

Rav Benjamin Yudin: Talking to Our Kids About the Birds and the Bees⁸³

Let us begin with a story: A young girl comes to her mother and asks, “Where do I come from?” Her mother turns red, swallows hard, and realizes the time has come for “the talk.” She sits her daughter down and tries her best to explain the topic of “the birds and the bees.” After the long explanation, the girl turns to her mother and says, “I don’t understand. My friend Shuli down the block comes from Brooklyn. Where do I come from?”

It is probably reasonable to assume that most adults did not sit down with their parents to learn about “the facts of life.” Somehow, we all figured it out. In today’s world, though, kids do not figure it out in a **positive** way. More likely, they learn it at a very early age and from a source that leaves a lasting, potentially harmful impression. Having learned about it from the wrong source, undoing what was learned becomes so much more difficult. Whether the source is television, the movies, internet, or social media, the problem is obvious and the question is clear. How do Torah-loyal Orthodox Jews combat and preempt these pervasive influences in order to ensure that the first exposure on this matter will be *al taharas hakodesh*?

One approach is to cut ourselves off from society as much as possible, like our brothers and sisters in New Square or Monroe. Assuming, however, that this option is not a practical one in the Modern Orthodox community, a different solution must be found.

A good place to start our discussion, as well as the one with our children, is by presenting a novel approach to understanding the unique Jewish laws of *taharas hamishpacha*.

When an adult man or woman wishes to convert, the *beis din*, act-

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ing as representatives of the Jewish nation, questions the individual in order to ascertain if he or she is sufficiently knowledgeable in the laws of the Torah and sincerely motivated to abide by them. Based on what the court finds, it may choose to proceed with a *ma'aseh geirus*. Can a child, who cannot be so questioned, be converted? The *gemara* in *Kesubos* (11a) teaches that indeed we do have an institution of *geirus* of a minor: “גר קטן מטבילין” – In the case of a minor who converts, we immerse him [in the *mikveh*] on the understanding of the court.” The *beis din* must assess and evaluate the environment in which the child will be raised. If it will be in a home in which *shemiras hamitzvos* is the norm, then the court can assume that at the age of 12/13 (girl/boy) the child will naturally choose to adhere to the *mitzvos* (Shabbos, *kashrus*, etc.) throughout his life.

The *gemara* proceeds to question the necessity of this teaching. It does not seem to inform us of anything new, because we already learned a similar halachic principle in a *beraisa*: “זכין לאדם שלא בפניו” – we may benefit a person in his absence.” For example, one can accept a gift on behalf of another by performing an action necessary to make the acquisition, if it is of clear benefit to that person. Why, then, did the *gemara* have to teach that we can convert a young child via the *beis din*? –It seems obvious that we can, as we are doing this child a tremendous favor!

The *gemara* answers: “מהו דתימא עובד כוכבים בהפקירא ניהא ליה” – You might have said that an idolater prefers a life of license,” free from moral restrictions and Torah values. “לדהני מילי גדול דטעם טעם דאיסורא” – [The *gemara*] informs us that this is so only for an adult who has tasted the taste of the forbidden, but for a minor it is an advantage [to be converted].” Because he has not yet been corrupted and therefore does not have to give up any forbidden pleasures, the benefits of *geirus* are a pure advantage to him. We are doing a huge favor by converting the child before the damage is done.

What is this “taste of the forbidden,” this “*ta'am d'issura*”? Is it forbidden foods – a cheeseburger? A lobster? What is it specifically that the non-Jew has tasted that is so difficult to give up? Rashi explains, “[A slave] would prefer to remain in servitude and be permitted to continue a promiscuous life with slave women, than to be a free-man and be allowed to marry a Jewess, who he cannot treat cheaply and who is not available to him promiscuously.” It is not the shrimp nor the bacon, but it is the sexual appetite, an insatiable hunger for self-gratification through promiscuity, that he does not want restricted.

There is an interesting dimension or quality that G-d has imbued into man. Shlomo HaMelech tells us, “מים גנובים ימתקו – stolen waters are sweet” (*Mishlei* 9:17). This rule is not something that holds true for only some people; rather, built into the DNA of each and every individual is a dose of מים גנובים ימתקו. In fact, it is this element that gives us the opportunity to exercise our *bechira chofshis*, free will, and ultimately that enables us to be rewarded for making prudent choices. After all, if one is not inclined toward choosing wrong, why reward him when he chooses right?

According to this principle, that which you may not have is what you desire most. That which you are proscribed from doing is what beckons you the strongest. The more forbidden the act, the greater the attraction. Controlling these inclinations is what grants one his reward, but, if not controlled, these desires can grow to terrifying proportions.

A person who has already “bitten from the apple” has already lost control. The *ta'am d'issura* is an incredibly powerful force that drives the sexual behavior of much of the non-Torah world and accounts for so many of its problems. The *ta'am d'issura* comes in several tragic flavors, among them pornography, extramarital affairs, incest, bestiality, child molestation, etc., and each represents a violation of a fundamental, moral precept. Of course, each person has his or her own taste preferences, but the com-

mon denominator is that in the very “forbidden-ness” of the activity lies the glamour, the allure, the fascination, the excitement, the sensuality. An appetite for what is forbidden can be developed in many types of activities, but nowhere is this fascination for the forbidden manifest more than in the pursuit of sexuality.

An interesting example is the *yefas to'ar*. The Jewish soldier goes to war and is victorious. He has been away from home for a long time and suddenly sees in captivity an attractive woman (whom the enemy has actually set there to entrap him). Naturally, he is intrigued and has feelings of lust. Can he indulge his desire? We would have expected the Torah to command him, “Just say no!” Had it done so, the woman would have become a forbidden object, and by doing that, the Torah would have made the *ta'am d'issura* almost impossible for the soldier to resist.

Rather, the Torah says, “וַחֲשַׁקְתָּ בָּהּ וְלִקַּחְתָּ לָךְ לְאִשָּׁה” - and you will desire her, you may take her to yourself for a wife” (*Devarim* 21:11). You want her? She’s yours! By so doing, the Torah brilliantly takes the edge off, diminishing the initial excitement because she is less forbidden. But there is a process; he cannot touch her for 30 days, during which he may come to his senses. She must cut her hair and nails, and mourn for her parents. Her appearance and demeanor will reduce the excitement somewhat, but what will really attenuate the desire and passion? The fact that she is no longer forbidden. That is the deeper meaning of Rashi’s comment, “If the Holy One, Blessed be He, would not make her permissible, he would marry her in a forbidden manner.”

A second example occurs on Yom Kippur. The sending of the *se'ir la'azazel* to the wilderness, where the goat will be thrown off a rocky cliff, is a very important aspect of the atonement process. A designated individual, an *ish itti*, is given the responsibility of taking the goat a considerable distance in the desert. Because of the importance of his mission, he is techni-

cally allowed to eat, despite the fact that it is Yom Kippur. The *mishnayos* in *Yoma* (6:4-5) relate that ten different *sukkos* (booths) were erected along the way to provide the *ish itti* with food and drink. Yet, no one ever needed to eat or drink along the way (*Yoma* 67a). Why? Because that which was forbidden to him, eating on Yom Kippur, had been made permissible. The *ta'am d'issura* was removed. Unburdened of the restrictions, the *ish itti* could ignore his desires and focus on his mission.

Given this understanding of the powerful impact of *ta'am d'issura*, and the fact that man is innately programmed to respond to the sweetness of *mayim genuvim*, the challenge we face as Jews become clear. The least glamorous and therefore the most neglected of all the “flavors,” the plain vanilla of the bunch, is marital intimacy. Where in marriage is the *ta'am d'issura*, the forbidden aspect? Intimacy with one's spouse is seen as pedestrian, lacking in excitement or novelty. Especially in our society, its very “permitted-ness” divests it of appeal.

In this light, we can begin to appreciate the remarkable wisdom of the Torah system of *taharas hamishpacha*. Every month there is a period of approximately twelve days (five days, followed by the seven clean ones) that a woman is forbidden to her husband. In this manner, Halacha injects into the pure marriage relationship some of the elements of the forbidden, of *ta'am d'issura*. Indeed, by means of insistence on conforming to the laws of *taharas hamishpacha*, the *ta'am d'issura* has been brilliantly changed into *ta'am dehetaira*.

This is one of the most powerful ways to invest the permitted relationship with excitement and allure. This is not just a philosophical idea, but one with great practical relevance. The Torah was given to human beings, with all of their natural urges, and the institution of *taharas hamishpacha* responds to man's most basic needs. The concepts of *ta'am d'issura* and *mayim genuvim*, along with the concomitant response of the Torah to

those realities in the form of *taharas hamishpacha*, are essential values that must be conveyed to our children.

A second point relates to the contrast between the Torah's approach to sexuality and that of our host culture. Christian society treats sexual activity as something lurid and dirty. In Christianity, the sexual act is looked down upon and considered a *bedieved*, a compromise. Judaism, on the other hand, embraces sexual intimacy and imbues it with *kedusha*. The Torah's approach is always to combine the *gashmiyus* with the *ruchniyus*, to elevate the mundane to the realm of the sanctified. What is for much of the world profane is for us holy.

This is a fundamental contrast that our children have to understand. For Jews, marriage is the highest of ideals. The *Kohen Gadol* who enters the *Kodesh HaKodashim* just once a year could not serve on Yom Kippur unless he was married. This is not only because, as an intrinsic part of the *avodas hayom*, he is commanded to beseech *Hashem* for atonement for the sins of his family. Rather, perhaps more significantly, if he is to act as an appropriate representative of the Jewish nation, he must be a complete individual. This requires the *Kohen Gadol* to be a married man.

Thus, the Jewish attitude towards sexuality is remarkably free of guilt or shame. In the Torah philosophy, sex should inspire as much guilt or shame as eating *matzah* – none. Both are *mitzvos* of *Hashem*, performed with joy, gratitude, and loyalty to G-d. Regarding the Torah's laws surrounding sexuality, moderation should not be mistaken for guilt, nor modesty for shame. The Torah requires moderation and modesty in one's sexual behavior, but never guilt or shame. This is a very important point to stress when communicating our approach to sexual conduct to our children.

Obviously, communication requires talking. *Chazal* employ the expression, “לא דברה תורה אלא כנגד יצר הרע” - The Torah spoke only against the evil inclination” (*Kiddushin* 21b). A homiletic interpretation of this

teaching may be suggested as well: to combat evil, one must speak. The very act of talking about sex with young people who may not have other appropriate outlets gives them the opportunity to confront and talk about sex in a mature way. Our teenagers need to see that their parents are very comfortable with such discussion. No secrets. No smirks. There should be no need for Googling in the middle of the night or hiding magazines under the bed.

Nothing substitutes for the open dialogue that parents need to have with their children on this matter. The most important thing is that a child sees that a parent is willing and able to talk about this topic with him. This is at least as important as the content itself, because the child will appreciate that sex is a natural part of life that they can talk about with their parents. If children see the discussion as normal, then they will intuitively understand that the emotions they are experiencing are natural. They need to know that passionate feelings are nothing but a gift from *Hashem*. Judaism does not want them to repress those feelings, but rather to take them, preserve them, and hold them for that very special opportunity called marriage.

Our approach should be the same on the topic of *negiya*. More than relating to the fact that the Halacha says that such activity is prohibited, teenagers will appreciate that *negiya* is wrong if we can convey the following perspective. Do not, G-d forbid, profane the sanctity of intimacy by wasting it in a mundane setting, depriving it of its innate beauty. Do not squander that gift on something that is temporary, something that is not meaningful, which will leave an empty feeling in its wake. Rather, save those feelings, channel them and reserve them for a marriage that is holy and pure.

Unfortunately, if the teenager fails to be engaged in such conversation at home, he will get his indoctrination elsewhere. We want them to hear these ideas in the beautiful way that only a Torah perspective can provide. We must therefore be prepared to initiate the discussion. My

suggestion is to broach the topic by means of a *pasuk* in *Chumash*. You may take out a *Chumash Bereishis* (4:1) and together learn the *pasuk*, “והאדם ידע את חוה אשתו – And Adam knew his wife Chava.” Explain what the Torah means by this expression, for a husband and wife to know each other in terms of sexual union. You can be explicit regarding the sexual organs of reproduction.

Let them hear it from you in an environment of *kedusha*, that *baruch Hashem*, we have a very special *mitzvah* of procreation given to us by G-d. The alternative is that they will see it (literally) elsewhere but in a very different, much less holy way. In a society in which non-married couples living together and having children is very much the norm, the concept of marriage as a *mitzvah* needs explanation – that in the Torah value system, marriage is the way a man and woman unite to have children and build a family. It will not be obvious, certainly to a young child, that marriage and family-life are special gifts from G-d, and are the opportunity to be G-d-like in creating new life.

At what age should this occur? Each parent knows his or her child and can best determine the ideal time. For some, it is 8; for others, 9 or 10. The potentially devastating mistake would be to wait too long, because they will certainly be exposed to something less than holy sooner rather than later. The dialogue on this topic has to continue over time between parents and children. It is not a one-time conversation; rather, a genuine, ongoing discussion is essential. The child will eventually recognize that often-times what they are seeing or hearing on TV or the internet is antithetical to Judaism's values.

It is most noteworthy that a young man becomes a *gadol* and a young lady a *gedola*, according to Jewish law, at the age of puberty. Precisely at the time that their physical bodies are going through significant changes, that is when they become a *bar da'as*, someone with intelligence

and discernment. We are taught (*Yerushalmi Brachos* 39b), “אם אין דיעה – הבדלה מניין – if a person does not have intelligence, how can they differentiate [between right and wrong]?” This is why we recite *havdala* on *Motza'ei Shabbos* in the *bracha* of *Da'as*, אתה חונן לאדם דעת.

In *havdala* we declare, “המבדיל בין קודש לחול בין אור לחושך בין – ישראל לעמים – Who separates between holy and secular, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations.” Children have to understand deeply that the Jewish People are not similar to the rest of the world, especially in regard to sexual conduct, and the differences are very real and profound. The only reasonable way to convey this to them is by involving them in dialogue, by working together, not by lecturing to them. Of course, parents must also do some serious homework and have a well thought-out approach to the topic of sexuality. Most importantly, it must be a two-way discussion without any distractions. If the parent takes this matter seriously, so will the child. The first time is going to be hard. The second time will be a little less hard. Still, we have to learn how to do it. Each parent will find a different *lashon*, and you will see how much your children will welcome this discussion.

Why not take a different approach and separate the sexes entirely? It was reported that there was a discussion between the head of the Bnei Akiva movement and the late Lubavitcher Rebbe *zt"l*, who questioned the policy of Bnei Akiva with regard to allowing mixed events. The Rebbe wondered about the propriety of close interaction between teenage boys and girls, even if the environment was well supervised. Bnei Akiva believes that given the society in which we live, and all the things teens are exposed to, it is preferable that the socializing be done in a “kosher” way. Furthermore, when these same teenagers become *chassanim* and *kalos*, they will be much less apprehensive. The Rebbe disagreed and suggested that perhaps the uneasiness and awkwardness are actually part of the beauty and intrigue of the fresh marriage relationship.

There may be great wisdom in the Rebbe's outlook, but it is simply unrealistic in the Modern Orthodox world. It is true that supervision remains crucial and parents continue to have the great responsibility of always knowing where their children are and whom they are with. Good parenting includes the recognition of "מה יעשה אותו הבן שלא יחטא" – What should that son [whose parent bathed him, anointed him, hung a purse full of money on his neck, and placed him at the entrance of a house of prostitutes] do so that he not sin?" (*Brachos* 32a). Placing stumbling blocks before our children will lead to poor outcomes, G-d forbid. Children learn to appreciate the importance of *kashrus* when parents inquire about the caterer at an affair. Why not also convey the importance of appropriate behavior with members of the opposite sex by calling about supervision at a party?

It goes without saying that equally important to discussion and dialogue is the parent's lifestyle. This is another form of communicating our values to our children. Rav Soloveitchik *zt"l* pointed out that in *Pirkei Avos* we find a repetition of a particular phrase in regard to the various *Tannaim* who taught different ethical lessons: "הוא היה אומר" – He used to say." The Rav suggested that it may well be that the *Tanna* never actually articulated the particular teaching quoted in his name! He never said it, because he did not have to say it. The *Tanna* conveyed the moral teaching through action, rather than word. "His persona itself, his essence, used to say."

If we talk to our teenagers about *kedusha*, but we do not live a life of *kedusha*, how meaningful is that discussion? They will see right through it. If we talk about *tznius*, but our own behavior is arrogant and immodest, what value will that have? How we interact with members of the opposite sex who are not our spouses will make an impression. We don't have to talk as much about *kedusha* if we live *kedusha* in our homes, if our kids see how their parents compromise with one another, how they don't raise their voices to one another, how they treat one another with respect. This is הוא

היה אומר. The modeling of proper behavior is a powerful means of communication, one which our children are more likely to imitate than the very different messages they see on television and in movies.

The *gemara* teaches that we should speak *belashon nekiya*, using refined language (*Pesachim* 3a). As we have noted, there is nothing dirty about the word “sex” or the sexual act when done *bekedusha*. Yet, Ya’akov *Avinu* says, “אם יהיה אלקים עמדי ושמרני בדרך הזה אשר אנכי הולך ונתן לי לחם – לאכל ובגד ללבש – If G-d will be with me, will guard me on this way that I am going; will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear” (*Bereishis* 28:20). *Chazal* (*Bereishis Rabba* 70:4) comment that the phrase “bread to eat” implies that Yaakov requested that *Hashem* protect him from *giluy arayos*. Ya’akov asked for assistance in finding a proper *shidduch* as a means of freeing himself from the temptation of promiscuity (see *Eitz Yosef*).

Similarly, Yisro says to his daughters, regarding Moshe who had saved them at the well, “ואיו למה זה עזבתן את האיש קראן לו ויאכל לחם – Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Summon him and let him eat bread” (*Shemos* 2:20). Rashi interprets “let him eat bread” as, “perhaps he will marry one of you.” Again, the Torah is teaching us to speak *belashon nekiya*.

It is not the case that we are ashamed of mentioning sexual matters explicitly. Rather, the private way in which we confront sexuality is a reflection of the fact that we are dealing with a matter of extreme holiness. In Judaism, intimacy is not a relationship founded on externalities. It is a way to make the ultimate, profound connection with one’s spouse. We are engaging the *penimiyus*, literally the inner core, of the individual, and this aspect of the person is nothing less than his *kodesh kodashim*.

It is the same in the case of a *sefer Torah*. Obviously, we are proud of our association with this most sacred object, yet we “protect” it with multiple coverings, a *paroches* covering the doors of the *aron hakodesh* and a *mantel* on the *sefer Torah* itself. What is *kadosh* is covered, not out of

shame, but out of **respect**. This understanding forms the basis of the laws of personal *tznius* as well. We must teach this perspective to our children and convey to them our sense of pride in this way of life.

Reish Lakish comments: “בג’ לשונות של חיבה חיבב הקב“ה את” – With three expressions of affection did the Holy One, Blessed be He describe His love for *Klal Yisrael*: with cleaving, as in “ואתם הדבקים בה’ אלקיכם” (Devarim 4:4); with longing, as in “לא מרובכם מכל העמים חשק ה’ בכם” – Not because you are more numerous than all the peoples did *Hashem* long for you” (Devarim 7:7), and with desire, as in “ואשרו אתכם כל הגוים כי תהיו” (Malachi 3:12)” (*Bereishis Rabba* 80:6). What is the source of these three expressions? These are the very expressions that the foul-mouthed, evil Chamor used (כי חפץ, שכם בני חשקה נפשו בבתכם, בבת יעקב, in *Bereishis* 34:3, 34:8, and 34:19) to describe how deeply his son Shechem loved Dina!

Reish Lakish seems to be teaching us a crucial lesson that must be applied to the parenting of our children. In regard to their religious development, the potential exists for very different types of outcomes. As we have seen, the **identical** expressions of affection can be used in the most malevolent and in the most positive of relationships. If we do not steer our children in the right direction, there is a high probability of a poor outcome, and there therefore exists an exceedingly great responsibility upon parents. Parents have to be proactive in transmitting – without shame and without guilt – their fullest understanding of Judaism’s perspective of sexuality. We possess, *baruch Hashem*, a beautiful “product,” the potential for a fulfilling lifestyle that gives all of us the opportunity to create worlds and practice the highest ethical standards – in other words, to be truly G-d-like. We would do well for our dear children if we were to share this *masora* with them.