

Educating American Modern Orthodox Children about Sex:

Guides for Parents, Guides for Pupils

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There are many of us who attend this institution [Yeshiva University] who have never had a comprehensive sex-ed class in our life. We have certainly never had such a class from the Jewish perspective.¹

Without conducting a major sociological survey, it is impossible to know what Modern Orthodox children are taught about the heterosexual act by their parents and teachers. Are there characteristics that distinguish the kind of information which is conveyed and the way it is transmitted in Modern Orthodox families and institutions from those belonging to other faith or secular traditions? Some characteristics are obvious. It is likely that many Modern Orthodox parents will mention theological ideas while providing information on sexuality, for example, that sexual relations are—in addition to whatever else may motivate them—divinely commanded in some circumstances, but a major sin in others; that modesty in everything sexual is a religious obligation; and that God is somehow involved in the process of procreation. Many Mod-

1 Olivia Wiznitzer, “This Too is Torah, and I Must Learn”, *Yeshiva University Observer*, December 30, 2008. This article is no longer available on the journal’s website.

ern Orthodox parents will almost surely tell their children that sexual relations before marriage are forbidden, or are, at the very least, highly discouraged. In this, they follow rather basic tenants of Jewish law. And yet, without sociological data, one cannot say much about actual practice. Do some Modern Orthodox parents find this subject difficult to speak about? I suspect that the answer is yes,² but this may be the case for many parents of other faiths, or no faith. At what age do Modern Orthodox parents tend to speak with their children, and what is the content? Again, I will not be surprised if a study would show that the average age is later than among Jewish parents who feel less bound, or not bound at all, to Jewish law, and that some elements that more secular parents are likely to address, for example, safe sex and the use of contraceptives, are more rarely mentioned. If among many more-or-less secular parents the assumption is that their children might begin to engage in sexual relations at some point during their (late?) teen years, many years before marriage, and that they are very likely not to marry the person with whom they had their first sexual contact, average Modern Orthodox parents probably typically hope their children will not engage in sexual relations before marriage, and that they will marry in their (early?) twenties. Obviously,

2 People with way more knowledge than me seem to have the same impression. Thus, Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, a rabbi who was the Executive Vice President of the Orthodox Union, the most important body of Modern Orthodoxy in the US, says “We have little knowledge about how parents conveyed information about sex and reproduction to their children in times gone by. We know that most Orthodox Jewish parents today find it very difficult to impart this necessary information to their children in a scientifically factual, halakhically accurate, and truly helpful manner” (Debow, Yocheved. *Talking About Intimacy and Sexuality: A Guide for Orthodox Jewish Parents*. New York: Ktav and OU Press, 2012, xxi).

with such differing assumptions, the timing and content of “The Talk” is likely to be different as well. And yet, as I said, I am not aware of any qualitative study that can provide us with solid information about the way this issue is dealt with in Modern Orthodox homes. What we can do however is to examine books published by members of the Modern Orthodox community which are intended for parents or school children in this community, and so possibly learn what, according to people who are heavily invested in this issue, should be the ideal content of teaching on sexuality and the ways in which this information should be transmitted to children. This article tries to do just that, focusing on books published in the first two decades of the 21st century.

In 2009, a little booklet of 68 pages entitled *Talking to Your Children About Intimacy: A Guide for Orthodox Jewish Parents*, was published by Sara Diament. Diament is, according to the book, a Modern Orthodox woman herself, who has academic qualifications in Jewish Studies and Health and Behavior Studies. The book is very clearly written “from within,” using the language, codes, and assumptions of American Modern Orthodox Jews. The book discusses the importance of parents talking with their children about sexuality, while, of course, adapting it to the child’s age, maturity, and interest in the matter. The text is peppered with Hebrew and Yiddish words that are commonly used in Modern Orthodox circles, and provides some examples of how adults in this community might explain these issues to children. Explanations are likely to include theological assumptions. The following is an example of instructions and ideas given by Diament:

While you should never say anything that is not truthful, you need not give *complete* information at all times. When my children were very young, and

they asked my husband and me how parents have a baby, our first line of response was always, “The first thing you do is *daven* [pray] to Hashem [God] to help you have a baby.” This response was both truthful and imparted our *hashkafah* [religious point of view] and was usually quite satisfactory, at least initially. I remember that when my son was about nine, he asked me, “If non-Jewish people don’t *daven* to Hashem how can they have a baby?” I answered him truthfully (but not completely) that a man and a woman could have a baby without *davening* to Hashem, but that was something that Jewish people did. My son didn’t probe any further. But if he had, I would have explained that beyond *davening* to Hashem, there was something that *Immas* and *Abbas* [mothers and fathers] do together to help make the baby, and answered any further questions that arose.³

Towards the end of the book, Diamant provides an imaginary report by a brother and sister, aged 10 and 11, of the information they learned from their parents (father to son, mother to daughter). Diamant says that letting children read it alone or together with their parents can help the discussion. The text is an interesting mix of explicit content together with theology:

When Hashem created Adam and Chava [Eve] the first thing that He instructed them was, “Peru u’revu – Be fruitful and multiply,” which in regular English means “Have children!” [Mom] also told me that while it is true that Abba [Dad] and she davened [prayed] to Hashem [God] to have us, that there is a special part that parents play alongside Hashem in creating a baby... Abba explained to me that because an Abba and Imma [father and mother] love

3 Diamant, Sara. *Talking to Your Children About Intimacy: A Guide for Orthodox Jewish Parents*. Xlibris, 2009, 37.

each other, when they are alone together at night in bed they like to be close. Sometimes, they might just hug and kiss each other. Other times, they take their clothes off to feel very close in a way that only Immas and Abbas do. They may also decide to have sexual relations. Abba said that he needed to explain what that was - because beside being a nice way of being close, it is also what an Imma and Abba have to do to play their part in creating a baby. He told me that when a man and a woman have relations the man comes very close to the woman. By then, from thinking about all the cuddling they are doing, his penis has become firmer than usual. This makes it easier for the man to put his penis inside a special opening in the woman's vagina. My Abba told me not to worry - it doesn't hurt the lady - in fact it feels very nice. Hashem wanted to make sure that it was something pleasurable to do so that married people would want to do it. He said that it's one of the ways that a husband and wife can show their love for one another, even when they aren't going to create a baby from it. After a man puts his penis inside a woman's vagina, he rubs it back and forth so he can release from it a little bit of liquid called semen. In the semen, there are something called sperm, though they are too small to see - you'd need a microscope. The sperm have something like a tail so they can travel, in a swimming kind of way, deeper into the vagina...⁴

A few years later, in 2012, another book of the same type, *Talking About Intimacy and Sexuality: A Guide for Orthodox Jewish Parents*, was published by Yocheved Debow.⁵ Earlier, Debow had written a doctoral dissertation on sexuality among Modern Orthodox teenage girls

4 Diament, *Talking to Your Children About Intimacy*, 51.

5 Debow, Yocheved. *Talking About Intimacy and Sexuality: A Guide for Orthodox Jewish Parents*. New York: Ktav and OU Press, 2012.

in Israel. The book, 342 pages long, does not contain as much Orthodox jargon as Diament's book, and is by far more comprehensive. Whether this is a good or bad thing depends on the reader's expectations. Diament's book can be read quickly by busy parents and provides ready-made recipes on how to deal with the issue. Reading Debow's book demands more time, although it is written in a very accessible way. It also includes topics that are extremely important, but not part of our interest here, such as body image, eating disorders, clothing, relationships among teenagers, masturbation, exposure to media, and more. Like Diament, Debow uses both scientific and Jewish literature and concepts, but obviously, Debow's more voluminous work includes by far more of both. At the same time, Debow's book at times feels more apologetic. Very often it contrasts between "Judaism" and a "Western Approach". "Judaism" according to Debow is spiritual, while "Non-Judaism" is materialistic, commercial, and supports immediate gratification.⁶ In its essence, the attitude the book expresses is not different from Diament's. Parents should speak with their children, adapting, of course, to age and personality; actual scientific terms should be used to refer to the sexual organs; lack of explanation is not a good idea (or as Debow puts it, even a bad explanation is better than no explanation); when the time is appropriate, and the child is, or seems to be, interested in the matter, the basic details of the sexual act should be explained honestly and accurately. In fact, Debow's explanation⁷ is very similar to the one offered by Diament and quoted above.

Debow's work is a by-product of her involvement in

6 See, for example, Debow, 20-21; the same theme appears in almost any section of the book that defends Modern Orthodox concepts.

7 Debow, 104-109.

creating a curriculum on the matter⁸ under the auspices of Yeshiva University, the flagship academic institution of the American Modern Orthodox world. It was published jointly by two respected organizations in the Modern Orthodox world: the publishing house Ktav and Orthodox Union Press. It is hard to imagine better credentials from a Modern Orthodox perspective. It even includes a “Foreword” by a rabbi, Tzvi Hersh Wienreb, who is said to be “Executive Vice President, Emeritus of the Orthodox Union.” On the other hand, this strong identification with Modern Orthodoxy, which is also very central to the content, might push away Haredi (“Ultra-Orthodox”) parents from using it.

The two books of Diament and Debow represent an important moment in dealing with the matter in American Modern Orthodoxy. One slim, the other comprehensive; one practical, the other more theoretical; one published independently, the other under the auspices of major institutions. Both provide English-reading Modern Orthodox parents specific guidance of how to speak about the matter with their children in a manner that is in line with the current recommendations of professional organizations, while, at the same time, is adapted to Modern Orthodox sensitivities, wishes, and practices. Guidance to children should be given, according to them, with implicit or explicit understanding that they should not engage in sexual relations or any physical contact of any kind with a person of the other sex before marriage.⁹ In addition, the entire sexual act is described as an act with religious meanings. No drawings of body parts are provided.

Would an average American Modern Orthodox per-

8 We will discuss it later in this article.

9 Debow’s book includes a chapter on homosexuality (chapter 10), but the topic is outside the scope of this article.

son follow the instructions of these two books? I do not know. The books by Diamant and Debow show it is possible to find a way to explain the fundamentals of the sexual acts to children, while respecting core concepts of Modern Orthodoxy.

It is likely that for some children, sexual education comes from explanations by their parents, whether planned ahead or as answers to surprising questions. Some parents, perhaps, use sources like those explored above. Most probably try to come up themselves with what they think to be good answers. For many other children, the sources of information are likely to be from older siblings, peers, written sources, and today, apparently by far the most important source, the internet. Obviously, it is hard to make any assessment about the type and quality of information provided by these means. Another source of information may be formal education on the matter in schools. The majority, possibly vast majority even, of Modern Orthodox children worldwide study in Modern Orthodox schools. In the coming pages I will explore some of the curricula used to teach about sexuality in such schools in the US.

As of this writing, the most sophisticated and comprehensive curriculum on sexuality for Modern Orthodox schools in the US that I am aware of is *Life Values and Intimacy Education: Health Education for the Jewish School*, which was published by Yeshiva University in 2008. The book, written by Yocheved Debow, who was mentioned earlier, with contributions by Anna Woloski-Wruble, is based, among other things, on a preliminary draft of topics that need to be addressed in schools, produced by a group led by Miki Wieder. This book of Debow constitutes a curriculum for students in Modern Orthodox schools, from grade 3 to grade 8 (generally, ages 8 to 13). Another part, for grades 9-12 (ages 14-17) was

produced in 2011 but at the time of this writing, it is not available on the market, and can only be obtained directly from Debow.¹⁰

In a few places, an explanation for the *raison d'être* of the curriculum is given under the title “Being an Orthodox Jew in the modern world”:

An important component of our discussions and the underlying reason for the development of this curriculum has to do with being an Orthodox Jew in the modern world. There are many sex education curricula available; we could easily have used one of them and left out the parts that do not apply to us. But as Modern Orthodox Jews, we must turn to our own traditions *first* and see what our values are. If they are compatible with modern, Western values, then we can have a joining of our worlds, but if not, then it is the Western values that we usually choose to decline. We always begin our search by learning from our own sources, and only then see if we can incorporate some of the ideas of Western culture to our Torah-based curriculum. With each new encounter, we must decide whether it can be incorporated or not. This important theme will be a part of many of our discussions.¹¹

Many aspects of this curriculum are similar to the book for parents that Debow wrote later, and that we an-

10 Debow, Yocheved and Anna Woloski-Wruble, *Life Values and Intimacy Education: Health Education for the Jewish School, Grades 3-8*. New Jersey: Yeshiva University and Ktav, 2008. The curriculum for grades 9-12, completed in 2011, is unpublished, and available only through Debow. I would like to warmly thank her for allowing me to consult this second part of the curriculum.

11 Debow and Woloski-Wruble, *Grades 9-12, Grade 9, Unit 1, 4-5*. An almost identical text appears, for example, in Grade 6, Unit 1, 6.11. One of the interesting differences is that there, “Orthodox” appears instead of “Modern Orthodox”.

alyzed previously. It contrasts constantly “Torah-Values” with “Western Culture,” with the “Torah” getting the upper hand and a straw-man “Western Culture” depicted as being obsessed with pleasure and self-gratification. Leaving aside this issue, the curriculum has many merits, in that, for example, it presents honestly and adequately both scientific information and Jewish sources. Thus, for example, it does mention that Judaism also has an ascetic tradition,¹² even though this is contrary to the book’s general attitude. Similarly, it says that according to science there is nothing bad about male masturbation,¹³ even though this statement does not help its ideological stance that according to Jewish law, male masturbation is forbidden and therefore boys should try to refrain from it.

The curriculum deals with a vast range of topics, and the actual sexual act is, understandingly, only a small part in what it sees as “Intimacy and Sexuality.” Things such as behavior in society, body image, gender roles, puberty, friendships, and much more, are among its many topics. However, loyal to the topic of this article, our interest lies only in the sections that discuss sexual relations. The first part of this kind is a short discussion about the genitals in grade 4,¹⁴ and about puberty and physiology in grade 5.¹⁵ In these sections, the curriculum recommends inviting a physician or a nurse (when possible, a Modern Orthodox one) who can discuss some of these matters with the students. The same topics appear again in the curriculum for grade 6,¹⁶ when it is supposed to be dealt with more thoroughly than in the previous year. Inviting a health prac-

12 Grade 6, Unit 12, 6.49.

13 Grade 7, Unit 10, 7.44.

14 Grade 4, Unit 9, 4.40.

15 Grade 5, Units 8-9, 5.41-5.58.

16 Grade 6, Units 11-12, 6.43-6.54

itioner is recommended again, even though it is admitted that in some cases, if the teacher is comfortable with the topic, teaching it by the regular faculty has its own benefits. The curriculum does not include any specific information about the sexual act, but it seems likely that at least some aspects of it will be discussed by the physician, nurse, or teacher, who delivers this unit. Yet another discussion of the matter is planned for grade 7.¹⁷ A new topic that was not explored previously is masturbation, which is presented separately for boys and girls: boys are told it is medically legitimate but halakhically forbidden. Girls are indirectly told there is nothing wrong about female masturbation. The title of the chapter for the girls, “Celebrating the Body”, can hardly be seen as discouraging the practice. The fact that masturbation is discussed in grade 7 is unquestionably related to the estimate that at around age 12 the topic will begin to be of relevance to many of the students. Another new topic is “Reproduction and Infertility.” One of the goals of this topic is to provide students with “a rudimentary understanding of human reproduction.” How “rudimentary” this will be probably depends to a large degree on the teacher and what he or she decides to discuss. In grade 8,¹⁸ the main topics related to actual sexual activity include a unit on refraining from any physical contact with a person of the other sex, a unit on homosexuality, and a unit on the idea of “holiness,” which dictates, according to Orthodox understanding, among other things, setting additional limits on sexuality. The unit for grade 9 includes for the first time an explicit discussion of the female and male genitalia.¹⁹ It is preceded by a warning to teachers:

17 Grade 7, Units 9-11, 7.40-7.59.

18 Grade 8, Units 8-10, 8.28-8.43

19 Grade 9, Unit 1, 20-27.

Teachers need to think carefully before presenting this unit to their students. While much information is provided here, not all of our students are necessarily able to hear it all. For some, too much information about anatomy and physiology of the opposite sex can make them quite uncomfortable. Information should be presented thoughtfully. Some groups may come to be more comfortable during the course and teaching this unit later in the year may be advisable.²⁰

There is no discussion in this section about what exactly happens during the sexual act, but it certainly gets rather close to that; perhaps one should not expect more. Needless to say, being only a curriculum, specific teachers or instructors may explain verbally issues that are not written in the text. The curriculum suggests regularly giving students the opportunity to ask questions anonymously; one can imagine that questions about the details of the act might be raised in this way. Some instructors might choose to avoid such inquiries while others are likely to use them as a trigger to cover the topic. The unit has again a section on masturbation, geared towards boys only.²¹ In grade 10, sexually transmitted illnesses are explained. For the teachers who might ask why, Debow answers: “Although our expectation is that our students are not sexually active, it is still important for them to be made aware of these illnesses, how they can be contracted, how they can be avoided, and what should be done to treat them.”²² An extensive and rather detailed discussion about sexuality, its meaning, and why the realization of sexual de-

20 Grade 9, Unit 1, 20.

21 Grade 9, Unit 2, 62-66.

22 Grade 10, Unit 3, 35.

sire should be accomplished only in marriage, is also part of grade 10. In it, the curriculum tries yet again to answer the question that haunts it throughout: If sex is so good, healthy, natural, and endorsed by the Torah, why can't teenage students practice it?²³ The answers might not be acceptable to many contemporary secular readers, but they do follow common Orthodox arguments about the specialness of sexual relations when practiced only in the context of marriage, and they also incorporate a selection of secular sources that warn against the risks of sexual relations among teenagers. Yet again, a section about masturbation, geared "mainly for boys," appears in this grade.²⁴ A year later, in grade 11, the students learn that:

The *mitzvah* [=commandment] of *onah*²⁵ recognizes that women have sexual needs. It is a *Mitzva* [from the Torah] for men to have relations with their wives in a way that brings the wife pleasure... The [Talmud] mentions the "children of nine *middot* [=qualities, types]," a list of ways in which marital intimacy is not acceptable. These examples all have in common that they reflect a failure in relationship between husband and wife.²⁶

The curriculum during this almost-last-year of high school declares clear goals:

1. Students will know that the Torah sees sexuality as being good and rewarding when it is an expression of the intimate relationship between a husband and wife.
2. Students will learn that according to Halachah, giving sexual pleasure to one's partner is part of the

23 Grade 10, Unit 4, 46-57.

24 Grade 10, Unit 4, 58-61.

25 The obligation a husband has towards his wife to have sexual relations with her.

26 Grade 11, Unit 2, 26-27.

commitment husbands and wives make to each other in a Jewish marriage.²⁷

Yet again, a leitmotif is a comparison between “Jewish Values” and “Western Culture.” It is found everywhere, including in the very titles of sections, for example “The Objectification of People and Judaism’s counter-message”²⁸ or “Contemporary Attitudes versus Torah Attitudes”.²⁹ In some cases, actual comparisons are done, showing, predictably, the superiority of Judaism:

The idea that women have sexual desires that need and deserve to be satisfied has only become part of Western thinking since the sexual revolution, and it is only in the last fifty years that researchers of human sexuality have discovered the differences between the ways the sexual needs of men and women are fulfilled. It is actually quite remarkable how forward thinking the Torah is in this area. The Halachah reflects the very real differences between men and women in the area of intimacy and sexuality. The Halachah takes these differences into account and creates parameters to maximize fulfillment of women’s needs as well.³⁰

Both parts of the curriculum (grades 3-8 and 9-12) include some diagrams of male and female genitals.³¹ Teachers are encouraged to use them, but are warned this should be done carefully:

27 Grade 11, Unit 3, 56.

28 Grade 11, Unit 2, p. 24.

29 Grade 11, Unit 3, 58.

30 Grade 12, Unit 4, 65.

31 In the curriculum for grades 3-8 these depictions appear at the end, A1-A5. They are found again in unit Grade 9, Unit 1, 24-25 and 29-30.

It is important that students are shown diagrams of the reproductive systems, including key terms. A selection of diagrams are included at the end of this unit and the next one about the male reproductive system... Please feel free to make use of them. In many communities, giving out diagrams of changes in the bodies of the opposite sex may not be recommended – you need to know your population!³²

It is not easy to say what actual knowledge about the sexual act is given to students through the curriculum for grades 3-8. The relevant parts are, as explained above, very general, and suggest the use of outside sources of information through health practitioners. At the same time, considering that this curriculum is for rather young students, it is not surprising there is no detailed information on sexual relations. In the curriculum for grades 9-12 the information is more explicit, even if it is not provided while discussing the sexual act itself, but rather while explaining the structure and function of the male and female genitalia. The curriculum itself does not teach explicitly what intercourse is and, other than in quoted secular sources, uses the precise term “intercourse” rather rarely. It seems to assume though, certainly in its later units, that the students know what intercourse is.

It is not possible to know, from the sources we explored here, what girls and boys in the American Modern Orthodox world know about marital sexuality. But it is perhaps possible to understand what some significant players in this community would like them to know. This article has tried to explore this issue. Surveys among this population, if done well, might help us know what these children actually know.

32 Grade 9, Unit 1, 20.