

## II. Rabbi Eliezer and Imma Shalom's Bedroom Modesty:

### Minimizing Sexual and Emotional Intimacy between the Hasidic Bride and Groom

#### A. Opener: Memoir of Groom Preparation among Skver Hasidism by Shulem Deen, *All Who Go Do Not Return: A Memoir*



##### 1. New Skver Hasidic Village, NY State: Classes in Grooming the Hasidic Groom

A dozen of us attended each of Avremel's sessions of "groom instruction":

- a. *"Respect her more than your own self!"* Avremel would cry during those sessions, quoting the Talmud. ["One should love his wife as much as himself/his own body and honor her even more than himself/his own body." (TB Yevamot 62b; Sanhedrin 75b)]..

"But how do we understand this passage? ... What it really means, esteemed young men, is that we must be vigilant! Respect what she, a woman, can do to a man if he does not remain careful."

He would wag an index finger over his head, “Let down your guard, and she will lead you into *sheol tachtis*—the abyss of sinful temptation!” ...

**b. The Groom’s Jitters:**

When the session was over, I waited until the others left, and then asked Avremel: “I am not happy. ... I just don’t think she [my bride] and I have anything in common.”

Avremel said, “You were hoping for a friend.... **A wife isn’t a friend....** *A wife is to be a helpmate* (Gen. 2:18). Your friends will still be your fellow students.”<sup>1</sup>

I had misunderstood the whole marriage thing, he said. A wife is not a friend. A wife is not something to think about excessively. To take a wife is a biblical commandment, and so we do God’s will by taking one. **A wife is there to assist with one’s service to God, nothing more.**

**c. Last Minute Instructions**

My wedding day arrived a month before my nineteenth birthday. At three o’clock in the afternoon, I was to meet with the last of all groom instructors, Reb Shraga to learn **the mechanics of how to perform** “the mitzvah.” ...

He opened a large volume on the table and read aloud: *One who marries a virgin takes possession of her, and separates from her immediately.* Then, at last, he described the mechanics of the sexual act. He used a series of hand gestures, and finally I understood, more or less.

“Before the act itself,” Reb Shraga said, “lie beside her and chat for a few minutes.”

“Chat about what?” I asked.

“Doesn’t matter. Any tale about a righteous man.... Then you get on top, and tell her you love her.”

“How?” I asked simply, and the question felt stupid on my lips.

“Just say, ‘I love you.’”

The notion of loving my wife had never occurred to me. Marriage was a duty, no more. To pretend otherwise seemed ridiculous. “The law says you must tell her you love her.” There was no arguing with the law.

Most important of all, **the mitzvah must be done the way it was done by the great sage Rabbi Eliezer: with awe and with fear, as if forced by a demon.**

“Mazel tov,” he said. “If there are any problems, call me.”

**d. Technical Difficulties:**

At three in the morning, we arrived home to our new apartment. We fumbled our way into bed, moving about each other shyly as we adjusted to this unfamiliar intimacy. We needed more guidance. I hesitated but made the call anyway. It took several tries that night and a couple of nights after, with several more consultations with Reb Shraga.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sheva Brahot* rabbinic wedding blessings: “Grant great joy to these loving companions (*reim ahuvim*) as You once gladdened Your creations in the Garden of Eden.

## B. Talmudic Model: Modesty in the Bedroom of Imma Shalom and Rabbi Eliezer

### 2. Imma Shalom's Homespun Advice on Eugenics

They asked Imma Shalom: "How do you merit such particularly beautiful children (sons)?"

She answered: "[My husband, Rabbi Eliezer] does not have intercourse [literally. "talk" (*m'sapeir*)] with me - neither at the beginning nor at the end of the night, but only around midnight.

I once asked him: Why [do we always have intercourse at midnight]?

He answered me: "So that I do not direct my eyes to another woman!"

That way his children would not become *mamzerim* / bastards.

Then, when he is having intercourse, he uncovers only a handbreadth and then he covers over a handbreadth. He acts as if a demon were coercing him [to have intercourse]." " (TB Nedarim 20b)

Rabbi Eliezer teaches: "One should always flee from ugliness and from whatever is similar to ugliness." (Tosefta Hullin 2:24)

## C. Medieval Halakhic Debate: Legislating according to Rav or Eliezer's Bedroom Protocol

### 3. Maimonides (12th c. Egypt) legislates according to Rav:

"A husband: shall not coerce her and force her into intercourse against her will (i.e. rape), but rather seek her consent and as an outcome of conversation (*sikha*) and joy (*simkha*)" (Maimonides, Laws of Marriage 15: 17).

Rabbi Meir said: "When anyone marries off his daughter to an uncouth ignoramus, it is as if he has bound her and placed her before a lion. Just as a lion takes its prey and devours it without shame, so too an ignoramus beats her and has intercourse without shame." (TB Pesahim 49b)

### 4. Maimonides recommends according to Rabbi Eliezer: Scholarly and Ladylike Self-Restraint

a. "A woman should be modest at home, minimize laughter and light-headedness in the presence of her husband and she should not verbally demand sexual satisfaction of her needs." (Marriage 15:18; see Forbidden Intercourse 21:13)

b. "A scholar ...should not be too light-headed and should not be foul-mouthed ... even in intimate relations between him and her." (Character Traits 5:4)

### 5. Dr. Maimonides' Prescription: Healthy Intercourse by Doctor's Orders Only

"When one has intercourse, it should only be to make one's body healthier and to produce surviving seed. So one does not have intercourse whenever one so desires but only when one knows one must express seed **for medical purposes** and to procreate." (Character Traits 3:2)

Semen is the power of the body, of his vitality and eyesight, and the more one expends semen, the more the body decays, one's power dissipates, and one's life force is lost. . . . When anyone is profligate in intercourse, old age springs on him prematurely: his strength decreases, his eyes grow dim, bad body odors waft from his mouth and armpits, his hair, eyebrows and eyelashes shed, his beard and body hair become abundant, his teeth fall out, and his aches and pains increase.

The wisest of the doctors [Hippocrates?] says: One in a thousand dies of illnesses, but a thousand from excessive intercourse. . . . So beware if you wish to live a good life. . Therefore, only have intercourse in order to make the body healthier and in

order to propagate the seed. Do not have intercourse every time you desire it, but only when one knows one must eject semen for medical purposes, or to reproduce.

Yet even though all these are permitted, the pious should modestly distance themselves from all these disgusting animal behaviors. The Rabbis condemn as wicked those who engage in these practices for their own pleasure. The final purpose of sexual relations [in Nature] is propagating the species, not solely generating erotic pleasure. . . . Therefore the pious should direct their intention to this natural end alone. The Rabbis praise that intent, they love it and they call that intention “sanctifying oneself in the act of intercourse.”



6. Rav Yosef Karo (The Code of Jewish Law, *Shulchan Arukh* (1565) legislates according to Rabbi Eliezer:

a. “Engage in intercourse with fear and awe just as it says of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus who would only uncover [his or her] body one handbreadth at a time and then cover it up again and who would behave as if he were being forced to do intercourse against his will as if coerced by a demon.” (Yosef Karo, *Shulchan Arukh*, Orah Haim, Laws of Modesty 240:8)

b. “Even when one is having intercourse at the time of *onah*, one should not intend to enjoy himself but rather he should think of himself as one who is just **paying off a debt** for he is obligated to provide *onah* [to his wife according to the ketubah agreement], as one who is

obligated to perform the Creator’s mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply, and as one who wants to have children who will engage in Torah and keep Israel’s mitzvot.” (*Arukh HaShulchan Even HaEzer* 25:4)

c. A person should accustom himself to **extra holiness**, purity of thought, and proper character . . . Therefore, he should avoid levity, drunkenness, and erotic words.

## D. When Hasidim and Litvaks Parted Ways

### 1. Ashkenazi Family Origins: Russian Jews? Litvaks, Hasidism or Yekes? Geography and Religious Ideology





## 2. Historical Herem: The Vilna Gaon Banishes Hasidim from the Community (1772)

**A SEVERE BAN (Herem) by the Great Rabbis of Vilna with the Approval of THE GAON OF VILNA THE HASID (the Pious One) THE GRA (Rabbi Elijah) OF VILNA**

**Our brothers the House of Israel, do you know of these innovators (*hadashim*) . . . who have banded together into a suspicious sect called HASIDIM . . . who formed separatist groups . . . and engage in many ugly customs. . . .**

**Therefore, the leaders of our people must don the cloak of zealousness, zealousness for God, to destroy, TO ANNIHILATE AND TO DECLARE UPON THEM BANS AND CURSES. . . . One must search for them like hometz [bread on Passover], disintegrate them and toss them to the winds. . . . Their dispersion will be good for the world.**

- 3. Where Litvaks (Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia) and Hasidim (Ukraine, Poland, Hungary-Romania) Disagreed**
- a. gefillte fish and kugel – savory or sweet
  - b. Talmud Torah or Prayer; study or practice; sober or enthusiastic
  - c. Lawful Punctuality or Mystical Kavanah (spiritual intentionality); Torah-centered or God intoxicated
  - d. Secret kabbalah for the elite or public dissemination of kabbalah (prayerbook)
  - e. Intellectual elite or Spiritual Elite channeling divine blessing to masses
  - f. Inventing the Modern Yeshivah or Inventing the Hasidic Court (Jewish magic, folk medicine, pastoral counseling, and the rebbe’s kvitlalkh)
  - g. will power and rational self-control suppressing the body and its desires (Mussar) or emotional worship mediated through the body (group dance, whiskey, food at the rebbe’s tisch);

**4. Besht (Baal Shem Tov) (d. 1760)**

*Avodah B’gashmiyut, Service of God through Corporeality*

“It is better to serve the Lord in joy without self-mortification.”

“Every mitzvah or act of holiness starts with thoughts of physical pleasure.”

“The soul cannot rejoice in the spiritual until the material has rejoiced in the corporeal.”

“[Penitential fasting] is the way of melancholy and sadness [because] *the Divine Presence* [Shekhinah] *does not inspire out of sorrow, but only out of the joy of performing the commandments (simha shel mitzvah)* [TB Brakhot 31a. As it says, *Do not deny your flesh* [Isaiah 58:7], God forbid, more than is obligatory or necessary.

**5. Hasidic rebbes and Marital Intimacy**

**a. Maggid of Mezritch: Rebbe Dov Ber(d. 1772)**

“One should love one’s wife only in the way one loves one’s tefillin, namely as [an instrument for fulfilling] commandments of God, but one should not think about her. She is [merely a means to serve God] just as in the analogy of someone traveling to the market who needs a horse. But does he love the horse?! . . . So too in this world a man needs a wife in order to worship the Creator in order to earn his place in the world-to-come. But should he leave aside his work and think about her? Nothing is a greater foolishness.

**b. Rebbe Shneur Zalman of Liadi (Belarus, 1745-1812), a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid and the founder of Chabad Lubavitch Hasidism: *The Tanya* (1796):**

The mystical Hasidic reason for “waging war against [the pleasures of] his body and

the animal soul within it . . . is in order to crush them, and to beat them into dust.”

“A completely righteous man” [*tzaddik*] . . . has completely removed the filthy garments of evil, [and he is] utterly repulsed by the pleasures of this world and by men taking pleasure in gratifying their appetites instead of serving God—for these are drawn from, and flow from, the [evil] shells and the [evil] Other Side.”

- c. **Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav** (d. 1810), the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, reported that he experienced pain rather than pleasure in the act of intercourse:

“Copulation is difficult for the true zaddik [i.e., spiritual virtuoso or Hasidic rebbe]. Not only doesn’t he have any desire for it at all, but actually from that act he has real suffering like the suffering of an infant during circumcision. The very same suffering, to an even greater degree, is felt by the zaddik during intercourse.”

## E. Hasidic Marital Asceticism in Contemporary Haredi Hasidism



April 19, 2019. Likud woman poll watcher in Bnei Brak was removed from ultra-Orthodox polling station so Gur rebbe Yaakov Aryeh Alter could vote. Followers of Ger Hassidic dynasty's leader reportedly called Likud lawmakers to intervene after female polling officer refused to leave her post in Bnei Brak.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/woman-removed-from-ultra-orthodox-polling-station-so-top-rabbi-could-vote/>



## 1. The New Normal: “Voluntary” Sexual Abstinence among Married Men within the Parameters of the Sexual Mitzvah of Marital Intercourse

### Professor Benny Brown: Kedushah for Hasidism of Gur, Slonim, and Toledot Aharon:

“*Kedushah* (holiness) developed as a pietistic ideal for the virtuous few, encouraging married men to limit to the minimum the frequency and modes of sexual intercourse with their wives. Today, the hasidic groups of Gur, Slonim, and Toledot Aharon (*Toldes Aaron*) radicalize this ideal by imposing it on the community as a whole. Gur’s version is the most restrictive and the only one formalized as a set of ordinances (*takunes*).” “The famous ‘hole in the sheet’ mode of intercourse is probably practiced by no more than a small minority, but similarly restrictive methods are not uncommon.”

## 2. Unpublished Ordinances on Holiness (Israel after 1948) on Marital Intimacy promulgated by 4<sup>th</sup> Rebbe of Gur Yisroel Alter (grandson of the author of the Sefat Emet)

### FREQUENCY of Onah (Marital intercourse):

The couple shall have sexual intercourse **only once a month**, on *leil tevilah* (the night after the wife’s immersion in the *mikveh* at the end of her halakhically prescribed menstrual period).<sup>2</sup>

- The couple shall refrain from sexual intercourse from as early as the seventh month of pregnancy. After the wife has given birth, the couple shall refrain from sexual intercourse for a further period of six months.

### QUALITY of Erotic Intimacy:

During intercourse, the couple shall aim to minimize physical contact. The husband shall wear some of his clothes, including his *tsitsit* (considered a *segulah*—supernatural remedy—against the sexual drive) and will not hug or kiss his wife or engage in any behaviour that is not required for the performance of the act of intercourse itself.<sup>3</sup>• The husband shall direct his thoughts as far away as possible from the sexual act.

### SOCIAL DISTANCING with YOUR SPOUSE

- Never walk alongside one’s wife in public but keep a distance of at least four cubits (about two meters). The husband should not address his wife by her first name.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Later Gur Hasidism added a second night of intercourse per month, which may fall on Shabbat, however, Slonim Hasidism forbids the crude physical act of intercourse on Shabbat lest it defile the spirituality of the holy day.

<sup>3</sup> The only approved position is husband on top face-to-face with his wife. The only approved location is a darkened room. The process is quick and goal oriented – ejaculation inside the vagina while avoiding very stringently letting drops of semen spill outside the wife’s vagina.

No hugging, kissing, foreplay or afterplay is allowed and no conversation of any kind in the bedroom.

Some marriage counselors suggest the man hold himself above the woman on his elbows and fists, so as to minimize physical contact during penetration. In short, there is no expectation of erotic pleasure, emotional unity or love by either husband or wife. Emotional excitement, interpersonal intimacy, sexual arousal, and spontaneity are minimized.

<sup>4</sup> In the street a wife will not walk beside her husband, but behind him by several paces and so they must time their synchronized walking to the same address so that they do not meet or even stand simultaneously at the same stop light. On the bus or airplane they will not sit near each other nor will they enter an elevator together.

### 3. Rebbe Avrom Yitshok Kohn of Toldes Aaron in Me'ah Sh'arim, Jerusalem:

“The difference between the *hasid* and the ordinary person is that the *hasid* says: ‘That which is forbidden is certainly forbidden, while that which is permitted—I nevertheless do not have to do it.’ The ordinary person, on the other hand, says the opposite: ‘That which is permitted is certainly permitted, while that which is forbidden—I can nevertheless seek permission to do it.’ Even that which is permitted requires a great deal of careful attention and prudence in determining how to behave rather than being eager to satisfy one’s lust. And this is what the Sages meant by ‘Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you’ (TB. Yevamot 20a-b).”

### 4. Rebbe Sholom Noach Berezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe (1981-2000)

#### The Pep Talk for the First Year of Marriage – Preparing for a Spiritual Battle for Sanctity and Heroic Abstinence on the Frontlines of the Sacred Bedroom

- a. **The Bedroom as the Sacred Battlefield:** “Husband and wife—the Divine Presence (Shekhinah) dwells among them; their home is like a minor Temple . . . , their table is like an altar, their bed is like the Holy of Holies, and he [the husband] is like the High Priest who enters its innermost part to offer sacrifices.”
- b. Therefore “[Physical] contact that is not required [for the fulfillment of the commandment of onah] is prohibited.” [If the husband simply indulges his sexual urge, he is labeled an adulterer even though sexual intercourse with his wife is permitted by the Torah.]
- c. **The crucial first year of marriage as the time of testing by Satan:** “It is against my nature to write about these matters, but I am concerned, and I care about you . . . , as I have brought you up, fostered and guided you up until now, [showing you how] to be wholesome during the days of your youth [=bachelorhood].

But now that you are a married man, I see that once again, you stand alone, engaged in a raging battle that is even fiercer than the previous one. For in that [first battle, i.e. before marriage], it was prohibited, while in this [second battle, i.e. within marriage], it is permitted.

Many have already been slain, and many others will be slain [in this battle]. Only the elect few, whom God has preserved and planted in every generation, can emerge from it [unharm]ed and gloriously victorious. By virtue of this they go on to illuminate other realms [of life] as well. I pray that you, my beloved, will be among them.”

- d. **Pep Talk for the Heroic Soldier:** “When confronting the enemy face-to-face, rational argumentation is of no help . . . One should know how to act as a faithful soldier who is willing to die for the sake of victory, not sparing either his own life or that of his wife and family members. Self-sacrifice, blood, tears, and sweat are required, . . . for a life of happiness and joy is a life of abstinence and purity.... [As the dying King David said to his son Solomon]: *Be strong therefore, and show yourself a man* (I Kings 2:2)—a man, and not a woman.”

**5. The Spiritual Vocation of the Women of Hasidut Gur:  
“Who is a kosher wife? One who does the will of her husband.”**

sociologist Nava Vasserman, *The ‘Abstinent’ Society - Hevrat HaKedusha: The Process of Building a Home among Gur Hasidim in Israel*



**a. the challenge of preparing brides and grooms for the wedding night intercourse**

As the couple approaches their first night together and their first night relating to their own bodies as a sexual object, they have reason to be anxious. Neither husband-to-be nor wife-to-be have been taught anything about the laws of intercourse or menses or about the physiology of their body until just before the night of their marriage.

Recently official courses for brides have been instituted to socialize these new wives into the way of Gur and men are instructed in the yeshiva by their spiritual mentor. But not until the very day of the wedding itself is intercourse itself discussed. Then the counselors often walk the couple through a partial simulation in a bedroom, so the couple may each fill their roles without need for conversation or awkward negotiation.

The counselor reassures the bride that just as your husband uncovers his arm before putting on tefillin, so you uncover yourself for this mitzvah and your body will be sanctified to a higher purpose. She advises: ‘Give yourself to this mitzvah and then your children born of this night will

willingly give themselves to a life of mitzvot.” ***M’sirus nefesh*, willingness to martyr oneself, is the hasidic ideal, not standing up for your rights and getting what you need out of a relationship.** The counselor promises that with God’s help you can “break nature” and its impulses and “sanctify yourself in [abstaining from doing even] what is permitted.”

**b. the obstacles to marital communication**

In the realm of interpersonal communication neither the bride nor the bridegroom has any experience in dialogue with the opposite sex, nor are such communication skills valued either before or during married life. After marriage the husbands still maintain distance and minimize intimacy both sexual and interpersonal lest the spirituality of their homes be disturbed. The less time a husband stays at home with his wife, the better.

In Gur no value is placed on investing time or effort into the needs and feelings of the self or into the marital relationship. What is needed is spiritual discipline, repairing one’s selfish traits, controlling one’s impulses, and appreciating whatever God has given us – the good and what appears to us to be bad but is not. Issues in marriage are viewed as the product of **God’s personal providence** (*hashgakha pratit*) since God is the ultimate matchmaker of each couple and these challenges are occasions for spiritual growth in self-discipline.

**c. gendered division of labor in the Gur household**

Women are taught to live up to the rabbinic adage, “**Who is a kosher wife? One who does the will of her husband.**” A good wife nullifies her will before her husband’s, just as a hasid nullifies his will before the Divine will. A wife must accept submission to her husband’s rule in all matters both religious and economic in order to fulfill God’s curse on Eve that “*he will rule over you*” (Gen. 3).

For Gur conversations between spouses should be reduced to practical issues minimized so as to convey information and instructions without emotions, hopes and fears. Husbands are discouraged from conversation with their wives, but are instead instructed to issue commands which wives are expected to obey. It is the wife’s task to defer to male decisions which are not accompanied with explication or persuasion.

Yet often the men do not know more than the women, so their exclusive prerogative to give orders is hobbled by ignorance. In practical issues of banking and shopping, women know much more than their husbands. One official counselor for brides who teaches them the facts of life cautions the brides: ‘Don’t let the husbands think you know more about these matters than they do.’

**A woman’s role is to receive and a man’s is to give (*mashpia*).** The daughters of Gur are taught that the spiritual blessings (*shefa*) come to them exclusively through their husbands, just as the blessings for all Israel come through the rebbe. The woman is not called a *hasida*, but only the daughter of or wife of a hasid, since she has no direct relation to the Divine or to the Torah.