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Sexuality and the Sacred
(Leviticus 18:1-23; Genesis 2:16-25)

I come from a long line of people who argue a lot. Not without cause do we quip: “Two Jews: three opinions”. This came true again on Wednesday, when Judaism’s Conservative Movement voted on both the ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis and the celebration of same-sex commitment ceremonies. The Committee on Law and Standards accepted not one, not two, but three legal opinions. One of those three legal opinions was groundbreaking--it affirms the ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis and supports rabbis who choose to officiate at same-sex commitment ceremonies. The three who wrote this report, RABBIS ELLIOT N. DORFF, DANIEL S. NEVINS & AVRAM I. REISNER conclude with the following acknowledgement:

“Having studied this important topic for many years, and having considered the approaches of other rabbis, we are humbled by its complexity and significance. We are motivated by our obligations to be loyal custodians of Torah and defenders of the dignity of our fellow person. We conclude this complicated conversation with an ancient rabbinic prayer: “May it be God’s will that we not humiliate another, nor be humiliated ourselves.” (Moed Katan 9b).¹

Whatever one’s position on the complex issues of sexuality--from homosexuality to sexual ethics--mixing the realms of sexuality and the sacred calls forth questions of humility and humiliation. The juxtaposition of sex and the sanctuary makes us nervous. Many years ago from this pulpit, I shared a poem that contained the word “underwear”. I received several complaints. How much the more so, words like sex, nakedness, and homosexuality. Yet the Bible addressed these issues. Our religious traditions must do so as well. We can’t wall off our sexuality from the rest of our lives. Consider the word “passion”; it has two equally well-known meanings; one conjures up the realm of sex; the other bespeaks the realm of the sacred.

In synagogue, Jews are reminded of sexuality at least twice a year through the cycle of the Torah reading. Once, during the spring when we read Leviticus cover to cover, and then again, on the holiest day of the ritual calendar, Yom Kippur. It is especially on that sacred day of self-examination, that the litany of forbidden couplings in Leviticus is front and center. “Do not uncover the nakedness of a woman and her daughter; do not take her son’s daughter, or her daughter’s daughter. ...Do not have carnal relations with your neighbor’s wife and defile yourself with her... All who do any of those abhorrent things—such persons shall be cut off from their people” (Leviticus 18:17, 20, 29).” It is on a day of extreme vulnerability and heightened awareness of physicality that thoughts turn to sex. Sex is one of the most explicit acts by which we might overcome being alone. Yet, as Leviticus teaches, sex is potentially inflammatory--dangerous both to us and to society.

This weekend, many congregations are participating in a campaign called "Raise the Alarm" on Darfur. This campaign is designed to raise awareness of the horrific situation women and girls face every day in Darfur. **Women and girls as young as 8 years old are being raped and sexually assaulted** by the Janjaweed on a daily basis as part of a calculated strategy of genocide. They live in constant fear of attack. Even routine tasks such as searching for firewood have become perilous for them.ⁱⁱ

Perhaps some of us can dismiss this sexual violence as extreme and far away. But, closer to home, our society, too, is not immune. This October, after ten girls were shot-- five of them fatally-- at an Amish school, New York Times columnist Bob Herbert asked, "Why aren't we shocked"?

"Stories about the rape, murder and mutilation of women and girls are staples of the news, as familiar to us as weather forecasts. The startling aspect of the Pennsylvania attack was that this terrible thing happened at a school in Amish country, not that it happened to girls...

Staggering amounts of violence are unleashed on women every day, and there is no escaping the fact that in the most sensational stories, large segments of the population are titillated by that violence. We've been watching the sexualized image of the murdered 6-year-old JonBenet Ramsey for 10 years. JonBenet is dead. Her mother is dead. And we're still watching the video of this poor child prancing in lipstick and high heels.

What have we learned since then? That there's big money to be made from thongs, spandex tops and sexy makeovers for little girls. In a misogynistic culture, it's never too early to drill into the minds of girls that what really matters is their appearance and their ability to please men sexually.

A girl or woman is sexually assaulted every couple of minutes or so in the U.S. The number of seriously battered wives and girlfriends is far beyond the ability of any agency to count. We're all implicated in this carnage because the relentless violence against women and girls is linked at its core to the wider society's casual willingness to dehumanize women and girls, to see them first and foremost as sexual vessels -- objects -- and never, ever as the equals of men.", Herbert saysⁱⁱⁱ

In the Bible, when sex is used destructively --to wield power, to bludgeon, to humiliate, to secure privilege--the punishment meted out is *caret*--the perpetrator is exiled, cut off from society. In the biblical worldview, abusers of sexual intimacy were rendered cast off and alone. But in contemporary times, as these disturbingly familiar instances of sex and violence remind us, too often what is cut off is our awareness of our own humanity, our recognition that sexuality is precious, and our comprehension of the paradox that sex has the potential both to humiliate or to elevate.

And closer to home still-- here on campus-- both manifestations of sexuality--the humiliation and the elevation-- can be found. Sex that humiliates exists here. Date rape, blackout sex, undesired hook ups, objectification of sexual partners, and violation of

emotional as well as physical boundaries. Even on this highly educated and sophisticated campus, sex that brings disconnection, destruction and isolation in its wake, certainly for the victims and sometimes, for the perpetrators, occurs all too often.

College is a time of exploration, of expanding boundaries, of learning about the world in part through loving, through friends and new adventures. That search is one of the most enduring and endearing aspects of being in college. There is so much to experience, so much to open one's senses to. That search teaches us about who we want to become, about who we can become. How can we ensure that, if that search includes sexual exploration, that it elevates rather than humiliates?

Leviticus provides some wisdom. It begins, "The Eternal said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites and tell them: I am the Eternal your god. Do not act according to the practices of the land of Egypt, where you live, nor of the land of Canaan where I have brought you: in their statutes you may not walk."(Leviticus 18:1)

Assimilating the values of the majority culture is not new. It took place in Biblical times as well as today. The Torah attempts to counter those values, to carve out a different set of sexual standards, to delineate boundaries for acceptable sexual encounters. Rabbi Daniel Landes writes, "Sexuality is at the core of human identity. In Genesis, human creation is described as both singular and dual; "And God created Adam in God's image, in the image of God, God created him, male and female God created them (Genesis 1:27). Reading this literally and with a view to the later emergence of Eve, one Midrash arrives at this psychological insight: Adam was, "bisexual and double faced with each identity back to back." The human is composed of a two-fold nature, apparently whole, but actually, and tragically, unfulfilled. True sexuality is not internally focused, but rather relational, directed outward toward one who is strangely familiar but totally different: [an] *ezer k'negdo*, "a helper who stands in opposition" (Genesis 2: 20). Adam is split into two separate identities so that he might eventually (re) discover his other (self) with this cry: "*zot ha pa'am, etem mei'atzamai u'basar me'bisari*, at this moment, essence of my essence, flesh of my flesh."

Sexuality at its root is consciousness. The biblical term for sexual congress is *yadah*—to know. Adam's declaration discloses the paradoxical consciousness of sexuality—that at the [very] moment of integration and wholeness, it is simultaneously, a fleeting, *zot ha pa'am*, "at this moment". [Experiencing the other as "The essence of my essence, the flesh of my flesh" is, by its very nature, transitory.] The human must find her/himself in the other, but because it is the other, achieved unity disappears."^{iv}

As Rabbi Landes suggests, the power of knowing union through sexual encounter is both a momentary knowledge and a continual process. This is the sexuality that can elevate, that can help us to know ourselves and to deepen our capacity for empathy and compassion most fully. Such a sexual encounter is an intimation of holiness not unlike the holiness we brush against when we bring ourselves fully to prayer.

When we enter a sanctuary to bare our souls before God, we try to be scrupulously honest. So should we be equally honest when we take in the full power of what it means to bare our bodies, to be sexually intimate with another human being.

Most college students aren't. Psychologist Susan Cochran found that sexually active college students routinely lie to their partners about their sexual histories. 47% of the men and 42% of the women said they would report fewer partners than they had really had. 42% of men and 33% of women said they would never admit a one-time impulsive affair.

There is no doubt that it is difficult to be honest in the intimidating cauldron of sexuality, performance and exploitation that suffuses our culture. Add to that the realities of alcohol and drug abuse, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, and it becomes clear that for those who choose to be sexually active, intimacy can be destructive and even deadly. But if sexuality is to be elevating rather than humiliating, if we are to be able to proclaim, "at this moment", as we experience our own essence in the essence of another, we must find a way to be honest with ourselves and our partners. We must find a way to treat sex as sacred. We must remember that pristine and hopeful exploration in the Garden of Eden, when humanity first learned about union and mystery.

There's a story in the Talmud that says that Rav Kahana once went in and hid under Rav's bed to see how his teacher conducted himself while making love with his wife. He noted that Rav carried on a conversation with her while in bed. Rav Kahana, from under the bed remarked, "It is as if you had never had this experience before!" Rav said, "Kahana, are you in here? Go out, for it is not good manners." And Kahana responded, "Ah, but this too is Torah, and I have to learn." (Brachot)

While I don't think any of us would welcome disciples under our beds, Rav Kahana's point is well taken. The sacred quality of sex can be taught, and it can be learned. To be fully intimate, to find holiness in sexual closeness requires listening, observing, communicating, empathizing, trusting, caring for another human being. All of these are necessary for sexuality that mirrors the sacred, that teaches us holiness, and that treats another with devotion.

In my estimation, what makes our sexual relationships moral is not determined by society's label -- premarital, marital, homosexual, heterosexual, bi-sexual-- but by how attentive we are to the sacredness of sexuality. Is this relationship exploitative or loving? Is it intimate or distant? Is it self-destructive or enriching? Is it joyful or guilt inducing? Are we treating ourselves, are we treating one another with respect? Are we celebrating the wonder of sharing our vitality with another? Are we together reaching closer to heaven?

Genesis teaches, "*Lo tov heot adam levado*". "It is not good for human beings to be alone." With sexual intimacy and all that can come with it, we have the possibility of recovering our original essence, of knowing the goodness of being complete. It is up to us to treasure that possibility. It is up to us to create a society in which love accompanies

sexual intimacy. It is up to us to create a society in which violence and dehumanization have no quarter. To paraphrase a carol heard often this season, “Let there be love on earth and let it begin with me.”

This season, this season of Advent, of anticipation, may we be fortunate enough to build connections of sacred intimacy. May we be strong enough to resist humiliation and objectification and outspoken enough to protest dehumanization. This season, may we treasure our sexuality as a ladder to heaven and may we be accompanied to the heights through relationships of caring, of respect, and of love.

ⁱ HOMOSEXUALITY, HUMAN DIGNITY & HALAKHAH, a combined responsum for The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards by RABBIS ELLIOT N. DORFF, DANIEL S. NEVINS & AVRAM I. REISNER This responsum was approved by the CJLS on 15 Kislev 5767 / December 6, 2006 by a vote of thirteen in favor and twelve opposed.

ⁱⁱ Save Darfur Coalition

ⁱⁱⁱ Bob Herbert, New York Times, Oct. 16, 2006

^{iv} Rabbi Daniel Landes, “Judaism and Sexuality” in *Tikkun Magazine*, March/April 1988