperation, they began to pray. For three days they fasted, weeping and pleading with God, "Let us slay the sexual drive before it slays us."

Finally God acquiesced. The masters then witnessed a lion of fire leap out from within the Temple's Holy of Holies. A prophet among them identified the lion as the personification of the primal sexual drive.

They sought to slay the lion of fire. But the result was that for three days thereafter the entire society ground to a standstill. Hens did not lay eggs, artists ceased creating, businesses faltered, and all spiritual activity came to a halt. Realizing that the sexual drive was about more than sex that it somehow echoed with the Divine, the masters relented.

They prayed that only its destructive shadow be removed while retaining its creative force. Their request was denied on high with the insightful response: "You cannot have only half a drive." The greater the sacred power of a quality, the greater its shadow; the two are inseparable. So they prayed that the lion at least be weakened, and their prayer was granted. The lion, less potent but no less present, reentered the Holy of Holies.¹⁷

¹⁶ Gafni, *The Mystery of Love*, 7.

¹⁷ Gafni, *The Mystery of Love*, 8.

In this lovely Jewish story, we encounter the power, paradox, and dilemma in sexual desire. While the core drive in sexual desire was forceful and needed management, it remained at the heart of all creative endeavors. From this it is possible to extrapolate that when we let our core desires find expression in loving and just ways, we participate in the creative process that reflects the image of God within us. We are the only created creature with drives to create complex relationships with deep intimate bonds – this is the face of the image of God within us. Is it powerful? Yes, desires can be very powerful. Do we need God’s guidance and wisdom to discern and decipher how to manifest desire? Yes, we do. After all, we look in a mirror dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12). But are our core desires and drives a gift from God? Most certainly, yes. Another subtle but important point in this story is how the lion of sexual desire came out of the temple’s Holy of Holies.¹⁸ This is where the presence of God, the *Shekinah*, was said to reside. This is one of many affirmations in Jewish writings where we see the eros of desire emanating from God to God’s people and between God’s people.¹⁹

[A] Entering the Holy Tabernacle and Entering Sacred Union

Jewish author and psychologist, Rick Blum, notes when a couple joins together in a carefully prepared time of union—in essence they are partners in creating a tabernacle of love.²⁰ A dwelling place for God.²¹ This tabernacle, Kabbalah teaches (a branch of Jewish mysticism), expresses God’s desire to make a home for the Divine in the material world, just as the Holy of Holies was a home for the presence of God in the Temple. So sanctified and physical is this image that the same Jewish preparation practices for priests to ready themselves to enter the

¹⁸ Gafni, *Mystery of Love*, 8.

¹⁹ Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, 34.

²⁰ Blum, “The Most Sacred of Places”, 14-17.

²¹ Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, 33.

Holy of Holies is also applied to a husband and wife in preparation for entering their tabernacle of love. Each is expected to know they are entering into a place where no one is allowed or could ever go without God's invitation.²² When sexual touch is entered into with sanctified purpose and loving intention the fire of passion can brightly burn at the heart of the union and a couple's sexual life can remain vibrant and deeply satisfying across their lifespan.

However, when entered into lightly, the blaze will burn you to dust. If we think about it, we see this Hebrew lesson in our current culture every day. When handled incorrectly, as we see in various forms of sexual addiction and sexual compulsivity, sex can become an insatiable drive threatening to extinguish all other creative life a person may have. Or as we often see in marriages where sex is routine and thoughtless, sexual desire burns itself out leaving the couple withdrawn and alone—unable to emotionally connect even in sex. Making sex (versus making love), in or out of marriage, will either burn itself out or burn out those involved. Sex, outside its purpose in love and connection, is unsustainable and unsatisfying over time. It falls to the law of diminishing returns. Making love requires preparation of the space, heart and body. It requires a sincere intention to enter into love, with your full attention and mindfulness. And it requires awareness that you are entering a holy communion as the beloved with each other and with God.

[A]The Cherubs in the Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem Temple

A conceptualization of the divine-human relationship in Jewish literature was the divine presence which resided between the two cherubs over the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, within the temple. The cherubim were thought to have an amount of life in them and were said to turn toward each other when Israel followed God's commandments, and turn away from each other

²² Blum, "The Most Sacred of Places", 14-17.

when Israel sinned.²³ While there were gold cherubim in each rebuilding of the temple, the dimensions, depictions and positions of the cherubim varied. Sometimes they were presented as open winged in mutual protection of the ark. Sometimes they were thought to be seated in sexual embrace over the ark.²⁴ The memory of the original significance of the Cherubim is said to have survived among the Babylonian Talmudic masters. According to one of them, Rabh Qetina, who wrote in the late 3rd century , “When Israel used to make the pilgrimage, [the priests] would roll up for [the people] the *parokhet* [or the curtains separating the Holy of Holies], and show them the cherubim which were intertwined with one another, and say to them: ‘Behold! Your love before God is like the love of male and female.’”²⁵

The famed eleventh-century commentator, Rashi, explains the passage in this way, “The Cherubim were joined together, and were clinging to and embracing each other like a male who embraces a female.”²⁶ According to Moshe Idel, the nature of the intertwining cherubim functions as a metaphor of the divine eros that God has for God’s people. When the last temple was destroyed toward the end of the first century CE., Idel conjectures, the role of the cherubim as a dwelling place for the presence of God was believed to be preserved through the sexual union of a husband and wife when the couple prepared to enter their sacred space with the same kind of intention and preparation as a priest entering the Holy of Holies.²⁷

[A]Song of Songs

My beloved called out to me and he said, “Rise up, my dear mate, my beautiful one and come to me. Behold, the chill has fled and the rain has ceased and gone on its way. The blossoms have

²³ Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 84.

²⁴ Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 31; Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 67-68.

²⁵ Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 84.

²⁶ Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 84.

²⁷ Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 33.

appeared throughout the land. The time for pruning has arrived and the voice of the turtledoves can be heard around our land. The figs have livened up their hue and the vines are bursting with their bouquet. Arise, my dear mate, my beautiful one, come to me. My dove who is nestled is hidden in the crevice of the rock, in the hollow of the steps' ascent, reveal your form unto me and let me hear your voice, for oh, how sweet is your voice, My love is mine and I am his, who grazes me amongst the roses. (Song of Song 2, 10-17)

The famous rabbi, Akiva (ca. 50-135 CE), is reputed to have said, “All of Scripture and its texts are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”²⁸ Here an early Jewish teacher reminds us that this cherished Jewish text, which would be included in the Jewish canon, involved the highly evolved and deeply sensual love of God for God’s people, God’s Beloved. This text can be interpreted to refer to experiencing God’s presence and essence through a passionate, awe-inspiring and boundless love. It is an erotic message of union of love, God’s love and human love, merge into an experience of the God of Love. When a couple makes love with the embodied awareness of God’s gift of love within this space of sacred commitment, the lines between giving and receiving, pleasure and love are no longer distinct. God dwells in this holy place. So sanctified and holy is this physical union in Jewish practice that the same elaborate rules of ritual purity apply. This involved intentional and mindful practices of readiness to enter God’s presence. Recurrent in rabbinic Judaism we read, “If a man and a woman are [religiously] worthwhile, the divine presence dwells between them.”²⁹ There is an enticing parallel process between the priest’s entry into the Holy of Holies and a couple’s entry into sexual communion.

²⁸ Schiffman, “Mishnah Yadayim”, 119-120.

²⁹ Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 32.

[A]The Vow of 'Onah

The last old Jewish wisdom I will share comes from the vow of 'Onah taken by a young Jewish man at the time of marriage. The vow of 'Onah reminds us of a few important elements for sexual fulfillment. In fulfilling the 'onah, men are taught that sexual pleasure is the right of the woman – not the man.³⁰ Moshe Idel says it this way, “The term 'onah as a religious obligation is commonly connected not to the sexual satisfaction of the husband but to the special sexual needs of his wife.”³¹ The responsibility is given to a husband to become the lover of a woman – his wife. He is to study her, how to bring pleasure to her and how to love her.³² This is a wise and elegant request that invites a young man to expand his relational and sexual skills – inviting his love for his beloved to guide his sexual touch instead of his sexual desire alone being the primary drive of his touch.

This vow leads, if we engage it creatively, to a critical component of intimacy. Careful attending by her husband invites a young woman to not only feel desired but to engage a more active voice and involvement in sexual touch. Here she is encouraged to express her sexual desires while in the safety of his love. Both the skill of a man to open a woman's heart and the skill of a woman to own and express her sexual preferences are lovemaking skills often not seen until midlife, if at all. These are areas a couple needs to develop in order to create a vibrant, intimate and meaningful sex life that can stand the test of time. Men who learn how to connect to a woman's heart will open her, allowing her to feel safe enough to share her sexual desires and vulnerabilities. This pathway allows desire to linger and grow, providing more satisfying sexual encounters - emotionally, spiritually and physically.

³⁰ Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 18.

³¹ Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 18.

³² Magonet, *Jewish Explorations*, 222.

A young man's growing edge in marriage is to see, hear, learn, and study his partner in order to meet his lover's needs. Loving well relies less on competition, conquests or goals and more on learning the nuances of his beloved. In loving well, husbands are not competing with other men, they are learning to grow their relationship and lovemaking skills. This practice of truly learning their wives helps men to connect their sexual and accomplishment drives to their heart. The sooner men learn the value of their relationships to ground their life purposes, the less mistakes they make, the less pain they inadvertently cause, and the less meaningful time they lose with children and spouses.

American culture often fails to introduce skills to men or women that help them grow into good lovers. Men are often taught through secular and religious channels that sex is about intercourse (the penis), to which they are entitled after marriage. How much and how often are based on *their* wants. They are the sexual creatures. This belief *reinforces* the tendency of men to lead from their core drives and ignores their need to learn the skills of the heart and the skills of how to love a woman, how to be her great lover.

In turn, women in American religious and secular culture often learn that sex is about intercourse and about the man's sexual drive. They learn that sex is not about them – but what they can do for a man. They learn to be sexually passive. This idea eclipses their need to claim their sexual wants, power and voice – and may have communicated that their sexual power was shameful. The focus on intercourse and a man's pleasure inadvertently teaches women to ignore their sexual pleasure while focusing on the rest of the relationship. A woman can fail to learn how boldly and clearly to own her sexual power with her husband. This Jewish vow, however, reminds women and men that sexual *intimacy* is not an option, an act, but a relationship quality needed for a satisfying marriage. Sex is not just *for him*. Sex is not just *about him*. Sex is not *his*

job, and the relationship *her job*. *Intimacy* is their job. When women try to drive the relationship alone and men try to drive the couple's sexual life alone, the sex *and* the relationship will become void of emotional connection and passion. It will become routine and monotonous. And eventually desire will burn out ... for her, for him or for both. At best this leads to a life-less and love-less sex life.

[A]Conclusion

As believers and educators, we must begin to develop a New Covenant sexual ethic and concomitant sexual curriculum that can open grace-filled dialogue with our children and youth, while sharing the vision and capacities in God's gift of sexual desire and sexual intimacy. At the heart of the study of romance, sexuality and spirituality is the understanding that our created nature is to know that God calls us his beloved. And our created call from God is to love – to live love, be love, and stand up for love. When I listen deeply to the sexual pain of our Christian youth and see the opportunity we have to impart a much needed integration of sexual health with our belovedness, I think the time is well overdue.

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