

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SEXUAL-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN SINGLE ORTHODOX
JEWISH MEN

by

YAAKOV (KOBY) FRANCES

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of
New York

2008

UMI Number: 3325403

Copyright 2008 by
Frances, Yaakov (Koby)

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI[®]

UMI Microform 3325403
Copyright 2008 by ProQuest LLC
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest LLC
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

© 2008

YAAKOV (KOBY) FRANCES

All Rights Reserved

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Jeffrey Rosen, Ph.D.

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Maureen O'Connor, Ph.D.

Date

Executive Officer

Elliot Jurist Ph.D.

Henry Kronengold Ph.D.

David Pelcovitz Ph.D.

Lissa Weinstein Ph.D.
Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SEXUAL-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN SINGLE ORTHODOX
JEWISH MEN

by

Yaakov (Koby) Frances

Advisor: Jeffrey Rosen, Ph.D.

This qualitative study focuses on both the phenomenological and psychological experience of sexual-religious conflict for single, heterosexual men in the Jewish Orthodox community. These men, whose lives tend to revolve around dating and intimate relationships, adhere to a religious system of law that prohibits masturbation and all forms of premarital physical and sexual intimacy. Given their upbringing in a religious culture that is typically silent and punitive about sexuality, and their simultaneous exposure to the permissive sexual norms of modern life, sexual-religious conflict may be especially amplified for individuals in this cohort whose single years are protracted.

In the course of 1-2 semi-structured, recorded interviews, ten single men over the age of 24, who identified themselves as both Jewish Orthodox and heterosexual, were asked to reflect upon their sexual-religious conflicts throughout development. Six of these narratives were selected for their psychological depth to be transcribed and organized chronologically and thematically in order to create a coherent narrative. These narratives were examined using three psychoanalytically informed, qualitative lenses called “defenses, adaptations and compromises”, “integration of self representations”, and “sexual ownership”.

Findings revealed several distinct types of conflicts that participants experienced as well as several specific ways in which they behaviorally and psychologically managed, coped with and resolved these. These conflicts and resolutions were shown to impact, and also be impacted by,

important life events, their religious identity and development, their intimate relationships and their overall psychological wellbeing.

An underlying psychological theme of sexual religious conflict emerged: the individual struggle to consciously attribute sexual feelings and actions to oneself and to see one's own will, participation and pleasure behind them. This process called "sexual ownership" is described as a developmental trajectory with three distinct phases that determines the types of resolutions, defenses and coping mechanisms an individual uses to handle sexual-religious conflicts at a given point in time for a given set of sexual experiences. The particular phase privileged by an individual will create corresponding reverberations, both psychologically and religiously. While the distinct religious-sexual restrictions of Jewish Orthodox singles allow this psychological storyline to emerge in clearer relief, the process of sexual ownership is considered a universal task of sexual development.

Acknowledgments

This project has spanned the course of many years and many life experiences. While researching and writing this dissertation has been one of the most personally fulfilling achievements of my life, it has also been an extremely frustrating, challenging and lonely process; one that could not have taken place without the advice, friendship, support and love of so many.

First, a special debt of gratitude to Jennie Rosenfeld, Ph.D., who helped both inspire and shape this project when she asked me years ago to co-lead a conference presentation on this very topic. I have learnt a great deal from your courage and integrity. I probably would not be where I am today without you. I hope that this thesis provides you with even more evidence of the value and timeliness of your work with Tzelem and with the Orthodox Jewish community. I hope we will find ways of continuing to collaborate together.

To Jeff Rosen, Ph.D., my intuition that you would be the right Chair for this very challenging and personal endeavor was thankfully right on target. You have been able to both mirror and contain my passion and interest in this topic throughout. The clarity of your thinking combined with the holding power of your conceptualizing prowess has helped to guide, enrich and refine this very personal theoretical and psychological study. You have been immensely supportive in offering your time, wisdom and especially reassurance when the “going got tough”. I have learnt a great deal from you in terms of how to be a better thinker, writer and person.

To the rest of my dissertation committee, Elliot Jurist Ph.D., Lissa Weinstein Ph.D., Henry Kronengold Ph.D. and David Pelcovitz, Ph.D., I could not have assembled a smarter, finer and more interesting group of therapists, professors and advisors. I consider myself incredibly lucky to have worked closely with each of you and can’t thank you enough for offering your insight, critique and unique voice to this project in a way that always felt thoughtful, clear, sincere and respectful.

To my parents, Ima and Aba, who have literally been with me and behind me throughout the ups and down of graduate school(s), up to and including the completion of this dissertation. Your support was especially noteworthy given the personal nature of the topic I've chosen to study for my thesis – one that I had always felt you respected and encouraged despite it not being easily amenable to family dinner conversation. Thank you for all your boundless love and support.

Also I am grateful for the ongoing encouragement of my siblings Yael and Tamar, my brother n'laws Rafi and Eli, my nieces, Avital and Atara and nephews Rafi and Noam. You have all in your own unique ways brought color, fun and much welcome distraction to my studies. Though you have watched this process unfold from somewhat of a distance, your love, respect and appreciation have been very meaningful and have helped to smooth out the bumps along the way.

To my grandparents, Opa and Oma, my inspiration and role models who I love dearly: thank you for being so giving, proud and supportive. Your love has meant a great deal to me and knowing how much *nakhas* this gives you, is part of what makes the completion of this project so meaningful.

And to my New York “family”, each of whom have taken such an active interest and role in shaping this thesis: Shira Kaufman, Shalom Goldberg, Yossi Nissenfeld, Ben Beres, Solomon Kalkstein, Yossi Horowitz, Ethan Eisenberg, Josh Hane and Maya Yaar-Golan. To Amir Perlson, you have been an incredible friend and philosophical Starbucks partner. You were a major help in the beginning of this process. To Neil Lester, you have been a very close friend and support over these years. You were one of the few people who I could intelligently talk to about my thesis topic as it unfolded, from both a personal and theoretical angle. I cannot thank you enough for your friendship. To Eli Greenbaum, friend, editor and humus-maker-extraordinaire: thank you for being so much fun and for always being there with my craziness. You have really been through it all with me.

Finally, to the love of my life, Debbie Marton: from day one that we were together, you have supported me and have looked up to me. I so much appreciate how you have considered this project to be interesting and important both for me and in general. It was especially meaningful and amazing that you were present at my oral defense, where you bore witness to the climax of this process and also presented me with my first of many music cards. Thank you for being the light of my life and an endless source of learning, smiles and laughs.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Research Context	1
Statement of Problem.....	1
Overview of Study.....	2
Contribution of Study.....	4
Statement of Personal Interest.....	6
Literature Review.....	11
Premarital Sexuality, Religion and Culture.....	12
Jewish Sexuality.....	14
Sexual Conflict.....	18
CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY.....	28
Background of Research Population.....	28
Orthodox Judaism.....	28
Judaism and Sexuality.....	29
Premarital Sexual Laws.....	31
Sex Education.....	32
Orthodox Singles.....	34
Three Psychoanalytic Lenses of Sexual-Conflict.....	38
Fred Pine.....	40
Lens 1: Sexual Ownership.....	43
Lens 2: Integration of Self Representations.....	45
Lens 3: Defenses, Compromises and Adaptations.....	51
Procedures.....	60
CHAPTER THREE: PRESENTATION OF DATA.....	61
Introduction.....	61
1. Dan.....	62
2. Jacob.....	76
3. David.....	99
4. Mark.....	124
5. Joel.....	151
6. Isaac.....	171
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS.....	206
I Conditions.....	206
II Anxieties.....	211
A. External/Social.....	212
B. Impulse/Desire.....	216

C. Religion and Religious Identity.....	222
D. Personal and Ethical Concerns.....	227
E. Deviance.....	230
III Defenses, Compromises and Adaptations.....	233
A. Behavioral Approaches.....	233
B. Phase 1: Denial and Dissociation.....	238
C. Phase 2: Coping.....	249
D. Phase 3: Acceptance.....	266
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	275
Introduction.....	275
Recruitment of Study Participants.....	280
Principles of Sexual Ownership.....	281
Phase 1: Denial and Dissociation.....	286
Phase 2: Coping.....	291
Phase 3: Acceptance.....	296
Jacob: Case Example.....	301
Factors that Influence Sexual Ownership.....	307
Other Research Findings.....	314
Conclusions.....	317
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	323

Chapter One: Introduction

Research Context

Statement of Problem

According to mainstream orthodox law, premarital sexual activity of any kind is forbidden. This includes not only actual intercourse but also any form of affectionate touch between men and women and also masturbation for men only. (Rosenheim, 1980, Klein, 1994, Schachter 2004) Historically speaking, Judaism had always encouraged men and women to marry young so that one's single life, and the potential for sexual impropriety, would be limited (Biale, 1997). But following the trends of general society and of the general Jewish population, orthodox men and women are currently marrying later and less than they have ever before. (2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey) The situation that had successfully been avoided for generations of Jewish life is now in full bloom. Thousands of orthodox single men and women who strongly believe in and abide by their code of law and tradition, are now engaged in a struggle to balance their adherence to orthodox Jewish practice with their sexuality.

While the type and frequency of actual sexual behaviors that orthodox men and women engage in is worthy of exploring, this study is concerned with both the phenomenological and psychological experience of sexual-religious conflict, assuming that most single people, no matter what their actual sexual values and practices are, will encounter such a conflict during these years, whether interpersonal or autoerotic. The experience of sexual religious conflict is explored using qualitative interviews of single men who identify themselves as orthodox and heterosexual. The study, therefore, assumes that men in this population will share specific and identifiable anxieties and

resolutions towards sexual-religious conflict even across their wide array of sexual practices.

Despite the fact that this struggle is experienced by so many and that it might arouse a host of religious, existential and psychological quandaries, there is very little research on how individuals psychologically manage their sexuality amidst these prohibitions. The literature about sexual-religious conflict is rather scant. As we will discuss, general psychology and psychoanalysis does not address this as an independent subject of inquiry and there is surprisingly little research in both empirical and religious literatures. While researchers have acknowledged the difficulties in collecting data on sexuality within orthodox Judaism, mostly on account of the very taboos that are trying to be explored (Tobin, 1997, Klein, 1994), one would have expected more data to be available specifically because it is a topic of great psychological weight and communal concern. The following qualitative study of sexual-religious conflict is considered to be a starting point for this discussion.

Overview of Study:

This study will explore the experiences of sexuality among Orthodox single men with specific attention to the psychological processes that mediate between ones' sexual thoughts, feelings and behaviors and the individualized set of prohibitions which restrict them. Because of their affiliation with both religious and secular worlds, it is suggested that these individuals may struggle intensely with expressing and accepting their sexual feelings, wishes, impulses and behaviors while also maintaining a connection to their religion that proscribes these. Pilot data, as well as several research studies (Tobin 1997, Schachter 2004), have also endorsed this likelihood.

Individuals will be interviewed about their experience of sexual-religious conflict. These narratives will be recorded, transcribed and then examined for the most prominent psychological themes. This analysis will utilize three psychoanalytically informed lenses to best capture these themes. These lenses include “defenses, adaptations and compromises”, “integration of self representations”, and “sexual ownership” - constructs which have previously been used to examine sexuality in the literature as we will discuss. I suggest that these lenses provide the most useful framework for understanding how individuals experience and manage sexual-religious conflicts both in our population and for anyone who struggles with these same conflicts.

The main questions posed by these three lenses are as follows: Defenses, adaptations and compromises: What defenses, adaptations or other compromises are called upon before, during and after sexual experiences if each one is tinged with sin? Integration of Self Representations: How do individuals understand and organize their “sexual self” if sexual thoughts, feelings and actions are considered at odds with their value system and religious way of life? Sexual Ownership: How are individuals struggling to accept and own their sexual ideation and actions? While each lens represents a separate inquiry, relationships between them will be illustrated and discussed.

The thesis is organized as follows: The first section will establish the contributions of such a study while contextualizing it in my own experience as a single Orthodox male. Afterwards, I present my findings within the general psychology and psychoanalytic literatures that deals with aspects of sexual conflict as these support the goals of this study.

Following this discussion, a methodology section will describe basic sociological and cultural features of Orthodox Judaism, with a special emphasis on single men that includes an overview of religious laws and cultural attitudes about sexuality. Following this, I outline the data collection, interview and analysis process. Several psychoanalytic writings are reviewed which establish the justification for using three conceptual analytic lenses to examine narratives of sexual-religious conflict.

The results section presents thematically organized findings along with excerpts to exemplify those themes. The final discussion uses these results to build a more systematic psychological theory of sexual-religious conflicts in single Orthodox Jewish men, which I suggest to be a culturally-specific version of a universal developmental process.

Contribution of Study

There has yet to be a qualitative study that examines the phenomenological experience of sexual-cultural or sexual religious conflict. Such an investigation could yield an enhanced understanding of the affective-cognitive-behavioral pathways traversed in sexual conflict. The insights, findings and further hypothesis that may result from such a study could contribute to the theory of psychosexuality and to clinical psychology, and could benefit the Orthodox community or other religious groups seeking to enhance their understanding of what their constituents may struggle with.

As so many individuals in our own cohort suffer in silence around these issues, a presentation of such research could normalize and contextualize these emotional difficulties, making it an important agent of awareness and empathy. By explicating some of the themes and by providing a deeper insight into the nature of these conflicts as they

are experienced, clinical psychologists may be able to have a more layered and complex understanding of their patients' sexual struggles, which is often what brings them into therapy.

In terms of benefits to the literature, there have been few psychoanalytic theorists after Freud who studied normal sexual development and conflict as its own systematic psychology, and who endeavored, as Freud did, to understand the internal dialogue between instinct and transgression. While psychoanalysis had formulated much theory about instinctual conflict in general, and had sometimes addressed aspects of sexual development and pathology through case studies of individual patients, few writings have theoretically mapped out a developmental psychology of sexual conflict and how it exists as an ongoing experience.

Considering how other cultures and religions may also have restrictions or attitudes that convey negative attitudes about sexuality, especially premarital sex, this study's benefits could go well beyond the Orthodox single men. Even beyond religion, it is well understood how in our current society the enculturation of humans into sexuality often proceeds without open discussion and frequently occurs in the context of negative emotions and negative injunctions (Mosher 1979, LoPiccolo 1994). Children may also experience intense negative feelings around sexuality in response to an often punitive socialization into sexuality by parents (Mosher 1979).

Fears and worries about sexually transmitted disease, pregnancy, acquiring a bad reputation and violating religious law have very much colored the content and flavor of how children, adolescents and adults are educated about their bodies, sexual pleasure and

sexual desire. (Levine, 2002) It would not be surprising if many people found sexuality to be conflicted, dangerous and difficult to manage.

This type of conflict is especially common in modern society where many individuals struggle to understand and hold onto sexual morals and values, whether religious or not, in a culture saturated in sex. A study that enables individuals who have few permissible sexual outlets to describe the felt experience of this struggle, would allow us to gain a deeper understanding of what many people experience.

As mentioned, there are very few phenomenological studies of sexual experience, including clinical case studies of heterosexual men or women emotionally distressed over sexual conflict, with or without religious undertones. Though the difficulty in finding individuals who are willing to talk openly about their sexuality is well documented in the literature (Tobin, 1997), one would expect an increase in this kind of research given the increasing openness of Western culture. By carving out hypotheses about sexuality that is grounded in qualitative data, I would hope to fill this gap and also hope to inspire greater interest and research on this topic.

Statement of Personal Interest

My interest in this exploration stems largely from my own experiences of sexual conflict as both a Jewish Orthodox male and single adult. I was raised in a Jewish Orthodox family who placed much emphasis on involvement with both secular and religious worlds. My home was enthusiastic and passionate about Jewish holidays, laws and values, while at the same time being appreciative of academia, politics, the arts and popular culture such as television and radio. Overtly, my parents seemed to be very concerned about my exposure to aggression through popular culture, which pervaded

television and movies. When I was young they did not allow me to watch cartoons that had violence and, as a teenager, they made sure I did not watch action movies that were popular among my peers.

But they were less vigilant about my exposure to sexuality, whether through television, magazines or rock music. Yet clearly they had some discomfort with it. When as a family we watched movies with sexual material, my father would characteristically gasp, “Oy Vei!”, while my mother warned “Ok kids, turn away”. Clearly sex was something prohibited, but also enticing and special.

During my childhood and adolescence the experiences, questions, worries, and desires I had about my body, my actions and my own sexual feelings were largely kept inside and occasionally shared with peers. I did not necessarily have a language to articulate these experiences, nor did I consider them to be normal and permitted. As I developed a greater sense of the religious taboos and prohibitions surrounding sexuality, I was especially careful to keep sexual desire and curiosity to myself, lest others see me as shameful, pathetic and sinful as I sometimes felt inside.

In terms of education, my parents occasionally delivered awkward speeches about sex, puberty, masturbation and girlfriends, which, though memorable, had no beneficial impact that I am aware of. Several times, I was mildly reprimanded when my curiosity about sex took me to Rated-R movies. This only confirmed that sexual curiosity and pleasure was indeed abnormal and immoral. The Orthodox elementary school I attended remained silent about all things sexual despite the fact that we studied passages of the Bible or Torah that depicted graphic sexual relationships both illicit and holy.

As a teenager in high school, my Yeshiva talked about masturbation and illicit thoughts in punitive, generalized ways that did nothing to tame or normalize the effect of my raging adolescent hormones. Masturbation, they recited from ancient texts, was like murder and it brought destruction and chaos into the world. Even through late adolescence I harbored intense fantasies that masturbation had somehow affected the cosmos or angered God so much that it was partially because of these actions that natural disasters and terrorist attacks continued to occur. I felt like a criminal who must be the only one in the world burdened with these dangerous feelings, unable to tame, control or speak of them.

As I grew older and had more intimate relationships, I continued to often be consumed with guilt, shame and internal conflict. I remember how hard I tried to keep my sexuality away from my otherwise ordered, predictable religious life and my self-perception as a good person. In my earliest intimate relationships, I will never forget how utterly alone and afraid I felt, unable to speak to anyone about my fears and worries.

Though I found ways to cope and perhaps adjusted to the pain in some way, many of my experiences continued to be torturously trapped inside. Only later did I truly feel comfortable sharing my feelings and experiences about such an important part of my life, first with my therapist and then with peers and eventually even with rabbis and Jewish leaders. The fact that I could speak aloud what was screaming in my own mind for so long was immensely relieving and empowering. It allowed me to embrace both my sexuality and religion in much more profound and meaningful ways.

I started to become fascinated with understanding the processes that modulated my own sexual desires. Throughout development, I had very different ways of viewing

my sexual feelings and behaviors. At times I felt like a hopeless heap of garbage for acting out on urges. I would do everything possible to separate those moments of “weakness” from the otherwise normal part of my day. Other times I felt pathetic and ashamed of sexual fantasies that burned inside my head, feeling like I would be punished for having them. I felt desperate and out of control. And at many other times, I simply didn’t care.

I often wished that the sexual part of me could simply be silenced once and for all. Sexual thoughts and feelings often felt like they did not come from my own mind, but were aggressively imposed on me from the outside. I tried to figure out what Judaism and God expected of me, how I could still be an acceptable Jew in my own eyes if such a large part of me acted in ways that my religion disapproved of.

The large amounts of discomfort with these feelings and behaviors made it hard for me to accept the fact that sexuality was something important that resided in me and that I might even be able to think about it consciously. Restraint became relegated to a less prominent place and instead, I became attuned to sexual thoughts, wishes and fantasies in different ways. Realizing they were ultimately productions of my own mind and psyche, I was able to make sense of them, negotiate with them and take greater responsibility.

I started to become more comfortable accepting the fact that I was a sexual person who had feelings and urges that did not, as I once thought, have an isolated existence from the rest of who I was. This helped me to be kinder to myself about the “mistakes” I made within sexuality, realizing that I was not necessarily burdened under the impossible demands of these forces. My sexual feelings and interests, which was a normal part of my

identity, could also exist without necessarily needing to be expressed. I also become more able to accept the fact that I was religiously imperfect and that it was normal for my single years to pose a particular challenge in this specific domain. I thought more about sexuality in relation to my evolving self that included my personal values, relationship and other internal struggles. I did not have to cordon that part of myself off from my waking life. It was not evil to have this residing in me.

This process of introspection led me to explore how my environment had shaped this part of me. Messages transmitted by the media, for example, often objectified sex as a thing in itself, unrelated to psychological motives, life circumstances, religious feelings and actual love and intimacy. Magazines, movies and television, through titillation and rampant displays of unclothed women, reinforced how touching, nudity and sex were to be most enjoyed with no strings attached, devoid of intimacy, dissociated from one's psychology, commoditized and fetishized. It only seemed to reinforce what every other avenue of experience was saying – that sex is dirty, that we are victims of our sexual urges, that sex was an end in itself.

Aside from being detached from self, the media also presented sex as pleasurable precisely because it was forbidden, naughty and illicit as if the sin and enjoyment were inextricably linked. And even in these explicit portrayals, sex still needed to be suggestively hidden rather than talked about or even shown in the context of intimacy and tenderness.

Ironically, this view of sexuality also seemed to permeate the ethos of my religious culture, which explicitly taught laws about every other aspect of life no matter how gory or personal, but with sexuality was either silent or fiercely damning. In my

home, neighborhood and school, traces of sex were naturally everywhere. Yet everyone squirmed and no one talked. That sexuality, even in my religious-cultural life, was isolated from the rest of human experience, was exactly aligned with what my secular culture conveyed to me.

This fascination with my own psychological experience, led me to delve further into understanding the incredible range of emotions and psychological maneuvers that can be elicited when love and God start to seem at odds with one another, when basic human physical contact becomes an act of rebellion, or a sinful mistake that requires deep repentance. Because one of the most important themes of my personal and religious development was the process of how I understood my sexuality, I wanted to explore psychological theories that could contextualize these experiences. I also became especially curious about other people's sexual struggles and whether or not they echoed my own.

Literature Review

This section will review two broad literatures; the intersection of premarital sexuality and religion and writings about sexual conflict. Both bodies of literature provide ample justification for the importance of this study and for the need to identify psychological paths of reconciliation between desire and prohibition. Following these reviews, other works are discussed which provide an initial foundation to understanding sexuality through three analytic lenses which include: "Defense, adaptation and compromise", "Integration of self representations" and "Sexual ownership".

Premarital Sexuality, Religion and Culture

In perhaps the first mention of a relationship between sexual activity and religiosity, Alfred Kinsey (Kinsey 1948, 1953) and his associates reported greater limitations of sexual behavior on the part of religiously active persons than those less involved in their faith. (Wulf, 1984) Researchers taking interest in these findings launched into quantitative inquiries to ascertain features of religiosity that determined sexual liberalism both in attitude and behavior. (Glenn and Weaver, 1979, Hunt 1974, Singh, 1980, Tavis and Sadd, 1975) These studies demonstrated strong negative correlations between levels of premarital intercourse and religiosity as it was self reported along different dimensions of observance.

Wulf (1984) proposes to look at religion in more meaningful ways by applying Allport's (1966) intrinsic-extrinsic religious dichotomy to specify the relationship between religious level and premarital sex attitudes and behaviors. Intrinsic faith refers to strong identifications with the moral ethical values of traditional Christianity while extrinsic faith is more socially oriented and maintained for the sake of security. In a study of evangelical Christian singles, Wulf found that those who use their religion as a moral guide to everyday living, tend to be relatively conservative in the sexual domain, while those whose religiosity is more extrinsically based are more likely to approve of and engage in a wide variety of sexual activities.

Wulf's study shows the evolving flavor of empirical research, which moves closer to understanding the quality of one's religion as it interacts with sexual attitudes and behaviors as opposed to only examining quantitative, behavioral measures of it. If the different ways people experience and internalize religion has bearing on one's sexuality, many others lines of investigation are then also implied about how these two parts of the

self interact and shape one another. Again in the empirical research, Thornton & Camburn (1989) substantiate the bidirectional effects of religion and sexuality.

Lopiccolo, (1994) a sex therapist and prolific sexuality researcher, notes the impact of the current Judeo-Christian sexual ethic on the formation of male sexual dysfunctions. Negative attitudes on sexuality, which permeate the ethos of these religions, he claims, may foster unusual attitudes and feelings about sex. Some of his male patients, for example, find their sexually expressive partners to be repugnant and immoral, while being sexually interested in women who are not their mates. Lopiccolo specifically sees intercourse as the most religiously shunned sexual act, which often becomes the battlefield of sexual conflict in couples. Negative sexual attitudes are sometimes internalized so rigidly by some patients, he says, that efforts to reverse these can be perceived as attacks on their entire value system. These insights provide a window into the kinds of powerful impressions religious attitudes can have on individuals, which often brings them into contact with therapy.

It is worth noting an emerging literature from Christian psychologists that deals with the sexual struggles of single men and women who are seeking relationships, intimacy and sexual expression while trying to uphold their religious values. Interestingly, no other organized religion or culture has addressed these topics with the same level of concern. While many of these writings provide religious guidance to those who struggle with Christian values of sexuality, Rosenau (1982) in particular, approaches the topic somewhat more academically as he delineates common sexual compromises that individuals choose while torn between the sexual attitudes of their liberal culture and of their religion.

In response to this struggle, Rosenau's mentions how people use repression and denial to either squander their sexual appetites or convince themselves that sex is unimportant. He also refers to the ways that people isolate their sexuality from other needs and emotions, such as the need to be touched, the need for acceptance and connection, recreational enjoyment or to master other anxieties and conflicts. Rosenau does not expand on both the defensive processes he identifies and this lack of sexual integration that he believes is related to how sexuality is taught in Western religious communities.

Jewish Sexuality

There is a small qualitative literature on sexuality within Jewish populations. In one study, Coyle (2001) conducted open ended interviews with men who identified as both gay and Jewish to inquire about their identity conflicts. Coyle's stated objective is to understand the nature and source of this conflict as well as the methods and ramifications of the individual's resolution. Several general themes are distilled from the responses based on his interview. For example, participants expressed a long-standing preoccupation with their conflicted identities and their felt exclusion from Jewish law, community and family, which they claimed had caused much emotional distress. Fragmentation was also a notable theme in this study as interviewees commented about how sometimes they had to "leave their sexual identity at the door" of their synagogue because of the striking internal contradiction of identities.

The results of the study underscore the kinds of emotional and social challenges that confront those whose sexuality is proscribed and whose marital or sexual status excludes them from conventional religious community life, something which Orthodox

singles share with homosexual populations, albeit much less intensely. But Coyle does not enter into an exploration of the phenomenology and psychology of sexual activities for homosexual men, which would potentially contribute to an understanding of how any individual, including heterosexual men, experiences and manages their sexuality when it is religiously or culturally sanctioned.

Tobin (1997) examines sexually active heterosexual, observant Jews across Reform, Conservative and Orthodox denominations to “examine factors that may characterize the religious Jew who engages in premarital intercourse, a behavior which goes against the sexual ethic of his or her tradition and community.” (p. 5) Tobin studies a cohort of Jewish single university students to quantitatively measure their attitudes about premarital intercourse, levels of sexual guilt and quality of religiosity to determine if these factors, in particular, have any correlation with premarital intercourse or abstinence.

Tobin poses questions in her study that are similar to our own, as she states, “one is left to ponder how the religious person who wishes to remain abstinent before marriage deals with frequent exposure to the liberal sexual ethic of the secular culture in the media and on the street”. (p. 3) She discovers that while both sexually active and sexually abstinent individuals hold similarly conservative attitudes towards sexual permissiveness, sexually active individuals have less sexual guilt and lower levels of religiosity. This, she concludes, makes sexually active observant singles less likely to experience “inner conflict between the mandates of their religion regarding sexual intercourse and the decision to engage in it”. She adds, “This person would then be less likely to seek clinical or pastoral counseling to deal with this issue”. (p. 87)

As Tobin does not define “inner conflict” it is difficult to engage in a discussion of this particular conclusion. For example, conflict can take conscious and unconscious forms and can manifest as guilt, anxiety, depression, fragmentation, identity diffusion or somatic disturbances to name but a few, all of which can easily lead to emotional distress and to counseling. But her findings do leave some questions that can be studied further.

For example, why would sexually active participants have similar conservative attitudes towards sexual intercourse as sexually abstinent ones, but feel less guilty about their experiences? Tobin explains how other psychological factors would account for this such as rationalization, which individuals may employ to “subvert or suppress the inner conflict between the demands of their religion and their own desires, and thus experience less sexual guilt”, (p. 12) though intellectually they would maintain their conservative sexual attitudes. While rationalization is offered only as a single speculation, this research implies that there can be many psychological maneuvers that could enable individuals to remove their conflict and guilt, which may include repression, denial, compartmentalization or dissociation.

This illustrates the complex psychological terrain that Tobin is entering which requires more elaboration and specification. While Tobin dips into these questions, a qualitative study of sexual-religious conflict would allow for an experience near account of how sexuality is managed in religiously observant populations.

In the only published journal article to examine the conflict between religion and sexuality in Orthodox Jewish singles, Schachter (2004) asks participants to discuss their religious and sexual development in order to understand how they psychologically maintain a sense of self-continuity and sameness in the face of conflict. Schachter

examines these narratives using Erikson's *identity configuration theory*, which proposes several common psychological configurations depicting the way individuals reconcile conflicts of identity. These categories are discussed theoretically and then applied to the narratives of different respondents.

Schachter underscores how sexual-religious conflicts specifically arouse questions of identity such as how people manage and organize two seemingly contradictory experiences of self. He describes four different ways that individuals manage opposing identities, which include choosing one while suppressing the other, synthesizing both into a new assimilated identity, holding both identities side by side in an imperfect state and a last resolution where the clash of identities is embraced by the person as a sign of their toughness or uniqueness.

While these four categories may prove useful to our own study, our conceptual aims and methods are different than Schachter's who does not address the phenomenology of individuals who feel caught between their religious and sexual lives, but rather, questions of Jewish identity and the perceived flexibility of one's faith, both issues of which are stirred by sexual-religious challenges. The questions of identity that Schachter explores, and the four ways that he sees individuals resolving these, may indeed become central themes of our study as well. But why individuals choose one identity resolution over another and how these choices evolve or interact with other psychological, social and religious variables are questions that we hope to shed more light on.

The literature on premarital sexuality and religion, including those studies looking at Jewish or Orthodox populations, highlight the complexity of the psychological and sexual struggle that religious individuals may be engaged in, which have yet to be

examined through qualitative research. Several psychological compromises and resolutions are alluded to in this literature but these processes are shown to require further exploration.

Sexual Conflict

As Freud may have been the first to formulate a psychology of sexuality and sexual conflict, we will first turn to his theories. Though he wrote extensively about sexuality in many essays, I have used only those devoted specifically to the topic. A brief discussion of his evolving ideas on the relationship between neuroses and sexuality will bring to the fore several important questions that have remained unexplored within psychoanalysis. This will also set the stage for some theoretical possibilities, borrowed from other discussions of sexuality, of how we might begin to understand the psychological processes that occur within sexual conflict.

Within several different essays written between 1900 and 1925, including his classic *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud charts a clinical formulation of psychosexuality, which spans both the theory of sexual psychopathology, sexual development and the dynamics of sexual conflict. As is typical of Freud, many explicit and implicit contradictions, dichotomies and ambiguities punctuate these writings. As one of the first systematic thinkers of psychosexuality, his writings also reveal several attempts to ambitiously connect many aspects of sexual functioning and behavior along several kinds of binaries and continuums.

Throughout these formulations, Freud is clearly searching for an integrated, all-encompassing way of linking aspects of sexuality to one another including perversions, fetishism, invertedness, impotence, sexual neurosis and sexual frigidity, while grounding

these links in development and psychopathology. Anticipating how these sexual norms and peculiarities were somehow interrelated, an understanding of sexuality that was inclusive and conclusive seemed, in the end, to be speculative at best but probably more so inaccurate and incomplete.

What stays constant and central throughout Freud's theories of psychosexuality is his belief in the impact of cultural prohibitions on the formation of psychological illness, though the exact mechanism and contribution of the environment was not always thought about consistently or thoroughly (Lowenfeld, 1970). It is clear from his writings that these prohibitions took the form of religion, formal education and parenting – different versions of authority who transmitted the same disapproving attitudes towards sexual experience, knowledge and curiosity.

Exactly how these attitudes shaped the sexuality of the individual and how sexual experience was psychologically managed by those who internalized these prohibitions remained unexamined both by Freud and psychoanalytic theory. We are thus left with only a beginning understanding of individual experience of sexuality as it exists in conflict with a person's values, prohibitions and sanctions.

Abstinence vs. Repression: While Freud initially believed in the power of behavioral abstinence as leading to various types of sexual problems and psychological neuroses, his later ideas centered on repression – a type of “mental abstinence” that stubbornly refused to entertain any and all types of sexual thoughts and feelings, regardless of the behaviors engaged in.¹ It was this latter model that was most aligned

¹ His ideas linking neurosis with behavioral abstinence seemed to have permeated much of popular Western culture, which continues to perpetuate the stereotype of the neurotic sex-starved virgin in film and literature such as the 40 Year Old Virgin.

with, and that perhaps also propelled his thinking about, the role of the unconscious in neurosis formation.

To illustrate his first formulation of abstinence, Freud's 1908 essay *Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness* discusses the ill effects of abstaining from sexual intercourse.

Under the pressure of education and social demands a suppression of the perverse impulse is indeed attained but it is such a kind as not to be a true one, and can be better described as a miscarriage of suppression.

Inhibition successfully stops the expression but the impulse is still "expressed in other ways which are quite as injurious to the person concerned and make him quite as useless to society...and in this lies the failure of the process. (p. 19)

In this model, the damming up of sexual excitement caused psychic upheaval, rendering the individual useless to his society. These "injuries" might have also included a mass depletion of the person's mental energy, fighting with all his might to suppress sexual urges.

These beliefs led him to conclude that, "the majority of those who compose our society are constitutionally unfit for the task of abstinence." Those who were able to stay abstinent were only successful by indulging in "masturbation and other similar means of satisfaction which are connected with the auto-erotic sexual activities of early childhood" (p. 26) Though success in abstaining is achieved, however, other harms result which cause "numerous forms of neurosis and psychosis which are conditional on a regression of the sexual life to its infantile form." (p. 26) Freud's prognosis for sexual conflict was,

therefore, either to have illicit sexual intercourse and be healthy or to suppress urges and become an infantile masturbator or a neurotic mess.

The appearance of his second model of neuroses in this essay is foreshadowed. “Extreme measures however are more successful in effecting repression of the instinct than are moderate ones” (p. 24) His use of the word “repression” in this earlier statement indicates the beginnings of a different kind of sexual theory, one which was less concerned about drive tension and release, then about intrapsychic tension and the strain that this had on consciousness.

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud makes this shift explicit. His attention shifts away from abstinence and turns more towards how the mind abstains from thinking about and feeling its sexual desires. Intrapsychic sexual feelings and ideas as they were formed in fantasy, were judged by the mind to be prohibitive, illicit and shameful. Renouncing these fantasies would lead to various neurotic manifestations.

Our study of the perversions has shown us that the sexual instinct has to struggle against certain mental forces which act as resistances and of which shame and disgust are the most prominent. It is permissible to suppose that these forces play a part in restraining that instinct within the limits that are regarded as normal. ... (p. 28) The character of hysterics shows a degree of sexual repression in excess of the normal quantity, an intensification of resistance against the sexual instinct (which we have already met with in the form of shame, disgust and morality) and what seems like an instinctive aversion on their part to any intellectual consideration of sexual problems. As a result of this in especially marked

cases, the patients remain in complete ignorance of sexual matters right into the period of sexual maturity. (p. 30)

The attitude of shame, disgust and morality – sentiments used repeatedly throughout this volume – were the building blocks of intrapsychic sexual conflict leading to repression and ultimately neurosis. It was this contempt towards ones' own natural impulses, thoughts and feelings – products of the mind and not behaviors – that was what led to repression and therefore long-term psychological damage. Torn between an exaggerated sexual craving and the restrictive forces of “shame, disgust and morality”, an individual sought to evade this conflict by transforming libidinal impulses into symptoms through repression. The symptoms of hysteria became the product of this conflict. Ultimately, the psyche sought to relinquish its sexual feelings as vehemently as it perceived them to be abnormal, disgusting or bad.

In this particular essay Freud marks the sinister stance of religion, parenting and education as the driving forces of this self-contempt. For example concerning education, he remarks:

In so far as educators pay any attention at all to infantile sexuality they behave exactly as though they shared our views as to the construction of the moral defensive forces at the cost of sexuality and as though they knew that sexual activity makes a child ineducable: for they stigmatize every sexual manifestation by children as a vice without being able to do much against it. (p. 45)

These childhood attitudes towards sexuality, Freud believed, continued to, “persist in a great number of people throughout their adult life”. (p. 69)

Though these writings predate the introduction of the “superego”, Freud even here acknowledges that cultural inhibitions simply echoed what was already organically predetermined.

It is during this period of total or only partial latency that are built up the mental forces which are later to impede the course of the sexual instinct and like dams restrict its flow – disgust, feelings of shame and the claims of aesthetic and moral ideals. One gets the impression from civilized children that the construction of these dams is a product of education and no doubt education has much to do with it. But in reality this development is organically determined and fixed by heredity and it can occasionally occur without any help at all from education. Education will not be trespassing beyond its appropriate domain if it limits itself to following the lines which have already been laid down organically and to impressing them more clearly and deeply. (Freud Three Theories p. 43)

Even if organically predetermined, education, or religion for that matter, would only solidify this sexual self-contempt. But regardless of the original source, what is important is the end result which was an antipathy and displeasure towards ones own sexual body, desires, fantasies, interests and feelings. These deeply impressed attitudes created fertile ground for gross psychological damage.

Freud’s ideas about sexuality and culture, and specifically how these interacted in the individual, were an important introduction to our understanding of sexual conflict. No one before Freud had linked cultural attitudes with individual psychopathology in such pointed and sophisticated ways and no other theory had placed sexual education,

abstinence and repression at the center of various sexual and psychological problems. Though we have a sense of how repression works, why it is used and why it causes psychological damage, we don't quite have a sense of how a person psychologically manages their sexuality on a day to day level when they have internalized this "shame, disgust and morality".

If Freud understood sexual conflict as having arisen from one's shame and disgust towards their sexuality, planted by culture and organic forces, and if this was the essential building block towards his theory of repression and superego, it seems remarkable that few after him have stopped to examine the vicissitudes of how this plays out in development and in ongoing sexual experiences, particularly when many modern societies continue to educate in the same negative ways as were common in Freud's time. Perhaps this gap in theory is part of a larger gap in psychoanalysis, where the study of normal sexual development and functioning appears to be sparse.

Shmiderberg (1933) discusses this in saying, "But psychoanalysis has occupied itself to a comparatively small extent with the psychological problems of normal sexual activity. (p. 224). Forty years later these remarks are echoed by Nancy Chodorow (1978) who in her forward to Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* writes:

Psychoanalytic commentators note these days that the place of sexuality in psychoanalysis has been inappropriately diminished and remains hard to determine. None of the elaborations, critiques or revisions is comparable in scope or depth to the theoretical and clinical developments that have extended and transformed all other aspects of the Freudian corpus, and none of these latter developments itself offers us a theory of sexuality or

indeed even makes sexuality a central point of interest...the 1905-1923 developmental theory of sexual phases and infantile sexuality has either been tacitly relegated to a place of secondary importance in the overall schema of development or it has been left fundamentally unchanged. (p. xvi)

Considering that Chodorow also acknowledges how much anxiety is experienced by clinicians around sexuality (p. xviii) her observations of psychoanalysis neglecting to continue the tradition Freud started, accentuate the need for an expansion of these theories as they would apply in our current culture.

Despite this void in the literature, there have been some minor discussions of sexual conflict since Freud. Lowenfeld (1970) in exploring Freud from a more modern perspective acknowledges that though the repressive forces of culture have now been lifted, man continues to suffer greatly on account of the new sexual freedoms, such as by developing other character neuroses and psychosomatic manifestations. (p. 591)

This, he claims, was what Freud essentially meant when he decried the propagators of sexual repression, but at the same time, expressed concern over less guarded sexual attitudes, as Freud states “Human civilization rests upon...the restriction of our instincts...Woe if they should be set loose!” (Freud 1925)

Menninger (1974), in another psychoanalytically informed article to address sexual conflict from a more “modern” perspective, discusses the impact of cultures’ sexual openness on a person’s sexual decisions. He claims that the wide availability of sexual outlets combined with the popularized notions that both masculinity and health are maintained by being sexually active, creates the ideal opportunity for sex to be used in

avoiding thoughtful decision making and conscious struggle with anxieties and conflicts. Sexual activity, he discusses, offers an easy way for “persuading, demanding, exploiting (and) motivating.” (p. 56)

Especially for young adults struggling with developmentally normal insecurities and worries, and especially in the area of sexuality where “id demands” are extremely potent, sexual behaviors can easily help one to “express and to escape from compelling personal problems”. (p. 59) Menninger’s tone oscillates between self-righteousness and self-help, and is also not driven by theory or attempts to deepen our understanding of sexual conflict. Still, some of his remarks are worth reviewing.

First, unlike Freud, Menninger sees sexual urges as driven by many other needs that are not inherently sexual. In discussing the management of sexual conflict, he sees the ability to consciously think about sexual decisions as the only way to avoid the pitfalls of irresponsible sexual activity. This involves examining ones’ desires and searching for their underlying meaning. If these factors are not made more conscious, he claims, they can lead to “non-decision” sex or externalizing responsibilities.

Though not providing an epistemology of sexual conflict, these insights at least introduce a binary of sexual behavior and management between willful and passive sexuality, the former leading to mastery and responsibility and the latter leading to impulsiveness and externalization. How and why individuals are more or less conscious of their actions and motives however, remains a mystery.

Person (1999) in her book, *The Sexual Century*, distinguishes Freud’s “essentialist” view for a more modern “constructionist” one. While the former model indicates the biologically driven processes of instinct, tension and discharge, the latter

perspective, discussed by Foucault (1978) and others, believes that “each individuals sexual practices and attitudes are shaped and colored by cultural attitudes and directives”, though at the same time, “being grounded in anatomy, physiology and hormonal secretions of the human body”. (p. 14) While her book examines many pieces of “dialogue” between body and culture as it relates to sexual orientation and sexual pathology, there is much less attention to ideas of normative sexual development and conflict, including that which may arise from cultural-religious restrictions.

The need to expand upon these psychoanalytic theories becomes especially important when understanding the experience of individuals caught in between the polar opposite sexual extremes of their environment – those of rampant permissiveness and strict prohibitions, such as that occurs in our research population. Understanding the way these individuals navigate behaviorally and psychologically through sexual experience will shed light on muted variations of this. Both literatures of premarital sexuality and sexual conflict point to the importance of our study as a way to further Freud’s thinking about psychosexuality – a step that psychoanalysis has yet to take.

To refocus, this study will specifically try to uncover how Orthodox Jewish Singles navigate through their sexual desires and actions and how the transmission of sexual violations from early childhood impacts their developing psycho-sexuality. This study proposes to make some advances in this area by analyzing narratives of sexual experiences through three psychoanalytically informed lenses of sexuality. It is hypothesized that the ideas contained in these lenses will help to elucidate the underlying themes of the phenomenology of sexual-religious conflict for these individuals. The justification for employing these lenses is provided in the methodology section.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Background of Research Population

Orthodox Judaism.

This brief discussion will provide some context in which to understand the lives of our research population – Jewish Orthodox singles. Since there are many different stripes of Orthodox Judaism, rather than limiting ourselves to the rituals, lifestyle and social patterns of one particular subgroup, we will focus more broadly on typical features of Orthodox individuals who interact with both with their religious and modern worlds. While some refer to this group as “Modern Orthodox”, we will avoid this label since it has many different meanings and connotations to different people.² Because some individuals who live in “Ultra-Orthodox” and “Hasidic” communities are very much insulated from the secular world, these individuals will not be examined or discussed.

Orthodox individuals who straddle these two worlds simultaneously often encounter deep religious and psychological challenges. Values and norms of the modern and religious worlds can be powerfully inconsistent. Therefore conflicts between commitments, expectations and desires are very familiar to members of this group who are trying to balance their openness to the larger world with a detailed and rigorous religious way of life.

² While used loosely in the Orthodox community to describe those who interact with both religious and secular worlds, Schachter (2004) and Guterman (2006) gives a more detailed context for this particular label which will be briefly summarized. According to Schachter’s review, Modern Orthodoxy originated in 19th Century Western Europe as a consequence of the Enlightenment and the emancipation of Jews. This movement, as opposed to secular, Reform, Conservative and Ultra-Orthodox sought to adhere to traditional religious commitments, including observing the Jewish code of law (Halakha) while at the same time embracing many aspects of modernity, though somewhat ambivalently. Thus, Modern Orthodox individuals are typically involved in a range of simultaneous interaction with their religion and the secular world. This integration of tradition and modernity is sometimes seen as a religious ideal and at other times as a way of preserving religion in the face of secularism. In fact much religious scholarship and community resources have been devoted to address the more conflicted areas of this intersection such as the role of women in religious authority, attitudes towards homosexuality and the media.

In many aspects of Orthodoxy there is the dual experience of secular and religious. Most children in this group are raised by parents who adhere to Orthodox Jewish practice but who also professionally or socially interact with the secular world. Most Orthodox homes contain both Judaica and common media outlets such as TV and radio. Many Orthodox children attend schools with dual secular/Judaica curriculum throughout high school and sometimes even through university. Conflicts between these two worlds, which appear in many areas of life, are often particularly present within the categories of Shabbat observance, relationships with non orthodox individuals, involvement in the cultural world, keeping kosher and sexuality.

Judaism and Sexuality.

Though deserving of its own separate discussion, the history of Judaism's sexual attitudes, laws and stories is rich, complex and the subject of several well known works including Biale's *Eros and the Jews* (1997) and Boyarin's *Carnal Israel* (1995). As an illustration of this complexity, Ancient Jewish History and traditional religion, including Talmudic and Midrashic lore (sacred interpretations and elaborations of the Torah or Jewish Bible) were permeated with sexual injunctions (Gochros, 1986). The history of the early Jews also includes numerous accounts of sacred and profane prostitution, ritual sodomy and masturbation, marriage by capture, sexual "hospitality" and sexual slavery, as well as punitive rape and castration. (Edwardes, 1967) This all existing alongside numerous laws and attitudes protecting the exclusiveness of marital sexuality, many statements governing one's sexual expression outside of marriage, punitive responses to illegitimate sexual behaviors and strict demands on people's sexual thoughts and feelings.

As another illustration of this complexity, Biale (1997) points out the remarkable role that forbidden sexual relationships had in the history and leadership of the Jewish people, despite clear, restrictive textual proscriptions. Adam and Eve were the first to “know each other” and engage in illicit sexual relationships. Jacob married two sisters, which is also forbidden by Jewish Law. Judah, the son of Jacob whom King David descended from, had sexual relations with a prostitute who unbeknown to him, was his own daughter in law, Tamar, in disguise. Moses married a non-Jew. The great King David descended directly from the a sexual relationship that was not only illicit on account of it being premarital, but was also a forbidden union between Boaz, a Jew, and Ruth, a Moabite women explicitly forbidden to the Jewish nation by the Torah. King David is described in the Bible as leading an overly sultry life, taking more wives than the law permits and even arranging for the death of the husband of one of his most sought after sexual conquests.

While the narrative of the Bible often leaves judgments and legal rulings about these and many other incidents ambiguous, and therefore subject to interpretation, the stories are nonetheless revealing of both a sexual discourse that is frank and unapologetic as well as a certain sincerity in its portrayal of Jewish history and it’s holy leaders. One of the most mysterious books of the Bible, called the Song of Songs, describes a love affair in graphic sexual detail, though how Rabbi’s interpreted this work, whether as an actual erotic poem, or as a passionate allegory of man’s relationship to God, and whether they taught this part of the Bible in schools and synagogues, depended on many interactive forces of each particular history and culture.

Biale's book examines the evolving and changing sexual attitudes from the Bible to Modern American Jewry, largely presenting these attitudes within their overall historical and social context, and highlighting the ways secular culture and other religions, nationalities, or General Rabbinical trends had shaped these. According to Biale, Textual Judaism and Cultural Judaism, two disparate components of Judaism, were in constant interaction in the ways that they interpreted and understood each other's views of sexuality. How textual Judaism related to cultural Judaism and vice versa, depended very much on the specific time and place of this interaction. Thus a Jewish view of sexuality is one that takes both cultural and textual aspects of Judaism into consideration, while understanding their interaction in the context of social and historical settings.

Pre-marital sexual laws

Since identifying oneself as Orthodox usually means believing in the validity of Orthodox Law and practice we will review these details. Interpersonally, the restrictions of normative Jewish Orthodox Law prohibit any physical or sexual contact with members of the opposite sex before or outside of marriage. While according to mainstream law there is some allowance for non-intimate physical touch such as handshaking at work, most other forms of extramarital physical contact with the opposite sex remain prohibited. Physical touch with immediate family members is permissible though some stricter authorities prohibit touch between siblings of the opposite sex after a certain age. Whether contact is prohibited with extended family members is also debated among authorities.

Intercourse with another Jew is considered the gravest, most serious violation in the scheme of sexual contact, and is therefore likely to be least common among this cohort. But it is not only physical behaviors that are forbidden. Being alone with one other member of the opposite sex in an enclosed room also violates a well-known prohibition called *Yichud*, since it is also an act of extramarital intimacy that may lead to sexual relations. (Rosenheim, 1980)

In terms of autoerotic behaviors, men are prohibited from masturbating, which includes ejaculation and also touching one's genitals for the sake of pleasure. (Klein, 1994) Women are allowed to masturbate. Sexual feeling, ideation and licentious speech is generally frowned upon by authorities because it might lead to prohibited action or ejaculation, though it is not necessarily an explicit violation (Rosenheim, 1980). In terms of homosexuality, only anal intercourse is strictly forbidden. The details surrounding homosexuality and homosexual activity are complex and beyond the scope of this paper.

Sex-education.

Conversations with peers, educators and Rabbis as well as pilot data, confirm that for the most part, children and adolescents are not formally introduced to either the Jewish laws and values of sexuality, or sexual health information, even in schools with a more sexually active population. Some school teachers might find different ways of addressing aspects of sexuality woven through the material of other classes and teachings. Children and teenagers who are curious about sex, are often inhibited from asking teachers who seem uncomfortable themselves or who they fear would respond negatively to their questions. In many cases children will address their sexual questions

through books, internet, peer interactions and certainly by reading non-verbal expression from family members and teachers.

In some stricter Yeshiva settings laws and attitudes may be transmitted in a directive way that may not necessarily be realistic or psychologically friendly. The laws, along with the exaggeratingly punitive sexual myths found aplenty in the Talmud and other ancient texts, might be presented with little regard for the child's intellectual capacities, inherent needs, desires or questions, as if it were strange to even have those wishes, never mind break the law. These conditions may exaggerate the confusion and emotional whirlwind of adolescent sexual development especially because these normal feelings and bodily changes are not mirrored, normalized or contained by frank and honest discussion but are rather tinged with danger, sin and pathology.³

Other less austere Orthodox educational institutions are less likely to talk about religious laws or the biology and psychology of sexuality, knowing in advance that these restrictions are highly discordant with the actual sexual practices of their student body. Unable to deny the importance of some type of sexual education, however, many schools have devoted some hours to teaching anatomy and safe sex but are either taught by an outside "expert" or a health professional already in the school, both who are often limited in their abilities to answer questions and concerns about the role and attitude of religion in these areas. The seemingly difficult task of bridging Orthodox practice with sexuality,

³ Klein (1974) even considers the stricter Ultra-Orthodox Yeshiva setting to be ideal for cultivating sexual disorders and addictions later in life – symptoms which he claims to be extremely common in the population. While formal research has yet to substantiate this, informal conversations with psychologists and rabbis working with more Ultra-Orthodox populations does point to this likelihood as well, though no one has compared these rates to the general population. But while Klein and others may be correct, no theoretical explanation has been explored or formulated to explain how and why these settings can act as catalysts for these disorders. Such an explanation could provide a much needed understanding of the relationship between sexual development and sexual disorders and how this relationship is impacted by specific types of cultural and educational environments.

has held up many schools from explicitly teaching the Jewish values of sexuality and the tensions that may exist with secular values and attitudes. Therefore, few attempts at embracing these contradictions and tensions have been made.

There is probably much variation in how parents of this population talk to their children. It is likely that, paralleling the stance of Jewish Orthodox education, parents walk the line somewhere between total silence and uncomfortable, educational discussion of sexual right and wrong. One would hope that a certain portion of parents could talk comfortably with children about their bodies and about sexual desire and activity but sadly, because there is no formally articulated Orthodox Jewish ethic of sexuality to accompany the restrictions and Talmudic myths, the balance of psychosexual health and religious adherence becomes an especially tenuous one.

Orthodox singles

The following will provide some socio-religious background to contextualize the kinds of sexual struggles that our research population may encounter. Since the lifestyle and patterns of this cohort have not been empirically explored or verified, this description relies on personal observations and experience as well as conversations with leaders of this community. And though the following description may accurately capture the lives of a large portion of individuals in this cohort, they are by no means equally or necessarily applicable to each one.

Geographically, Orthodox singles tend to move away from their families and communities of origin in their young-mid 20's to live in new or already established religious communities, which seem to provide a more comfortable and acceptable place to live, work, attend synagogue, date and socialize in. In this position, these individuals

experience a wide range of continued involvement with community and religion, though, often and for the most part, remaining somewhat “outside” of the more traditional family and community structure.

Since a major part of Orthodox single life revolves around dating and intimate relationships, the religious restrictions meant to prohibit premarital sexual expression become particularly striking and noticeably at odds with cultural standards and personal desires. The religious laws and expectations around sexual behavior, feeling and ideation are often highly incongruent with the typical ways that these individuals blend into and interact with the wider secular culture such as with media, education, gender roles and interaction with the opposite sex.

In terms of sexual behaviors, there is likely to be much variation on how unmarried orthodox men and women abide by sexual restrictions depending on the interaction of factors such as education, psychology, religious background and other external factors. But because the religious restrictions on sexuality are quite clear and because other areas of orthodox law are generally honored and kept, one would expect premarital sexual activity to occur less intensely and less frequently than in the general population (Tobin, 1997). And because the religious violation and taboo surrounding premarital sexual intercourse is much more extreme than other forms of sexual activity, it would also be fair to suggest that intercourse occurs much less frequently than other kinds of sexual activity within this population. Since there is no other culture or religious group of people whose values and laws of sexuality are as clear, comprehensive and restrictive as in Orthodox singles, they are well poised to give a lucid account of their sexuality as it exists under conflicting forces.

The ways that single people interact with the larger Orthodox community will vary. But because, both socially and practically, community and family structure remains central to religious life in its ideal, they are most certainly at a religious disadvantage. The balance and struggle between modern life and traditional Orthodoxy might look somewhat different for a single person as compared to one who is entrenched in family and community life. Where the single individual's religious responsibility is often only to themselves, those who live among family have the "advantage" of their actions impacting many others. In that sense, family and community may inadvertently act as a buffer against the distractions and temptations of the modern world. In nuclear family life, for example, disruptions in religious or ritualistic behaviors and attitudes could translate into ruptures in relationships, family stability and continuity.

The social intimacy found in family-centered Orthodox communities provides other means of reinforcement and protection from "outside influences". The structure of these communities facilitate continued religious involvement throughout the Jewish ritualistic calendar year. Because these external structures are lacking in single life, many of these individuals maintain ambiguous, inconsistent and sometimes torturous community and religious connections. Often, these diffuse connections to larger community structure may inadvertently magnify the intensity of many psychological struggles.

In terms of how singles are perceived by the larger Orthodox community, for a group that has historically placed family and community as central to religious life, Orthodox singles are somewhat of an orthodox sociological anomaly, often viewed by "the establishment" as cultural pariahs. Fishman, a Brandeis University professor of

Jewish Studies, who writes about American Jewish sociological trends, comments (2007), “this cultural bias towards marriage, when implemented by Jewish social groups, has made married adults and their families central, and has simultaneously marginalized the unmarried.” (p. 23)

Much like the statistics of singles in the general population, there are likely to be a host of intersecting social, economic and cultural factors which are creating, what Fishman calls, “unprecedented levels” of orthodox singles in America and in Israel – a cause for much communal concern among many Jewish groups. These trends, she claims are reflective of general American Jewish ones, noting that “As each decade passes, marriage and fertility patterns of American Jews are more like other white, highly educated Americans, and less like historical Jewish patterns.” (p. 8)

But while these levels are endemic to Jewish population in general, the Orthodox groups are especially likely to see it as an epidemic. The anxiety surrounding the marital outcome of these individuals has been “ratcheted up to a fever pitch”, according to Fishman. In response, the community has devoted in incredible amount of attention to the topic of Orthodox singles. Informally labeled as “the singles crisis”, these increasing levels have become bundled with other worrisome trends like the increased average age of marriage and the high prevalence of divorce rates, all which have become “hot-topics” in Orthodox social and intellectual circles, though rarely addressed with singles themselves.

Perhaps fueled by parents concerned for their children’s future, singles, like never before, are being analyzed, discussed and, unfortunately, marginalized as individuals who are “commitment phobic”, “too picky” or “who just need to jump into marriage and stop

thinking so much”. “What is the solution to the singles crisis?” is a question that one hears fairly often in Orthodox circles. Aside from the “chatter” that has been generated, the community’s most concrete response has been to double their efforts at increasing the breadth and power of singles organizations, dating websites, and relationship advice columns in the hopes of changing these statistics.

These perceptions, interactions and responses concerning the relationship between Orthodox singles and the larger community has also been observed within my own social circles, whether by informal conversations or through the pilot data. The dynamics between these constituents is certainly fertile ground for an independent systemic examination. For the purposes of our study, however, we will note how this relationship may have some important bearing on the sexual dynamics of this population and to the extent that it does, will be included in the discussion section.

Three Psychoanalytic Lenses of Sexual Conflict

Rabbi Elah the elder says: if a man sees that his desires are overcoming him, he should go to a place where they do not recognize him, he should dress in black and adorn himself in black and he should do what his heart desires as he shouldn’t desecrate the name of G-d openly. - *Babylonian*

Talmud: Tractate Chagigah 16A

Though by no means, a mainstream view, a sociological reality or a well-known passage, the above Talmudic statement demonstrates at least the sympathetic stance that some Jewish leaders may have taken towards the conflict of sexual desire and religious prohibition. Despite the fact that religious law is misrepresented here, the recommendation however provides a revealing window into the unconscious Rabbinical

attitudes towards sexuality. There is recognition of both the strength of sexual desire and the weakness of man in suppressing it. Since it sometimes must be expressed, better to do so outside of the community than risk being seen. That prohibited sex should not occur in the person's clothes or city implies that there is some difficulty in integrating these actions with the rest of who they are. They must occur under disguise or anonymously because, presumably, the person's city, clothing and deity will have trouble tolerating it.

What is so surprising about this recommendation is that it does not advocate sexual suppression but rather dissociated, fragmented and secretive expression. While this may have reflected the concern of Jewish society to preserve an overall chaste and sexless public persona, one could imagine the psychological toll this would take on the individual who is told to "step out of themselves" when they are overwhelmed with desire.

From the above passage, three psychoanalytic constructs are invoked. The first is defense mechanisms that might be used to manage the conflict between one's desires and religious prohibitions? For example, in the above passage splitting, dissociation, denial or repression, may all be working in very different ways to achieve the same result – the expression of desire and removal of guilt. These defenses would presumably arise from different organizational structures in the personality and would contribute to shaping unique forms of pathology and sexual experience.

The second approach defines the way that the person is able to consciously own their sexual feelings, urges, wishes and fantasies when society seems to perpetuate a certain distance from one's sexual urges. The third lens looks at the kind of "self" or "selves" that are constructed when a major part of the person's ideation and activity is

forbidden and shameful. How would the self either expand to include “difficult” aspects of experience or create fragmented, alternative selves isolated from the “good” ones? Though these three constructs overlap, interact and flow into each other, seeing them as distinct inquiries may yield different and more nuanced understandings of sexual conflict.

Anecdotally then, this Talmudic passage establishes the justification for using three separate psychoanalytic queries to discover the intricate psychological processes of sexual conflict anew and are therefore used here as lenses to examine narratives of sexual experience. These lenses will be called a) defenses, adaptations and compromises, b) integration of sexual representations, and c) sexual ownership. As we will now discuss, these three lenses are also alluded to in the psychoanalytic literature, and most clearly in an article by Fred Pine.

Fred Pine

To introduce our discussion of these lenses, which are essentially suggestions of how to examine narratives of sexual conflict, we turn to Fred Pine who examines the developing and expanding self in a 1982 article called *The Experience of Self*. In it, he introduces the concept of self ownership by establishing how drives or instincts, urges or fantasies can be felt to reside from within oneself or “acting upon me” from the outside. These different states are depicted among patients who describe “experiences that take the form of ‘I wasn’t myself’ or ‘I don’t know what came over me’ or ‘I can’t believe I’m doing this’ ”, which “highlight the experienced discontinuity between actions or feelings and the ongoing, familiar, and ‘owned self experience.’ ” For each person “various mental contents can be recognized and experienced as ego-syntonic rather than being disowned”. What cannot become included at a given stage of life, according to Pine, is

actively kept external through mechanisms such as repression, splitting, or denial, which offer a range of resolutions designed to either preclude or defend against the experience of conflict.

Affects, drives, thoughts and fantasies that are more conflict prone become particularly difficult to integrate into ones' experience of self and may be ongoing development challenges. One of these areas according to Pine, is sexuality, the ownership of which he calls "inherently difficult" and is one of the most stage defining tasks of adolescence that first surfaces in puberty. "How does the originally 'external' drive become 'internal'?", Pine asks. "How does it come to be experienced as 'me' or 'mine' rather than 'it'?"

He explains,

"The work of achieving ownership of conflict prone experiences (involving impulses, affects and fantasies) is accomplished slowly over time; it is facilitated by the holding role of the caretaker (which makes those experiences more tolerable) active and/or unavoidable repetition which contributes to an increased sense of familiarity and of personal activity and the appeal value of environmental offerings which provide pathways to displacement, sublimation and adaptation; repression, splitting and other forms of disowning would be the alternative in areas where some such processes as these have not been successful." (p. 164)

According to Pine the ability to include a sexual self within the boundaries of self, is predicated upon the success of the three different processes: holding environments, repetition and appeals.

Holding environments, which is only briefly discussed, refers to care given to the child by parents who from birth, gradually help the child to tolerate and internalize disturbing and unpleasant affects and ideation through mirroring, holding and an attitude of love and acceptance. Repetition, he explains, is where “the person is the actor again and again, can slowly bring the event into the arena of ownership, something I produce at my timetable in my way with results that gradually come to be predictable and familiar (p. 158)” Repetition fosters the eventual inclusion of what is at first foreign into a familiar part of the experienced self. Success is not the removal of sexual conflicts but rather their becoming “integrated within the realm of the ego as life-tasks”.

To explain the concept of appeal, Pine writes:

“In the course of development a large array of inner phenomena are in an unsettled state at any given time. These include wishes and preferred modes of gratification, preferred fantasies about oneself, preferred modes of relatedness to others, and defenses against any or all of these. The unsettled state is due to shifts in what is externally defined as permissible as development proceeds or to what is internally tolerable dependent upon the anxiety, guilt or conflict associated with these phenomena.” (p. 159)

In Pine’s discussion of processes that allow sexuality to become accepted in the self, he alludes to concepts of defense, ownership and self representations as governing the experience of sexual conflict. Though these are not discussed in detail as distinct analytic constructs in this article, their individual explication and application may be useful for understanding narratives of sexual experience and may help to provide different “traps” of qualitative analysis to meet and capture a wider range of personality styles and

meanings ascribed to sexuality. While Pine introduces these constructs as ways to view sexuality, other psychoanalytic writers employ them with more specificity.

Lens 1: Sexual Ownership

In trying to understand more about sexual development and sexual ownership, Rizq (1985) is particularly concerned about some individuals who clinically present as seeming to be alienated from their own desires, as if they were not part of them. She also describes a clinical case where her patients difficulty in owning her sexuality seems to be at the root of her sexual difficulties and at times was able to be owned in “the other” when it was split off and projected into the analyst. Her patient’s lack of owning sexuality, she believes, was unconsciously designed to relinquish responsibility for her desires and remain in a passive, uninvolved sexual role in her love life. This was enacted because she was “not yet able to contain the excitement the risk and the frustrations of experiencing desire” and so it was kept outside of her or invested in someone else.

Rizq grounds her clinical account in normal sexual development. She explains how this ability to accept and own ones sexuality is a developmental achievement that will unfold naturally under normal circumstances but be impeded by inadequate caregiving or ongoing sexual conflicts. Rizq sees it not only possible, but part of normal parenting, for the mother to mirror and encourage her child’s sexuality.

In the normal course of development, the young child’s early physical explorations of his or her own body, and exhibitionistic manifestations of childhood sexuality, are first noticed, encouraged and celebrated by the child’s mother. (p. 9)

But when the mother's response is ambivalent the child may continue to reject its body and sexuality throughout adolescence and adulthood. This, she claims, could lead to one's developing a "pocket of vulnerability", a term coined by Hannah Segal (1929) to depict how one aspect of self, like sexuality, can exist immaturely in an otherwise fully developed person and therefore become "unavailable for symbolic representation, allowing a relatively mature but restricted ego to develop and function".

According to Rizq, infant sexuality does not have a "critical period". Whether the mothers' response to her child's early sexuality is inadequate or whether the child is simply overwhelmed by its own sexual ideas and physical sensations on its own accord, "the adolescent has a second chance of now consciously negotiating and thinking about earlier issues of sexuality and separation... (so) that sexual desire undergoes a radical recontextualization. (p. 7)" This seems to be in line with Pine who acknowledges multiple avenues for instincts to become incorporated within ones' self. Indeed, several other psychoanalytic writers also consider adolescence as the time for major sexual developments in relation to becoming comfortable with ones body, urges fantasies and thoughts. They describe this either by depicting the discomfort the adolescent often feels, or in terms of the progress made in this area or the consequences of this process becoming overwhelming and mired in conflict.

Thus, it appears that sexual ownership can be a useful lens of inquiry and its application to our narratives may help to further unpack the questions we have posed. Taking what we know so far about this ownership, we could imagine those who have less access to the "facilitators" of such a process, whether in infancy, childhood or adolescence, to be especially challenged with expanding the borders of self to include the

sexual. Those who are reared and who continue to interact with heightened sexual restrictions, taboos and cultural prohibitions throughout adulthood, might be especially prone to experiencing, as Pine would phrase it, a less than adequate holding or mirroring caregiver, a lack of repeated positive experiences and a constraining, “unappealing” environment that provides even more hurdles towards what is already difficult and inherently conflict prone. This might impede the individual from incorporating a sense of sexuality that is their own - with all the conflicts, desires and feelings as originating from oneself. Orthodox singles may be more challenged with this developmental task than any other constituent in this cultural group, and perhaps even more so than many other religious groups.

Lens 2: Integration of Self Representations:

Almost all contemporary conceptualizations of adolescent development stress the formidable task of integrating a powerfully emergent “sexual-self” into the myriad other representations around which the child’s mental organization is constructed. It is at this time developmentally that the adolescent constructs representations of self as the newly discovered center of sexual energy and desire – a self that exists in all forms of actual and fantasized relationship to significant others who respond or fail to respond to such emergent sexual strivings in an almost infinite variety of ways. Within this new scenario where the erotic replaces the romantic and the body overwhelms the mind – it is of course the postoeidial parents who become the most essential and influential responders. (Messler-Davies, 1998 p. 758)

Messler-Davies version of sexual self representations is explained rather clearly in this quote. Other writers unravel this concept even further. Didier Dumas's monograph entitled "Sons Lovers and Fathers: Understanding Male Sexuality (1997)" provides another eloquent illustration of a sexual self, which we will quote from directly.

At a time when we are only beginning to recognize children's sexuality, the infantile trauma experienced by the majority of psychotherapy patients lies primarily in the impossibility they had, as children, of integrating a coherent concept of sexuality. An adult's fantasies appear completely disconnected from the emotional process primarily because the child was unable to imagine and understand his parents sexual mechanisms.

Therefore fantasies cause fear. In solitude or masturbation the incomprehensible crudeness of sexual fantasies can only give rise to problems.

Dumas seems to describe the process of integrating a self concept or representation of sexuality from childhood. "A coherent concept of sexuality" is explained as an understanding of ones sexual desires and fantasies, as this can be coded into something comprehensible and therefore be integrated into the self. While "ownership" theorists, like Fonagy, lay claim to the lack of mirroring from mother to child which translates into a certain sexual affect disregulation, Dumas sees the balance of comprehension and fantasy in early development as tantamount to building an integrated representation of sexuality.

Dumas's main thesis is that "the formation of fantasies by which the child gives himself an image of his own sex depends on his mother tongue and on the vocabulary used by his parents." (p. 41) It is the vocabulary of sexuality - what is spoken aloud between parent and child - that decodes fantasy and allows the child's to understand and integrate them with their inner life. If sexual fantasies remain incomprehensible and mysterious, he explains, the child's concept of sexuality remains inaccessible to other representations of self, and therefore traumatic.

Dumas elucidates the child's process of developing fantasies and how their caregivers will impact the ability for these to become lingual and therefore integrated. His lively description of this process is worth quoting from directly:

"These parents' inability to verbalize the reality of their sexuality becomes the first disturbance in the child's sexual development. 'We don't talk about that', a mother says to her 3-yr old son when he approaches the public bench where she sits and asks, 'Why is my wee-wee hard?' 'It shouldn't be!' she repeats nervously, as if trying to keep herself from being at a loss. The child doesn't move. He's astonished. His obvious shock derives from his discovery that his mother does not possess words to verbalize a bodily action.

This absence of words creates gaps in a child's system of sexual representations. The gaps a child faces in his mother tongue generate sexual inhibitions and perversions in adulthood. When parents cannot or will not talk about the way they themselves deal with sexuality, they sentence their children to having no other recourse than their own

imaginations in order to formulate an idea of the role sex plays in human relations.”

Dumas stretches this formulation to sexual psychopathology in saying that “all bizarre aspects of human sexuality stem from the child’s rich imagination when his mother tongue was unable to provide him with representations allowing him to concretely understand the reality of human sexuality.” An example he gives about the development of a sadistic perversion nicely illustrates this point.

A child asks his mother about his erection, and in response his mother slaps him. In fantasy, the child sees himself as the active person in the face of this slap since “Fantasies return the subject to an active position in situations where the fulfillment of his desire depends on someone else.” (p. 27). The child must conclude that there was something about his penis that was too hard and mean, but that she must desire it if she is so bothered by it and slapping him. The slap then signals the pleasure of which he deprives his mother. He will then grow up to consider his urges as sadistic – inflicting harm on others. This example explains a basic model of the development of all perversions. They develop when language fails to explain what the child sees and feels, leaving fantasy to make the interpretation.

Perversions aside, Dumas believes that not having the language to unravel, contain or explain the sexual fantasy in early childhood, will foster a representation of sexuality that continues to be all image based, mysterious, inexplicable and overwhelming to even the normal person. As such, the sexual representation remains isolated from the rest of one’s inner life, from other feelings, desires, needs, fears and

pleasures, creating a sense of being double, fragmented and unintegrated. Dumas considers this to be traumatic to children and adults.

Indeed, some of the literature we have reviewed such as Rosenau, Menninger and others, have also discussed the ways sexuality in the mind is divorced from the rest of ones' self and the troubling sexual decisions which may follow from this. This is certainly something to consider in explaining how with sexuality, it is so common to find normal people who are suddenly irresponsible, abusive, impulsive, unsafe or promiscuous. When sexuality is cordoned off from emotions and when it rests on images and fantasies implanted from early childhood without a linguistic translation to mitigate its intensity, it is prone to become dissociated from selfhood, unlinked to other aspects of inner life.

Interestingly, from all the theorists we are reviewing, no other speaks as clearly and subtly as Dumas does about the psychological conflict between sexual fantasy and the moral attitudes one has towards it. Where the two collide, he discusses, morality alone can hardly act as a barrier to sexual fantasy since, "the unconscious force of sexual fantasies easily overturns all the barriers that the moral conscious mind tries to construct for it is ruled by words while the unconscious flourishes with images that – like dreams – elude the normal order of thoughts." (p. 25) Since sexual fantasies take the shape of images and are often not translated into words and then thoughts, they can be experienced as burdensome and unmanageable, especially when they are at odds with one's conscience. The result being that, "Shame and guilt barricade an enclosure where the fantasy lives on like a devil that, because inside, creates a feeling of being double. Thus,

in his own fantasies, the respectable Dr. Jekyll becomes the terrible Mr. Hyde, whom he embodies when the night falls...” (p. 26)

Certainly in the population we are studying where one’s sexual life is religiously restricted, but also very often, culturally sanctioned and prohibited, there is even more likelihood that one’s sexual fantasies can be burdensome, weighing heavily on values, morals and rules which they are meant to follow. Because of the cultural taboos, it is likely that caregivers, themselves lacking a safe language to process their sexuality, are unable to give their children the words and the knowledge they may need to frame and contain their already overwhelming sexual ideas and images. In lacking this language, children’s fantasies can become lost in the power of images, disconnected from other representations of self, especially their religious ones. Thus the Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde complex flourishes, perhaps even lasting through marriages when sex is finally sanctioned.

An assumption underlying this discussion and also underlying Pine’s ideas of self expansion and psychic incorporation of drives and conflicted affect, is the notion of a continuous and consistent self experience. This idea, which dominated psychoanalytic theory for much of its existence, has more recently come under the scrutiny and revision of other psychoanalytic schools who understand “self” in more discontinuous and fragmented ways. Previously understood as a sign of illness, trauma and dissociation, the idea of multiple selves as healthy and culturally normative is one that is accepted by more post-modern and relational psychoanalytic thinkers. While we have not delved into other models of self construction, we will conclude this discussion only by noting the existence of these alternative frameworks and allow the narrative to speak for itself in this manner.

Lens 3: Defenses, Compromises and Adaptations:

While in our discussion thus far we have alluded to many aspects of defense mechanisms such as with Freud, Pine, and earlier with Rosenau and Tobin, we will try to expand the discussion of defenses and how they may be used in sexuality and sexual conflict. I included “compromises and adaptations” in this lens because these terms are also used in the literature to denote mental or behavioral phenomena that alleviates psychological conflict. Since in the psychoanalytic literature, “defenses” are most often used to represent unconscious processes, adaptation and compromises will be used to capture those protective functions that are more manifest.

Individuals may use cognitive maneuvers which help the person avoid conflict or anxiety in ways that they are aware of. These will usually include attitudes, beliefs and statements about religion, ones’ self, or about sexuality, that serve to protect or diminish internal conflict, anxiety, depression or guilt, whether or not those beliefs and attitudes are substantiated in reality. Some anecdotal remarks gathered from interviews and informal conversations can best demonstrate this.

“Pornography, is like, totally *mutar* (permissible by Orthodox Law) said one Rabbinical school student to me with a self-conscious chuckle, knowing full well that, technically, it really isn’t. “G-d doesn’t expect me to be able to hold back – I’m 30 years old!” said another colleague of mine. “When I go up to heaven, you know what G-d’s going to say? You idiot! You couldn’t you just hold her hand when she was crying to you?” was what one interviewee raised. “Now I masturbate, I look at porn, I fool around with women, I feel no guilt, it’s like I’m totally free”, expressed another interviewee who told me this after describing a life full of intense guilt, fears and anxieties over his

sexuality. With the understanding that these specific statements arise from deeper, less conscious phenomena, and to the degree that they are “tips of the iceberg”, I believe that there is utility in attending to these kinds of resolutions as they convey something qualitatively different than unconscious mechanisms do alone.

Individuals also use behavioral strategies to avoid or minimize conflict or anxiety, though these originate in conscious or unconscious thought processes. For example, one peer of mine would take his glasses off while walking along NY sidewalks in the summertime in order to avoid the temptation of looking at sexually appealing women. One young man and woman who were dating, agreed to devote one day a week to not touch, though the rest of the week were physically intimate. Another acquaintance who I would rent movies with, would gracefully leave the room for the duration of the time that a sexual scene would play. These can all be seen as the behavioral manifestations of complicated internal and external processes that express something much more clearly and poignantly than other ones buried further under the surface.

In dealing with the concept of defenses per say, we will first turn to Fred Pine’s brief reference to defenses mobilized around sexuality. As we mentioned previously, Pine most specifically alludes to all three of the psychological constructs that our lenses are based on. His mention of defenses is probably more scant than his reference to models of self representation and ownership, and his description only touches upon the numerous, albeit disparate, types of defense mechanisms employed in the course of sexual conflict.

To quote what was previously referenced, Pine (1982) writes:

“The work of achieving ownership of conflict prone experiences (involving impulses, affects and fantasies) is accomplished slowly over

time; it is facilitated by the holding role of the caretaker (which makes those experiences more tolerable) active and/or unavoidable repetition which contributes to an increased sense of familiarity and of personal activity and the appeal value of environmental *offerings which provide pathways to displacement, sublimation and adaptation; repression, splitting and other forms of disowning would be the alternative in areas where some such processes as these have not been successful.*” (p. 164)

[Italics mine]

This statement requires more elaboration since these three defense mechanisms operate from three distinctly different levels. The first describes those defenses which seem to come in tandem with achieving proper sexual ownership - displacement, sublimation and adaptation. The other two levels involve mechanisms of disowning sexuality. Repression is this second level and the third level, splitting, is presumably the most pathological form of disownership. Though Pine does not distinguish these last two as qualitatively separate, I will take the liberty to do so based on what is widely accepted now in psychoanalytic theory (McWilliams, 1994).

Where repression is a higher-order, conflict based-defense, splitting is considered a more primitive defense designed to preclude the experience of conflict. The distinction between three levels of defense is also alluded to in Messler-Davies (1998) who states, “adult sexuality as it emerges in the post-oedipal phase *involves recognition, and not repression or dissociation*, of the erotic as well as the confident capacity to manage and contain these experiences both in the realm of the interpersonal and in the realm of fantasy.” (p.758) Again sexuality must either be recognized, or renounced through one of

two types of processes, that of repression or dissociation – a defense that is at the heart of splitting.

Seemingly, these defenses are used by very different kinds of personalities and so we are left to wonder how the defense and the overall personality work together. For example, the neurotic personality might have a qualitatively different way of understanding and relating to sexuality in general than the borderline. The defense employed is only a part of a whole system of psychic organization and processing.

Another consideration here is the possibility that psychological and defensive functioning, specifically in sexuality, would be less mature and developed than psychological functioning in the overall personality. Several sources suggest this same notion. Freud (1953), for instance, claimed how “many people are abnormal in their sexual life who in every other respect approximate to the average and have, along with the rest, passed through the process of human cultural development, in which sexuality remains the weak spot.” (p. 15) Later as we mentioned before, Rizq (2003) discussed “the pocket of vulnerability” that may characterize the way sexuality sits within a well developed personality.

To build upon this third lens we will summarize some important points from Charles Brenner’s *Mind in Conflict* (1982) and David Schapiro’s *Neurotic Styles* (1965). What we discover and learn about defensive functioning in relation to these questions will afford this particular lens more qualitative power and meaning.

David Schapiro presents defense mechanisms as only one aspect of an individual’s general style of defensive functioning. “The defensive process cannot be regarded merely as an operation of specific drive-inhibiting mechanisms (like repression

or displacement only) since it involves the whole drive-tension and stimulus-organizing style.” (p. 195) The defensive process includes the original experience and understanding of the drive, the degree of tension the drive produces based on the degree of inconsistency that it has to the personality, and the resulting series of defensive strategies that is designed to remove or diminish the tension from coming into consciousness.

Specific defenses are not chosen by anyone, but are automatically triggered by the person’s “characteristic experience of special tension” and their “characteristic tension-reducing function”. (p. 191) When a thought or feeling, which is inconsistent and intolerable to the person’s general style, threatens to surface into consciousness, a defensive process designed to self stabilize and self maintain will thwart the thought or feeling from emerging into consciousness. Any neurotic style, according to Schapiro, “tends to inhibit the development into consciousness of tendencies that diverge from it”. Though such a process usually, “does not eliminate the underlying sources of the particular tension”, some modes of functioning, “may operate with sufficient smoothness as to prevent all but negligible amounts of special tension from arising”. (p. 195)

Being that psychic threats and defenses are particular to individual styles, it makes sense for some personality styles to find certain experiences more intolerable, inconsistent and threatening than others. According to Schapiro, “Any defensive process insofar as it is an aspect of the organization of tension according to certain forms, excludes from consciousness not merely specific mental contents but *classes of mental content* and subjective experience.” (Italics mine) Thus the individual according to their defensive functioning can exclude from consciousness an entire category of emotional experience. No doubt, sexual thoughts and feelings may be one “class” of experience that

commonly evokes the discomfort which constantly and persistently triggers a defensive reaction. The discomfort becomes apparent because the thought or feeling is perceived as something unacceptable and disagreeable to the personality and so its emergence into consciousness is thwarted.

We can surmise that the degree of perceived inconsistency, threat and danger that is ascribed to the sexual thought or feeling, would be part of what dictates the severity of defensive measures the person would need to take. But in addition to this, the kind of defensive measure used to remove tension would also be based on the psychological resilience of the personality in being able to tolerate both general and sexual inconsistency and discomfort.

Schapiro adds to his portrait of defensive functioning those processes that are not only intrapsychic but also conscious, such as attitudes or actions that work along the same lines of the general defensive posture. Since defenses involve the whole style of functioning, it includes the persons overall relationship to external reality. Therefore, according to Schapiro, “the neurotic persons mode of activity, including his characteristic mode of communication as well as his mode of apprehension of the external world, are all likely, at various times, to be essential elements of defensive functioning.” (p. 196) This notion, therefore, provides some validity for including other more conscious mechanisms in addition to defense mechanisms themselves, which are related but distinctly different. This study uses compromises and adaptations to indicate these conscious maneuvers as separate from the less conscious ones that we call defense.

While the mechanisms of defensive functioning are more thoroughly understood, the *content* of the tension that is being actively thwarted by this defensive process seems

a little vague. Shapiro seems to describe psychic tension as merely the product of emerging ideation or affect that is inconsistent or intolerable to the personality. In this view the main goal of defense is to maintain a stable, non-contradictory, psychic equilibrium. But how and why does something become inconsistent or intolerable in the first place? Are other affects and ideation aroused by this inconsistency that activate defenses into place? Why does inconsistency alone provoke such a striking defensive posture?

Brenner (1982) describes psychic conflict and defense in somewhat different terms, which may help to fill in the above gaps. He believes that one way for psychic conflict to arise is when “gratification of a drive derivative is associated with a sufficiently intense unpleasurable affect”. (p. 55) The affects, which he specifies as depression and anxiety, are feelings which imply “the familiar calamities of childhood: object loss, loss of love and castration.” The difference between anxiety and depression is not in their contents but only in their relationship to time. In anxiety it’s the felt displeasure that something related to these calamities is *about to* happen. In depression, it’s the felt displeasure that something related to these calamities *has already* happened. “Thus what distinguishes anxiety and depression is not the provoking content but rather when this content is applied to, either the past, present or future.” (p. 55)

When drive comes up against these thoughts and affects and tension is experienced, the mind seeks to relieve the tension by both expressing the fullest amount of drive satisfaction possible but at the same time minimizing the resulting depression or anxiety. “When anxiety and/or depressive affect become too intensely unpleasurable, defense is heightened to mitigate them”. (p. 111) But it is the defense that allows for both

the satisfaction and the inhibition at the very same time. If these affects grow more tolerable, more drive satisfaction will be allowed. Repression, for example, allows instinctual material that is both pleasurable and unpleasant to be consciously forgotten, thus removing the risk of depression or anxiety, but on the other hand, expressed subversively.

But unlike Freud, Brenner did not consider repression to be foolproof. If it was completely successful in blocking threatening ideation and content, psychoanalysis would not be able to rely on patients' slips of tongue, dreams, gestures and general patterns of speech and behavior to decipher what is not immediately accessible to the patient. As he states, "A strongly cathected drive derivative....regularly gains access to consciousness and influences conscious mental life and behavior while it is repressed...this means that parts of the id Freud called the repressed are among the determinants of the phenomena of daily psychic life." (p. 113) This very failure of repression, or "return of the repressed" as Freud called it, is precisely what enables both the expression of the drive in seeking pleasure, and the inhibition of drive in avoiding pain or the "calamities of childhood" as Brenner calls them. Brenner therefore considers defense mechanisms to be a small piece of a larger processing system and therefore this qualitative analytic construct would encapsulate more than what we originally thought.

To summarize the insights of both Shapiro and Brenner as they are useful in solidifying the scope of our lens, we can begin to see defense not as specific mechanisms but as part of a larger pattern of personality style that has as much to do with the way drives are taken in and understood as it has to do with the ways people mobilize the actual tension reducing tactic. We can therefore extrapolate that different personality

organizations may employ qualitatively different kind of defenses, and so the type of defense used can give some indication of the general psychological functioning, in addition to the particular style of the personality.

We are also aware that defensive functioning around sexuality, might be very different from the kind of functioning experienced in other “classes “ of conflicting situations since different styles respond to different types of thought and affect in ways characteristic of that style and in ways that allow the personality to maintain its psychic equilibrium. Defensive functioning refers not only to unconscious processes but also to conscious attitudes and actions, which we will delineate as “compromises” and “adaptations” - separate processes that are related to overall functioning but different than actual defense mechanisms.

The tension provoked by the surfacing of drive, has to do with the inconsistency of this drive with the personality style and the implied vicissitudes of basic childhood threats and losses, which are perceived by the individual as either about to happen, as in the case of anxiety, or as having already happened, as in the case of depression. The psyche attempts to remove the discomfort of these affects from consciousness while satisfying the drive as best as it can tolerate through the use of defenses. In doing so, both the inhibition and expression of the drive can take place consciously or unconsciously, affecting the realm of emotion, thought or behavior.

For example, if repression aims to remove certain contents from consciousness, like dangerously illicit sexual fantasies, these contents, though “forgotten”, still remain available in so far as they can be seen behaviorally as “drive in disguise”, or as far as they expend their energy in other passive, indirect ways, internally or somatically. Indeed, the

research method we are using to study sexual conflict, which examines “secret” or less conscious themes that emerge from conscious narratives, relies on this very premise.

Procedures

This study administered ten open ended interviews to self identified Orthodox single men over the age of 24 who also interact with the modern world. The interview consisted of two individual hour and half meetings that were audio recorded and then transcribed. I asked questions about sexual experience and development, with specific attention to areas of conflict heard or seen in the interview setting. The person’s evolving relationship to their religious culture as this influenced their sexuality was also explored.

The basic question I asked was, “Can you tell me about your experiences of sexuality as a single Orthodox male who also interacts with the modern world. You may start at any point of your recent life or early development and if there is something specific you don’t want to discuss you can simply tell me. I will stop you at various points to clarify and ask questions.” Once transcribed these narratives were analyzed through the three lenses that were discussed, which the literature and pilot interviews indicate to useful ways in which to understand experiences of sexual conflict.

Chapter Three: Presentation of Data

Introduction

This results section is a presentation of six narratives that come from six individuals chosen from the ten participants for their ability to reflect upon and articulate their sexual struggles in the clearest manner that was deemed most useful to understanding the phenomenology of sexual-religious conflict. The behaviors and experiences depicted cannot be said to represent the behaviors and experiences of individuals in this population overall. The narratives were all carefully organized by theme and then paraphrased in my own words to capture the interviewees' experience as accurately and succinctly as possible. Direct quotations are woven throughout the narratives and footnotes are meant to guide the reader to what will become significant for the analysis and discussion that follows. The behaviors and experiences depicted cannot be said to represent the behaviors and experiences of individuals in this population overall. For purposes of confidentiality, the names and identifying details of each participant have been altered or deleted. Any resemblance to a live person is entirely coincidental.

1. Dan

Introduction

Dan is a 26 year old Assistant Rabbi in a small Modern Orthodox Congregation and also works for a Jewish Outreach Organization. Dan invited me to his office to discuss his experiences over the years. He was above average height and weight with a warm smile and wore a sharp looking dark suit. Though shying away from sexual detail, he spoke candidly and fiercely about how his overall sexuality played into his religious development and current worldview.

Narrative

Religious Development

I used to adore Judaism. I loved it, I have amazing childhood memories of Jewish rituals and holidays. I was also a leader at a very young age and had big responsibilities and roles in my community. “I was always at the forefront and was always a leader”. Growing up, “I always liked being different. I liked being the more religious one there” but not an “annoying kind of more religious”.⁴ I was a cool and popular kid. I hung out with the kids that did the “cool” things, though I didn’t do them myself. I always wanted to be a good, clean kid. I liked that my friends thought of me as the more religious one among them.

After high school I went to study at yeshiva in Israel. The religious environment there was very strict and rigorous. I felt a lot of pressure to conform to the high religious standards set by Rabbis and reinforced by many of my student peers. “I started to feel more like I was pushing from behind, trying to catch up to something, trying to be something else, trying to live up to a standard as opposed to setting a standard.” I lost my

⁴ Notice his frequent usage of “always”, perhaps a certain idealization of his youth.

grounding as the leader and as someone who was more religious than others. All of a sudden religion started to be a system that was an “all-encompassing-every-moment-everyday-learning-and-world-and-conflicts-and-relationships” I felt like I had to learn Torah all the time – every moment that I wasn’t learning I was conscious of wasting time and being bad. I didn’t know if I could have other interests, desires, a personality, I felt like I was being swallowed by this intimidating set of rules and expectations, which I complied with very quickly and easily.

I began to question and feel conflicted about every expression of myself. I lost my autonomy. My desire to practice religion was subsumed and overshadowed by this new forceful and dogmatic approach to religion. Law and religion felt oppressive to me. My participation was no longer my own will but was my submission to someone else’s authority. I played the exact opposite role that I played in my childhood. I began to resent religion and learning while feeling trapped and bound by it at the same time. I also felt very alone.

At this time, sexual laws had also become more meaningful and strict – they took on a harsher, “though shalt obey” quality. Not that I understood their values or purpose, not that anyone ever explained this to me, but these laws became part of the fabric of a dominating and binding religious tapestry. I began to do things out of fear, obligation and submission, which I never experienced before and which I came to resent. Although I thought I was doing the right thing and was complicit with laws I believed in, I still sometimes regretted that I changed in this way. I wondered what made me so susceptible to this shift – why did I submit so easily and so extremely? This impossible quandary is what led me to therapy.

Even today, learning and playing by the rules sometimes makes me feel like I am submitting more and more to a system of laws and restrictions that continue to take away my agency, authority and independence. Whom am I really learning Torah for anyway? It's becoming less and less enjoyable for me. My Judaism has always been on my terms, the way I want it, at my pace and doing the things I enjoy. Now, the more I learn and know the less freedom I have. I feel badly about those thoughts but I can't deny that I have them.

Keeping and Internalizing Sexual restrictions

The right wing Ultra-Orthodox community espouses, 'do it because you are told to do it – end of story'. There may be a certain value to that idea but that's never been my approach. The values of Modern Orthodoxy that I subscribe to emphasize the importance of thinking, questioning and understanding religion. But when I try to understand the laws around sexuality, I am deeply troubled. At the time these laws were written, Jewish men and women had very little interaction with one another. It was much more realistic to limit all premarital physical interaction between sexes. That is totally not the case now. Western culture is saturated with sex. We are told that any sexual choice we want to make is healthy and normal. And in this type of climate, so different than the one in which these restrictions were introduced, we are still required to conform to the same religious standards. It seems outlandish.

While sometimes I can relate to the current meaning of these restrictions as protecting the value of sexuality or of fostering a kind of emotional intimacy between couples that would not otherwise flourish, these kinds of rationales hardly measure up to the feelings and urges I have in a more heated moment between me and my girlfriend. "In

the emotional moment, um, its hard to say words other than it sucks. It's hard in the moment to really identify with whatever values are trying to be created even if at other times I do ah feel more connected to them." Who knows, maybe one could argue that these laws protect people from devaluing their sexuality; without them, they might be having random sex all the time. But I don't think that's really true. So it's more often than not that I have trouble understanding the purpose of these laws as they are relevant to me. It upsets me that I'm still required to keep them despite this. It feel unfair. Why are they asking me to do this? What do they want from me!?!

I'm really trying hard to understand and own these laws. I wish they made sense to me. But there's no one to talk to about this. There's no one who I can even vent my frustrations to. Rabbis don't always have the answers and I don't necessarily trust them to be honest. Their explanations won't necessarily help me understand it on my terms and make it more relevant to me. I am also not comfortable speaking to others about my private sexual life, given that this community is so closed to these kinds of topics.

Though I think that commitment to Jewish law should be absolute, I understand how in reality everyone picks and chooses. But I personally can't justify breaking these laws simply because they don't make sense to me or are difficult, which many many other people do. Religion doesn't work that way. I would never be able to deliberately drop these laws simply because I had a clever way to justify it. Not that I judge others who do, but I don't really understand how they could do it in good conscience.

The only way I would allow myself to be physical with someone is if the laws actually changed. If Orthodox laws can adapt to socio-historical realities, why haven't sexual laws changed? I don't understand the legal process and why some laws change

and others don't. I'm not accomplished enough to try and make these changes myself or to even take a position against them. And I'm reluctant to even research this issue more in depth so that I could better understand it.⁵

I feel extremely angry about this religious system that restricts all premarital physical contact. No one gets how difficult it is to live up to standards that other people set. My struggles feel very invalidated by my community. The supposedly more "humane and psychologically savvy" religious literature that tries to make these laws meaningful and relevant, makes these restrictions sound beautiful and rosy. But they say nothing about how impossible they are to keep in real life. They are unrealistic and they make me feel even more ashamed when I do transgress. These laws are upheld with little regard for people's realities and feelings.

My anger doesn't always have a clear object. Sometimes I direct it at Rabbis who are dismissive or insensitive as to how confusing and hard it is for people, especially kids – as if these restrictions were easy to keep, as if they actually made sense, as if they were being taught properly and as if people didn't try their best. The implicit assumption underlying the laws is that people are technical and machine-like - they don't have desires. It feels dishonest and inauthentic to learn about these rules without learning their psychological ramifications. I am disappointed and angry at my community who avoids this particular kind of conversation by invoking "tzniut" – the religious imperative to talk, act and dress modestly. This is a blatant misuse of the concept and it provides a convenient excuse to avoid uncomfortable discussion.

⁵ His reluctance to even intellectually explore the development of laws on premarital sexuality and the legal process is striking given how preoccupied he is by the emotional toll it takes on him. There may be something meaningful about keeping this blindfold on.

The irrationality of these laws make it very difficult to explain these laws to kids who I see around my community who are so curious about sex and the laws surrounding it. It's one thing to teach the restrictions on marital sexuality or premarital intercourse since these are more manageable and realistic - their values make sense to kids. But restrictions on things like hugging and kissing "are pretty foreign to modern orthodox high school kids" and very out of synch with the norms of their social environments and backgrounds. I don't want to spit out the kinds of flawed reasoning that I was exposed to like touching will lead to sex or will be too distracting. These aren't true and the kids know it!

I'm more comfortable teaching that one must follow these restrictions simply because the law requires it, as opposed to providing some kind of rationale for it. At least that's honest. It's the only way I can relate to them at this point. But frankly I'm not sure if it's in these kid's best interests to hear it that way. They'll continue to transgress but feel unproductively guilty about it. Education should spend more time teaching healthy ways of communicating and relating between the opposite sex, not reinforcing awkwardness, tension and guilt. It's so hard for me to believe that G-d really wants kids to refrain from this, especially in its more innocent and constructive forms. But I can't say that out loud, I have enough trouble even thinking it! So overall, while my obedience to Jewish law and my behaviors appear to be in synch with "just do it" that doesn't come close to encapsulating the pain, anxiety and tension that I experience with my adherence.

I would talk about these frustrations in my therapy but I'm afraid to encounter the tension between the values of psychology - self exploration, individualism and non-conformism - and the values that I understand my religion to promote - conformism,

obedience and blind faith. If I talk about this tension, I'm afraid that my observance would crumble. So many modern worldviews espouse choice and freedom. These ideas are so at odds with my religious worldview. I'd prefer to avoid them in general. I also stay far away from intellectually learning and speaking about sexuality. Perhaps this will also shackle my commitment to these laws. At the end of the day, however, I am proud of myself that I keep these laws.

Pride & Rigor

Most other single guys that I know in the MO community are not careful to abide by the sexual restrictions. They justify their behaviors by saying that these laws are unreasonable or too difficult to keep. Though I agree with these intellectual arguments, they don't work for me. I would never use those reasons to act out. Law is law. The fact that my peers have thrown them away doesn't lead me to change my stance. In fact, it only strengthens my resolve and fuels my determination to stay the course. "I don't just go with the flow, that I'm not just part of the community and do whatever everyone else does. But I have a real sense of what I think is right and I try to be independent about things." I feel like I am better than they are. I do what's right. I am my own boss. I feel proud.

It isn't always easy to be this independent because being my own boss means that I have to answer questions and defend myself from attacks and accusations that I sometimes anticipate. Not belonging to some larger unit of people who are like me feels uncomfortable and scary. So I avoid presenting my stance to others. I prefer to remain private about my decisions and way of life. But I feel stuck and very alone. "There's a lot of religious fervor out there and there's a lot of intellectual honesty out there and trying to

live with them both, together, I find to be a very lonely place. It's not only in the realm of sexuality. I find my whole religious outlook to be a very lonely place..." I feel like I am the only one who questions but who also adheres. There is no one else to commiserate with about this position. But there is something about this loneliness that also feels good. It makes me feel unique and proud.

Fortunately, my girlfriend shares the same values and viewpoints as me. I often feel like together we are up against these restrictions as if it's us against the world. This is both painful and pleasurable at the same time. It's nice to be able to discuss thoughts and feelings about sexuality with her. Because we are in this lonely space together, it makes me feel closer to her. She and I have something that no one else does and it makes me feel like our relationship is stronger than other peoples.

Love Life

In the one other long term relationship I had, we were careful not to touch each other and for the most part succeeded. There wasn't very much complaining or talking about it even though I remember how hard it was for us not to touch. She had been ill for some time and it was frustrating not to be able to express basic affection and be physically responsive. It really bothered me that I couldn't touch her. It really highlighted how screwed up these laws are.

Also in my current relationship it's hard to not express affection like hugging, kissing and holding each other. How can these actions be wrong? But still, my girlfriend and I help each other be strong, we validate our love and desires for each other, we protect one another from violating when the other person is weak. We often come close to touching in more heated moments of intimacy but there is usually someone who stays

stronger than the other one and who can rescue us from falling any further. Something about being able to process these moments verbally makes the relationship feel stronger.

Actually, we complain a lot that we can't be physical. "It really really sucks." I don't think it's healthy for our relationship to not have that outlet. Being physically intimate would be much easier for us. We also validate one another's anger at the halakhic system – what do they want from us already! "I mean, gimme a freaking break!" It feels cruel and it pisses us off. It's like the two of us are alone, up against this system and in this struggle together. People are often amazed at how close and communicative we are about it. Trust me, talking about sexuality certainly doesn't make these laws any easier to keep. It's still very challenging.

While I am careful to observe the technical laws of *negiah*, I'm much less careful about having arousing sexual conversations on the phone with my girlfriend. In person there is definitely a lot of sexual tension in the air but we continue to uphold the rules – at least for the most part. Not touching has entailed a Herculean amount of restraint and ongoing effort. It's an impossible thing to do. Touching would definitely improve our relationship a lot. I don't really know how we do it.⁶

Aside from masturbation and physical affection, another "rule" of the system that is totally out of synch with reality and with people's emotions, is this whole notion of getting engaged quickly just to avoid the possibility of physical or sexual interactions. Overall, the system infuriates me because it presents standards that are virtually impossible to keep and that hurt other people.

⁶ He does not elaborate about the kinds of intimacy that he does allow himself to express with her. He mentions that he's not perfect with it and it's not clear if they are actually touching or if they are getting very close to it and/or being verbally sexual with one another, which is what is implied by his mention of their phone relationship.

Though I could find some relief from this when I think about the sexual freedom that marriage offers, I still feel annoyed that restrictions will continue to impose their reach into my sex life – they will continue to “rule over us” and strip us of our autonomy.

⁷ It’s really annoying and unnecessary! Though I know that there will be times when I’ll be having sex, the prospect of marriage doesn’t give me very much relief from this whole conundrum. My anger and frustration may overshadow any feelings of sexual freedom.

Fears of Being Found Out

Growing up I knew that sexual expressions were prohibited but it didn’t have very much personal meaning to me. I fooled around with girls here and there and also masturbated but I didn’t care about my peers finding out. This kind of stuff was pretty normal amongst my friends. Also, they saw me as more religious than them and respected me a lot, which may have also made me less anxious about my behaviors. While my rabbis never condemned masturbation openly, there was definitely a sense of not wanting them to find out about my actions. Even now my conscious experience of transgression seems related to people finding out about me and not thinking highly of me. It has always been important for me to be admired and respected by others.

In fact, “I spend a lot of time in my life worrying what people will think, what do they think of me.” “I care very much about how I’m perceived and what people think and I also compare myself to other people a lot.” Some of my religious practice is ruled by fears of how others perceive me. I often feel inferior to other people in terms of my knowledge and Jewish learning and how articulate I am. I hate these feelings. Since I sometimes break the rules when I masturbate, this only adds more fodder to my sense that

⁷ He is referring to laws that govern sexual relationships within marriage where husband and wife are not allowed any physical contact for two weeks out of every month.

others are better than me. Hypothetically, these “holes” could easily be used by others as proof that I am less than them.

Especially as a leader in my community where my conduct is expected to be purer and the stakes are higher in terms of the consequences in being discovered, I’m a little more frightened that others will know what I do behind closed doors. I’m afraid kids in my shul will ask me questions about sexuality that would put me on the spot. Even approaching the conversation with them is threatening. It’s very hard for me to say “this is my private life” or “none of your business”.

If they would ask me about the purpose of sexual laws I’d feel a responsibility to be honest and say that I don’t really get it. Or I would want to raise provocative questions myself. But I’m not really prepared to present, defend and stand up for my rebellious ideas – what if others question or attack me for it. Do I know enough to be able to answer them? Presenting my questions or critique of the system may also lead others to become conflicted themselves. But I’m also not okay telling them the “party line” which is totally flawed. These worries prevent me from talking openly about sexuality to kids, which is something I believe to be important and necessary. I’m disappointed in myself that I can’t do this.

The truth is, even when not among other Orthodox Jews, I worried on a gut level that people would find out about me. I had these worries at other non-religious settings. So I guess these fears are intensified in my community, but they are fears that reside in me. The advantage, however, of being in this close knit community is that I have more reason to be careful with transgressing. It protects me from acting out much more than I would if I were less involved. Though it’s a pain and often cause for great concern, my

level of involvement ultimately helps me to continue doing what I think is halakhically right. I can continue to feel proud of myself.

Ultimately I have a sense that other people can know things about me very easily, such as my masturbation, and will use “my stains” to substantiate what a bad person I am in their eyes. When I am in stricter more religious environments, these transgressions confirm this sense of being inadequate and an outcast in their eyes. In more Modern Orthodox settings (aside from in the school where I teach), since I feel more religious than others to begin with, I’m not as worried about this. I don’t know how much internal guilt I have about masturbating, though I definitely feel angry that Rabbis expect me to hold back.

My fears of other people “finding me out” seem to be related to the community’s obsession with judging and categorizing others. To the extent that I sometimes see this stance as the source of my own worries, and to the extent that I hate having these worries, I despise this about my community. I don’t want to contribute to this stance by being silent or critical myself. But at the same time I can’t help being afraid of this system turning against me if I speak up. So I end up just being silent.

The socially constructed category of “shomer negiah” falls right into this. It is an artificial Jewish label made to lump people into groups, and therefore also judged and criticized. I feel angry when hearing the term being used. It’s also not accurate because people are not one or the other – there’s a lot more grey there. The terminology represents everything I hate about the system; the lack of rationality to sexual laws, the technical non-humane way they are taught and reinforced, the way people’s struggles are invalidated and even the very law itself, since it is unnecessary and oppressive. It also

implies that people have a choice in the matter, which is ludicrous. No one has a choice. Halakha is halakha no matter what the law is so don't tell me I can choose!⁸

This concern of others finding out about my transgressions carries over to this interview itself. I experience it as such an intense worry in the moment that I am paralyzed from asking you normal questions about the privacy I'm entitled to – those normal questions are infused with these deeper worries that I know I have but am ashamed of. If I tell you something is private you'll know I'm hiding something. I'd much rather avoid the conversation to begin with. Though I can come up with many reasons why privacy in sexuality should be respected, those explanations don't seem to account for the intense worries I have about them.

I hate that I have this fear of others finding out because I am both ashamed of it and I feel like it prevents me from even entertaining the full range of choices that I have. I feel bound by my need for others' approval. At the same time, there's some benefit to being "good" in this way in that I can feel that others respect and honor me, look up to me, see me as righteous and perhaps more religious than they are. In fact, I am very conscious of how others perceive my current non-physical relationship knowing that they think I am a little extreme and weird in how strict I am. I feel proud of this. Everyone else fools around with their girlfriends, and I don't.

The dilemma over my desires to masturbate has always been very intense. "What happens when you do, you know, transgress so to speak and when you do struggle with a particular issue and you don't always come out on the right side of it...you don't always come out on the side of where you wish it was easy to come out of so what do you do

⁸ His expression of anger here is unmistakable and noteworthy.

with that...how do you move forward from that?"⁹ If I tell myself it won't happen again that's a lie. But I can't premeditatedly bracket these laws because that's wrong too. So I'm often left feeling like a failure over and over again. And there is no opposite notion of feeling great when you abstain from masturbating, which could hypothetically balance these feelings of failure. "You're either at ground zero or below". Even so, I'm not sure how often I experience internal guilt about this. I wonder if I would feel badly when I removed the fear of others finding out.

It's always possible that part of what fuels my overall sense of badness, and my need for external praise and admiration about my religiosity, is the very fact that I masturbate. The constant sense that others will discover "my badness", may stem from these very activities. This is perhaps expressed indirectly when I worry about others thinking that I'm not so religious or learned. This worry is so strong and pervasive that even when I'm praised by others, it can't seem to shake my sense of being bad. Although I seek other people's respect and admiration, when they do express this to me I often end up thinking, 'If only they really knew who I was!'

⁹ His vague and passive language here – "come out on the right side" – and generalizing "you" instead of "I" is noteworthy.

2. Jacob

Introduction

Jacob is a straight-talking, laid back 27 year old lawyer who lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. He grew up in a small, close-knit Orthodox family in Cleveland and, since high school, has been living in yeshiva dormitories and in shared New York City apartments.

Narrative

Growing Up

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I was very popular but always tried hard to do what I thought was religiously right. I was “the cool kid that could have had girlfriends” but chose not to. “I never touched a girl, never fooled around, I was clean as a whistle – by choice”. People really respected me for that and I felt good about myself. When I masturbated, however, I felt really bad. It seemed inconsistent with the rest of who I was and I didn’t know how to stop. At certain points, “I’d keep track of how many times I did it per month to try and bring the number down.” I felt really guilty.

I remember having a really good relationship with Judaism growing up. Summer camp was a big part of this. The environment was almost like this “perfect bubble”, separate from the outside world. I loved learning Torah and I had amazing friends and plenty of role models who I really looked up to and who also seemed to care about me. There was no pressure to do anything that I didn’t want to. When I did things religiously, it came from my own desire. I felt in charge. There weren’t so many issues of being sexually challenged or tempted. “My head was a lot clearer” - girls or masturbation really weren’t on the map. As I would go to camp year after year, it really felt like home.

Given that I was so “gung ho” about Judaism, I was eagerly anticipating my year in Israel to learn full-time in yeshiva after high school. “I thought yeshiva was going to be that opportunity to shine and take off and really get into it”. Unfortunately it ended up being “far from perfect”. There was a lot of tension, competition and condescension among my classmates: Who studied more? Who was “frummer” than who and which guys were slacking off? A lot of us were depressed over there. “I was kinda a little let down.” Still though, I was proud that I was able to adhere to the rules of shomer negiah throughout high school and yeshiva. “I was a good kid, I was very religious”.

First Relationship

There was one girl who I had been friends with in high school and we always sort of liked each other. I was attracted to her but it was “nerve racking” for me to talk to her because she was from a much less religious background than me and I really didn’t want to get involved with a girlfriend then. We liked each other but I was scared of getting too close. When I was learning in Israel we kept in touch a bit and when I got back home we started talking almost every day on the phone.

Though we had an intense phone relationship, I didn’t want to meet her in person. Going on an actual date “just seemed outrageous to me. I wasn’t supposed to be doing that as a yeshiva boy coming back from Israel! I was just afraid of myself”, that I would fall into something I wasn’t ready for. I was very confused. Of course I liked her and probably wanted to see her but it just seemed really inappropriate, especially since none of my friends were even thinking about dating yet.

But this girl really liked me and she kept asking me out, almost insisting that we see each other. “She was really pushy”. Eventually, I decided to meet her. I figured it

wasn't such a big deal - it probably wouldn't go anywhere. "I had no intentions of touching her in the whole sexual thing um and I guess marriage wasn't out of the question". In fact, as the relationship developed more, we did talk about marriage. I guess it wasn't that unreasonable to her meet her.¹⁰

As we spent more and more time together that summer, she started to act more seductively towards me. She was trying to get me to touch her. "She would throw her scarf on my face... teasing me for weeks." Because she came from a less religious background than me and her friends all had physical relationships with their boyfriends, she was much more comfortable with the idea of fooling around. She continued to pressure me even though I was resisting. With these pressures, I wasn't sure I was going to be able to hold my ground that much longer.

"One month almost to the day", the movie we were watching had just ended and I finally decided to kiss her. It felt really scary, like I was losing control of the situation. I didn't really know what I was doing and why I was doing it, or at least that's what I told myself. I had restrained myself for so long. How much more pressure could I possibly withstand? I knew it was only a matter of time before it would just happen anyway. In retrospect, I must have also wanted to kiss her but these thoughts weren't in my head at the time.¹¹

At the time it was especially hard to know if I was really being honest with myself or if these were all ways to justify what I really wanted to do. When I finally kissed her that night, I was crying. Obviously, this must have been really hard for me. "I couldn't

¹⁰ Notice the extra measures that he take to ensure himself that he had "good" intentions when he agreed to meet her.

¹¹ His description of sexual desire is conspicuously absent.

believe it”. Well I wasn’t really crying but I was definitely tearing.¹² It was a difficult moment, even though I must have also been happy that I finally kissed her.

From that point on our relationship became very physical. But it wasn’t such a big deal. Compared to what I do now, it doesn’t seem like we really did anything crazy. “We didn’t go below the belt” or anything.¹³ Soon enough, “I became comfortable with the things that we were doing”. While the guilt and confusion gradually muted, I had a lingering sense of discomfort with this relationship. We would have to make out in awkward, secretive places because we were so ashamed of our actions. We led this double life that no-one else could know about. I become really distant with my friends and family. “It was like the two of us and everything else was like closed out. Like I just, I just, became a little bit of a loner.”

Other kinds of moments would make me feel even worse about myself. I remember at my friends wedding, watching the bride and groom under the holy chuppah, surrounded by family and friends. I felt so jealous that I wasn’t pure like they were. “Look they’re getting married, they’re so happy they probably didn’t fool around. Wow that’s what I want, that’s where I was, that’s where I am, that’s where I need to be.” It was those kinds of moments that would “kick the guilt back into me” and make me feel so lonely and alienated from the good yeshiva kid I once was.

¹² The revised story of how he first “cried” and then was “tearing” may be meaningful. It perhaps suggests his preference to see himself as suffering more for this kiss and that he was really pained by it. He was a good religious kid after all.

¹³ It’s interesting to compare his reluctance beforehand, his crying when he kissed her and then his post-kiss dismissive attitude that we see here.

Though I sort of got used to our physical relationship, I was never comfortable enough to stay with it. I kept trying to be shomer with her again and again, but we would keep breaking it. We tried this a whole bunch of times. “It was like this fight back and forth. It was very unhealthy.” That whole year I got really depressed. I stopped talking to my friends, I would sleep in really late and avoid classes. It was a really hard year. “I think I was just really guilty, like, I felt like I was a traitor to my self and a traitor to my family a traitor to my religion. It was really bad.” It seemed like there was no way out. There was no one I could even talk to.

At the end of the year, after this torturous back and forth and many tough interactions, she decided to end it. Religiously, she was much more mature than I was because she knew who she was and what she wanted. She didn’t think one way and act another and didn’t feel like she needed to be ashamed of her actions. I, on the other hand, kept initiating the breaks in our physical relationship and couldn’t even keep to them. I was so conflicted.

Although I allowed myself to be somewhat okay with breaking certain religious rules in private where no one could see us, like touching or listening to her sing or being ok with her wearing pants,¹⁴ I was not at all comfortable doing these actions in public;¹⁵ I wouldn’t hold her hand outside, I wouldn’t let her wear pants in front of my parents and I would never listen to her sing publicly at her choir performances. I was still concerned with “making a statement” to myself that would more aggressively solidify the religious

¹⁴ Traditional Orthodox law prohibits men from listening to a woman sing unless she is his wife and encourages women to dress modestly, which to some authorities includes restrictions on wearing pants. There are many variations on these laws and many different shades of grey.

¹⁵ While there is no halakhic difference between these violations being done in private or public, he is drawing this line for the reasons that follow. This boundary may represent another compromise that allowed him to express his desires while hanging onto his religious identity at the same time.

shift I was making. It was also important that others continued to see me as a good religious kid.

The summer we broke up I wanted to go back to camp and rejuvenate myself. Camp would be a place where I could get my energy and enthusiasm back. Because “I felt like I had turned a bad leaf” by “losing my shomer negiah virginity” this was my chance to “get back on track religiously”. Camp was this “safe haven” for me surrounded by good friends and few distractions. I ended up feeling much better and having a great time. “I thanked my friends for saving my life”. I was back to my good old self.

But when I returned from camp back to regular life “I petered out pretty quickly”. I really missed my girlfriend and started to feel lonely again. I didn’t really have anyone to talk to about this relationship or my feelings. My friends and family knew I was depressed and tried to help me. But they didn’t really know what to do for me, other than recommend I see a shrink, which I wasn’t comfortable doing. “I wanted to deal with my own shit.” For that whole year again, I was really depressed.

I experienced a major turning point when a relative of mine spoke to me about her own physical relationships when she was younger. This conversation “really just opened my mind about what goes on in relationships even in the orthodox world.” Apparently I had “misconceptions” about how pure everyone else was. I came to understand that my expectations to be shomer negiah were totally unrealistic. I wasn’t the only one dealing with this and I didn’t need to feel so down about myself.

I was angry that I had to go through so much before I came to this realization. I felt like I had been “deceived by my community”, that they had set me up to feel bad about myself for no reason. They encouraged me to be secretive and to hide my shameful

behaviors and feelings from everyone. They never prepared me for the realities of relationships, they never told me what was normal and what was to be expected, and they certainly did not make it easy for me to talk to them about my troubles. I came to see how the community's emphasis on putting on a show, on keeping things secret and on hiding sins from everyone, could be extremely damaging. From then on, I decided that religion was no longer going to be about "showing a certain face and acting another way". I wasn't going to let my fears about what others think of me, get in the way of doing what I wanted to do.

I realized how hypocritical my own behaviors were. Behind closed doors I fooled around with her and listened to her sing, but in public I wouldn't do this because I was afraid of my reputation? It didn't seem to make much sense to me. So although in the relationship I wouldn't do many of the things she was asking me because of concern over my public image, after the relationship I totally changed. I became as comfortable doing these things in public as I did in private. I listened to women singing in public, I didn't care if they wore pants, I touched girls in public. Through many of these realizations and decisions over the course of that year, "I really climbed out of the depression."

Second Relationship

By the next summer I was upbeat and energized again. I was looking forward to going back to camp where I could reevaluate myself and rethink my path. But I "fell into this relationship" with a girl named Suzie so I ended up working in the city that summer. We started off as friends and I wasn't really interested in her. She was a little out of my league religiously because she was on the "fringe of religiosity" and had dated a lot of secular guys before, which for me was "off the charts". This was really foreign but also

intriguing. I wasn't going to date her because I really wasn't interested in falling back into the hole I had just climbed out of. I became friendly with her because I thought I might be able to help her become more religious and "bring her kinda into my fold", which I had done for many other people before.¹⁶

We ended up getting physical right away. Although I describe this relationship as "falling into", I know I was obviously chasing something too – whether the longer term relationship or the sexual one. We started to date only once we got physical which is why I describe it as "falling into". I never actively chose to date her. It only happened once we were physically involved which made it seem less deliberate, more organic, but also somewhat out of my control.

The beginning of the relationship was hard for me because, again, I wasn't so resolved about being sexual with her. I was often aware that "it just wasn't getting me back on my religious track." Besides the different levels of comfort around our physical relationship, there were other religious tensions. She loved to dance at clubs and wanted me to go with her. I had never done anything like that before, so I was really uncomfortable with it. I sometimes agreed to go but would always come home miserable.

Sexually, I reached a totally different level. "We started to do things under the belt.... blow jobs, eating out". I started to sleep at her place, which I couldn't really hide from other people, like her roommates and neighbors. This definitely worried me because "I had been a religious figure, you know, people expected certain things out of me" so I had to make sure that I was comfortable with their knowing this about me. While I may have become somewhat more comfortable shedding my "good religious kid" self-

¹⁶ Notice how he justifies this friendship on religious grounds. Not only is it not wrong, he seems to be saying, it's even a Mitzvah!

perception, I wasn't as sure if I felt as ok knowing that others would view me differently and possibly lose their respect for me. I wasn't sure if I wanted to make this kind of a statement about who I now was and what I was comfortable doing.

Though I had these worries about our physical relationship, I didn't start and stop being shomer like I did with my first relationship. But I was still troubled by it: When I fooled around with her:

“It was like ok you know we're (sigh), I was more ready for it...the relationship was more ready for it... it just kind happened you know...it just kinda like it was the time...there was only so much you were gonna hold back - you can only hold back so much about certain things... I don't recall what I was really thinking... I think we were struggling, I don't know... I don't think we were too iffy about it... maybe ya - after we did it the first time there was a day of reconsideration maybe yes maybe not maybe... We just ended up going with it.”¹⁷

Sexual intercourse, however, “just wasn't even in like the realm of possibilities for me.” Not that I thought that having sex was such a big deal, but I still wanted to have that line so that “the girl I would marry would be very clear that she had something going between us that that I didn't have with other girls”. But even with this boundary, I was still racked with guilt. I kept thinking “I could revert back to that Jacob that came out of summer camp the first year after college all refurbished. A year and a half later I was still wondering, should I be in a different relationship.” Eventually we broke up because of these doubts and tensions.

¹⁷ The conflicting storm of thoughts here is certainly noteworthy.

Though my anxieties persisted up until the end of this relationship, I still appreciated her “level attitude” about religion. Given that I was bouncing back from my depression and was coming to different conclusions about relationships and religiosity, I liked not feeling any religious pressure from her. I needed “that open field” to discover what I thought for myself and to not feel pressure to be someone I didn’t want to be - or couldn’t be. The relationship felt a lot healthier. I sensed that as I kept hitting new baselines of sexual activity, I would probably need those levels going forward.¹⁸

Although I wasn’t totally able to shed my allegiance to religion, it was generally much easier for me to forget about halakha when it came to sexuality. I came to believe that “physical relationships were not only healthy, not only not bad, but... should be embraced in a relationship... The other option just didn’t seem right.” The only conscious problem I experienced with this new stance was getting into physical relationships before I knew the girls well enough and before there was an emotional connection, which was sometimes very hurtful. But as long as I was thoughtful about these potential dangers, this seemed like the best option for me.

Interestingly, once again, since the relationship ended, “I’ve one eighty-ed.” Two months later I was out going to clubs dancing with girls that I didn’t know. “I jumped right in.” For some reason when I was pressured to do those things in the relationship, I resisted them. Now that I was free and could decide for myself, I was comfortable doing those things. Again, I found myself drawn to activities that my girlfriend had previously tried to pressure me into and that I had previously resisted.

¹⁸ This statement has a certain giving up sound to it as if he doesn’t feel very much control over what he needs. Sexual experience wasn’t something he could control, revert back from or try to turn around.

During the time of this second relationship there was an incident that had a very large impact on me. I had grown up being very close to a certain Rabbi in my high school. We talked very openly and both confided in each other about some of our personal problems. He especially helped me a lot when I was depressed. One day I was feeling particularly down and I called him. He decided he would come over to my place, which was a little unusual for him. There was no one home at the time but I wasn't too concerned about it. As we talked, "I thought he put the moves on me." It was nothing serious but it was unmistakable that he tried to make some kind of sexual advance. I was really shaken by this incident. I trusted him as a friend and really looked up to him religiously. He had also helped me to deal with a lot of religious questions that I had throughout the years. When I confronted him about this incident a few months later so that we might try to resolve and move past it, he adamantly denied it and threw me out of his house. That's when I realized that we would never be able to repair this relationship.

Because of this incident, I completely lost my relationship with him but also lost "my religious anchor". In addition, "I lost a lot of respect for religious authority and halakhic authority and rabbinic authority. I lost a lot of reverence." I didn't have a relationship with anyone else like that and I really felt alone without him. I always wondered if that incident had a role in my sexual and religious trajectory, though I'm not exactly sure how that would work. "Since then I've been even less interested in what the rabbis have to say so I'm aware what the traditions are but halakhic life is not something that I pursue."¹⁹

¹⁹ Again there is some "chicken or egg" confusion here about which came first – his religious shift or this unfortunate incident. The ramification is whether we'd look at this incident as a primary motivator for his religious shift or whether it adds fuel to what is already in motion for other reasons.

Change of Heart

With all these experiences coming together, my attitude towards religion and sexuality was becoming much clearer. I decided that I wasn't going to pretend that I didn't touch girls. "I'm not going to mislead people." There was nothing wrong about being physical, in fact, it was a good thing. When it came to dating I would be very clear what I was comfortable with and what I wanted. "Religion wasn't going to get in the way of my relationships". Not only was I empowered to treat myself better but I began to empathize with a lot of others who had been in the same position as I was.

For example, it was easy to spot the guys who were depressed about their sexual experiences and having religious struggles. These were the ones who were sleeping in, missing classes and walking around with their head down. I felt emboldened to speak to these people, to make myself available to them. I wanted to explain to them what I wish someone told me a lot earlier. If you were going to start dating "let me explain to you what it's really like." Physical relationships are part of dating even in this community and it's going to be hard for anyone to avoid that. There is no reason why these people should feel depressed or abnormal. This is what relationships are about.²⁰

Some of my friends are going through their first relationships now and although they don't say anything to me directly, its pretty clear that they are fooling around with their girlfriends. I feel like "I have somewhat of an obligation" to help these people through the guilt and anguish of their relationships. I think sexual-religious conflict is the "driving force" for much of the depression that most people my age go through. In fact, I think almost every modern orthodox kid goes through this kind of psychological

²⁰ His feelings of betrayal have led him to go in the exact opposite direction of what he previously believed. Now he only sees the good in physical relationships and he is on a mission to tell others all about it!

experience. They really think they are doing something terrible but they're not. If they would just run it by their parents, they would hear how ridiculous their feelings were - unless "the parents are at this point disillusioned by their own upbringing". In general, if the community allowed for these kinds of conflicts to be spoken about more openly, it could avoid a lot of the depression that people go through.

Religious Commitments

In terms of my current religious commitments, I still observe many different laws but it's important that "I could do things kinda my way". The laws around kosher and Shabbos I still keep "the way it was given to me", despite the fact that it doesn't always make complete sense. These areas of religious life are also at the bedrock of my Jewish identity, though I can't be certain that they always will be that way. After all, being a virgin used to also be a major component of my religiosity and now I am no longer one.

"My relationship with God has definitely changed a lot." There are a number of rituals that I grew up keeping which I no longer do. These include washing my hands before eating bread, davening in general, wearing a yarmulka, tzitzis and tefillin (phylacteries). Sometimes I still keep these laws in public, not because I am trying to fool people, but out of respect for my religion.

Interestingly, tefillin was always "one of my favorite mitzvahs". Wrapping the leather straps around me had this visceral feeling of physical intimacy with God, especially because you aren't allowed to be involved in anything else while wearing them. But I haven't put on tefillin for five or six months now. I'm taking a break from it. They sit in the closet. I'm not sure if it's because I'm lazy or because of something much more symbolic, tied to my complex religious feelings.

“I don’t think about it very often. I really don’t have the time in the morning. I could throw them on and off... It’s not such a big deal you know it really only takes a couple of minutes... I don’t think it’s laziness... I just don’t want it right now ... you know it’s just too defining for me... if I’m putting on tefillin I should be doing other things... I lost the ah the meaning in my davening and then after that, eventually the tefillin lost its meaning it just wasn’t worth it anymore so... I guess it’s just symbolic for me, it’s my disconnect now from god and religion and traditional religion and halakha and that sort of thing.”²¹

In terms of my tzitzis, I remember the discomfort with my first girlfriend I when we fooled around. We would take off our clothes and there they were – my tzitzis, and our sin, looking us straight in the eye.²² The tzitzis begged the question, “why are you doing this if you’re religious?”, which is a question I try my best to avoid. I began to remove my tzitzis as I entered her apartment when she wasn’t looking: Out of sight, out of mind.

As we fooled around regularly, I started to avoid the whole charade by just not wearing my tzitzis at all. I also realized how much neater and tailored I looked without them and never had to worry about them sticking out. While I wore them on and off for a few years depending on my relationships, I gradually just stopped wearing them altogether. Especially now that I am freer about sexual activity, it doesn’t make sense to wear them and have to worry about that uncomfortable scenario coming up.

²¹ A confusing slew of contradictory thoughts. This somewhat mirrors his way of thinking about new sexual acts as we’ve seen. First it is too difficult to do (or not do) and then it becomes a much more aggressive religious statement.

²² Imagine how hard it is to remove the religious conflict from that kind of moment!

In general, if you ask me how I perceive my Jewish tradition now, I would tell you that “I don’t get Rabbi’s as infallible, I don’t get chachomim as infallible, I don’t look at our tradition as infallible.” I believe in the Torah, I believe there is a God but, ultimately, I see my life choices not as religious-philosophical decisions but as personal decisions that fit best with my needs, abilities and preferences. “I’m not a philosopher I’m not a rabbi. I’m down to earth about who I am and what I have to offer on this topic.”

Sexual Intercourse

I was recently in a less serious relationship with a girl who was not religious. She was really “pushing for the sex”. Though it might have been subtle and she may not have even realized it, it was clear that she was accustomed to having sex with boyfriends and that’s what she wanted from me as well. While I held off for a bit, “Eventually, I cracked”. She was somewhat dissatisfied with the relationship because in general she thought I was too religious for her. But I liked her a lot and “was willing to concede that much” in the hope that she would be more happy with the relationship and like me more.

At the time I remember telling myself that it was bound to happen soon anyway. With each relationship I had, my sexual activity and religious freedom had gone up a notch. I knew what usually happened after relationships ended – I would jump into the very behaviors that I had resisted doing, such as I had done before when listening to women sing in public or going to dance clubs. If I resisted sex with this girl, I told myself, it’s likely that “the next girl I’m going to go out with I’m gonna have sex with. This was going to happen soon so I’m just going to do it with her. I was fine. I was happy. I liked her, you know. It would be a good, the right experience.” I knew I was struggling with this – after all I did not agree to have sex right away – but this very

struggle probably meant that I was more ready to do it than reluctant. Or so I like to believe. In fact, I'm not even so convinced that I struggled with this decision at all. ²³

Actually, really I attribute the decision to my religious level. With a previous girl I dated who wanted to have sex with me I did hold my ground. I considered having sex but "it was not even on my radar screen". I held onto my values in that relationship because I must have been more religious then. But now "I was at that point, I don't know why, you know. You just, you just become less concerned with fulfilling traditional orthodox um laws and ah ah structure that makes decisions differently every time." I stopped caring about these restrictions. That must have been the case because otherwise why wouldn't I stop myself this time around as well. ²⁴

Having sex for the first time wasn't even such a big deal after all:

"It wasn't too dramatic, wasn't someone that I was too involved with, we didn't do it many times - we actually did it twice, which is nothing. I hadn't really figured out what I was doing (laughs), Before you know it she was gone, so I kinda felt like I got that out of the way... its not a life changer." ²⁵

In fact it's almost like it never really happened:

²³ Note his interpretation of his struggle and how he changed his mind about the fact of ever having one.

²⁴ Notice the multiple versions of his story: Initially his motivation to have sex is from her pressure. Then it becomes a way to salvage the relationship. Then he decided that he doesn't care about religion anyway and it wasn't problematic for him. Finally, he ends by saying that he did it because he's angry and resentful and therefore dismissive of his background. Again there are patterns that echo his descriptions of the first and second sexual relationships and even his musings about tefillin. Also notice his transition from "I" to "you" as in "you just become less concerned". Perhaps talking more generally about this and less personally is his way of distancing himself from such a "heretical" sounding statement.

²⁵ Note how sex is almost described as an arbitrary hump to get over with. It seems important for him to devalue this experience and strip away the emotional weight of it.

“I don’t feel like I really had sex... I feel like I’m pretty much still a virgin, that’s how I feel. I mean, I haven’t had that much of it, I don’t have like crazy sex... I haven’t had sex with a girl that I was emotionally connected to and doing it for a while... Images of this girl whom I’ve had sex with, uh, at some point, it will wash away...”

Since I didn’t have that much of it and it wasn’t in the context of strong intimacy, I still feel like a virgin. It’s not like I’ll even remember this experience for very long.²⁶

It could be that I was really confused at the time about whether I should have sex and what I was okay with. I didn’t think that God was unhappy with me or even that I was doing something so religiously wrong. It was more disconcerting because of how it would change my identity. Was I ready to look at myself differently? In truth, I think I was. “I was pressured into it, but it was something that I was ready to do and I was enticed to do.” So I guess I really wanted to do this.²⁷

I can see myself how these decisions play out. While I like to think that I am in control of situations – only doing sexual activities that I know I have made peace with in advance, it doesn’t work that way in reality. “It’s usually only retroactively”, after I engage in the behavior, that I change my attitude and tell myself that I am religiously comfortable with what I did - that it was healthy, positive and therefore I will continue to seek after it. So prior to having sex, I wasn’t so clear about my boundaries and I never decided what I wanted beforehand. I am aware, however, that being less decided is my

²⁶ It almost sounds like he wants to pretend it never happened.

²⁷ An interesting admission considering how hard he’s been trying to avoid owning this.

oblique way of allowing others to pressure me, letting my desires take the lead and, ultimately, permitting myself to do what I want.

In general, I have a sense of how conflicted I could feel and could continue to feel about the fact that I had sex. But I don't perceive myself as someone who's good at tolerating this kind of conflict.²⁸ Adjusting my values and beliefs often seems like the best option. Now "I'm a fan of sex" and it doesn't bother me on a religious level. One aspect of sex which I am somewhat torn about is the issue of it being reserved for one person only, the person I eventually marry. But it is a cost-benefit situation. Saving my virginity for marriage is an ideal but it would stifle me and preclude relationships with less religious girls who I like to date.

Saving sex for marriage is a value I believe in. But given that I don't even have a serious girlfriend and that it's hard for me to imagine finding a wife and planning a marriage anytime soon, it doesn't compete very well with my more immediate needs and desires. It's a hard value to hold onto practically even though I believe in it conceptually. Besides, I had sex already so it's kind of too late. I'm very forthcoming about my attitudes towards sex as positive compared to my peers who I think want it, but won't allow themselves to seek it out consciously. They're not ready to acknowledge their needs and desires as explicitly as me because it still remains in conflict with values that they're not willing to let go of.

Reconciling sexual intercourse with my religious observance is still confusing. "It's moved me quicker than I was ready for. So I had sex - am I ready to do everything else that's under the sun, that's irreligious now? Is it a leading indicator? I don't know." I

²⁸ We know that he certainly had a hard time with this in college.

see that I wasn't really as prepared for sex as I would have liked to be. In many ways I feel like I lost control of that experience but, even so, it's hard to hold onto any notion of regret or guilt. Instead, I have allowed sex to lead me down a certain religious path, one whose slope may be more slippery than I realized. As I don't feel so in control of my own religious life anymore, I'm not sure how low I will go exactly. Will I stop keeping kosher, will I leave this community entirely? I'm not sure because I find myself sliding pretty quickly already. It's a troubling question but I try not to think about it too much. Thinking about it will only make me feel guilty and there's nothing I hate more than religious guilt. I never really learnt how to deal with that so well.

“After having sex I find it hard not to have sex again because it is the most I'd say the most comfortable things between giving a hand-job, fingering a girl, that's on par, or eating a girl out or giving a blow job... they're a lot nastier they're more off color in a sense than having sex – sex is pretty clean you use a condom and there's really no mess and its you know its mutual ...”

Sex may even healthier and more wholesome than other sexual activities –other activities don't have that value. They're nastier and dirtier. On the other hand, “I don't think I've gotten used to it to the point where I think I need it in a relationship... I really, I don't feel like I am not a virgin and I haven't been chasing sex and thinking about my experiences too much.”²⁹

Casual Sex

²⁹ In general we see how conflicted his thoughts on having sex are: is sex good or bad, does he want it again or not, did he really have sex or not. All of these musings seem to reflect some kind of inner turmoil about his experiences.

Now, there isn't much holding me back from pursuing sexual relationships. "I'm kinda' no holds barred." Last year my big break was having sex and this year my new milestone is having casual hook ups with two girls where we had sex even though it wasn't a very serious relationship. "Now I kinda take it where I can get it." Often, I pursue sexual affairs regardless of whether that relationship has any long term potential. "Don't make me think about it too much and we'll see what happens." Sometimes, I want to be with someone, "just for the sake of having a fun night just a big stress reliever."

I don't see anything wrong or inappropriate about my behaviors. As long as I'm open about what I want and there's a mutual need between us and no expectations, it's nothing to feel guilty about. In fact, sometimes a "more lustful event" could lead to a more serious relationship and I am usually open to that. Also, these kinds of experiences are the easiest way for me to feel comfortable with a girl I'm getting to know. "I like to fool around and lie down with them and talk to them that's my comfort zone I get really close with them really quickly - wide open." Being physically intimate with them right away, forces us to be emotionally intimate as well. Although I'm pretty certain that I'm okay with this style, others in my community would look down on it. So I try to be extremely careful about my own and other people's privacy in this area.³⁰

Overall, "I'm more advanced sexually than I am religiously". From the time of my first physical relationship where I experienced so much guilt and depression, my decision has been "somewhat writing off the laws for my own life saying that this isn't realistic, this, its just not going to happen." Technically speaking from a halakhic

³⁰ He seems to be doing a little bit of work to convince himself that causal sex is both appropriate and fostering of close relationship. Perhaps his conflict is also expressed in the form of a worry that others will talk about him.

viewpoint, it doesn't matter whether you are kissing a girl or fooling around or having orgasms. If you weren't doing that you'd be masturbating anyways so better to do it with someone else than by yourself – it's certainly more enjoyable that way.

What Kind of Relationship Do I Want?

“I want a serious relationship but ah it kind of ebbs and flows... Some weekends I'm just not looking for that... Relationships have been ah less easy to come by... Ideally I would want to snap my fingers and the next girl I have sex with is the girl that I marry.” Given my busy schedule and how rare it is to meet someone I really like, I often don't have very much hope of finding the right person anytime soon. Dating is very stressful for me so as long as the right person is not “falling into my lap”, I'm going to enjoy myself and not hold back on sexual opportunities. If in the process of having fun I “tumble” into the right relationship, great. I know that “getting drunk and fooling around with girls right away” may also sabotage my ideal to get married, but I still feel like it's the best way to do things right now.

I'm not really sure if I want to end up with a girl who is religious or not. On the one hand I would want to be with someone religious because I still consider myself to be genuinely religious. I fear God and believe in a higher purpose of life. I also don't want to stray too much from my family's religious values lifestyle. But given my comfort and preference for having sex, I could see there being a lot of tension if these girls are still virgins. I know I would want sex but I would also never really want to pressure them to do something they didn't want for themselves.³¹

³¹ His concern about pressuring others is noteworthy considering his sensitivity to being pushed around religiously and his proclivity (and perhaps preference) for being pressured sexually. He also mentioned a troubling dream where a girl he was fooling around with said to him, “I'll do this particular sexual act but I want you to know that I'm uncomfortable with it.” He had trouble remembering exactly how she said it and

I'm also afraid that religious girls will challenge me on my religious choices – why I choose to do one thing and not another. A religious girl may even try to push me into doing more religious things. For example, one girl I dates used to ask me, “Is it so hard to daven three times a day?”. I understand why this matters to them, but it makes me feel really bad. “It interferes with me doing my thing... I'm just very sensitive about being pushed around religiously.” How can I be sure that this won't happen?

Girls who are less religious may “appreciate my religiosity... They'll appreciate what I do do”, as opposed to what I don't do. But at the same time I don't want a less religious girl to pressure me the other way – to become less observant and to do things I'm not comfortable with. I would want to make sure that these types of girls know and respect my boundaries and the things I value.³²

“If she's not religious then other values are just off and if she is religious then she is either too jappy or too pushy. It's like very, very much like in those two buckets, maybe my expectations are wacky.” Ultimately, I would love it if I found a girl who is the best of both worlds: someone from a strong religious background and who is at a similar religious level as me. The more similar they are to me in this way the less potential there is for the kinds of problems I worry about. But I'd be very surprised if I actually met someone like this. The religious background I have combined with the current religious lifestyle I lead is very unusual. “It's not the typical. It's just not the norm.”

Family

what she meant, but the crux of the dream was this component of doing something sexual with her that she herself would not want to do. But she will do it anyway – presumably just for him.

³² This is his only expression of complaint about his being pressured sexually by several girls to go past his usual boundaries. Seemingly it does bother him on some level, though he has never before indicated so.

My experience of keeping or breaking Halakha is intricately linked with fears of being rejected by my family and friends, in addition to being comfortable with the choices I make. Since I've made some very bold religious statements to myself over these past few years, I'm concerned about how much my family knows and how they react to me. Fortunately, I sometimes get a real "boost of confidence" from friends and family when they tell me how much they respect who I am and that I am doing ok.

"I am a very different person and I had a lot of respect for the little Jacob, so I try not to forget the way he thought too much." I used to really like how diligent and disciplined I was, so different than the person I am now. Hearing positive reinforcement from other people, reminds me that I am still ok despite the changes I've made. It assuages my worries that I might not be respected any more because of these choices. Even though I'm not the same religious kid I used to be, people seem to still admire and look up to me. I feel like I'm doing the best I can. Sometimes I'm not sure if that's good enough so these kinds of these comments really make a big difference to me.

Sometimes I feel like my behaviors are bad in other people's eyes and if they found out they'd be really shocked and disappointed. But a few of my family members who have a sense of my actions, don't seem to be bothered as much as I would have thought. They kind of shrug off what I'm doing as if it's no big deal. Those kinds of moments are very relieving for me. I guess they are more tolerant than I would expect. "They could recognize that I am doing what I need to do and I am doing good things despite being a little different religiously."

3. David

Introduction

David is a 30 year old lawyer in a top Manhattan firm. We talked about his story at his well-furnished apartment. Tall, thin and dark skinned, David spoke with a certain serious intellectual air that only occasionally broke into a more casual way of speaking. He is originally from Westchester, NY.

Narrative

Growing Up

I grew up knowing some of the religious “norms” of premarital and marital sexuality, as they were transmitted more “through the back door” than through direct instruction. It was mostly through peers that I first learnt about these prohibitions. Discussions would be triggered for example when, schools or camps introduced policy about boys and girl not being allowed to touch, or when individuals were caught breaking these rules. It was never addressed formally in a classroom which was really unfortunate. Kids were left to figure it out on their own alongside all the baggage they brought from movies and their own misguided experiences. It would have been a powerful statement for a teacher or Rabbi to have told us, “You know everyone talks about how you’re not supposed to masturbate, but everyone does. I did.” This could have had a “major impact” on people’s lives.³³

After high-school, when I went to study at yeshiva in Israel, there was really “this break from an old mold”. I started to take my religious commitments much more seriously than I had in high school where laws didn’t mean that much to me internally. In

³³ The seamless jump from personal to general experience and from life history to social criticism is interesting. The content of his complaint about masturbation is also probably not inconsequential. Both these process dynamics and the content around masturbation appear repeatedly throughout the narrative.

general I became more thoughtful, sincere and diligent about religious laws, beliefs and rituals. This kind of growth was greatly facilitated by the sanctimonious atmosphere in yeshiva, which pulled for students to achieve a level of religiosity that, in retrospect, was totally unrealistic for an 18 year old. It would have been helpful to have the yeshivas remind us that we can't be those role models right away, "but we don't do that".³⁴

In Yeshiva,

"That was the first time that I really decided to take on the laws of not touching women seriously um of trying to, trying to, really try to conquer my desires um in masturbation, in touching... trying to avoid, which is trying to avoid thoughts of of of sex and of attraction when, you know, not necessarily looking at someone who's dressed in a way that might stimulate those thoughts and feelings, um being more careful about, or I should say, dealing with the issues in being more careful, the kinds of media I allowed into my life whether movies or TV or whatever it isI would say um I kept to that and through some situations where there was emotional intimacy but no physical intimacy."

When I look back on this time, my understanding of the sexual laws was more "black or white". The obligation was clear. "If I'm not meeting it, that's a bar I need to work towards." It was just "a given", "a way of life", not something I was able to choose or play with or challenge. I tried so hard to conquer my urges to masturbate but when I failed, I would feel really guilty and bad about myself. I tried my best to hold back, but

³⁴ Interestingly, he lumps himself together with the system he is criticizing when he says, "but we don't do that". He does this repeatedly.

never in a “systematic” or “strategic” way. My guilt was more paralyzing than productive at this time.

Impact of Education

“I think it would be an interesting thing if a high school rabbi or a yeshiva rabbi said, ‘You know, I know these are the norms. They are not norms that I kept and, frankly, I don’t know what to tell you about it. Or I’d know what to tell you about it and this is what I’m telling you’, whatever it is. It’s almost irrelevant, I mean, we address every other area of life...”

I remember learning many legalistic elements of marital and premarital sexuality when studying the Talmud. It is ironic that we delve into the technical details of sexual acts and menstrual fluids and talk about them openly and directly without flinching, but at the same time stay far away from any real conversation about our own experience of sexuality or how these laws impact us. It seems to highlight the “detachment from reality” that is inherent in our yeshiva educational system. Not addressing sexuality openly makes people confused about what’s right or wrong or what’s normal or expected.

When you don’t talk about something, it’s a just a milieu of fragmented pieces that create your views on something so when you bring baggage from society from movies from this and that from high school and your own opinions from what you think authorities want from you on this topic and what you are reading and what you are feeling and experiencing you know with the guilt of those feelings and what you are thinking tacked on, its not a pretty picture.

I don't know why we don't teach people that perfectly observing all the laws, especially sexual ones, is a process and a goal to strive towards, rather than something that is expected to happen right away.

Struggling with Masturbation

I had always had a very difficult time in stopping myself from masturbating when I had the urge to do so. "It was tough being my own task master", especially because I wasn't so connected, clear or convinced about the values or purpose of stopping. In general, if I am going to work at something I have to be much more attached to its personal meaning and relevance. While there were times when I set goals for myself to stop masturbating and was able to successfully "hold off", the experience was usually short lived. It would last a few days at most. The conflict between what my urges were telling me and what religion said was very difficult to withstand. I didn't know how to stop but I also didn't want to let myself down or disappoint God.

I wonder, "was I fighting myself or was I fighting something outside of myself? How did I view my sexual urges?" Sometimes the experience of the urge to masturbate was so powerful and relentless that it didn't feel like it came from me. It felt imposed from the outside, maybe from "the yetzer hara, the evil inclination... this separate being". My wish to conform to the restriction, on the other hand, felt like it was coming from inside me – I really didn't want to sin. When I think about the conflict as my own will versus this external urge, my failure seems like a lost battle with a more dominating force. But when I think of the urge as coming from within me, which is more often the case, my failure represents caving into urges that I can't control. After enough of these failures, I began to just think of myself as "a weak willed person", which made my

failures almost self-determined. They became “a crutch to lean on”, or perhaps, a loophole that allowed me to follow my desires in a less conflicted way.

There were times where I was able to withstand the desire to masturbate such as by falling asleep or finding a distraction. Sometimes the conflict felt more balanced – I was able to weigh the pros and cons of each option before making a decision. I would have more of a chance to reason with myself that I should hold back because by doing so, for example, “I would be pushing myself further religiously, getting to a higher place or a closer place”. These moments were rare.

More often, my anxiety over masturbation was concentrated into the moments before I did it, “in the build up... when I have the ability to impact” the decision. But as opposed to other religious conflicts and decisions, my free will and ability to choose whether I masturbated or not felt “extremely reduced.” The urge felt too strong to contend with. Everything happens very quickly in the heat of the moment. “I guess it always felt like a losing battle. Some people, I think, had an easier time.”

Conflict and Torture

Though I felt bad about masturbating I was able to put those feelings at the bottom of the “guilt pile”. I remember experiencing the failure and disappointment as pretty short lived because, in general, “I don't really get so upset at myself”. Even as I began to take religious obligations very seriously in my post high-school years and was troubled by these conflicts much more, the emotional impact over time had been much more reduced. In general I was not the kind of person to get overwhelmed with feelings, looking like “that walking wreck that we stereotype”. The only times I can remember feeling that way was in specific “dire” situations, such as after I broke up with a loved

one. As the immediate intensity of such conflict and guilt seemed fleeting and also manageable, I believe that the “torture” here was related to the long term duration of the struggle – ever since the age of 12. The role of sexuality in my life and how I could fit it into my religion was always something I thought about a lot and tried hard to put together.

I’m aware of the disparity between this perception of myself and my recollections of feeling horrible after I masturbated and this may represent my ability to “function with blinders” to “compartmentalize” and to “not feel the direct weight of things even if they are very significant in my life”. But since I saw this is a losing battle from the start, it didn’t seem like a major failure each time and was easy to forget about, even if it did feel pretty bad right after. Luckily, I am well adjusted and so I was always able to distance myself from these bad feelings.

However, my “continuous failure to live up to standards that I thought were required of me um may have started to generate a system of thinking which would accommodate that.... I had to create some kind of system whereby my behavior was still acceptable to go on living and to go on forward without being destroyed by guilt.” As I saw this guilt as very powerful, I needed to make some sort of acceptable compromise in this struggle. I began to tell myself that although “the system” had a certain standard, it was a totally different story whether I kept to that system or not. This “duality of system verses individual” represented my more “nuanced” approach to my relationship with these restrictions. As I always saw myself as more “sexually charged” than others, I didn’t think that I could continue to adopt a system so incompatible with my desires.³⁵

³⁵ This is actually his second compromise based on what he said before, though he may not have called it that. The first compromise was creating a perception of himself as being weak-willed or as too sexually

Nuanced Approach

This more nuanced approach to orthodox law partially developed in college as I spent a lot of time studying Torah. I started “exploring and expanding my view of how I approach the law, of how tradition has played a role in the development of my community and how I want it to play a role individually”. This approach took the place of the more authoritarian one of “though shalt not masturbate, though shalt not touch women, though shalt not fool around”. At the same time I began to take a more academic approach to sexuality, including its intersection with Judaism. I found books in the library which taught me about sexual norms and practices. I read essays in Jewish intellectual journals and books. While I could have been drawn to this because “I got turned on by it”, the result was that I was able to demystify some of my perceptions of sexuality as a mysterious and uncomfortable part of life.

In terms of Judaism I began to explore the evolution of sexual restrictions, their purpose in society and how they applied to modern life. I began to see myself as someone who could understand the system as it applied to my life and then opt into or out of it if I chose to. I started to look upon these laws as more of “an outsider”. “Learning a halakhic system allows you to think about it as a system, rather than, you know, what you hear in camp or in school, or on the playground, which kind of just becomes internalized as organizing principles which you never think about.”

Seeing it as a system made it more flexible to me and made me see its adherence to it as on an ongoing process. “In other words if this is a system of perfect existence, it makes sense that people would not live up to it entirely... but this is what I'm pushing

charged. This perception was also built in order to accommodate his sexual behaviors. It sounds like the this first compromise wore thin over time and is now being replaced by a change in his religious identity.

towards.” By making more sense of my sexuality, and by seeing halakha as more patient and forgiving than I used to believe, I was able to “tackle” my masturbation habits more strategically, such as by setting smaller goals for myself or by distracting myself in a more heated moment. The guilt wasn’t as paralyzing as it had always been. Failing didn’t pose as strong of a “visceral emotional reaction”. These thoughts were what I would call the “start of enlightenment” for me.

At the time I was exploring these issues, I was also involved in a very intense relationship with a girl. We had spent the first few weeks of our relationship not touching each other but it started to become very intense. Pretty soon it became “unbearable” to not touch and at a certain point – “I could probably mark it with a month and year” – I kissed her and we began a physical relationship. It just seemed like the “buildup” of emotional intimacy had simply “conquered” the boundaries that I had initially established. The desire was so powerful, I felt helpless against it.

Even though I don’t reflect upon that moment as much of a decision because it was so intense, it would be hard to say that it wasn’t premeditated given the amount of thought that preceded it in the weeks before. I had been holding back and analyzing what to do for so long. After this endless cycle of unproductive ruminating, I eventually said to myself, “I’m just gonna do it”. Though my nuanced thinking about these restrictions was already developing, “at the time it was just, wow, this is someone who I love and I really need to kiss her.”³⁶

³⁶ He really struggles to understand how he allowed himself to kiss this girl. Either he was swept up in the moment or his behaviors followed a deliberate change in his religion or he really wanted to just do, despite the fact he knew it was wrong. This last approach may be the most disturbing one to him as he has the most trouble staying with it when he recollects the scenario.

Another factor that led to the development of my more nuanced approach was graduating college. I was no longer exclusively friends with Orthodox people, and was exposed to many different kinds of religious expressions and ways of being observant. I started to relax my adherence to other religious norms. I knew that sexual norms “probably was a sure next”. My intense relationship with this girl together with the expansion of my religious worldview led me to care less about the laws restricting touch between men and women. I remained observant but “bracketed” many of the sexual laws that I was previously concerned with.

Part of what allowed me to do this was my understanding of the law’s development. First, they were created by older married men past their sexual prime, for unmarried adolescents who were much more “hormonally active” than them. These laws may have been normal for the socio-historical context that they were developed in, but were much less so for our modern society. Men and women at that time were largely segregated - the sexual temptation was therefore much less than it is now. Furthermore, the normal age of marriage was adolescence. Single men did not have to struggle for very long with their unfulfilled urges. Nowadays, even in stricter religious communities, it is encouraged to wait at least until early adulthood to get married. The single years, in general, are therefore much longer than before.

Since “there’s been a shift sociologically without a shift legally”, I sometimes believe that these laws are in fact no longer relevant. The only reason why they haven’t officially changed is because the Orthodox leadership is afraid to take an active stand against them. So when I think about along these lines, my freer position on sexuality feels more legitimate. It doesn’t feel like I’m even going against the law when I touch women.

The other way I sometimes justify my more liberal sexual position is by saying that even though the laws are out of synch with modern times they still haven't changed. But "maybe there's some benefit in holding up the norms of what people can't fulfill or won't fulfill." I suppose that the law would then function as holding up some kind of ideal value that people should strive towards. In that case I'm also okay with the sexual decisions I've made though they are against halakha. The guilt or discomfort that is attached "isn't such an awful thing" to have to live with. If I view "halacha or torah as a separate set of norms for close to perfect existence, I'm ok with not being perfect. Certainly at the age of 26, I'm ok not being perfect".³⁷

Though I'm not always sure which of the two approaches I believe in, I feel proud that I am now less emotionally stuck in this conflict. Rather than going by the default and being paralyzed by unproductive guilt, I have actively thought about and engaged the social, religious and personal repercussions of these laws. Now I think about these issues in a "somewhat more cerebral way". I'm "less effected by the conflict, which manifested itself in a very emotional, psychological way in the past".

The way I have taken more agency over these conflicts has also strengthened my identity and my ability to feel like I can establish my own way in many different areas of life. I definitely have an investment in maintaining my religious observance overall. I haven't simply thrown religion away. That being said, in general I feel that "the religious system is not providing... a direct emotional religious experience. I don't really feel religious experience" any more.

³⁷ The personal reference in this latter option "certainly at the age of 26" combined with his tone and affect reveal something much more sincere about this second option.

After college I had gotten involved with another girl and we dated for nine months. We were very physically intimate with each other and “there was not even a pretext of ‘we shouldn’t be doing this’ like there was in the last one”. Although we never had sex we did “just about everything else”.³⁸ My first relationship made these sexual experiences “part of my repertoire and my memory” so it wasn’t like I was going to hold off on doing them. Also as I began working and interacting with more non-observant people I needed to be able to bracket these laws and these general religious norms that governed the kinds of physical interactions I was allowed to have.

But still I can’t fully explain why I allowed myself to get so physical with this girl. “I’m sure I’m missing factors. Its complex. People are complex and decisions are complex and I talk about it like as an active decision but its something which feels like it just happened.” In making sense of my actions in hindsight I can try to put all the pieces together in some kind of orderly fashion but at the time I felt much less in control and much less aware of what I was doing and why. I talk as if my actions and beliefs matched up perfectly but I’m not sure if that’s how it unfolded then.

Though me and this second girlfriend touched in private, I would not be physical at all with her in public. I didn’t want to come out with my actions to others given that “this is not something acceptable in the eyes of the community that I want to associate with”. Furthermore, given that “I see myself through the eyes of the community as well as through my own eyes” this was not the kind of message that I wanted to send. I was aware of how hypocritical this sounded and my girlfriend, who wanted to touch in public, disagreed with me on those grounds. In hindsight the distinction between public and

³⁸ His tone in saying this sounded very self-critical.

private action still seems reasonable to me, though I can see why it poses problems as well.

Sexual Practices/Beliefs

“I’m probably more of a sexual being than it seems a lot of my friends and more, I don’t know, horny or whatever the term you would use is”. I always felt like I had very strong sexual urges, much more intense than any of my friends from what I was able to measure. Reading books about sex has taught me that there’s a “good chunk of people” for every sexual abnormality and type of sexual expression so there’s probably people that are like me as well.³⁹ I just don’t encounter them very often. From the conversations I’ve had with friends about masturbation or interacting with women I can tell that sex is on my mind a lot more than others and that my urges are stronger. People don’t talk about sex or masturbation too openly so I’ve sometimes wondered if everyone is walking around with the kind of urges that I do, but my hunch is that really I’m pretty different. This gives me some feeling of concern though I’m not able to put my finger on what that concern is.

I often wonder how many Orthodox men regularly masturbate. It is not something openly discussed in our community so it’s hard to gauge what people do. I don’t think I’m the only one struggling with this problem or that it’s too abnormal. The concern around this is more how I will be able to “tackle” my sexual needs in a relationship. Will these needs overwhelm the other person so that there isn’t room for their needs? This applies “even in the context of friendships or even in the context of walking down the

³⁹ It is interesting that he lumps his overactive libido with sexual abnormalities. It suggests that he may feel his tendencies and behaviors to be very abnormal. The crux of his worry seems to be more specifically about masturbating, as evidenced from the question he now asks.

street, how I navigate, how I talk to, how I meet new people, how I approach um how I approach female coworkers and uh female friends...”

It’s not only in intimate relationships that my sexual interests or urges can overwhelm others. My sexual life can seep into more causal interactions with women whether the concern is how I might look at strangers in a sexual way, how I interact with women at my workplace or how I talk to female friends. And it’s wrong to have these ulterior motives. I should somehow try to squelch these feelings because it is terrible to treat women as sexual objects.

Sexual Behaviors

In my interactions with other women “I’ll send a flirtatious vibe” if I’m attracted to them even if I’m not really sure what I want. “My default is to be very friendly and to send signals of interest when I may be interested.” I’m naturally a “flirtatious guy” and I attribute this both to my sex drive and my inherent personality. “It is somewhat of a mechanized response for me” in that I’m not consciously even deciding to act that way - usually. It doesn’t seem to be motivated by anything other than my natural style – I think. I know that I do this because women have confronted me many times saying, “you know, you don’t just look into a women’s eyes that way or speak in that way or have that kind of physical closeness if you’re not interested”. Hearing that makes me feel like I gave them a mixed message and hurt them. I should probably be a little more responsible about this.

But sometimes I think I act this way around everyone, men too. That makes me feel like my flirtation is more about who I am as opposed to it being about something that I want, which indicates that I am more deliberately using it to get something. Though I’d

prefer to think of my flirtation as not having a particular function, I still might be a little too liberal with it. I guess “if I see this relationship going somewhere... then I’ll be flirty but if that’s not there, the long-term result, then I won’t be.” Then again, to be completely honest, “if there’s some interest of any kind of relationship here then I generally tend to go into that mode.” I guess it’s hard to know exactly when I’m flirtatious, but it’s definitely not the case that I’m only like that with girls who I could see being married to. I wonder how it works when I am only interested in someone sexually.⁴⁰ Perhaps an example will help clarify.

I met a girl at this party who I was very attracted to. We spoke to each other for a while and really hit it off. It happened to be that she “does not touch men as a rule” and was totally “shomeret negiah”. But I was being flirtatious and was “sending those signals” “cause I didn’t know what my interest was”. I guess the fact that she wouldn’t touch me is significant here because had she been willing to go there, we would have ended up being sexual instead of getting to this level of “this advanced flirtiness”. After all, she is interested in me. But whether or not she was interested:

“From my end I would have been interested... probably, or or, that’s not that not the right way to say it. - from my end, in the very in the um absolving myself of any responsibility, which is a very irresponsible thing to do, I would have said it would have just happened... I mean I remember the level of emotional intensity that was there in those conversations and now I don’t think that a relationship would work out... in knowing her a

⁴⁰ He seems back and forth about being in control of his flirtation and when he uses it. Given his worries about his sexuality spilling into his daily life, this conflict is interesting.

little better but even in that initial intensity I think that would have been a natural result for me.”⁴¹

I find myself saying “it just happened” very often in sexual situations. And even though I am aware of how irresponsible it is to absolve myself in this way, it seems to be my automatic way of reasoning through these situations. For example, this year is the first time that “I’ve fooled around a little” in a casual way, out of the context of a relationship. “In each of those experiences I think while I’ve been conscious of what’s going on at the time sometimes it feels like there was no decision there on my part and it was just something that just happened”. Though this is something that I hear many people saying, I don’t like that I think this. “I reflect on that experience of no choice with disdain”. Though they feel like they happened automatically without my participation, I would like to think of them as active decisions. I need to be control of my actions and live with the consequences of them.⁴²

Another situation was with a girl I met where there was, of course, an “emotional backup”⁴³ and she was visiting the city and “needed a place to stay, was gonna crash on my couch, instead crashed in my bed um, with me,⁴⁴ and you know we spent the evening I was showing her around the city we were just hanging out but then at the end of the night when we got back to my apartment which happened to be empty um it just

⁴¹ Notice his language and sentences all breaking down here. He seems very conflicted.

⁴² Though he’s troubled that he can’t easily do this, there is obviously something that makes it difficult to do so.

⁴³ One of the many instances where he is adamant about the emotional connection with someone who he was sexually interested in, almost as if reminding himself that his sexual urges are well-behaved.

⁴⁴ This kind of sexual detail along with his use of slang is very uncharacteristic. Perhaps it reveals some form of conflict.

happened and... I guess right wink wink that it happened to be empty.” So even though I obviously thought this may happen beforehand, it still didn’t feel like a decision to me at the time. Although it’s possible that the organic way the situation unfolds makes it feel like it just happened – and that really I don’t feel guilty about the experience and I’m not trying to disown it – I still think that those experiences are “quite damaging” even outside the context of religion.

Perhaps if I was fooling around with someone who was “equally uninterested in a relationship and equally interested in just fooling around” it would not be as disturbing to me, though I’m not even sure if that’s true. But if the girl is interested in a more long term substantial relationship and I am only interested in a sexual one, that kind of interaction would be unacceptable. It would be much worse than sending flirtatious signals to girls who I’m not interested in a long term relationship with.

It’s a horrible thing to do to someone, it’s a horrible thing to make someone feel vulnerable and hurt them and say – Ya, it feels like usury. I’m using someone else’s body for your own – you know, using anything for your own gain, where it hurts someone else is awful but using someone else’s self, their body, their mind, whatever, their heart is ah I think its an awful thing and so those I’m really pretty sure I’m not okay with, and so maybe I need to do my thinking in that area a little bit better.

This kind of tension exists even with my female friends: and this is stuff that I’m still formulating so if I struggle for the right terms or the right description here just know that this is not stuff that I have tackled it’s stuff that I am working on now as I explore you know ever

developing identity and that in the context of new contexts and relationships and physical relationships too, I would say this year is the first year where I um you know I'll hug and kiss female friends in public um whereas before even if that was something that I would do in the context of a relationship it wasn't something that I did as a social...⁴⁵

This started around the time I began working. For the first time in my life I was shaking girl's hands and touching women more casually. I decided that if I was touching women at work, I wasn't going to stop touching them in "my weekend life". So I became freer with physical affection with my friends, such as by wishing a girlfriend Shabbat shalom in shul with a hug and a kiss on her cheek. Although many people will make an exception to shake women's hands at work or school but then remain "steadfast" about the law in their social life, "I think that I'm more holistic in my in my self orientation" and it's harder for me to make these separations. Then again, that explanation doesn't quite resonate – "I'm not sure what motivated that decision".⁴⁶

I acknowledge though, that casual touch isn't always so innocent, such as with female friends who I feel emotionally connected to. What happens if there is also a sexual interest when I get close to them like that? With many of these girls, it's not so simple. "There's always that other element lurking there". If it's a girl who I would not be interested in being with long-term, but might be interested in sexually, it's much more conflicted for me.

⁴⁵ Unquestionably, this long-winded, intellectualized and unnecessary preamble – why would he struggle for the right words about this? – points to some hesitation in saying this.

⁴⁶ He is trying to account for new behaviors that he has allowed himself to do but can't seem to find the reason behind it.

There's a lot of tension for me in general when I meet girls who I am sexually attracted to but not romantically interested in. "I'm nervous about what messages my actions are sending." Since I am probably acting flirtatious, and since my hugs and kisses are sometimes more than just "friendly", I'm worried that they might perceive my behavior as a more serious interest in them. Because it feels wrong to have sexual interests in women that I don't want to be involved with, I sometimes try to pretend those interests aren't there. Sometimes I'm so preoccupied with how my actions might impact others, I "cut out my own desires... I cut out the fact that I want things for me".

It seems like there's no perfect solution though. Before when I tried to keep the sexual restrictions, I was "tortured" and overwhelmed with guilt because I simply couldn't do it. Now that I made a religious decision to bracket these laws and no longer feel as badly, I find "myself to be overly sexual and not restrained enough", which is a different kind of torture. Though I've made a religious decision about what's ok for me, I worry about sexuality "in terms of healthy relationships with those I meet, with those who I care very much about and ultimately someone who I hope I would like to spend the rest of my life with... I don't want that to be a governing factor."⁴⁷

I have some sense that my sexual needs could be very demanding and overwhelming for others. I've allowed myself some religious freedom to explore my sexuality, but it's opened up a "floodgate that now I need to regulate in some way." I hope I can figure out a way to balance my sexual desires and interests without feeling like they are taking over. I'm trying to figure out "what I'm ok with and what I'm not okay

⁴⁷ He is very quick to jump away from the nature of his concerns and move into the "superego" aspects of what he should be doing instead, ie; healthy relationships. It's not so clear how he sees his sexuality as so damaging and selfish.

with in this new physical realm that I've entered into". It's possible that religious values will have some say in that and I may slowly start to "bring the religious stuff back into it" as this helps support the decisions that are best for me personally and socially. While I'm not doing that yet, I could see that happening in the future.

These decisions aren't so much religious decisions anymore since my bracketing of the laws feels pretty guilt free. For example, although in past years I've spent a lot of time reflecting, regretting, and asking god forgiveness for my sexual sins on Yom Kippur, this past year I only thought a little about those sins even though I was much more sexually active. This changed either because I am good at "compartmentalizing" I was able to cordon off my guilty feelings, or because I was able to comfortably tell myself that these are not rules that I'm addressing at this point. The issue is on "the backburner". Perhaps "the bracketing was just such a thick and successful cordoning off" that I simply stopped feelings religious guilt in this area. Or maybe "there was no thought and that's exactly it – that it was somewhere else." I'm not completely sure how to explain this change in me.⁴⁸

The values that I am more concerned with now have more to do with respecting other people physically, to not send "mixed messages" to women, to be a supportive boyfriend if I am in a relationship and not just be interested in sexual activity with them. I want to eventually become a good husband who's not just interested in sex. "It's really important to be aware of... the role that sex plays as an active contributor to a relationship rather than as something which can hijack a relationship and cloud other

⁴⁸ He seems to be having trouble trying to "locate" his guilt – is it there and if so where? How can he account for his more intense sexual actions and less intense feelings of guilt.

things up.”⁴⁹ Now that I am freer with my sexual expressions, I’m scared that it may take over both my own interests and the wellbeing of my partner, if I don’t somehow keep it in check.

Walking Down the Street

When I was learning in Israel and then in college I was very conscious of the religious problem that looking at immodestly dressed women posed for me. I worked very hard to try and avoid thinking sexual thoughts, was careful about the movies I watched and the images I looked at in general. So I would try not to look twice at something appealing “that might stimulate those thoughts and feelings”. Now, it doesn’t bother me religiously to take a second glance at someone who’s attractive. It’s something I try to avoid “more out of respect in how I want to view other people”.

When I look at a woman in a certain way walking down the street whether or not... it’s a situation that she’s opted into..., I’m objectifying someone. If I don’t know this person I can’t possibly be interested! If I don’t you know them I’m objectifying them as a sexual object and that’s not something I’m ok with. It’s definitely the sex and the sexual feelings which are the issue.⁵⁰

When the restrictions meant more to me, I was much more distracted by the things I saw in the street. “Every little thing used to set me off”. Now that I am more relaxed about the religious restrictions, I just don’t seem to notice these images as much anymore. This leads me to believe that it might even be “the restriction which generates

⁴⁹ This way of talking about the dangers of sexuality is the kind of rhetoric one hears and reads about in orthodox religious settings when sexual restrictions are discussed.

⁵⁰ The forcefulness of the presentation and the repetition of these ideas is noteworthy.

the tension” and, “if people would just relax it then they just wouldn’t be so sexually interested anymore.” On the other hand, perhaps what makes it less stimulating is the very fact that your whole mindset is more sexual so you don’t notice the smaller things as much.

Pornography

Pornography is another example of where I feel uncomfortable because of the way I am viewing women. “If I find myself looking at pornography, again, not a decision, is a decision,⁵¹ which does happen sometimes - if I’m cruisin’ the internet and I’m lookin’ at porn”,⁵² which I try to absolve myself of by saying “it just happened”, though clearly I am actively searching for it. I know that I am not the only person who uses it because it is not exactly a small, dwindling business. What concerns me about porn is using other women to generate sexual feelings. “Any situation where I’m conscious of the fact that I’m doing something for the for the rise that it gives me is is something that um I’m uncomfortable with... And obviously drawn to it at the same time which is why I would keep doing it... which then after the fact causes me to reflect upon them the behavior negatively.”

Using pornography doesn’t make me feel so guilty, it’s not something I think much about and besides it’s not like I can stop it anyway.⁵³

⁵¹ It’s so hard for him to hear his own words, they have to be followed up by an immediate attempt to absolve. He does this in the next line as well with “it just happened”. This echoes his previous discomfort when trying to admit that he would have been interested in a sexual no-strings-attached liaison with that girl he met at the party.

⁵² Again the crass, more slang-like language which is generally unlike the rest of how he speaks. He seems to use it when describing sexual actions that are more extreme and perhaps more uncomfortable for him. There is also a tone of shame and disappointment that typically accompanies this way of speaking; ie; “more horny or whatever”, “crashed in my bed, with me” and “cruisin’ the internet, lookin’ at porn”.

⁵³ The tone here has a real sort of sad, giving-up quality to it.

I think I'm pretty good about it, um.... Pretty good about, pretty good about not - pretty good about respecting other people, pretty good about thinking about issues as they come up and constantly working on them which is that to say that this these particular manifestations of my behavior and what the problem is for me is... tied into these larger issues of how I view the role of sex and sexual feelings in my life...⁵⁴

My discomfort with porn is mostly related to this larger issue I have about seeing women as sexual objects. Though this is the central concern here I would not be surprised if it was also shaped by some religious ethic that I still remain attached to, though I can't specify what that is. Pornography is "pretty much the edge of my comfort zone – maybe in maybe out" in terms of what I talk to others about. I don't talk to anyone else about it, even close friends who I've talked about sex with. For all I know they use it as well but I haven't ever tried to bring it up with them. I don't know why pornography feels like the last taboo that can't be spoken about.

I think porn is more shameful, because when you are with sexually someone "there's some two way nature about it". It seems more normal to do and is certainly more accepted and talked about in general society. There's also someone in your physical proximity to point to as a partner. You can say this real thing is what I am attracted to.

⁵⁴ Whatever he is "pretty good about" it's all rather vague. It sounds almost like he's telling himself that he's still a good guy even though he uses porn. Interestingly, it could be said that one of the main draws of pornography is that it gives men the ability to freely "use" women as sexual objects. This aspect of porn seems to really bother him though he must be drawn to this at the same time.

Using porn is much more of an active experience in terms of going to the website and searching for what you want. It's something that you "really need to opt into."⁵⁵

Although I realize that many people use pornography to "stimulate themselves", I wonder a lot about other orthodox guys and whether this usage is widespread. And I wonder if other people in this community also try to psychologically absolve themselves from the responsibility of their sexual acts by saying things like "it just happened." Whenever I feel badly about my sexual actions, or that I'm the only one struggling with this, I tell myself that I must have "this drive issue". Otherwise it doesn't make sense because I'm not a shallow, thoughtless person.⁵⁶ I think that my sexual drive "dictates my decisions" more than it does with my peers."

Conversations with God

I always thought I was more "hormonally active" or more sex driven than my peers. If God gave everyone challenges, I used to reason, mine was definitely in the sexual realm. "I don't have a hard time picking up trash off the floor or reaching out to someone" – I was created with these kinds of tests. Now, I frame it more physiologically, since I'm not really sure how God is involved. I think "my body is built to release whatever chemicals are that motivates those kinds of needs... I think I've got more of them, or less of them or whatever it is that does that." Or maybe what I'm perceiving as a "drive issue" is really my being less religiously motivated and having a harder time imposing religious limits on my behavior.

⁵⁵ Though this could mean many things by this, one of them could be that it is also a little easier to own and admit to because you can share the responsibility for doing it with another person.

⁵⁶ This hints at his sense of a contradiction between being sexually interested and being a good person.

When I used to think that God was directly involved in my strong urges, I would sometimes pray for the strength to overcome those urges or to just not be tempted by these thoughts. I remember phrases in the liturgy like “v’taher libeynu l’avdecha bemet” (and purify my heart to serve you truthfully), that talked about purity which would often trigger those kinds of personal requests. Sometimes I would ask God for help outside of a formal prayer just on my own. I would never really ask God “can you help me to control my urges right now in this bed”. I don’t remember exactly what I said “either because it was very very important or because it really was not important”.⁵⁷

I never felt or expressed anger at God for my struggles or for my religious failures. It’s not like God was attacking me with these challenges. “I could see someone saying, why did you make me like this, or why did you make the laws like this” but that’s never what I felt. I was more well adjusted than that. I viewed sexual urges as something more natural and organic. The desire always felt like it came from within me, not an experience that someone else put in me.

Also I came to believe that there was a difference between my personal relationship with God and the legal system. I never thought of God as “standing right behind the rabbis”. The legal system played a role in terms of providing me with organizing principles in my life and “imbuing different pieces of my life and different objects in the world with certain kinds of meaning”. But in order for me to relate to the legal system “it needs to become internalized”. My goal now in terms of religion is to “make your will God's will” a passage I recently read in an ancient Jewish text. My ideal

⁵⁷ This seems to be a recurring theme: is his not feeling or remembering guilty feelings a sign that he is repressing his guilt or that he has just made peace with it. It’s also not clear if in this instance, as in some others, he is trying not to remember his thoughts about this.

is not struggle and tension but internalizing the system and making it personally relevant and meaningful.

4. Mark

Introduction

Mark is a 25 year old doctoral student in Chemistry at Yale. We met over coffee in New York City. He has blond wavy hair and gives off a very confident, laid back impression, though his speech is markedly self-deprecating. Mark spoke very candidly about his experiences and seemed quite motivated to want to help others in his community who were struggling with similar issues.

Narrative

Masturbation

When I started masturbating in high school, it made me feel pretty bad about myself. At many different points “I made concentrated efforts to stop”. Though I had the impression that my friends also masturbated from the way jokes got thrown around about it, I never *really* knew if I was the only one. None of us spoke about it directly. In terms of my formal education, masturbation or sex wasn’t addressed by my teachers or Rabbi’s either. The only time I’m pretty sure it was brought up was during more informal school gatherings that we sometimes had on weekends. But there was nothing significant said that I can remember.

The “cycle of trying not to do it and doing it” persisted for many years. And it was difficult. “You’re kinda ashamed of what you do, you really feel like... you really feel like you can’t stop even when you try. That’s how I felt.” What makes it even worse is that you start to believe that you’re the only one doing it. When rabbis say things like “we all have these urges and you got to learn to control them... you just kind of assume that everybody around you is, and that you can’t”. You’re caught between wanting to

speaking about it to confirm you aren't the only one and the fear of breaking this huge "taboo" if you did. Feeling like you're the only one having trouble with it makes you feel so much more ashamed. "If other people are doing it at least it's ok". I felt very abnormal "not in the sense of having the desires to do it, being abnormal in the sense of not being able to control them". My "control issue" made me feel horrible.

"I think at some point I just kinda gave up." After so many years in high school of starting and stopping, there was this incredible "build up" of shame and anxiety that one day I just decided I would stop once and for all. When I left to study at Yeshiva in Israel I told myself, "you're gonna stop doing this for good. And like I did for like 7 months. Like that was like a real accomplishment for me. And like then I started doing it again and I was like, after that, like that was kinda of like a crushing defeat I guess." After this last attempt, I realized how hopeless the struggle was. I couldn't win over my urges.

"I view it as almost an addiction its like the thing you really want to do, but you can't, or that like you know keeps like cycling back into it even when you do progress out of it. Like I I don't really think it's a disgusting thing like it just like really bothers me."

Part of the difficulty is that I know that Judaism has "a really really positive take on sexuality" and considers sex as something very holy only when it's in the right context. Like a professor of mine said, Judaism doesn't just see sex as a bodily urge to relieve, like going to the bathroom. It's something much more holy and I wish I connected to it in that way. But when I masturbate it's like I'm misusing and demeaning what is meant for more spiritual purposes. "I feel like I'm messing with my body". If

only I could stop I would be on a much higher spiritual level. And I'm worried that the way I devalue this now, will spoil the purity of sex even when I get married.

Sexuality feels cheap to me. I feel like it should be so much more.

Viewing sexuality as like, you know, like drive oriented and not like love oriented, you know, just like getting aroused by like you know some picture some like you know magazine some billboard something like that you know getting like a sexy idea in your head and like its just like you know dirty in my mind... its like I don't know - I feel like its tarnishing it... its turning it into this like sexual conquest mentality and like I don't want that.

I was just always taught that it was wrong, like doing drugs. It's "a cheap high" that just goes away when it's over. I don't feel like that's how I'm supposed to live my life. It makes me feel like a hypocrite. I stand for certain values but I don't act in accordance with them.⁵⁸ It's not a very good feeling. So when I keep doing it, I feel like I need to "make excuses for myself". I tell myself that I'm going to stop even though I don't really believe it or that I'm really stressed out and it will calm me down. Sometimes I do it just to get it off my mind so I won't be so distracted with those urges and the conflicts they bring up for me.

At this point I still sort of try to stop but "I've just kinda like lost the like real ability to like be alone in my own apt and say, no, I'm not gonna do this 'cause I know that's just not right... I just lost like... that like ability. Its driven me to a certain like type of apathy or I just like, I just like don't want to deal with it anymore. I just like try not to

⁵⁸ In presenting a slew of different reasons here, he is really searching to account for the reasons he felt so terrible. Given the intensity of his feelings, it makes sense that he is not entirely settled on any one of these explanations.

think about it.” It’s a little easier to stop masturbating when I’m in a relationship so it might be more realistic to stop then. But I rarely go for more than a few weeks without doing it so even then my success will be limited. I’m afraid that this could even ruin a relationship with someone. The girl might not understand this part of me and might totally disapprove of it.

I don’t feel as guilty anymore “just ‘cause I got used to it”. The fact that I’ve more recently confided in a few people about it, like my doctor and a girlfriend I had, has really been relieving. I feel like now I would be a little more open to talking about it in general with people. I was even about to tell this girl about it on a date. We were having this philosophical conversation about religion and somewhere in there she said that it sounded like I had a lot of guilt. When she asked why I was about to explain it to her “but then I got a little bit flustered... it’s embarrassing to me.... I thought for a second, like I was like maybe I should just tell her and then I just like pulled back. I’m not ready to do something like that.” But with someone I know better and trust more I would probably be more open with them.

Porn Site Incident:

One time when I was in high school my parents found out that I was on a pornography site. “They kind of called me downstairs and said like you know something in the computer saying that you know this site was visited while you were, while you were the only one in the house. What’s going on? And I kind of said like, you know, I was just using instant messenger at the time. I don’t know how that got there and what happened and she kind of left it at that.” Even though I lied about it I assumed that they knew I did it. There wasn’t really any other possibility.

I could tell that they were nervous during the conversation. “The air was thick with tension” and I don’t think they wanted to believe it either. They repeated the question once or twice after I denied it. They told me how they found out and that they had called the internet company and spoke to someone there and asked them how this could have happened. I don’t remember it exactly, it was so long ago and it was only a one line discussion, but I realized that “they didn’t want to push it any further”.⁵⁹

“That was a very difficult week for me just like looking them in the eye and things like that, it felt awful there was never like - there was just like this tremendous tremendous pressure that I felt like like I’m lying to my parents, I’m you know, just like I got caught doing something, like this was something they would like never ever have expected me to do. They have a very high opinion of me and for me to falter in front of them like that is such a sin, it’s like so clear that I am doing - that is so not acceptable... um... it was a big deal”

The most shameful part of it was having to see their face afterwards and look them in the eye. It wasn’t just that I walked around with the sense that they knew I did this, it was more actually seeing them, looking at their face while knowing that they knew what I did. “I never really had the guts to come clean with them” but I was ultimately relieved that we didn’t have to have the conversation about it. Whatever interaction we had was effective enough to make me never want to do it again. My parents also probably walked away feeling like they got their point across that this was wrong without having

⁵⁹ His story changes with how brief the “interrogation” was, and he claims to not remember it well though provides a lot of detail about it. Perhaps this points to some unresolved feelings about this.

to actually say anything direct about it. “I don’t know what could have been gained through a confrontation”.

But I was always afraid that they might want to have more of a conversation. I felt so much tension that they would bring it up again, so afraid of how ashamed and guilty I would feel if that happened. I imagined that at any moment they might turn to me and say “look, you know, we really need to talk about this, this is something, you know, we don’t want you doing... if they wanted to ask me questions about it like, you know, suggest that I see somebody suggest that I do something... any form of bringing it up would have got me upset.”

Having to face my parents was “the scariest thing for me” because this was such a clear violation of values and rules.⁶⁰ In my family sex was always a source of discomfort and awkwardness. When your parents are with you while you are watching TV or listening to the radio it’s really nerve racking when an arousing scene comes on, or when there’s a reference to sex. Either it gets really quiet for a second until it passes or you change the channel. “You don’t want to be around them for like something like that.” Once, when I was watching TV, my dad turned to me and said “are you sure it is ok to watch something like this?” Or another time he said, “I don’t know if I want you watching this” and we just left it at that. Any actual discussion about sex was “kind of like avoided at all costs in the family”.

To this day, even though I’ve become more comfortable talking frankly with parents around other charged topics, including even our religious differences, “talking about sexuality is something like we just don’t do.” In terms of this incident, I’m still embarrassed about it and I’m probably still scared that the conversation might come up.

⁶⁰ The next few sentences seem to reveal how much more than breaking “a rule” this is.

“But, you know, it’s so long ago that I’ve forgotten about it and I don’t really, I don’t really think much about it.”⁶¹

First Relationship

I was always taught that shomer negiah was the right thing to do. I had learnt this myself and taught many kids about it when I was a counselor at an orthodox overnight camp. So when I met Jessica we both “were shomer negiah from moment one”. We never talked about it, nor did we think about it. It was just kinda what we did. Six or seven months into the relationship we were getting a lot physically close to each other. We often sat really close together talking on park benches. There was a lot of accidental touching. “You just kind of like find spaces how you are like not touching but you are like... just as well might be.” We also started to become “very descriptive over the phone”.

After the first time this happened we had a short conversation that we’re getting too close to each other and need to start setting “firmer boundaries”. Sometimes we would spend hours just talking somewhere outside sitting really close - I mean it was wonderful. But afterwards she sensed that I was feeling uncomfortable about it and asked what was bothering me. I told her that “I felt like we were getting to the point where like we were breaking this, you know, where we were starting to touch each other and I said I didn’t want that to happen and she said fine so let’s try to be better at it, lets try to not be so close, try to set firmer boundaries”.

I felt this really strong “religious impulse... like this strong feeling inside” that this was the wrong thing to be doing, that it was “bordering on a transgression”. I didn’t

⁶¹ Some level of repression is obviously implied. We’d wonder how these repressed memories impact his ongoing relationship with his parents.

feel guilty for actually violating anything yet but the feeling of coming close to “breaking the boundary” was powerful enough to make me want to try and prevent anything from happening.

That summer we decided to work in the same overnight camp together as counselors. She lived in the same city as the camp so I decided to visit her for a few days before it started. We still weren't touching each other but we were “so close that I was breathing on her neck and then she was touching like my shirt or something like that, like, you know, just like signs of intimacy that weren't actually touching”. One night that week we had dinner in her apartment and none of her roommates were around and “we basically like started making out on the couchum... and that was a very um... I mean that happened like for about you know 45 minutes, we were there together and then we kind of like said ok we need to stop this we need to like we can't let this happen.”⁶²

While we were touching each other and kissing, there was a just lot of relief of finally doing something that I had wanted to do for so long. But also a feeling of “just like nervousness of like what am I supposed to do, like I don't know what's right and what's wrong here, you know, this wasn't something that we had like talked about so it was a very just like unsure situation... Like what am I allowed to do here, what am I not allowed to do here? What am I allowed to touch, what am I not allowed to touch like... in terms of what she would allow.”

“Right um like in the beginning I was like kissing her neck and then like there was like some not being able to like face up to her while doing it...

Like if I was like kissing her lips then it would be kind like an admission

⁶² We could question how premeditated this was given that the apartment was empty.

face to face that like this is what I'm breaking um like this is me and I felt like there was a bit of a like hiding in the beginning um then she kind of like said something like if we are already touching we might as well kiss and I'm like and so we did it and like it was just a whole very awkward this while like how our bodies were supposed to move together how this whole thing was supposed to happen."

At some point she said we should stop.⁶³ "And ah and ah ...yeah I don't know I don't really remember how things got from that point to when the fight started. I'm not really, I don't remember but it just kind of like came out at some point and in the end that was very tense."⁶⁴ I said that now that I know she also has physical desires for me it makes it harder to hold back and control myself. She took that to mean that I was blaming her for the physical encounter, throwing my guilt back on her, which I didn't think I was doing. But she got very upset and we got into a fight right then and there. It was a very tense moment. "I think the whole, you know, hyper charged um nature of the whole thing, you know, both from the guilt perspective and from the emotional perceptive, you know, just like an overflow of so much that had been kept in for so long and it just made us both very, just very on edge." We talked it through and eventually got back on the same page.

With all of that in mind, that night made me feel really good, like I was in love with somebody and really happy about it. "When we stopped, I felt like, it wasn't like

⁶³ His first version of the story sounded like they both decided this and now we learn that she is the one who stopped it. We could wonder why he didn't say that the first time.

⁶⁴ Something in his hesitation and forgetfulness may suggest the possibility of some conflict here, perhaps his reaction to her wanting to stop this very exciting moment.

this like dramatic stop, it was just like it was like, I feel like I guess a lot of the buildup had been lifted like I communicated on another level and that was something really satisfying.”⁶⁵

But aside from my feelings about the relationship, I was so relieved that I had somebody to share that with and that “I didn’t have to see myself as like some, you know, overly sexual being that was not being satisfied”. I had so much inner guilt about my sexual feelings from adolescence, just “to know that somebody else out there was feeling the same way that I was and wanting to express it in the same way that I was made made things a lot better for me in certain ways... just made me feel more comfortable with the desires that I had”. For the first time I didn’t feel weak or bad about my sexual feelings, I felt like we were experiencing something together. This kind of sexual expression was “wrong” – well, actually, “wrong” is not the right word here, but rather “not allowed. But it was totally normal.”⁶⁶

Before this I thought it was natural to have desires but I still felt guilty about expressing them, “like society was looking down at me for not being able to shut that part of me up.”

But now “it made perfect sense that I would have sexual feelings for my girlfriend and it was a totally natural thing, something that I was totally absorbed in and totally happy about, it was just that, just a problem that we weren’t married.” But that minor technicality didn’t overwhelm me with guilt and shame. I know that I contradicted myself

⁶⁵ Again his focus on the stopping, his explicit denial of the dramatic stop not being difficult, gives even more indication of how upset her stopping might have been to him.

⁶⁶ Even his correction with “it’s wrong” reveals a shift in the way he sees his sexuality. It’s gone from being “wrong”, which implies thoroughly and morally reprehensible, versus the term “not allowed”, which implies a more “technical” violation of a law.

about whether or not I perceived my sexual feelings to be normal before this, but “there’s like a big difference between saying that they’re ok and having somebody else express to you that they are ok... and once it was very clear that she had the same feelings that I did.....then it was more than just me telling myself that it was ok - it was her telling me that it was ok.” I had never shared my sexual feelings with anyone before, not verbally and not through any other means.

After this incident we decided that, especially since we were about to go into a religious camp setting, we’d stay shomer negiah. “We were gonna stay not touching each another”.⁶⁷ I still believed in the value of being “shomer” and I didn’t think it was a big deal that I slipped up once. We didn’t want to violate the rules “both for our own sake and for the sake of the program that we were in.” Anyhow, we were only able to see each other once a week since the boys and girls were mostly separate. We were able to keep to our decision for the rest of the summer.

After camp we decided to spend a week together in LA since I was going there to spend time with my parents.

The first day that she came... we were going to go to this park area... we just kinda spent the day there together and then we were just like sitting down having a picnic together and ah you know getting closer and closer and eventually we just started touching each other again and started kissing and umthere was a lot less guilt there at the time and lot less of the nervousness, it was a lot more comfortable and you know it wasn’t this frightening experience, it was something we had done before

⁶⁷ The language may be noteworthy here. “Staying not touching” as opposed to “going back to not touching” implies almost that they never touched, perhaps a subtle form of denial.

and it was a lot, it was a lot better than the first time it was a lot just more comfort and less shame Um there was like, there wasn't this nervousness in me like you know you know am I going too far because I knew that I wasn't and like and there was some, ya I guess that first time nervousness had gone away.

I also remember "all these feelings of like hypocrisy, well how could I be doing this, well this isn't who I am?" So I started to tell myself well maybe this is who I am now. I knew this was challenging my religious identity but it really felt right to me. I wanted to stay in the moment and put these questions aside. I probably figured I was going to marry her anyway. I suppose I may have been "just seeing it as caving into my desires".⁶⁸

If you ask, did I expect this to happen, I think the answer would be no, I didn't. We had gone a whole summer without any of this so I assumed it would continue that way. But I guess this was the first time in a while that we weren't surrounded by other religious people or our campers. The only time I was in public with her before was in a community where there were a lot of other Jews. If I was wearing my kippah I felt this pressure to stand by the values that I outwardly represented. But here we were in a nice private area of a park with just a mix of regular people. If someone saw us touching they'd think nothing of it. There was no way anyone could find us here and so "that pressure had all been released". In camp if you're caught fooling around you get thrown out. Now there weren't any of those fears and pressures.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ His confusion about whether he justified it or how he justified it, if he saw himself as doing something good or bad, is noteworthy here.

⁶⁹ It's not entirely clear how premeditated this was and if it had crossed his mind that they would do this.

As we continued seeing each other, we became even more comfortable touching. So while I still believed in the idea of shomer negiah “on a societal level”, I didn’t want to lose this relationship. I broke the laws saying to myself that “if this is where it needs to go then this is where it needs to go.” I started to think that the system was out of synch with the realities of relationships and was willing to deal with whatever guilt I felt in not being able to comply with it. I also had the sense that many other people did this, which made me feel like I wasn’t the only one. It gave my actions a little more credence.

But “I never fully reconciled the issue”. I continued to experience a lot of inner conflict.

I would say to myself we’re living in a different society and the system was not set up to really handle this type of situation just like the halacha gives hetairim when they know that people can’t withstand the challenge then maybe this is one of those situations its just that they didn’t have that societal situation back then, so so, you know, I would give answers like that but like I didn’t you know I just got like ok I am not keeping with the system I’m not keeping this one thing and I was ok with that my whole attitude was always that God will understand.

We both knew we weren’t doing what we were supposed to and this added a tremendous amount of guilt and stress to the relationship overall.

There was also a lot of hiding that needed to be done with our actions. No one could know what we were doing, especially my family. When we touched in public we constantly had to look over our shoulder or make out in the back seat of the car, paranoid that someone will see us. We lied a lot to my parents, telling them we were going to one

place when we were going to another place to make out. I even had to lie to my friends. I didn't like that I had to do this.

If somebody in the community found out, they would definitely tell other people and it will spread around. It's such a clear violation of the Jewish law, it's inappropriate, "it's just something that's not done". I didn't want to "get a reputation". It's embarrassing "saying one thing and doing another". I was a role model in my community, a counselor who'd taught many kids. My parents were well known religious figures in the community. "There's just a lot of communal pressure to be that person I am not at that time." All of these feelings "really got me thinking about the whole thing".

One time we were in my parents house cooking in the kitchen, just physically goofing around, when my father suddenly and unexpectedly walked in. We thought we were the only ones home but it turns out my dad had been in the room next door the whole time. Thankfully, when he came in we were on opposite sides of the room. But we got really nervous that he had heard us. I knew I would never find out if he really heard anything because it's not like him to say something about it. That in itself was anxiety provoking. But the incident gave me the sense that you never really know who's watching you. You could always get caught when you least expect it. We realized we needed to be more careful about it.

She was more upset about it than me because for her it was a big deal getting caught by your boyfriend's father. But "I was just kind of like apathetic to the whole situation". I mean I was nervous but what would be the big deal if he found out? At times I felt this "real heavy nervousness like you got yourself into trouble now what are you

going to do about it?”⁷⁰ If he’s going to bring up the situation then I would have to “come clean” because if he heard us, it’d be hard to deny it. I think I was more afraid of disappointing my parents than them being angry at me. I always had a warm relationship with them and they are very understanding people. That’s probably why I was so afraid of others finding out – not because of the consequences but more because I didn’t want to disappoint them.

Another major difficulty that came up in this relationship was in terms of my sexual urges. Even before we became physical with each other, I would become very aroused around her, to the extent that I experienced a lot of pain in my testicles from maintaining an erection for too long without ejaculating. I often felt a tremendous need to masturbate and release after going our separate ways. I felt like “I was kind of like betraying her by doing that” so there was a greater effort to stop. In a sense, my conflicts about masturbating only got “filtered in the context of her, because that’s where all my sexual energy was being directed”. I experienced a much more heightened level of conflict in wanting to stop and not being able to, and for a long time, had no one to discuss this with, especially not with her because I was so ashamed.

When we started being physical with each other I finally felt comfortable enough to tell her about this problem.

I told her that like... masturbation is something that I do that it had been something that I’ve done since high school and since, you know, I discovered that I could and since then that I’ve tried to stop doing many times but unsuccessful um... ya and that like..... I mean it came as a bit of like a shock to her.... She like was also like totally naïve about men’s

⁷⁰ The contradiction between his “apathy” and his very intense fears is noteworthy.

sexuality in general... she said, I don't get it, but I'm supportive of you and I'll help you with whatever you need... but, like, I don't approve of it.

It was very relieving ⁷¹ to finally tell somebody about what I do and that I'm not proud of it. I wish I didn't do it, but I can't stop. In that sense, ya, it was relieving but it was also difficult because I think it upset her a little bit. Fortunately, I was able to make her a little more sensitive to my problem so that if it was getting to be too much – if I was experiencing pain or feeling like I would ejaculate if we kept going at it – I would tell her that we needed to stop and she would understand. “I kinda like made her aware that like I had physical needs.” ⁷²

At one point, when I was trying harder in general to not release, I experienced a lot more pain and went to see my doctor about it. He basically said “if you're feeling pain then you need to masturbate”. He had spoken to rabbis about it and told me that I shouldn't worry about the halakhic issues. It was very relieving to hear this from him because I felt like I was able to put my body first and take care of myself without feeling so much conflict. But even now, if I masturbate because I'm in pain, its still tough. I just don't like myself when I do it. But “I feel like its an outlet for like, to relieve stress and like, its like, you know like a mini escape from like the world for however long it is”. I don't feel like I have very much control over it.

My relationship with Jessica ended probably not as a result of these tensions but they certainly affected things. She had gone back to the city where she lived so we had a long distance relationship for a few more months after that summer. Once we got used to

⁷¹ A surprising response given her reaction.

⁷² His compliant, passive and agreeable response is surprising. His difficulty discussing or asserting his needs is very palatable. It makes us wonder if he's trying to avoid his anger and discontent by being passive aggressive with her in other areas.

communicating physically, our verbal communication seemed less developed. That's when a lot of issues started to come up. It was a tough few months not only in terms of disagreements but also in terms of ironing out issues and making up. It was very hard to do that over the phone. "We kind of like lost that whole aspect of the relationship when she left and like there was just a lot of frustration like you know having sexual feelings towards each other and not being able to do something about it."

When the relationship finally ended, I really thought carefully about all the tensions that I experienced throughout. I decided that it was ridiculous to feel ashamed of my actions and I was going to try to own and stand behind the things I did and didn't do. I also realized that if this was happening in my relationship then it was probably happening in so many others. And nobody had anyone to turn to, no real support network, no one to give advice, to help guide you along the way. This really bothered me.

Most importantly I realized how valuable and supportive physical communication was and how much you could gain from it. How could you not be physical with someone who you're going to marry? Isn't that a major aspect of your relationship? I think it would very scary to not know that beforehand. I'm going to commit myself to somebody without having had that experience? I think it's very scary. I learned so much from having this extra means of communication with my past girlfriend how would I be able to commit myself to someone without it?⁷³

I dated another girl for a few months and said to myself that I could hold off for the first month or two, but after that, I'm not interested in staying shomer negiah. On the fourth date I asked what she thought about being shomer negiah and she answered that it

⁷³ He is rather redundant here in discussing both the importance of physical communication and how scary it would be to commit to someone without it.

was important for her to keep it. I told her that my view was very different. Having both expressed our views from the get-go, we decided that this difference alone wasn't enough to stop dating. I think there is room for me to change my mind and possibly room for her also. I figured we would just deal with it when it comes up. "I kind of have the feeling if the relationship was right that... she would probably eventually cave on that um... but I try very hard not to expect that."

Again, I was kinda scared that I would mess up a good relationship just because I wanted to be physical.⁷⁴ The types of girls I am interested in would probably want to be shomer negiah and I would try my hardest to respect that and not ruin anything on account of my sexual interests. But on the other hand if it gets to the point of marriage, can I really move forward without being physical? I guess it's doable if that's really what's necessary.⁷⁵ Being physical is much different for girls than for guys. "If a girl gets a reputation, she is in a lot, you know, bigger trouble than if a guy gets a reputation" and girls have the added pressure to get married young, which boys aren't usually so concerned about. For those reasons also I'm uncomfortable being physical with girls, especially if they are reluctant to do so.⁷⁶ All in all, I try not to let those considerations move a relationship one way or another. If the relationship is good then I assume there is flexibility and if it's not good, it probably is not related to the sexual aspect of it.

Religious Transformation:

⁷⁴ The way he again devalues his physical needs is very apparent as is the way he continues to see his urges, expressed or unexpressed, destructive. They spoil things.

⁷⁵ An obvious contradiction with his previous statement.

⁷⁶ He seems to be saying that by fooling around with girls, he has the power to ruin their reputation and marriage – their life. This belief may conveniently mask his ambivalence about having and expressing his sexual needs to others.

In the last couple of years I really went through a “religious transformation”. Growing up I had this sense that anything I did that was “not in line with Jewish law” was something I should be ashamed of or hide from others. I used to be very very tense about making sure I was doing everything perfectly right, “to the point where it made me nervous”. I would get upset if I was late for davening or if I forgot the proper bracha, “I could make myself crazy over all of this and, like, we just need to take a more human approach to these things”.⁷⁷

Uncertainty was also just a bad thing. If I ever doubted, or questioned or had difficulty with the law, “well this is what I am supposed to be doing, why am I not just doing it, you know? If the law system is made up so that I could handle it, then why am I not handling it? Why am I breaking shomer negiah if this is something that I am capable of?⁷⁸ ... And if everyone around me is following it why can't I?” I didn't realize that there's nothing wrong with uncertainty and that its even a good thing. If you're uncertain about something and you find that somebody else is also uncertain about it that could be really comforting. I found that people responded better to openness, to being upfront about your faults and uncertainties

Partially because of this relationship, I really just changed my attitude and started to feel that “I am going to be who I am going to be and I am not going to be ashamed about that”. If this is what I think is the right thing to do, this is the right thing to do. Meaning I wasn't going to be ashamed of being in a loving relationship or not fitting

⁷⁷ His quick transition from talking about himself to making a statement about what “we need” to do is noteworthy and points to his frustration with this part of himself.

⁷⁸ Note that he continues to think he is very capable of being shomer and is therefore doing something much worse.

perfectly into the system. When I became more confident in that and more upfront about who I was, it was a lot easier to go into a relationship and feel comfortable with myself and what I wanted. “I decided I needed to be more laid back and I think it wasn’t just only religiously. It was in other aspects of my life also and I just needed to take a much more, you know, easy going approach to things.”⁷⁹

This change definitely started with that first relationship I had. At some point after I began this transition I decided that “sinning was a good experience for me”.

Because it was like the first moment where my desires really came into conflict with what I was taught with what I was supposed to be doing um. Before nothing really ever bothered me like it didn’t bother me to keep Shabbat or to go to minyan or like you know do a lot of the tasks of religious Jews and like I always loved it and, you know, this is my first time that that’s really at cross purposes and I think from then on everything like I was learning in school, opinions that were forming in my head that were starting to take shape and there was really a much larger process of needing to reevaluate my religious personality and how I looked at the world and how I looked at my religion.

But it wasn’t so easy to reevaluate my religious views. The summer after the relationship ended I was getting sort of depressed and “had to see a therapist”.⁸⁰ “The shomer negiah thing was behind me” but I had a lot of religious questions. I was taking

⁷⁹ Stay tuned to hear his version of being more laid back. We will see, as he tries to do this, that his religious identity is tremendously threatened.

⁸⁰ The word “had” connotes something punitive about this, as if he’s in big trouble. This underscores the level of guilt and self hatred that is eating him up now.

Jewish History courses and was starting to see challenges to a lot of what I had learned and taken for granted. I was having all kinds of Jewish political arguments with people and disagreements about the educational methods of Jewish schools and camps. I really came to find fault in the system and started to reevaluate it for myself. I guess I was “coming into my own intellectual maturity” but it was a slow, painful process.

I used to be very much a “truth oriented worshiper”. I did everything because I thought it was the ultimate truth. But when I got to college and took courses like bible criticism, I discovered that there was a lot more out there than what I had been taught. It made me want to know if my religion really was truth based. Thinking that it might not be true made me really nervous. But I had to find out. When questions came up in some of these courses, I was able to sometimes get satisfying answers from rabbis and professors that I asked.

But in another course I took, I learnt that the Zohar wasn't written by who it was purported to be written by, which really shook me. I learnt how some of the Rosh Hashanah prayers, based on a touching true story of repentance, was really made up. That really bothered me. I started to think about all these inconsistencies in the Torah and all these ways that it seemed unjust. For example, the Torah commands the Jewish people to eradicate the entire nation of Amalek, including women and children. And during wartime, soldiers were permitted to take wives from the enemy if they were attracted to them, provided that they first make them physically repugnant before doing so! Homosexuality is strongly condemned? I felt that all of these things were immoral and it really got me. If the Torah was really written by God shouldn't it be the most moral thing? All of this “really shattered” my beliefs for a while.

My questions led me to believe that it made a lot more sense that the Torah was not really divine, but was constructed by humans. But I kept searching for more. I read books about everything, wondering all along if God really existed. From a Psychology and Religion course that I took I learned about theories which said that whether or not God existed, it made perfect sense for us to believe in Him. “That really just like rubbed me the wrong way ‘cause, like the fact that our belief in Him would happen if it was totally untrue makes me not trust it, you know, that was kinda how that transition began.”

So for a while I stopped davening and just put a lot of things on hold. I needed to figure out where I stood. I decided to go away for the summer someplace where I basically knew no one. I thought it would be a time to do whatever I want and not worry about anyone looking over my shoulder.⁸¹ I wanted to sort of recalibrate my beliefs based on the questions I had. When I got there it was both scary and exciting. At times it was almost “devastating” because it was so hard to remove myself from the way I was brought up and from the practices that were so internalized and automated. In the end, I decided “I want a God, I want to keep kosher. These were all things that I want to do and so I kept doing them and then I kinda realized that like, ok, so I’m not going to run away from this entirely.”

But I still didn’t, and continue not to, buy into the whole system. I recognize it as a construct and as something human that’s been created and given the name of divine for legitimacy. I don’t think anyone is trying to fool anybody - they truly believe its divine – but it doesn’t seem to be so believable. But now, I’m struggling a lot with my practice

⁸¹ There is a strong sexual connotation implied here in terms of what he wants to experiment with.

and trying to find a place that fits. “I toy with atheism every now and then.”⁸² I still very much want to stay in the traditional Jewish framework – I’m trying to “avoid being on the fringe” – but I don’t really want to commit to it in its entirety. I’m trying to find a happy medium of being involved and committed, at least in part, but definitely not to the whole system.

Until this point “things were kinda like neat and set out. I knew what it was that I had to do and the question was just doing it.... it would be challenging and it would be tough but I knew where I was going... this was the life I was supposed to live”. But suddenly when I was confronted with all of this, “I didn’t really know where I was going. I didn’t really know where I was trying to get to and that’s really frightening.” It’s much easier to go along with what you’ve always known. “I think there’s this security in the end goal” – raising children, starting a family, a carved out spiritual path – but when you start to ask what you really want for your life, it becomes much harder.

Like lets says you’re in a maze and you’re saying... this is the right way, I’m finding the exit, I’m finding the exit! And then all of a sudden you get to a cliff and you’re like... shit! I got to start over. And like there’s like major consequences and its like not just, its not just this maze where you could turn around and start again. Its like... your life and everything you’ve been working towards, everything you’ve been working within - like you don’t want to leave. I don’t want to leave the friends that I have. I don’t want to leave the institutions that I ascribe to, they’re all great and so like that’s like the real tension like what do I do, where do I go?

⁸² There’s obviously some question about whether he’s rejecting God or rejecting the Rabbis who claim to represent his will.

At the time I was fooling around with my first girlfriend and telling myself that breaking the law was the right thing for me, there was always this question underneath the surface. “Why does this have to be so hard”. And this idea is what may have pushed me in the direction of thinking that maybe religion wasn’t always good, moral or even correct. “You could say that I was angry at religion for like keeping me from certain things that I wanted to experience... but not like so angry that I just thought, you know, forget it.” I was angry that “religion made me feel so guilty about all my, like, sexual activity that I viewed as failings, like, for like making me feel guilty about something that was so natural, so like I was upset about that”.

I remember talking to an older friend of mine once about shomer negiah and he was like “oh ya, that’s what does it for everybody... ya, that’s just what pushes people over the edge”. I was like a little bit surprised to hear that at the time but when I asked people since then what they think about the percentage of those who are breaking these rules and covering it up, some have said that 90 % of all religious people say they’re keeping shomer negiah but behind closed doors are not. That made me really upset. “If nobody is keeping this why are we like pretending this is a rule?” Sometimes I can understand the decisions that rabbis make, but at other times “I find them to just be like ridiculous and in their like fundamentalism and in the way they, you know, increase burdens on the community in ways that I don’t think are appropriate... I feel legitimately upset but I feel like I shouldn’t be so angry about it or so bitter. I guess I feel like I should

just come to terms with it and... not let it get to me so much and I guess I'm kinda having trouble getting over that.”⁸³

Some of the laws within Judaism sometime feel like an injustice to me. “I feel like people are getting hurt by religion and that bothers me. I feel like its missing the point. Just by the way it makes people feel about themselves... like makes people feel like they have to conform to certain things or else they wont be accepted, they have to ah do things that they don't want to do just 'cause otherwise what will people say about them, it really bothers me.”

As much as things have bothered me:

I feel like I'm better equipped to handle them than most, I don't know why... things bother me but they don't hurt me, like they hurt other people. They hurt women who like can't get remarried because of Aguna issues⁸⁴ or even because of reputations, I feel like I'm not getting hurt and what I see is like some type of a microcosm of like a bigger issue, like the stakes are higher for other people... I feel like people are being oppressed like, I guess oppressed is a strong word but like I feel like this shouldn't be happening... I feel like what happens to people, religion should be protecting them better... and its not you know.

In terms of sexuality, I still view it as something holy. I still think that masturbation isn't something that I should be doing. It's like we have the ability to turn something purely

⁸³ Obviously, these feelings are infused with a great deal of conflict.

⁸⁴ “Aguna” is the halakhic term for a divorced woman who is refused by her husband the required divorce documentation that formalizes the divorce and allows her to remarry. Although the husband is at fault, this woman may not remarry until she receives this document. Often referred to as “the aguna issue” there is much controversy about this law within the orthodox community given the unfairness of it.

biological into something spiritual and “so much bigger”. Masturbation is just a “manipulation of my body that, you know, creates this like cheap pleasurable experience”. I don’t worry about violating commandments anymore, but “it’s just a bad habit, it’s something I’d rather kick”. Physical relationships are on a much higher spiritual plane than masturbation. Just the fact that it’s in the context of a relationship already elevates it in a certain sense. It’s more than just a biological act, it’s something that expresses feelings to somebody else.

I always felt like there was room within Judaism if you simply couldn’t fulfill the commandment.⁸⁵ The rabbi that my doctor spoke to obviously “recognizes the gravity of the issue” although he wasn’t giving me a free ticket to masturbate when I wanted to – it was just for when I was in pain. I think if the law endangers you in any way, you should break it. So when it physically hurts I feel a lot less badly about masturbating, more like “a victim of circumstance”. Otherwise it’s not something I’m very proud of.

I used to often ask God to help me stop masturbating. Every Friday night in shul I’d have a specific point in the davening which was my personal time to “spill out” whatever I was thinking. Sometimes I would also do that at the Kotel in Israel. There’s also this prayer before Kol Nidrei on Yom Kippur where I would spend a lot of time thinking about it and saying the words carefully.

“There was a lot of just asking for the strength to stop... and like for the understanding of what I was going through... I would even say its something I still do... but its just a lot less often. I think its different now, but that’s just cause like my whole experience of God is different now. I mean I don’t really feel God’s presence in my life anymore and when I did

⁸⁵ This seems to contradict a lot of what he said.

it wasn't something I really expected him to respond to in the way that I would be able to see him..."

5. Joel

Introduction

Joel is a 25 year old financial advisor originally from an Orthodox Jewish community in Rochester, NY. Short, with red hair and a slight build, Joel's frankness and sarcasm make him larger than his actual physical size. He dresses casually in khakis and a T-shirt while speaking to me in his apartment that he shares with one other roommate.

Narrative

Early in Life

I grew up as an only child so I had “a lot of adult time growing up”. My earliest sexual memory – well, I don’t really know how sexual it was – but I remember when I was three or four seeing my mother and grandmother changing in front of me. “It wasn’t all that interesting, which is pretty much what people say about you know – it’s just there, it wasn’t like...”⁸⁶ It’s funny because “my mother talks about how I used to try to seduce her with lines that I was watching from soap operas”. I would say things like she’s the women of my dreams, or let’s kiss like they kiss on soap operas.

“I remember um being exposed to...I found a... lets see, how old was I...

I was in 4th grade um I remember... my father was living separately from

the rest of my family on business, nothing bad going on or anything... I

found a Playboy magazine among his stuff and that like hit me very

harshly. I wasn’t sure what it was at the time so I went back and

⁸⁶ This brings up an interesting question about what constitutes a ‘sexual’ feeling or experience at such a young age. We could also wonder about what he saw exactly, whether his mother and grandmother knew he was watching, and what was said verbally and non-verbally during these moments. How he generalizes by saying “which is pretty much what people say” may also reveal some degree of conflict with this memory.

checked... Being exposed to aspects of my parents sexuality um was very jarring to me as sort of curious and then guilt making.”

At a young age I had read the religious laws about sex in the kitzur shulchan aruch.⁸⁷ Obviously these kinds of things were prohibited. My parents were clearly doing things that were wrong - does this make them bad?⁸⁸ But I’m not sure if my awareness of their halakhic violation was a “mask” to explain my psychological discomfort. These events “haunted me” intensely for a long time, maybe even up until recently. “I had a lot of anxiety. I used to cry at night about it...a feeling of stress like bubbling up over here, not of like heartburn, but of stress. Deep seeded stress. Exposure to these things. Finding these things. This type of stuff, aspects of my parent’s sexuality talking about, you know, a magazine or just seeing like birth control. And then at the same time driven to discover more.” As bad as I felt, I would try to find other things like by going into their night-table when they weren’t home.

I didn’t really understand why it was so distressing to find these symbols of my parent’s sexuality. They never talked to me about sex but weren’t sanctimonious either. Having grown up at a time when Orthodox men and women went to shul dances, they were pretty laid back. For a while, the only thing to pin my anxiety on was this halakhic book I read, which clearly held them in violation. But now that I’m in therapy I’m starting to see how this reaction might have something to do with my own issues like

⁸⁷ This single volume of laws is an abridged compilation of all the volumes of halakha and is therefore often studied in Orthodox elementary schools as a basic introduction.

⁸⁸ It’s not clear what other bad things he found and why he now refers to both of his parents as doing bad things and not just his father.

insecurities about my physical size.⁸⁹ Kids used to always make fun about my being the little kid in class. I think it's related somehow.

I grew up in a small American Jewish community. Religiously, people were pretty traditional in the sense that not much was said at home or in schools about anything sexual, religious or otherwise. I never had a sex education class in my life though I remember how the Rabbis at my high school were openly affectionate with their wives in public, almost as if to make some sort of statement that even holy people were sexual. So everything I knew came from what I observed, the books I read or what I heard my friends talking about. I was always reluctant to contribute to these conversations because I used to think, "I am better than they are, I can't talk about that stuff... that's what the bad people do."⁹⁰ Anything about sex was therefore pretty much "self taught" but it was mostly prohibitions and anxiety for me.

Masturbating

Maybe in 6th grade I started masturbating, though at first I wasn't able to ejaculate. But one day without knowing the end-result, I kept going until something came out. I felt extremely guilty when it happened because I had already read, as any curious seventh grader would, the *kitzur shulchan aruch* on my parents shelf which discussed "this horrible stuff about sex": its prohibited for men to enjoy sex, talking about how

⁸⁹ It's not so clear what he means here. We could speculate along several lines one of which would include oedipal anxieties as a "smaller" competitor for his mother's love. The vagueness here is may imply his lack of understanding the connection here.

⁹⁰ It is interesting to think about how sex became so closely linked with "bad people" at such a young age and the kind of impression that this book made on him, whether it introduced sexual prohibition or reinforced anxieties already present.

horrible masturbation is, “those things for starters.” The first time this happened, I didn’t know what the outcome would be - “there was just no reason for me to know that.”⁹¹

For the next few years I really struggled with masturbation. On the one hand a strong desire for sexual pleasure and on the opposite side feeling “really shitty” about myself if I pursued it. For a while I was able to masturbate very infrequently. Whenever it happened though, I felt really guilty. I would tell myself “ok you made a mistake don’t let it happen again” and would devise ways to try and avoid it. I was “very strict with myself” but continued to feel like I was being pulled by these two extreme forces. Soon I became able to “start and stop before anything came out. In other words masturbation would continue just without ejaculation, without completion”.

Probably in the middle of high school that changed. I was starting to hate “the endless cycle of violence” feeling bad about something that I knew I couldn’t really stop. I felt that the struggle I had endured for eight years had “hurt me” and made me feel terrible about myself. “At that point it just sort of became, okay, fine, this is just something that I do”. I probably still felt guilty but would just be able to put it more behind me, move on and focus on other things.

Shomer negiah

“I never in high school was not shomer negiah.”⁹² I never in high school had any sort of sexual experience involving me and another person. It was just what I did. I always felt like that doing something privately was better than doing something with

⁹¹ The repetition of this sentiment reveals both his guilt and his perplexity about it seeing that he did not know what would happen. Or so he claims.

⁹² This convoluted way of saying that he was always shomer negiah is perhaps a way of the achievement. He is proud for having “never” messed up.

someone else. So even though a lot of my friends were fooling around and I didn't really know about that until later, I would never do anything. That was not something that I would do. So the question is why was I not doing that? And it probably had more to do with my own social insecurities, its still the same issues, um, but again it masks itself with religion, this interplay is very interesting to me at this point.”

The first time I stopped being “shomer” was the summer after high school where “I spent the entire summer⁹³ sleeping next to but not touching the girl I was going out with. We had a body pillow. That was our mekhitzah”. She told me later that I used to recoil and jump back whenever she accidentally touched me. She also admitted to me that her seemingly accidental touches were ways of deliberately “experimenting” to see if I was still keeping the rules. From my jumping reflex, she knew that nothing would happen.

“48 hours before the summer program ended, um, I said enough of this⁹⁴. It's right before Elul⁹⁵ I can do this and then do teshuva... so we wound up holding hands and hugging. Really, really it was great. It was totally addictive, it was unbelievably releasing um it was great. It was awesome!” After that instance I went right back to being shomer with other girls I was dating until I ran into this same girl a few years later.

Actually, “I had tried to touch people in between”.⁹⁶ One person I would occasionally

⁹³ The “entire summer” may hint to his emotional preoccupation at the time which he does not explicitly mention.

⁹⁴ He does not describe the buildup and conflict that led to this.

⁹⁵ The Hebrew month of Elul is considered to be an ideal time for repentance. The High Holy Days are in that month.

⁹⁶ The word “try” is interesting considering that he partially succeeded and even so considers to have been shomer during that time.

pat on the back, little stuff like that, but nothing more. Another girl I tried to hug a few times but she was very uncomfortable with it.

A few years later I ran into the girl whom I had my first physical contact with. We weren't dating but decided to hang out a bit. The first few times we were shomer, until one night, it was really late and we just said "we should do something. And you know, that was it. No more shomer. Um."⁹⁷ The next day was my first sexual experience I would say, I mean the first time I ejaculated in the presence of another person."

"That's when a lot of this stuff started coming out... that's when I started to deal with this stuff in a productive way."⁹⁸ I went to a religious friend of mine, a married guy who came from a much more liberal background than me so I felt comfortable talking to him about this stuff. I said, "okay, here's what happened, you know, talk to me, help me out". I needed to reconcile some of this stuff that had just happened. After I spoke to him I felt a lot better about it. When I dated her again a few months later there was even more physical contact.

After that relationship ended a few months later, "I actually hooked up with someone twice which was very very interesting um... for her also... cause neither one of us had this experience outside of a relationship... Sort of we were just like hanging out, and kind of deciding if we wanted to date and whatever, and you know one thing led to the other and you know we had motives we had a place to do it. That's all."⁹⁹ It felt great. Um."

⁹⁷ This comment demonstrated the either-or quality of being "shomer" and how much it is used to define him.

⁹⁸ Some conflict is implied here but it is clearly not as paralyzing as his feelings about masturbation.

⁹⁹ This explicit contradiction of "one thing lead to another" and "we had motives" is noteworthy.

“It was much more sexual for her than it was for me, I did not ejaculate either time that I was with her,¹⁰⁰ um, we, were tired and it was late at night and I was focusing very much on her pleasure... The second time... she had a physical reaction to what we were doing that was sort of, not an orgasm, but was sort of over-stimulation, that sort of made us stop at that point, um nothing bad happened, um it was more like we just needed to stop, so nothing bad happened.”¹⁰¹

“And you know what? She and I are good friends today. She’s dating a friend of mine, I do meals with them, it’s all good! No one else knows about it except the two of us and that’s fine.¹⁰² It was a very positive experience for me because it gave me some more self esteem ‘cause it meant that there wasn’t just one person who I could be compatible with in bed, which has been a major concern for me... Feeling attractive was something that I had not felt until then – until those physical encounters a few years ago.”

When I was shomer with other girls “it was like ya I’m attracted to you, you’re attracted to me, but you know practically speaking it doesn’t have manifestations that I could get my hands on... so those experiences were very positive for me, in that respect... I made a decision... I was happy about what I did, we didn’t do anything that I felt was asur deoreita.¹⁰³ That’s all.”

Then I dated a girl who told me on our first date how much she loved the idea of shomer negiah, though “she had done far more than I had ever” because she had recently

¹⁰⁰ This might imply a more psychological meaning to “it felt great”.

¹⁰¹ His repetition of “nothing bad happened” may be meaningful. Perhaps he is trying to negate something uncomfortable that he did feel.

¹⁰² He describes this devilishly as if he had gotten away with doing something bad.

¹⁰³ Aramaic for “from the Torah” meaning an explicit commandment written in the original Bible as opposed to an additional law added later by the sages.

become observant. We dated for a few months and started to become physical.¹⁰⁴ “I felt very awkward because there were times where we’d wind up sleeping in her apartment um and you know a rabbinical student sneaking out in the morning feeling guilty and whatever... not really caring but you feel guilty anyways, um. That’s all.. That’s, that’s it.

105

A Sexual Crisis

“Um...at some point and I couldn’t tell you exactly when but I probably could have been in shana aleph – I um got sort of stuck in some sort of voyeurism thing, which I’m in therapy now dealing with a lot of um and trying to turn a lot of that energy that I’ve learnt to focus on myself and and on voyeurism, which may be an issue of aggression and anger and not being able to connect with other people, and learning how to connect socially and sexually um with other people.”¹⁰⁶

My condition fit pretty neatly into the DSM-IV criteria: “the act of or the strong feeling or urge to, within six months, um peep on people who are in various states of dress or undress or in sexual activity um without their knowledge that’s the textbook definition of voyeurism.” This became most problematic when I spent time in Israel after high school. The architecture there “is very um conducive to this sort of activity. We’re

¹⁰⁴ The process of how the relationship became that physically involved is an especially curious omission. Perhaps his knowledge of her being more experienced had some influence here.

¹⁰⁵ “That’s all” is said often, particularly when trying to foreclose any further reflection.

¹⁰⁶ This explanation is highly general and impersonal. It leads us to wonder how much he understands this for himself.

talking about a hilly country, you're talking about ground floor apartments, your talking about blinds that don't really close the whole way.”¹⁰⁷

I felt, and still feel at times, very strongly driven to peep. It's a feeling of “not being in control, like I have to do this, total like compulsion. Compulsion is the word and this gets back to the anxiety issue, oh this is my therapy coming out right now, trying to see how this stuff all fits together... Um while I was involved in this activity, let's say, I would feel like taken over, possessed, by you know the yetzer hara, whatever, I didn't put it into those terms but I sort of felt like an excitement or a drive that was not part of my normal state of being.”

If I'm watching someone on the one hand it's like “wow this is really great, I'm very happy doing this”. But at the same time I'm thinking “this is really bad. I should not be doing this. I could get caught. I could get into a lot of trouble um but at the same time, I'm like hey I can't move away from this. So I say, ok, I'll be here for another minute and then I'll leave and it passes. Then another minute and you know until something happens that starts me out of that, a light goes on, I hear someone coming, something you know. Well I know this person and I know what time they go to sleep so I figure if I just stay here for a few minutes I have a good chance of something happening. But at the same time feeling extremely anxious about that and then that ruins the relationship with the person because if I get caught it could be extremely embarrassing um, ya.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ The general feel of this paragraph, between his self diagnosis and his description of Israeli architecture, is highly detailed and controlled. This is especially interesting given what he says in the next few sentences about feeling like he lacks control over his voyeuristic urges.

¹⁰⁸ His “cat and mouse” game around this behavior is interesting. It almost seems to provide its own inherent thrill and excitement.

“I was so overcome with guilt, I never spoke to anybody about this.... Especially with my friends, I mean I was part of a shtark chevrah ¹⁰⁹ of guys you know, I never missed a tefilah. I never missed tefilah in my life... with the exception of one or two Maariv’s ¹¹⁰... I never missed a tefilah. I missed tefilin one day since my bar-mitzvah and that’s because I forgot... So I think very straight and narrow in many ways and sort of because of that sexual stuff comes out in other ways.” ¹¹¹ As opposed to these other aspects of sexuality that I’ve discussed, when I think about my experiences of peeping I don’t feel like it’s “normative, normal whatever.”

I still feel the strong urge to try and peep but probably less so than before. The most common age for this issue is around 15-25, and I just turned 25 “so I don’t know what’s going on... I guess there’s no clear thing to answer that with... I don’t know.” There’s a lot more guilt here than there is with any other sexual part of me. Why? I don’t know why. It’s a very good question and it’s something that I had not thought about actually until we discussed it here just now.

Reconciling Religiosity

Though the peeping bothers me a lot, I’ve always had been confused about anything sexual. “Like there’s this side of me that feels, you know, learning Hilchos Shabbos and Tanach, being close with many different Rabbis, and that can’t be the same me who, you know, is doing some of this stuff”. The guilt was coming from the

¹⁰⁹ Yiddish for a “group of friends” who are “serious” about religion.

¹¹⁰ This is the name of the third prayer of the day said in the evening, the obligation of which is slightly less strict than the first two.

¹¹¹ Again, a vague statement. It’s not clear what he means but he clearly enjoys seeing himself as being in control.

dissonance of being two different, apparently irreconcilable people. I was exacting and rigorous with religious rituals but, seemingly, had no control over my sexual actions. It didn't make sense. "This isn't what I should be doing. I should be better than this. I don't care if other people mess up, I should be better than this." I have high expectations of myself. Maybe with sex there's also some sort of fear of punishment, whether I think that's rational or not.

These are some of the ideas that I was able to discuss in psychotherapy. That helped me "integrate", which has been very important. "This integration of myself with myself and sort of a holistic view of things." I attribute this change to the different way that I've been able to perceive Judaism lately. I definitely wasn't able to see it this way ten years ago. But now I realize that with sexual activities "people understand where it's coming from even if they don't necessarily want to condone it... its part of the normal developmental process."¹¹² So I don't feel as abnormal as I used to in terms of my sexuality.

Others might have a religious problem with my being not shomer negiah and "I don't feel like I could justify to people if they were to ask me point blank, halachically. And the answer is I'm not trying to justify it halachically, I guess that's the answer." I was talking to a female friend of mine who's married and somehow it came up in conversation that I'm not shomer right now. And she says to me how do you justify that halachically? And my answer was that I don't necessarily. "This is where I'm at, and I'm not saying that I'll have that approach with, with you know Shabbos or with anything else, but this is where I'm at with this."

¹¹² In this instance the gauge of what's normal or abnormal is others people's acceptance of the behavior.

I think the reason why therapy helped me feel less anxious about this and allowed me to integrate my sexual and religious life was because ¹¹³ “if you have someone objective seeing a whole picture of you, a very personal picture of you, um in a very intense way, sometimes that allows you to then have a perspective on yourself. And, you know, sometimes a negative perspective, sometimes a positive perspective, but a perspective that gives you greater insight, which therefore allows you to understand your motivations and your actions. So that’s piece one... Piece two, is just talking to people” and realizing that this happens a lot. It isn’t as rare or abnormal as I once thought.

Sometimes I think these halakhot are unreasonable. But I still have a lot of reverence for them. A friend of mine once told me that when he was fooling around with his girlfriend his attitude was pretty much fuck halakha. I can’t believe he said that! (smiling) That really bothered me (laughing) because I would never say that even if I was thinking it. It’s something I would never say. “ Cause its just like – no! You talk about misery in your life but you don’t just say F-Halacha. It’s a little much!”

I have some friends who are training to be rabbis and they tell me that congregants come to the Rabbinat for all kinds of sexual problems. Thankfully rabbis are actually saying normal things to people. No one’s telling anyone to “snap the rubber band” when you have an inappropriate urge. My ability to make peace with these things also has something to do with being able to just say, “okay here’s what I want”. I’m able to be less hard on myself because other people are less hard on me and on themselves. ¹¹⁴

¹¹³ The link between his anxiety and lack of integration is clearly implied.

¹¹⁴ Supposedly as others have been more accepting, he has become able to own his experiences more.

For example, I spoke to a Rabbi when I was seeing the girlfriend whose place I would sleep over at. When I told him what was happening, that we were dating and trying to figure out if the relationship was right but were also physically intimate with each other, he didn't tell me that I needed to go do something or fix something. He listened to my dilemma and was really able to "just be in the moment and be okay with that moment". Another Rabbi who I approached told me that we shouldn't feel any more guilt about doing prohibited sexual activities than we might feel about other religious laws that we often break without the same level of hysteria and anxiety. These kinds of approaches were very helpful for me to hear.

But voyeurism is different. I can't seem to shake my horrible guilt over it. "There's something here that's not normal... you know certainly not in our society and then again you know 100 years ago people were sleeping with 10 year old boys and that was normal, so normal changes, but in the here and now that's not normal." It would help "if I can look at it as a manifestation that I am you know uncomfortable in certain situations with women, I am starting to learn how to be more comfortable in those situations, then, then, this is how I was getting that stuff out in the meantime, a sense of aggression, a sense of anger, a sense of uh curiosity, I don't know..."¹¹⁵

When I'm involved with someone I have a little more control over these urges. Certainly when there is some level of sexual contact "it smoothes out some of those bumps". But when I'm meeting new girls, especially those who are more religious than me, I have a lot of anxiety about them knowing this part of me. I'm also afraid that I'm going to marry someone who was socialized into an unhealthy and "frigid" attitude

¹¹⁵ His desperate search for what motivates him to do this is particularly palpable here. He seems to have trouble finding it amidst these therapeutic platitudes.

towards sex. This might make me feel more inhibited than I think I should have to feel in a marriage. This fear is “one of the elephants in the room” when I’m on a date. “It’s very pervasive” and it makes it hard for me to relax and enjoy myself.¹¹⁶

A “Shocking” Incident:

When I was in Israel a few years ago... um... I was there... I fell into a situation which is, which is, how I like to see myself in it but I guess there’s more... active parts of this on my part, which I am still trying to figure out. I wound up sleeping with a prostitute in Tel Aviv.” By “fell into” I mean that it didn’t feel like I went into the situation expecting that to be the outcome. “I went into the situation expecting some kind of sexual contact, some kind of sexual activity, the fact that it sort of became sexual intercourse and I had never done that before... um... was very shocking to me.”

“Believe it or not the most shocking part of the whole situation for me was um the fact that afterwards, I realized that she was Jewish... I thought that she was *not* Jewish, and this is where it gets into the whole Halachic issue.¹¹⁷ And it hit me like major amount of guilt, like voom! Which is like we say things like, you know, goyim are for practice and whether we like to say it or not you know there’s certainly that stream within halakha... what a rabbi might tell a student sort of under... behind closed doors... all of sudden I’m doing these like heavy duty sins...”

Until the point that I found out she was Jewish, which is after we stopped, “I was working on auto pilot... I felt very strongly driven to have some sort of sexual contact

¹¹⁶ The level of anxiety behind his concern over the girl’s frigidity, which also does not sound like it has very much grounding in actual experience, indicates the way that this concern may screen the one previously mentioned about his voyeurism.

¹¹⁷ Technically, according to Jewish Law, sexual intercourse with a non-Jew constitutes a less serious violation than with another Jew.

with somebody... circumstances allowed that to occur... I was able to pull it off... Driven by a very strong need to be with another person or to have some sort of sexual release... The best non-sexual analogy I could think of... if you haven't drunk anything, you know, post Yom Kippur let's say, you haven't drunk anything in 25-26 hours when you take the first sip, after that you don't even notice it, but you are constantly drawing liquid in from that cup... You sort of like forget that you are doing it but your body is so in control of the situation." I don't want to use the word not in control but I guess that is what it feels like. "Feeling like I have to go through with this, just so strongly is the urge to keep moving along these lines."

Looking back, that's one of the things that was so scary. "How did that happen?... How did it get to that point?" I was so motivated to go through with this that I broke a number of different things that I would never have considered before. All of a sudden I was doing those things! "What brought me to that point...what took away the normal blocks that I would have in my way to keep me from doing these things?"¹¹⁸

My main concern was this loss of control. The immense amount of guilt was feeling like "I did a really bad sin. That's what was hit me more than anything else...I mean guilt... The feeling of alienation from God the feeling of um God's going to punish me for this and there's nothing I could do to fix what I did... The expectation that my hair will fall out the next day because of what I did? No um, no, no, period, no... It wasn't a fear for immediate retribution as much as a deep seated guilt... The fact that I felt that way made sense since normally I'm already relatively anxious. So now I found something that's sort of like whoa, out there!"

¹¹⁸ He speaks of it as if it was this amazingly surprising act but many of his other words and actions indicate otherwise.

What happened was that I was at a restaurant, eating dinner with a friend whose place I was staying at. He was going to go back home and I told him that I was going to take a little walk by myself – my way of saying that I needed some time alone. I was moving around a lot that day from one place to another and it had been a very busy, stressful day. I was feeling strong urges then to have some kind of sexual release and I didn't think I had any other "outlets" that would have normally been available to me such as masturbating to internet pornography or hooking up with someone. I didn't really have that much privacy at my friend's place. In general, if those things are unable to occur in the normal way that they do the desire doesn't go away "so the energy has to go somewhere". So while I knew that this was the direction I wanted to go in, I did not expect this kind of result.

I sort of knew about this place from what I had read in my prior visits to Israel. "Tel Aviv bus station (hushed undertone), which is a big mall and a few levels of terminals ... Outside of it is South Tel Aviv, which is a very seedy neighborhood populated largely by non-Jewish immigrants or foreign workers, whatever we want to call them. There are a lot of sex shops and stuff there... There are these small brothels there... like storefronts types of things... not hidden... If I understand correctly prostitution is actually legal in Israel, pimping is illegal... there's no pretense of this is not what what's going on, like the cops are going to come... Ok. Background A."¹¹⁹

"Background B... of course, you know, reading things, I know that that's what going on there... You read the newspaper and you get all kinds of stuff... Background C

¹¹⁹ Again, the amount of detail that he launches into when discussing these more disturbing situations – which he seems to feel little control over – is very striking. This is illustrated both with his description of brothels and his listing Background A, B and C.

is like hey, I know, I could do something... that would be something interesting to me, sort of like the little yetzer hora¹²⁰ knocking on the door saying like click.”

“I had felt driven and wanted to do this... so I secured transportation... which would have meant taking a bus but the bus was very full. So I wound up hitchhiking with a cab driver who was just happy to have someone to talk to on the way. We had a nice conversation about God and stuff - it’s always interesting how those experiences come together.¹²¹ That’s what I like about Israel... I walked around didn’t know what I was going to do... um you know explored a little bit, saw different options... I finally went into a place and then you know whatever happened, happened.”

I went in expecting significantly less to occur than what did. I went into a room with this women, negotiated a price and whatever goes on and expected what she said would happen. Then all of a sudden in the middle of this she turns over and says ‘ok, fine, you can have intercourse with me now’. And just in the course of things flowing, I just let that happen. It was a little bit of a shock to me.

While it was happening it felt good. I never had sex before and I was very anxious that it wouldn’t be pleasurable or that I wouldn’t be able to perform.¹²² It was a very positive experience for me so, in many ways, something very practical and positive came out of this experience. But there were negative too. “Negative outcome: I broke up with my girlfriend. Negative outcome is I um feel guilt religiously. Negative outcome is that I have to repair my relationship with God because I feel like I did something wrong...

¹²⁰ Hebrew for “evil inclination” Rabbinical literature often uses this term to personify the “id”. His use of the term here is particularly interesting here where at least most of his act is premeditated.

¹²¹ Note the way that he continued to follow his desire despite whatever discouragement he may have experienced with the travel inconveniences and the reminders of God in the cab ride.

¹²² It’s not clear when he thought about these worries, whether only right in that moment or much before it.

Second part of this was that my therapist was able to say to me ‘hey – good for you, you did something you wanted to do. Whether you wanted to do it or not, you put yourself where apparently you wanted to do it, you learnt something from it, you grew from the experience and those are good things’, so there’s a certain dissonance.¹²³

There was also a lot of dissonance in the room, very profoundly so. First of all, before I got there I put my kippah and tzitzis in my pocket and I turned my sweatshirt with my yeshiva emblem inside out. I was very worried about “chilul hashem issues¹²⁴, like I’m a yeshiva boy going to this place, that it a really bad thing.” Whether it was because of personal shame or as a way of respecting my religious community, I don’t know. All I know was that “I was a Jewish male in my 20’s who had 150 shekels in his pocket - which by the way, is really cheap if one were to think about how much this type of thing should cost.”¹²⁵

After we had sex, she actually sat down and we wound up talking a bit. She said to me ‘you are religious aren’t you?’ She says, ‘you have that glow to you’ and apparently she’s talking about the respect that I showed her and I think she was also talking about the sense of, I don’t know, innocence or something that she noticed about me. I admitted to her that it’s sinful and that I am religious. We talked about prostitution a little bit and how she would soon get a work visa. It was a very positive interaction.

“After the fact I was upset at her cause I sort of felt victimized, like she made me have sex with her, which was like my immediate approach... because I didn’t expect to

¹²³ Does he own these positive feeling for himself or are these only the therapists beliefs?

¹²⁴ Literally means “desecration of God’s name”, referring to a transgression that involves behaving in any a way that draws negative attention to oneself and the God or Jewish religion they represent.

¹²⁵ The casual way he weaves in and out of some of these asides is interesting given the anxiety he claims to have suffered from. He also does not elaborate further on “the dissonance in the room”.

lose my virginity that night and I did. And she just took that in stride, like it was just part of business for her, this is what she does for a living and for me it was like this special experience so that was a little like... there was no coercion in the experience... that might have been the way for me to deal with some of my guilt, like it wasn't my fault. I'm the victim here."

At the time I was dating someone for about three months. "So I in my extremely guilty state, called her later that night to talk to her about everything that happened. Stupid! Um but – Dumb!" We didn't break up right away because we were trying to see if we could move past this. When she said 'I just can't trust you anymore', I chose not to fight her on that because "I didn't feel as if I could trust me. In other words, if I don't understand how this happened or why this happened or any of that stuff then how do I know it's not going to happen again? So should I just be another guy and lie to her like everyone else and I say no I love you and that will never happen again? But we all know that that's not going to happen. I didn't feel comfortable doing that. I didn't feel like I had the emotional energy feeling very drained to fight for that relationship at that particular point in time. ¹²⁶ That's all."

Even though my strong feelings about this episode have somewhat dissipated, what continues to bother me about it is my fear that if girls knew what I did they wouldn't want to date me. "It makes me dirty, bad, evil and not desirable." I'm not sure if I could tell them about this experience. If I don't tell them, I feel as if I'm tricking them or lying – like if they knew this about me from the get-go they wouldn't date me. But that's exactly what keeps me from telling them in the first place. "It's such a bad thing." I

¹²⁶ One motive for the breakup may be this inability to trust himself. But it's hard to know if he also unconsciously engineered this episode as a way to escape from a relationship he was dissatisfied with.

think they would react “with a sense of disgust”. ‘How could you let that happen’ they might say? ‘I don’t want to be with someone who’s done something like that!’¹²⁷

Maybe I’m projecting my own feelings onto others more than anything else. Because truthfully I’m ok with this experience, I just don’t think I should bring it up in a relationship because it would be hard for anyone else to understand. If it had to come up for some reason with a girl, and I can’t imagine why it would, “I think the important expression here would be one of I did something that’s in the past, I learn from it, I’m not going to say that it was a negative experience per say, I’m going to say that it was a mixed experience, like most experiences in life, I have made my peace with it and finished.” I feel ready to move on with it but I also feel like it will haunt me as long as I’m still dating and looking to be desired by other women.

In general I realized that when it comes to sexual activities, when I make a more active decision, as opposed to a decision where I feel forced, either by my own physical body or by someone else, I feel better about those things. I don’t feel as anxious about them. But in situations where I feel more forced or driven, like with peeping or with this prostitute who I felt had forced me to have sex with her as absurd as that sounds, I don’t feel like I have very much control. “When I am in control of the situation, whether the things come out the way I want them to or not... I feel better about those situations.” So with the girlfriends that I fooled around with, I didn’t feel overwhelmed with guilt, aside from feeling a little bit bad about breaking halakha. Like I knew I shouldn’t be doing that. But at least there I could say, okay, I want to do it.

¹²⁷ An interesting concern given how much his desirability has worried him in the past. This episode seems to play right into that, Perhaps it is even his way of at least maintaining the illusion of control over his being undesirable. It’s not because he’s inherently unattractive to others, he may reason, but because of what he did by going to see a prostitute.

6. Isaac:

Introduction

Isaac is a bright, introspective 26 year old originally from Chicago. He is short, with a full head of brown wavy hair and wears dark tortoise-shell glasses, giving a somewhat bohemian impression. He is currently a medical resident in Pulmonary Medicine and lives in New York City.

Narrative

Growing Up

I grew up in a close-knit upper-middle class Orthodox community. The community was very modern and liberal-minded. While there was a lot of participation in Jewish ritual, there was only a vague sense of commitment to Jewish text and Torah study. People were comfortable with their Jewish lifestyle. There were a lot of positive feelings. I grew up very fortunate. Besides not being allowed to go to an expensive college, there was never anything I wanted that I couldn't have. "My parents tried to instill in us a good sense of ethics, like 'its important not to want everything' or 'you shouldn't always get everything you want' or 'there's like reasonable standards, you know, you don't need, you know, excesses'. But I definitely grew up comfortably."

In the community Jewish day school that I went to, physical touching between boys and girls was normal. Everyone seemed pretty comfortable about it. So I grew up with "barely even with an awareness of restrictions on inter-gender contact". In high school I had some natural and normal "teenage exploration of physical contact, all above the belt all pretty ah, um, innocent... to some degree".¹²⁸ There was no expectation of

¹²⁸ There may be some effort to conceal the more sexual, lusty aspects of this.

commitment there. To some degree there were risks involved in terms of fooling around with someone where the level of emotional interest may have been different. I remember one time, after being with a girl physically, she expressed pretty strong feeling for me and I was really surprised, like “oh, I thought it was just New Years Eve and you know we each wanted to be a little bit together so we were, but you know, I didn’t know that you liked me.”

For a long time I was hard on myself when thinking about those early explorations. Like those were abusive... I was just thinking about my own physical desires and not the other person’s feelings. Or even if we were consensual like to kiss, each of us just, it was out of desire it wasn’t in consonance with a relationship that I had feelings about the other and building something together... At times you know I maybe even would have called it consensual abuse.... I think I beat myself up sometimes thinking back about that.”¹²⁹

It made me think that now “I would want to create an ideal society where that kind of thing happens less and where, where physical intimacy was in consonance with feelings and commitments and that kind of thing.” But I’ve managed to become less harsh on myself about this because I understand that my behavior was like “a component given the culture that we live in, of like the physical natural teenage physical exploration.”

Year in Israel

Right after high school, I started dating someone named Stacy and we continued seeing each other throughout our year of yeshiva learning in Israel. We developed a physical relationship. Overall, “our relationship was like a really nice year for growing

¹²⁹ This harsh attitude is curious given how “innocent” these interactions were described as.

and really like building a good foundation, spending a lot of time together, traveling together, a lot of good talking, and like developing like through some, a couple of stages of increased intimacy still pretty much all above the belt, a little exploration with hands below the belt umm.” The relationship was off to a great start. “I have like only good things to say about it you know it really felt like a healthy language, an added component to our relationship... it felt most of the time like really ah organic and genuine and mutual.”¹³⁰

We had “a couple of bumps along the way” where at times each of us felt that the other person was into the relationship a little less and was therefore “taking advantage, like seeking our own pleasure at the expense of really being present with the other person.” We were able to work through those kinds of situations pretty well. For the first time ever I felt, “wow! This is like a normal healthy way that you go through a process of, you know, developing any language or building any relationship. You try to be mutually respectful but each person has their own motivations and you explore. And sometimes - it’s a laboratory - sometimes you make a mistake or you hurt the other person's feelings. In a healthy relationship you share and you can work through it.” Ultimately our physical interaction was in the context of a serious committed relationship.

This relationship also unfolded in the context of learning in yeshiva and for the first time being “exposed to this amazing world of Talmud torah” and a very really serious atmosphere of halakhic observance which “attracts me and compels me and you know feels more rigorous and dynamic” than my community at home where halakhic

¹³⁰ The words used are stripped of desire or sexuality and sound rather general clinical.

practice was “dry and not imbued with a the sense of life and creativity and energy”.¹³¹ In yeshiva people were embracing and thinking about halakha at the same time as living it. There was a certain excitedness of really being a “participant in the process” of Judaism and halakha.

But the relationship was also a real “discovery”. First, there was more intimacy in terms of going farther physically than I had with other relationships and, second, it was in the context of something that was “integral to my life”. Like I was “directed in a direction”. Like it was part of “a whole process”. The relationship “was going somewhere”. I don’t know if I only thought this in hindsight but I certainly remember feeling like “we’re growing together, we’ll be together for college, like its sensible, like a sensible future and it has it has like a real future that we're both invested in... it just had like a sense of viability and long-termness to it and it was in consonance, that’s been a big thing... a sense of the importance of the physical intimacy being in consonance with the rest of the relationship and the nature of the commitment.”¹³²

As I was learning more Torah and beginning to develop my understanding of it as representing the highest morals, I began to be very conflicted about shomer negiah. On the one hand if halakha said it was forbidden it must be that “not touching was the most moral way for unmarried people to be um and therefore you know touching was immoral.” But that conflicted with my actual relationship where it felt more like “a moral touching.” So my first resolution to this dilemma was to say that the halakha did indeed

¹³¹ Though the words are different, the cadence and style of language is very similar to that used when discussing his relationship to his girlfriend. Both seem to play down the desire and play up the wholesomeness.

¹³² There is obviously something very gratifying about the consonance aspect of this relationship. Conspicuously absent again is the description of physical or sexual desire.

frown upon physical intimacy but only when it looked like the kind I might have had in high school; selfish, non-consensual and not in consonance with emotional feelings. But the physical relationship that I was having with Stacy was not abusive or exploitative. The halakha, I convinced myself, wouldn't condemn it.

“So that sort of satisfied a justification for my shomer negiah position.” It became especially important for me to think badly about the kinds of behaviors I did in high school to further justify my current position and to even take “the moral high ground” when it came to judging others. I would often think about telling others how bad touching was and would point to high school, “look what happened to me, I was so bad. You're at the risk of also being bad and not thinking about other people's feelings.”

But it seemed like most guys all around me in yeshiva were trying to be shomer negiah and I was not. There was just this “general culture” of keeping halakha, “just sort of committed to the system” or at least that's what was implied by the “rhetoric of all of our teachers and mentors”. For some guys it seemed that “it wasn't even like a question, it was just like straight up, this is how I was raised and this is what I do.” No one was making any subdivisions within that like I was. Feeling a bit like an outsider because I didn't know too many people there, I was especially motivated to become a central important part of the community. As I was also “really thirsting for Jewish learning“, I wanted to prove myself as a serious person and as a serious learner.

For a while I resisted changing my shomer negiah stance, partially because I may have also liked being an outsider to this group. I felt very justified “like I am pretty much sure that I'm right about everything.” I would say things like this is “psychologically damaging, its unhealthy, you know, this is a natural healthy growth thing and in a

committed relationship it's a really important part of expressing feelings and it just seems crazy. How could you really know somebody as a like a a life partner or a love partner without having some kind of physical contact with them. It just you know seemed crazy to me." I think at the time I would have even said something like "you just shouldn't keep this halakha, this halakha is wrong, this halakha is misunderstood... halakha is good, Jewish law is good, Judaism great ... but like some things are just crazy and this is crazy and this is wrong... This must be made up."

And then I remember one Saturday night at yeshiva, all of us were dancing in a slow circle ¹³³ and I was just was looking around. "There was this real air of something, I don't know something like very noble that I felt there. Like people are committed to this high extraordinary pursuit of of rigorous textual Judaism and learning and study... People are committed to this higher noble ideal and like they've sort of like really thrown in their lot. And I'm still... you know back and forth cause I haven't like come fully on board with halakha." I was learning and growing and loving this new community but there was just this like "glaring omission" that felt "incongruous to my yeshiva life". It didn't feel incongruous to my general life because it still continued to feel like a healthy part of our relationship and Stacy and I were growing together religiously as well. But yet it was "bumping up" against this other sense. So at that point I said "alright, I'm in... I'm throwing in my lot with halakha, the major implications of that will be shomer negiah."

And maybe I was so compelled because I always had a certain appreciation of asceticism. "I get a little bit of pleasure from denying myself things that I like... I like to live simply." I often tell myself things like "this isn't important to have, you don't need

¹³³ In Orthodox circles it's very common for celebrations and rituals to include single sex dancing. Groups of men or women hold hands in a circle while dancing.

this, you don't need that". In yeshiva, I was exposed for the first time to people living very simple lives. They didn't have huge houses. They made do with less. My life as a yeshiva student was also pretty minimalist. You lived in a small room, you ate in a cafeteria with everyone. There was this "commitment to a higher ideal, the torah ideal" that I was beginning to appreciate.

Stacy and I had talked about being shomer negiah before and she definitely did not want to stop touching. We would often have a lot of private physical time on Friday nights which was really special for both of us. But one Friday night, having come to my decision, I decided to speak to her. She came into my room, sat on my bed and took my hand. I pulled it away and she said what's going on. I said "hm I think there's something I want to tell you, I've decided I want to really commit myself wholly to halakha and that means also us not touching. Like it doesn't mean anything different about my feelings for you, but like this is just, this is a really important thing for me and like I hope this is something you can or will understand." She was upset because we had discussed this before and decided to keep being physical. She didn't like that I made this decision on my own. After a few tough conversations over that weekend she told me that she didn't see how we could be together anymore and we broke up. It was "a really difficult painful time for both of us."

Did it surprise me that she broke it off? "It's really hard to remember um but no, I think I, I, it, it she had been adamant in the past like when it came up and um it didn't, it didn't totally - it didn't surprise me.¹³⁴ I think I had an inkling that it might happen I don't know if I could estimate my odds I know that there was a reasonable chance that

¹³⁴ This was said like an admission. The way his speech breaks down before this, may indicate some level of conflict.

she would, that she would want to end it then.” What I ended up gaining from this was this new thing to have a relationship with and to throw myself into.¹³⁵ So I was like missing Stacy but I had gained this feeling that I had been looking for, which was that “now I really belong here, now I’m earning my keep here in yeshiva, now I can dance with, you know that real sense of like belonging here. That year ended up being a very intense learning time for me.”

College

Once I started college I was involved in a couple of short relationships where we both were unquestionably shomer negiah. We adhered to the letter of the law completely, even in terms of not being alone together in an enclosed room.¹³⁶ We would always put a shoe in the door just to satisfy the formal thing, but at no point did I believe that it was important for us never to be alone together. In fact, I made sure that we’re definitely going to try and be alone together. I wanted to make sure that there would be some kind of intimacy so I would say things like “oh, I wish I could touch you, kiss you”

Sometimes I felt guilty even about this, because maybe these comments were also wrong, but at the same time like “I can’t go insane!... How are we gonna develop the necessary intimacy?”¹³⁷ So the compromise was that we won’t touch but we’ll try to be alone together a lot and just put a shoe in the door and I’ll use affectionate words as some

¹³⁵ Now his full commitment to religion is described as a secondary gain of the breakup. Before it was described as the primary motivator. Some level of confusion or conflict is strongly implied.

¹³⁶ This refers to the halakhic prohibition called yichud, which restricts a man and women who are prohibited from having sexual relations (any couple besides a married one) from being alone together in a enclosed room.

¹³⁷ An interesting expression, as if the crux of his “going insane” worry has nothing to do with his desires or frustration in holding back.

kind of a middle ground. In terms of touching though, I was completely successful in holding back within these relationships.

And I was proud. “In my commitment to things I could be like really impressive and committed to them. Self control is like in that ascetic realm of something that I like, you know, work hard at and am proud of and value about myself.” So I wasn’t even afraid that I would “break” by putting myself in these intimate situations with them. At the time I didn’t experience our choice to not be physically intimate as destructive to the relationship. I actually thought of it as a “constructive frustration that we could share, you know instead of it being the actual physical intimacy that we could share we would be sharing the commitment to not doing it, coupled with the longing to do it, and then committing to not do it, it just became a replacement language.” I remember “it felt like wholesome”, more than what I remembered of the time when I was being physically intimate.

With a girl I dated a little longer I remember saying things like “I really wish I could kiss you right now um I, you know, I want to touch your face that kind of stuff um... Ya just maybe like complements, I think you’re very beautiful, you’re, oh, you’re really really beautiful, um I like your hair that kind of thing.” This compromise was “satisfying without being frustrating” and the tension was actually mitigated. “I was so iron-man about the fact that nothing was gonna happen” that these kinds of expressions felt safe. They didn’t heighten the tension.

Truthfully though, even those words “oh, it’s so frustrating” did not really come from a place of deep frustration. They felt more like “a script” just because I was so “wholeheartedly on board. I was really sold on the idea, like shomer negiah, that’s the

right way to be. Even if I could still maybe have an intellectual critique of it, that was like muted by a sense of like this is what I'm doing, this is what I should do, this is like the standard of the community.” If this was halakha, then this is what God wants from me. As much as I might be critical of it, I am an eved hashem (a servant of God) so there's nothing more to talk about. “It was uncomplicated to me at the time, it really was.”

In general, during college I still felt that fierce religious intensity that yeshiva introduced me to. Specifically, I sort of walked around feeling like “a role model, being like a bearer of the flag kind of thing.” While everyone else slacked off in their religious observance including shomer negiah, “I wanted to show my strength” maybe to prove to my Israel rabbis that I could stay strong even though I was in America and in college. I felt like I also wanted to be “holding down the frum fort” because I knew that I was more committed than others. And even though I was really curious to know what everyone else was doing sexually, I would make an extra effort to turn the other way, which was also easy to do since I didn't go to the parties and clubs that my friends went to. “It was part of my like noble responsible stance to say ‘I'm doing what's right, I want to have a favorable assessment of other people, its not my place to know what they're doing’.”

Second College Relationship

Towards the end of college I met a girl named Shelly who I dated on and off for a year. It was “an intense relationship and like a promising relationship, we had a lot of good language and communication and complimented each other well.”¹³⁸ We were both committed to not touching though she would say how much she relied on me to be the strong one. I'd always say “Well, I'm rock steady, you know don't worry (laugh).” But in

¹³⁸ The words he uses sound like those of a distant observer.

this relationship as opposed to others, there was more of “just sexual desire which just sort of pushed us to try to find more satisfying ways to bridge that gap... like long longing looks, like pretty deep focused looking into the other persons eyes, not talking during that time, maybe heavy breathing a little bit.”

We both had prior sexual experiences with other people before and we had our separate reasons to be shomer negiah. But we were both equally aware of what was missing as a result and wanted “to try and claim that back in some way”. So this was an attempt to “all but touch, meaning like have our bodies very close together, pretend that we were kissing”. As opposed to other relationships “here, there was much more actual like um sexual stimulation, like you know I had an erection lets say... there was much more of like sexual potency in that interaction um that that was helpful, that was somewhat effective, um we liked it.”¹³⁹

Even though we weren’t touching and only pretending to kiss, there was a feeling of organic growth and progress in the relationship “and like a closeness of bodies” that “befit you know the time that we were spending together and like the closeness that we felt to each other um.” I remember once when we were both in the same bed pretending to kiss each other, I had this “ridiculous feeling of like if my parents caught me...I think they would just be bewildered. What in the world would my parents think of this... like I think they would be more disappointed that I wasn’t kissing her than if I was.”

At that time I was also aware that these interactions couldn’t possibly be permitted. I felt a little bit guilty about them. I think I just had to say something about it like “look formal law says no touching, this is like a really serious important relationship,

¹³⁹ Notice his sequence of words “Helpful... Effective.... We liked it”. A little of the desire is named after these other safer words are used.

and so I'm gonna have to be ok, feeling that I'm sticking to the formal law even if not to the spirit of the law because I, you know, um - I'm not sure exactly what I thought the spirit of the law was then – um whatever it was, I don't know if I agreed with it or not but like I was still, I, I was still committed to trying to both maintain both the letter and the spirit, but I was willing at this point to sacrifice the spirit and just stick with the letter that felt like a reasonable compromise that I was gonna make at that time.”

“I didn't want to say like, ‘you know what Shelly, maybe we should go back and return to not being physically close, you know, I didn't, I didn't want to, like it was pleasurable... it felt in consonance with where we were.”¹⁴⁰In retrospect, I wonder whether I was scared to assert my own position to become completely shomer. What if she would have gotten angry or wanted to break up, which is what happened in the last relationship.

Several months later we ended up in different cities and the relationship got bumpier. It also lost a lot of the original “fervor and excitement” that started with. Shelly had wanted some sort of a marriage commitment from me and I was definitely not in that frame of mind at the time. I wasn't even able to tell her if it was heading in that general direction. We decided to break up. It was pretty difficult. I debated back and forth about whether I loved her or not, and felt a “big sense of loss” when it ended. “We had a great relationship, a lot of good times, and a real closeness”¹⁴¹but at the end of the day I wasn't able to give her what she wanted.

The “high stakeness” of this relationship, which felt like a dangerously close “brush with marriage”, really “sparked like a who am I, and do I want this... maybe I

¹⁴⁰ Pleasure and consonance seem intricately linked here.

¹⁴¹ The language is strikingly distant and removed from his personal feelings and desires.

should just sort of figure out this puzzle of do I want to get married, how do I approach marriage...?” Shelly was really clear about wanting marriage and I wasn’t completely sure how I felt about it. I decided to take some time off from looking for relationships. It ended up being around a two year break.

Autoeroticism

“The discovery of my own sexuality hasn’t been a big therapy exploration topic but I sort of like really never masturbated, like I just was not – in other words there was never like a learning how, there was never like it being discussed in school in the locker room. If there was, I didn’t know, I didn’t get what it was about um at that time, and like I guess I, I’ve always been surprised to like hear the massively large statistics of American men who masturbate... somewhere between 90-100 percent... have masturbated at least once, um. I’m like mesupack (doubtful) whether I would say that I even have, even at least once. Like I, I can’t point to like a, a single concrete time that I would call masturbation like I, um you know like I (deep sigh) its easier to talk about what you don’t do, than what you do do um.”

“(hushed tone) I’ll be gentle with myself, I’ve explored my own body um but never like manually tried to like bring myself to an erection and then an ejaculation.” I feel like that’s a very unusual accomplishment and so “maybe I want to be validated like ‘Yes! You never masturbated’ and then feel proud of myself” or maybe hear someone say to me ‘based on what you described I can clinically confirm that you have succeeded’. This all seems to fit in with my preoccupation with asceticism.

Even though on the surface this does seem to sound like asceticism a little bit - like I might get pleasure out of denying myself sexual enjoyment - it’s not like a ever felt

strong urges to do it. “Whatever is being described by masturbation is nothing that like interests me... I’m not even totally sure I know what this is, or how I would do this or like if I did it, if I would know if I had done it.” And I guess in theory I could see it as a natural part of exploration and healthy sexual growth but I’ve consistently felt that masturbation was something that’s not quite disgusting but a little bit “distasteful... like primitive, uncultured...unbecoming.” There is definitely an “unavoidable selfishness” to it and I don’t like to think of myself as a selfish person.

“My parents raised me not to be selfish, it was like a pretty bad word you know in our house like ‘You should always be thinking about others’ you know that that comes into the self control realm... the idea that um ‘When you think before you talk, you think about if what you said could possibly hurt someone’s feelings and if you could, you just don’t say it’ and like that’s been like a powerful thing for me growing up through now.”

“My parents voice in my head says - my mom’s voice in my head says, like ‘No, ‘cause that’s selfish. Really what you are doing is like having a good time, something that will make you happy and you’ll be light and silly but there’s the risk of hurting someone else and you never - when there is even the slightest risk of hurting someone else, there is no, there is no grounds for doing something unless it has like extreme importance. And this has no more importance than just fun and fun is not too important so, fun, at the possible risk of hurting someone else is never worth it um’ and that sort of like fits in the frame to me of ‘selfishness is bad’ um and so somehow I think that plays into my thoughts about masturbation.”

But that all seems like a very advanced way of explaining this. I just have “a more gut feeling of it. It’s a little gross, it’s a little like... perverted, maybe um... shame, its

definitely it's a little shameful. Maybe because... there's secretiveness in, in intimacy with another person but its with another person, so its like a secret from everybody else but its like a shared secret. But like masturbation is like a, just hiding under your covers... To the extent that secrecy often overlaps with shame so that shame is mitigated, the shame of vulnerability or exposure or intimacy with another person is like mitigated or like overcome by the sharing something with another person. When you are by yourself it's just sort of the shame." I'm not sure I could explain more about the shame but it just feels like basic gut feelings of pervertedness.

For me "the locus of the battle is just more in the fantasy seeking realm. That's where, like in bed at night, ah I want to imagine fooling around with this girl that I dated or that I met or on a much rarer occasion like a movie star or some more distant person - usually its familiar people... I want to indulge in those fantasies or thoughts or imaginings um and at different times, stages in my life I've gone back and forth about whether I could or should." In college I felt like I should try to stop myself from fantasizing and I was sometimes able to turn my attention elsewhere. These thoughts seem to come in "cycles and waves" and I don't know what they are correlated with in the rest of my life. Sometimes it's there many nights in a row over a few weeks and sometimes it's not there at all. I find it fascinating how it fluctuates like that.

Once in college when I was more torn about it, I went to ask my Rabbi what he thought about my fantasizing. I didn't think it was right but at the same time I thought "this is crazy... I think that it would be really destructive to like try and cut off all of this." The Rabbi told me that the halakha did find it problematic but he acknowledged how it might be a psychological impossibility to stop. Basically he emphasized how it

was wrong but that there's some room for compassion and understanding as well.

Although "my normal posture" about keeping halakha was to keep pushing, not give up and control myself, here I was okay saying: I'll try hard and maybe every third time I'll try to "really quash the thought" but the rest of the time "just don't beat yourself up that hard."

If someone would have said to me you're doing something asur I would have said "I'm moving, I'm working on it, or maybe not working on it, but I'm responsive to it sometimes, I'm engaged with it, I'm not, I'm not flagrantly disregarding the halakha in a general sense, on a night by night basis. Maybe some nights I am disregarding halakha but I wouldn't call it flagrantly because I'm engaged in the process of it." Since then I've become even more patient with it. Rarely do I try and stop myself from fantasizing. I'll usually "just push through the fantasy" until I fall asleep. At times I'll be aroused when this happens but often not. By the time I fall asleep, the fantasy will feel relatively satisfying but it won't ever reach the point where it becomes "consummated".

I think an old part of me would have said that fantasizing is "objectifying... it's abusive, its just that you're not actually doing it with a person, you're doing it to a mental image of them... it perpetuates a thought... still pretty one sided about your desire... like I'm not always wholesomely imagining this as like a fruition of a great relationship, sometimes its actually like a girl I knew from high school who I always - we were attracted to each other and never like had a deeply substantive relationship and she just pops back up and we have a one night, you know, fling... no intercourse fantasies ... its still pretty much just beyond the limits of like what my actual experience has been um so maybe it includes like oral sex and not really beyond that."

If I actually acted on that today I think I would feel terribly guilty for a whole host of reasons. Then again it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world but its certainly not healthy, respectable behavior even with two consenting adults. It's lower than the standards I try to set for myself in my way of living and treating other people but I don't resist from fantasizing about those kinds of things. I feel a little guilty about it but "I'm being so good in everything else - sometimes that's like an answer to the guilt" and sometimes that even precludes any experience of guilt whatsoever, "like this is my zone where I do what's either a little asur or a little not nice... I'm just allowing myself that."

I had graduated college and really wanted to focus time on Jewish learning. I had continuously been romantically involved for the past few years "I sort of felt, I lost track of myself a little bit. I wanted some the time to be on my own and you know grow personally you know psychologically get back into myself as an independent being and not like in a relationship being.... I just felt it was like time to hang out with myself for a while to get back in touch with my own self." So I decided to take a break from dating and relationships. While this happened, it didn't feel like a time of increased longing or missing something. I wasn't interested in looking around even. This was a time for me. I learnt a lot, a hung out with lots of guys and "I made do with that... Other things in life were satisfying me".

A Quick Relationship

Two or three years after having very little involvement with women I met someone who lived in my neighborhood. Something was clicking with her but at the same time I was really torn. I wasn't entirely sure if it was the right time to get involved in a relationship. I also sensed that it might not be a relationship that would lead to

marriage. I felt a little excited at the beginning but from pretty early on I had a lot of “stomach twisted-ness and I started to get even like unhappy.” I never knew the source of my unhappiness was her or something in me and for a while I was trying hard to keep my sad feelings separate from my perception of the relationship. I didn’t want to break up just because I felt bad. I had a lot of questions about whether she was the right one or not. That “uncertainly space” is very hard for me.

When I met her I felt excited because I really liked to talking to her and we had a lot of similarities. “She just loved learning... and that was what drew me to her initially. And then you know the other piece of you know is the whole physical sexual attraction um which, which was really notable to me for being like stronger than I could remember feeling in a while.” For example, one time before I asked her out we were both sitting by ourselves learning in the bait midrash of our shul and “I remember like the excitement of like woa we’re alone together ... imagining like we could like make out right now and that would be amazing.” I was even physically stimulated. It was very different and exciting.

That attraction-energy continued when we started going out and we talked a lot about physical contact. She was pretty seriously committed to halakha and didn’t want to do anything asur. But she still had this idea that if one night we were up late together, lets say watching a movie, and no one was around we could let our desires get the better of us. She said, “like let’s hope that will happen a couple of times and that will be like good for us.” She thought it would be unhealthy to restrain our desires and that was her plan. I disagreed and told her that I’m in control of myself and proud of that. “So if we’re

agreeing to not touch, were gonna not touch. Because there's no desire getting the better of me, like that's just not how I work.”¹⁴²

She was troubled by that because she felt that if I was really attracted to her I would be less able, or willing, to want to control myself. I answered that “I am attracted to you, like I want to touch you but I know that I won't” because we're committed to halakha. In my mind the “ace in the hole was like I know I have this other like method that's worked for me in the past as a way to sort of release some of that tension that I feel better about.”¹⁴³ But I didn't bring that up right away. A few weeks later she got frustrated and started to accuse me of being disconnected from my body and would say things like ‘you're like a machine, you're not like a person!’ even though she knew that I had feelings and emotions. I was surprised to hear her say that because I didn't think my position came out of being disconnected from my body – I felt very in touch with my physical self. I just knew that I was able to control myself. So I felt she misread me in that way.

Just as she was “nearing a breaking point about it” we had this long date where “we were sitting very close to each other ... outside, we were like playing with ... bugs ... like little insects... walking around our fingers. So I sort of like passed an insect to her and we sort of accidentally touched you know like by transferring a bug from one person from their palm to the other palm and we were just very close together and at that point like I think I sort of like leaned around her and breathed on her neck and sort of like eased into like a, just like what I described before breathing on each other, reaming

¹⁴² Said in somewhat of a self mocking tone.

¹⁴³ He's referring to pretend kissing and touching, which he had enjoyed before in previous relationships.

around each other, like looking very closely into each others eyes... We weren't touching ... maybe like our thighs were next to each other." She was very taken by this and recognized a certain power and energy to it and said to me afterwards 'I guess I take it all back.' Over the next couple of weeks that sort of "kicked the sexual energy back into a good place" where again we were excited to see each other and be alone together. We would try to go back to her apartment often where we could "slip into that mode"¹⁴⁴ of being close together and talking. Those were probably the best times of that relationship.

After a few weeks though the relationship spiraled downhill and we broke up. In general that initial unhappiness that I felt never went away. I became pretty depressed until a few weeks after it ended. In therapy we figured this was related to my difficulties of "holding my own in a relationship." Since I have trouble asserting my own opinions, feelings or identity, I can easily feel like I am being taken over by the other person which is when I become unhappy. From the relationship I had with my mother I learnt that "to love another person or care for them is to like always be what they want you to be or always be where they are." It's hard for me to say "I care about you but I'm over here even though you're over there." But these feelings may have also been more pronounced in this particular relationship because of how assertive she was. I also was creating a lot of pressure to decide as quickly as possible whether she was someone I wanted to marry or not. If that wasn't going to happen I saw no reason to stay together.

I would argue that the breakup had nothing to do with the fact that we never kissed or that I wasn't able to connect to the initial excitement that there was. "I felt then and I feel now that those felt unrelated. I didn't feel those were related... I didn't feel that

¹⁴⁴ Not sure if there is any greater significant "slip", whether it is used to accentuate some kind of accident.

way at all... I still don't feel that way.”¹⁴⁵ I was having a hard time moving the relationship forward while I had all these doubts about her being the right one for me.

There's one story though that I left out which feels “like sexually explicit, personally intimate” but I think very relevant. It's a little harder to talk about. Most of our physical intimacy was just sitting next to each other on the couch but one night “it slipped, it moved” more towards one person lying on the couch and other person kneeling on the floor leaning over so it was much more of a horizontal, sexual position. “It was very charged, very powerful. Um and at the, like, it sort of like, it felt like it was escalating like our breathing intensified um and I was at that like I – she was lying on the couch I was like kneeling on the – I had my knees on the floor and I was sort of like pressed against a couch and leaning over her and um I think that I like - I or she had admit some ignorance of sexual experience um - but I had some kind of like climax or release that I don't know if it was like - an orgasm? Or if it was like a pre-orgasmic ejaculation? I don't I don't actually know but it was – it wasn't like extraordinary but it was like I I I experienced I guess what I read or I've seen on TV, something akin to that, like a buildup and intensifying a freeing and then some kind of release.”

“We sort of like stopped, like I'm not sure how, it like came to a, right after that um we sort of like took a break um... and we cried like just sort of both of us sort of independently simultaneously and I could I, to this day I'm not sure why... it didn't feel like it was mostly guilt, some piece of it felt like it was guilt, some piece of it felt like it was something like just new and beautiful and um I don't know what, but like it was emotional um it was it was I don't know like sharing something with somebody and there was a weirdness in retrospect and I think I new it then from the fact that like some of the

¹⁴⁵ It's not clear what he so adamantly negates this possibility.

final stimulation was probably from the couch and not, none of it was from touching her body, but some part was probably physically like the couch and that I think I felt weird about um but it was like it was a, it was really nice um she, I remember when I got home that night she called and said I hope you're not feeling guilty and I said, I'm not, and I was a little bit but I wasn't going to say that."

In the last week or two of the relationship when we both knew it was winding down we both tried to "use some of that physical energy closeness" to bridge things together. But I wasn't feeling that sexual energy anymore and "I was almost like pleased with myself that I didn't feel it... I was like ya, I like that my like libido and my heart are in synch here." While I've always sought out people who I thought would be challenging and aggressive I think I went too far with that in this case. It did not feel right to me.

At one point she wanted us to talk to a Rabbi together about going to the mikvah to leave all our options open. I felt really uncomfortable with that and I liked the stance that we were taking. "This is my stance for now its working and... its gonna have too much stress to try and reevaluate... I'm not feeling any strong sense of like this is wrong or, or I want to be doing this a different way. Like it feels like a good position for now so that's generally how I was with it." But I want to just note that I maintained my position throughout the relationship. "I never flipped". We never touched each other, just as I had predicted.

I understood her position about occasionally making room for letting our desires get the better of us and wanting to slip in some way but I had a different way of seeing it. "I think that everything in life is a decision... you decide what you are going to do. So I was sort of resistant to her language of 'we just slipped a few times'. I don't think you

slip a few times. I always know what I'm doing, whether I want to be doing it or not." Even when I'm going from sitting up on the couch to lying down I'm aware that I'm probably doing more than what I originally wanted to do. But since I want to do it, I'm going to. "But at no time would I say that that was like not decided" that we just accidentally slipped into this mode with consciously choosing it.

Change of Heart and Mind

A year or so after this relationship I decided to try dating again. I had started to talk a lot on the phone with this girl named Ilana who I'd been friends with for a few years. I always thought maybe this could be something more and so we decided to try and "turn the corner from like a three year fantastic friendship to a romantic relationship." It didn't happen as quickly as last time but I do remember certain feelings that were "sprouting up of like a heavy stone in my stomach, waking up in the morning with like this sort of racing brain, how do I know?"¹⁴⁶

It was happening pretty early with Ilana but there was a lot of good conversations and she was just so smart and interesting. Actually she was even more aggressive and assertive than the previous girl and was very angry about Judaism and women's issues. Starting this relationship I felt like I needed a plan, "you know (laugh) touching/not touching". I had given the whole issue a lot of thought over the past few years and was really trying to figure out the route that "best balances my commitment to halakha, my commitment to other values (and) my psychological mental health."

¹⁴⁶ This sounds like intense anxiety. We'd have to wonder what causes it since it keeps happening in the beginning of these relationships and whether his conscious worry of "what if they aren't the right one for me" is disguising other worries related to the start of relationships.

I had always felt that the halakhot prohibiting touch don't make a lot of sense to me. In the culture that I live in where "touch is like a natural part of communication between people" those laws seem "untenable". "I'm a touchy person um I use touch to convey feelings." In past relationships I experienced touch "as (a) healthy, fantastic, constructive part of relating to another person and of like growing and feeling." My later compromises of breathing on or reaming around my girlfriends "seemed so bizarre and contrived to me." And furthermore it for sure was a "violation of the spirit of the law and even possibly some of the letter of the law - breathing on a person in a sexually intimate way is probably not aloud if winking an eye is not allowed" according to the halakha.¹⁴⁷

"The way that I approached it until then, didn't feel like they made perfect sense or ya, I don't know how to say it better than that now, um, so I had this thought which was... (long pause) um I, I don't know, it gets really hard to sort out how I think about this stuff.¹⁴⁸ I think I reached close to a breaking point of sort of saying there are things that feel incongruous, like I will kiss my friends mom when I see her in shul, so I'm not never touching women, right?"¹⁴⁹ And my friend's mom who is a married women, is maybe even more asur than my unmarried girlfriend. "I also sort of resumed a little more like social hugging with sort of non orthodox female friends...¹⁵⁰ it felt like a relief and a

¹⁴⁷ These mix of thoughts are articulated as one cohesive thought. The progression is noteworthy: 'Touch is against the norm. Touch is against his nature. Touch is a healthy good part of relationships. I was acting really bizarre in order to avoid sinning. I am sinning anyway.'

¹⁴⁸ Its interesting to note the anxiety and insecurity about his thoughts when he actually sounds rather clear.

¹⁴⁹ This goes back to the argument 'I am sinning anyway'.

¹⁵⁰ A statement that sounds very hesitant and tentative, perhaps revealing something conflicted here.

return to a self that I knew better. Like a high school self. It felt a little more whole and healthy.”¹⁵¹ My old friends told me how much they liked that and missed that from me.

I reasoned that “this isn’t much different than a hand shake and people have allowed hand shaking because... it’s between a social business greeting and an affectionate, but non sexual greeting, so like there’s a difference between hand shaking and hugging but its not huge... so some of it was like a halakhic style argument. And some of it was just ah, I don’t care, I don’t care enough about this halakha to keep it, its so often both of those things.”¹⁵²

“The language that I feel a lot of times I’ll make is that a halakhic argument could be made to allow this.”¹⁵³ No orthodox Rabbi has written such a thing out, though I do remember a rabbi telling me that I could hug my sister’s in-laws. It’s not good, he said, the halakha doesn’t really smile on it but it’s not really like asur to have an affectionate social greeting. So with that idea in the back of my head “the next step from there is to say ...¹⁵⁴ sometimes the energy of the, of the, um non touching/ touching was so intense, it felt like out of whack with the pace of the relationship. Like like I don’t know if I actually feel so close to you that I want to be pretending to kiss you maybe I just want to be pretending to cuddle... sometimes it ratcheted it up um and sometimes I thought to

¹⁵¹ This goes back to the argument ‘touch is a healthy, wholesome part of normal relationships’.

¹⁵² Finally after all of those arguments, he admits that simply doesn’t care enough. It makes us wonder how deliberate his choice to hug other women was, whether it was justified and decided upon before he did it or whether he “slipped into it”. He may be trying to make his actions sound more controlled than they actually were.

¹⁵³ This statement is made using a very official tone as if it is some sort of legal pronouncement.

¹⁵⁴ It sounds like he was about to say what his next logical step was – that he would allow himself to touch this girl – but quickly he “recovers” from this and goes back into justifying his approach.

myself like... if we could just hold hands once in a while I think it could actually diffuse a lot of like this like pent up energy.”¹⁵⁵

“So I sort of like thought to myself like here’s my new plan: I’m open to continuing to be shomer negiah in a relationship that I might get involved in, sort of based on where the other person is, I’m not sure if I’m gonna force it. But if I were with someone who wasn’t or who wanted to test things out or try exploring, I would sort of be open to like a little bit of physical intimacy with the hopes that sort of like that could be more in pace with the progress of the relationship and I could sort of feel like ya I’m ready to put my arm around you when we are watching a movie and that’s a really nice thing and that way we won’t be breathing like all over each other and pretending to do more when I’m not sure I’m ready for that... I’m sure in part I formulated that because I thought something would happen with Ilana, Ilana was decidedly not shomer negiah she had like a lot of – she thought it was absurd and stupid and um I wanted to be ready (laugh).¹⁵⁶

“I mean you could hear in that, that struggle of like wanting to hold my own position I wanted to have something to say that could be tenable to her because I don’t know how I could be in a relationship with her and say ‘You’re, you obviously are not

¹⁵⁵ He seems to be saying the being shomer negiah ended up creating the very dynamics that the law tries to protect relationships from – that physical interactions can confuse and overwhelm the emotional level of the relationship. But he leaves out the fact that he was the one – not the law – who created this dynamic through the pretend sexual activity. Nonetheless, if he wanted to rely on this “not touching but pretending to be sexual” model to keep the intimacy alive, it would not be easy to pretend to do lesser forms of affection such holding hands or hugging.

¹⁵⁶ The progression of intellectual twists and turns, justifications and arguments is followed by an explanation of the event and the real-time feelings he had about them. This progression is similar to the progression before when he admits, after a long-winded theoretical explanation, “I don’t care enough about this halakha to keep it”.

shomer negiah and I think I want to be'.¹⁵⁷ So I sort of, I wasn't sure how I felt but I sort of - I already wanted to swing around to her side a little bit and... I couldn't tell you whether that was really - and this is always a challenge I have - I couldn't tell you whether that was really because I wanted that for myself or because I thought that would make her happy and be a compromise I could suggest off the bat."

So early on in the relationship with Ilana I said "could we talk a little bit about touching?" So I told her "my little shpeil" of I'm open to having a little bit of touching but I would need it to be slow paced and in consonance with where we felt our commitment levels were. She was open to that also but didn't like how forced and regimented it sounded as if the parameters we agreed on beforehand would rigidly dictate everything we did with each other. There was little room for the physicality to evolve organically. She thought my way would "inhibit the freedom of expression that comes from physical intimacy... the excitement, the exploration" of the experience.

I already had put aside the halakha of yichud because to me that prohibition was about preventing actual illicit sexual relations and I was developing my own boundaries. And that was a big step for me. "Like there's a straight up halakha. I'm just putting it aside". And again there was the piece of "halakhic style argument ... which is that I'm not formally keeping the halakha but I'm responding to that value or law by setting my own boundaries and parameters...¹⁵⁸ But like I would never say to you at that point that we were observing halakha."

¹⁵⁷ This sounds like he is afraid of losing her if he asserts his position, something which has happened to him before.

¹⁵⁸ Though he puts the law of yichud aside, he needs to find a way to adhere to its value or at least to tell himself that he is adhering to its value.

It felt hard because otherwise, I was very serious about halakha - I always felt like I was supposed to be keeping all of it. But then again I also felt like I had “an organic relationship to halakha. I’m committed to it, I’m serious about it but there’s just some things that are like, seem unrealistic and unhealthy and not who I am and not the way I was raised and I’m just not doing those and I’m not worrying about them... That ‘me’ felt like a healthier person, felt like a happier person like, had more energy to like live a good life. Sometimes I feel like weighed down by these halakhot in a way that they like get in the way of that sort of youthful, creative, energetic self, you know? So part of me felt good and freed again by sort of saying like ok that’s done, yichud is done.”¹⁵⁹

So at some point in Ilana’s dorm room, we were sitting next to each other on the bed started to hold hands. “Like it was great. It was really, really nice.” I hadn’t held hands with a girl in a while and it was “like riding a bike - it came back, circling another person’s arm, playing with the other person’s hand um, it was great, it felt right for where we were. It was really nice.” Over the next few months it progressed to cuddling, arms around each other, back rubbing, massaging, stroking each others arms. It was really nice. Sometimes the uncertainty I had about the relationship made that touching feel less good, like I didn’t know if this was someone who I want to end up with so I don’t know if I want to be doing this. But interestingly, “there was no transgressive thrill like at any point... Ironically, there was much more of a transgressive thrill to the not touching breathing stuff.”

While this was happening with Ilana I kept wondering “where do I stand now with halakha?” Even though I couldn’t deny that I was breaking it “I still want to make

¹⁵⁹ Again some of the language is distant and clinical. It’s not that he doesn’t like these laws, or can’t handle them, its that they are “objectively” unhealthy and ruin his youth.

this halakhic argument that this is not so sexual, its like loving, but its not like... a big turn on. It doesn't have like that old like building up, intensifying, escalating feeling to it... it doesn't feel erotic...its physically stimulating... but its not the same.”¹⁶⁰

I had thought to myself... this is different in the rungs of what feels asur, if what feels asur is increasing sexual activity, this really feels like its not so high on the list... It certainly is not the same as social hugging... but I never, I never touched her breasts because... and here's again where's the halakhic piece bumps up against the psychology piece... I would have had guilt doing that because... it felt one sided in a way that cuddling... didn't feel one sided.” Cuddling was nice for me and nice for her and I imagined that touching her breasts would be sexually pleasurable for me and no matter what it felt like for her, I would be only be thinking about me so we never got past there in our physical intimacy.¹⁶¹

Objectifying Women

The whole thing with breasts has troubled me for a long time. “I have an extremely hard time saying the word breast. I have a secret fear that I have an unhealthy obsession with breasts. Like I look at them on the subway. I'm just like totally drawn to them and I really struggle with it, not just from a halakhic perspective (laughing).” I think it's like “objectifying” women. It's inappropriate to look at a woman's breasts. I know I have a “disproportionate amount of guilt” about this being wrong and inappropriate and it's hard for me to articulate why. In my head I have the voices of role models saying things like “Objectifying! You're objectifying a woman! You're looking at her as a

¹⁶⁰ Again he's trying desperately to stick to the halakha in some way but it's not clear why exactly. Is he bothered about breaking laws or losing control of his desires or being selfish? Perhaps something else...?

¹⁶¹ It seems safest when physical intimacy can be devoid of lust and sexual satisfaction.

sexual object and breasts are sexual. Her face is not sexual, so to look at a person's face on the subway is fine you know but um breasts are sexual, so if you look at a sexual object that's becomes objectifying." ¹⁶² No one has actually said that to me before but I think that any way of treating women's bodies as sexual objects is a form of objectification.

Soon we both started to get busy with other things and I was having trouble with how she was so aggressive, assertive and angry and critical of the Judaism I practiced. Ultimately the relationship ended. But since then I got back into the dating world and met someone who I've been seeing for a few weeks now. Early on she told me that *shomer negiah* was just not something that she or her friends did. But she herself was very cautious about touching guys. So I felt that was doable for me. We both agreed "on the *yichud* piece of things" so we'd hang out alone in her apartment. A few dates in she said "in certain ways you're an open person but when it comes to anything that's physical you're very bounded and sort of to yourself", which reminded me about that other girl telling me I was disembodied. So I told her that I was in fact open to something.

So that night "we went back to her apartment and like hung out and there was like some cuddling more of the same as Ilana, you know, um and my same conflict about touching her breasts, like it doesn't feel like the right thing to do. I want to but I'm not going to. I couldn't talk to her about it. I still haven't been able to really talk to her about it 'cause it, it feels extra hard to talk to like a woman and someone who I'm in a relationship with about it." I'm not sure if she would feel good about it or if she would think it's too much. Overall, though, we are a good match because, for different reasons, we both have mixed feelings about touching and wanting to take it slow.

¹⁶² The "music" of this statement sounds exactly like the internalized voice of his mom warning him not to be selfish.

At the same time I've started to feel like we reached a certain "plateau" where touching still turns me on but "there's no movement in the time that we're together." A few times she's said to me "lets slow down or like lets not get ahead of ourselves" and I went back and forth with thinking "like no, I want to and I feel like... maybe we're at that place" and then thinking "she's probably right, maybe we're not at that place and I'm letting myself, my physical desires get the better of me." And interestingly also I've started to feel "those same feelings that I've had in the previous two also of like, how do you know its good but its not great and its just interesting that that's coinciding... Sometimes I think physical intimacy can be like a lubricant, meaning like it smoothens... Like you want to get there, you're interested in each other, but sometimes you just need a little bump up, like a bump of confidence or a bump of commitment from touch."¹⁶³

"I almost imagined my body had an innate sense of keeping my sexual desire in line with where my heart was, so that makes me wonder whether the sort of plateau for me... (is) in some way myself saying, 'Ya like this is as far as its gonna go.... the fact that you're not ...making the next move means that you're not feeling the next set of feelings or commitments or whatever',¹⁶⁴ so some part of me wants to trust that. (But) some part of me thinks like 'You're scared of the next step and maybe pushing it a little physically will help that come along at the same time and some part of me thinks those don't have anything to do with each other, you just have to figure out how you're feeling... All those things are in the hopper right now.'"

¹⁶³ It might be revealing how his discussion of doubts follows on the heels of his sexual advances being rejected.

¹⁶⁴ It's interesting that he says he has not made a move when before, he clearly did, but was rejected by her.

Though I've taken certain liberties with *yichud* and *shomer negiah*, those laws are “are still part of me. It's the part of me that still sometimes thinks ... I'm looking for a person who will agree to not pass things to each other during the *shiva nekiim* (seven days of purity)¹⁶⁵ ... that's like a possible world for me and then sometimes I think its an insane impossible world for me.” Moving forward I think I'm going to struggle with “how I'll figure out what I want and how proactive a role I'll take in expressing that in terms of physical intimacy in relationships going forward, unmarried and married.”

I'm excited about having the “erotic versus affectionate” split. I was able to still feel committed to the *halakha* while I would “tow the affectionate line”. But at the same time “I would argue that once you are touching someone you need the erotic” in the same way as a long term relationship needs both stability and security but also excitement and “peek moments”. Even though those two sides “bleed into each other”, they're still different. Kissing to me is also erotic, like touching breasts, but it seems to be much more obviously mutual. “So I think that just like sort of solves the problem of my block with breasts... if I was going to try to go in that direction (laugh) you know um that sort of feels like a better entry point.” In fact, recently my girlfriend and I were hugging by the door a little more erotically and I said to her “I want to kiss you now but I don't know if we're ready for that and she said ‘I think we're not ready for that’ and I sort of said ok, um, fine, um but like even just like, fine, but feeling like desire felt like a good thing to me.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Referring to the seven days after a women stops bleeding where relations between a man and his wife are still prohibited. Other stringencies, such as passing objects directly to each other, protect people from violating this law.

¹⁶⁶ This is the first time he mentions the word desire. He seems to recognize this as a different experience. Although he was rejected, its interesting that he did not feel guilty about going too far. But by his tone,

Wholeness

Looking back on these changes “there’s something really fantastic about returning to the 11th grade wholeness but there’s a nagging ... like a real part of me that feels lost or missing or a giving up.” I could also see how being shomer negiah was wholesome like the way I felt in Israel dancing in Yeshiva that night. “Both those models of wholeness are out there and they’re mutually exclusive um and that’s tugging on me strongly in two directions... (And) in a very big way, a freedom of expression feels like the difference between those two things.” For example, in high school I felt like I could say, do and believe whatever I felt without it seeming to conflict with my religious commitment. But starting in Israel I felt that “there are just certain things you can’t think or say... The yeshiva circle says not only are those at odds but it’s to the point where you have to repress those parts of yourself.”

My relationship at the end of high school was like “the apex of good and healthy... The certainty, the connectedness in doing what you want, reaching out and finding that and embracing it.” It’s true that I felt guilty about some of those physical interactions with high school girls who I didn’t have real feelings for, but that was a risk both of us took knowing that it doesn’t always work out perfectly. I don’t see those hurtful interactions as a strike against the wholesomeness model because “you just like feel free and you’re connected to yourself ‘cause you’re following all the wants that you have and you know like try to be healthy and responsible about it but like you could be open to what you’re feeling and what you want.”

there is some indication that he was hurt by her rejection, especially after making himself so vulnerable to her.

On the opposite side, *hilkhot niddah* is “monstrous, its crazy, it doesn’t make any sense, it makes sense in its own context in a world of like sancta and the holy temple. Ya, I could understand how like physical bodily emissions would feel out of place there whether it was male or female you know. But we don’t have those same relationships to holiness anymore... and menstruation is private now, you know so like there’s a whole host of reasons why I think that whole area of halakha is just so crazy.

But I could also see a “certainty in the wholeness doing a prescribed thing, living a life with other people who are committed to doing that... share the trials and tribulations of the challenges... this is what we do, I don’t always love it, you know, sometimes I disagree with it but... it has a coherence that is beyond just like me, you know... it has a, a cohesiveness of like you can figure out what to do and you know that people are doing it together and... there’s also a certainly and a connectedness to doing some prescribed thing.”

On Being Interviewed

There’s something pleasurable in talking about a topic that’s “a little taboo” or a little “off limits in the culture that I live in”. It’s not quite a “transgressive thrill” but it’s definitely pleasurable. The other thing “that is just slithering around” is that I feel like I’m “a little good at it”. I’m articulate and “can sort of hold the different strands together”. I can be responsive and give you material that is helpful and useful. There’s something like pleasurable and pleasant about that. It’s an opportunity to demonstrate my capacity, my fluency and my articulateness in that way.

But at the same time there’s a bit of a conflicting sense in the self-indulgence of this experience. Even though I could see how this could be therapeutic for me, it still

feels self indulgent. Maybe it's the "yeshiva world" that still influences me but there's this feeling of bitul zman (a prohibition of wasting time), which ties into my "obsession with time management". Anything that doesn't have "a clear sense of supreme value is always a little sketchy to do." I could console myself by saying this is helpful for me and especially for you and for the research out there, but it still "bumps up" against this sense that "you could be doing something better with your time" than sitting around talking about my own sexuality for a few hours. In some way this "overlaps with my attitude towards fantasizing". On the one hand feeling like it's too self indulgent but on the other hand like "cut yourself some slack". I'm good at it, this is worthwhile and helpful. "You don't have to go so crazy kind of thing."

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

An analysis of these six narratives reveals 29 different themes, which are subdivided into two broad categories: 1) anxieties and 2) defenses, compromises and adaptations, which we will call defenses for simplification purposes. Anxieties describe the different types of concerns and conflicts that participants articulated when asked to reflect upon their sexual-religious conflicts. These were broken down into five different sub-categories and included a total of eleven different types. Defenses were broken down into four sub-categories which total up to eighteen different types.

Though these six narratives comprise most of what these categories and themes are based upon, some of the “blanks” were also filled in by two other important but subjective sources of information. One is the indirect or unconscious communications from within the interview situation. The other are aspects of my own experience as a member of this population. Before describing the 29 themes, we will briefly discuss seven different types of “conditions” which refer to background qualities described or alluded to in the narratives that appear to frame and shape sexual-religious anxieties and defenses.

I Conditions

These factors which are both static and dynamic, environmental and internal, exist in an ongoing dialogue with one’s sexuality. Specific conditions are discussed in more detail where they require elaboration and where the narratives define them more clearly.

1. Religious Subculture and Education

The types of sexual anxieties and responses are shaped very much by the particular attitudes, behaviors and teachings of the specific orthodox subcultures and the

personalities that make up those subcultures, both which have profound effects on the person's developing perception of their sexuality in general. For example, some Orthodox communities may not aggressively sanction premarital sexuality for children and adolescents. Therefore, these men may never really learn about or internalize orthodox premarital sexual prohibitions, and barring other kinds of conflicts, may experience relatively non-conflicted sexual activity during childhood, adolescence and singlehood. (Subjects such as these presumably were not drawn to the subject material of this study.) Some sets of sexual actions may become conflict prone even without the presence of cultural sanctions. With masturbation, for example, conflicts seem to exist independently of social sanctions as if there were something more inherently problematic about it.

Individuals adapt to the types of religious environments that they continue to interact with over time. For example, where there are drastic shifts in the person's religious milieu, such as that may occur when going from yeshiva settings to college, more intense kinds of solutions may at first be required to deal with the sudden frequency of sexual stimulation. Individuals transitioning from enclosed Orthodox communities to independent, culturally diverse settings will defend sexual conflicts differently than those who've already adjusted to these settings. Later in one's single years, when individuals might affiliate with religious communities where the sexual norms of the community are more lax, anxieties and defenses are going to change accordingly.

2. Faith and Religiosity

The individual's evolving and subjective experience of faith will greatly impact their approach to sexual-religious conflict and vice-versa. From the narratives it also

appears that throughout developmental both one's level of religiosity and sexual practices are greatly influenced by their peer group. Later towards early adulthood as individuals scatter and live in more diffuse religious communities, peer groups will exert a less prominent effect.

From the narratives and from my own experience in this Orthodox community, many individuals experience of religion takes on an almost predictable change post high-school when many become more independent. Those who remain embedded in Orthodox community life may at this point establish stronger and more intensely personal ties to their religion and social group. They may think more about their deity, practice religion freely without supervision and begin to feel more pride and guilt around religious obligation, growth and failure that is also more integrated into their identity.

This new phase of religious growth is often facilitated by learning in a yeshiva in Israel post-high school for one to two years. These yeshivas provide environments of intense religious study, questioning, challenging and growing in ways that perhaps could not be achieved if they remained at home. That religion for many at this point becomes more meaningful at this point is often the product of this year studying and cementing one's faith and developing the resolve and confidence to adhere to law and ritual independent of family and cultural origins. David articulates some important features of this stage of life which are quite common with the other interviewees descriptions:

After high-school, when I went to study at yeshiva in Israel, there was really "this break from an old mold". I started to take my religious commitments much more seriously than I had in high school where laws didn't mean that much to me

internally. In general I became more thoughtful, sincere and diligent about religious laws, beliefs and rituals.

Interestingly, however, some individual's Israel yeshivas experience seems to have the opposite effect – solidifying an even more socially-based religion where themes of competition, social approval and appeasement of authority become even more central, precluding the development of more internal religiosity. This seems to occur in more “hostile” yeshiva environments that are governed in an almost cult-like way by forces of intimidation, intrusiveness and closed-mindedness. Dan and Jacob, for example, discussed their experience in a post-high-school Israeli yeshiva as ultimately unpleasant and damaging, with the voices of authoritative figures and unreasonably strict standards still ringing in their ears many years later.

Probably because of this, their religiosity remained grounded in other people's expectations – an underlying religious construct that both men also came to resent. While Dan's resentment gets mixed into other psychological conflicts that keep him “in the fold”, Jacob psychologically moves away from the community on account of the perceived antagonism that others have towards his religious imperfections.

But other participants like David and Isaac who describe more positive educational experiences, grow into a more internally based religious position.

(Isaac) In yeshiva people were embracing and thinking about halakha at the same time as living it. There was a certain excitedness of really being a “participant in the process” of Judaism and halakha.

In this case, thoughts, feeling and behaviors that may be rooted in social expectations are translated into personal views and expectations, that perhaps later enables each to play with more personalized solutions to sexual-religious dilemmas.

3. Psychobiological Influences

Narratives point to distinct differences found in the strength of one's sexual libido, which is likely to be based on some dispositional combination of psychological and biological/hormonal features. That Isaac had never masturbated nor had the desire to do so, points to a low sex-drive. Other individuals who expressed a great deal of difficulty managing sexual drives from a young age may be describing the challenges of dealing with a higher sex drive.

4. Psychological Conflicts

These are seen to impact both the level of anxiety around sexuality and the defenses used as well as the particular sexual acts at the center of these conflicts. Dan's story shows how he is unable to move into a more satisfactory compromise between his sexuality and religion because of other sadomasochistic conflicts. Joel's greatly conflicted experiences of voyeurism seem very much connected to his earliest sexual memories of seeing aspects of his parent's sexuality. Isaac's attraction to asceticism and his enduring anxiety about sexual desire seem to have everything to do with the internalized voice of his mother, which criticized his interests in pleasure and frivolousness.

5. Relationship Experience

Obviously the more the person is interacting with the opposite sex, the more there are opportunities for interpersonal sexual experience. If individuals are hindered from

these types of experiences for whatever reason, they are more likely to seek out masturbatory experiences. From our limited sample, there do seem to be important differences between those who went to coed schools, who had earlier exposure to sexual interactions than those who went to segregated schools whose first experiences of the opposite sex may have taken place later in adolescence.

6. Ongoing Life Experience

This can include anything in the person's life which both shapes and is shaped by ongoing sexual experience, whether these are important losses, relationships, conversations or disappointments.

7. Exposure and Avoidance to Stimulation

Whether in the form of sexually provocative media openly displayed in their neighborhoods, or whether having to do with an internet connection, one's exposure to sexual stimulation, whether willful or accidental, will affect ongoing dynamics of sexual religious conflict.

II Anxieties

The following set of anxieties was described by participants as felt both before and after sexual expression. Within each type of anxiety there appears to be varying degrees of stress that dictate when and how a defense will be mobilized and what type will be used. While we are able to label four different types of anxieties, all of them can overlap and coexist, ebbing and flowing through time and experience.

Many of the anxieties mentioned by participants and described below, have little to do with religious law or religion per se. These concerns, nevertheless, were elaborated upon by participants when asked to describe their experience of sexual-religious conflicts

so they are included here. This finding in itself reveals that what many people call and consider “religion” or “religious prohibition”, is often an expression of a wide range of “superego anxieties” whether internally or externally generated.

A. External/Social

These are anxieties centered around the negative reactions of their external world. While they may persist throughout time, these are more prominent earlier on in life where social recognition matters more and where the cohesiveness of community and peer groups also create a greater threat of castigation and alienation. These anxieties tend to also be more intense when the particular sexual act is more alien and taboo both to themselves and to the particular social groups that they affiliate with. These fears may remain especially alive when the individual does not have an understanding of why the act is forbidden, such as is often the case with interpersonal sexual experience where the primary anxiety around the sexual act is its discovery and sanctioning by outside agents

1. Found Out And Social Condemnation

(Dan) My conscious experience of transgression seems related to people finding out about me and not thinking highly of me... I don't know how much internal guilt I have about masturbating.

In this anxiety the individual concept of sin is experienced predominantly through fear of discovery and social criticism, either by parents, peer groups, authority figures. These originate both in reality and fantasy as the child processes his own sexual reactions alongside attitudes transmitted from his environment. These may be realistic – they in fact would suffer adverse consequences should they be discovered - or may be projective

manifestations of internal conflict that are defensively experienced as originating from the outside.

Dan's fears of being discovered by outsiders, as described in the quote above, is how he experiences feelings of internal guilt. This echoes a common experience of adolescence where one fears that shameful sexual actions done in private can be easily known to others with just a simple, penetrating look, which depicts a temporary blurring of internal and external boundaries of the self. On the other hand when some adhered to the laws, they discussed feeling a great sense of belonging, inclusion and social such as Isaac expresses rather poignantly:

What I ended up gaining from this was this new thing to have a relationship with and to throw myself into. So I was like missing Stacy but I had gained this feeling that I had been looking for, which was that "now I really belong here, now I'm earning my keep here in yeshiva, now I can dance with, you know that real sense of like belonging here. That year ended up being a very intense learning time for me."

2. Punishment

(Joel) Maybe with sex there's also some sort of fear of punishment, whether I think that's rational or not... I did a really bad sin. That's what hit me more than anything else... I mean guilt... The feeling of alienation from God the feeling of um God's going to punish me for this and there's nothing I could do to fix what I did.

Punishment is described by participants as coming from multiple sources and agents including peers, parents, authority figures or their deity. Fears of punishment from God

can take the form of concern over suffering, damage or death through natural disaster or sudden disease. Though not found in the narratives themselves, informal conversation with others reveals how some individuals may see natural disasters or random acts of terrorism as directly related to their sexual actions.

These kinds of fears resonated with my own experience where for some time extending through even later adolescence I continued to harbor beliefs that acts of terror in Israel were directly related to my own sexual sins. This fear may have its origins in ancient texts that some men may have been taught, which discusses how sexual sins can bring destruction to the world. These worries can therefore be experienced as deep paranoia or fear about being punished by one's community, parents or by the natural order of things.

I myself grew up when AIDS first became a widely publicized epidemic. I spent years worrying that my own sexual curiosity had caused me to contract the disease. When these fears were heightened I would sometimes worry that every phone call to my home was actually a doctor delivering the terrible news of my disease, which would not only cause my imminent death but would also bring immense shame to my family.

As another example, a friend of mine once came running desperately to me for help after mistakenly downloading a video posted on the internet of a strongly sadomasochistic sexual act. His concern was that somehow, someone would monitor his computer and that he would be discovered and fired from his job as an attorney. Fears of punishment from external agents can be grounded in reality such as if one's family would in fact severely punish them for committing certain sexual acts or if in fact my friend had repeatedly downloaded illegal pornography. But often they are projections of external

guilt, that is perhaps not yet internalized because of the novelty and perceived magnitude of the act.

Some individuals description of feeling guilty for their sexual experiences, may be a form of self-punishment mobilized to preclude the retaliation from an outside agent such as their deity. Joe's quote from above blends feelings of guilt and fear of punishment from God, perhaps indicating how his experience of guilt is a form of protection from an outside punisher.

3. Internal "Gut" Prohibition

(Joel) I never in high school had any sort of sexual experience involving me and another person. It was just what I did... I would never do anything. That was not something that I would do.

This refers mostly to a vague sense of the forbidden surrounding sexuality that leads both to a seamless adherence to law but also, more importantly, to a sense of danger and taboo when confronting the possibility of sexual actions. This sense may arise from explicit rules and implicit gestures culturally transmitted from birth. These are considered external anxieties because they are directly related to ones experience of being in the culture and of rebelling in some major way against learned norms and customs. In most orthodox homes, for example, certain religious prohibitions such as *Shabbat* and *kashrut* are taught and reinforced in ways similar to how a parent implicitly and explicitly teaches a child not to play with matches. With sexuality, even more than other religious areas, explicit rules and implicit gestures transmitted from birth convey a "blanket sense" of the forbidden and dangerous, without necessarily communicating the reasons or values behind it.

Individuals may avoid sexuality on account of this gut sense though they may not articulate this directly and though they may not understand exactly why they are doing so. Mark, for example, expresses this sense in the beginning of his first intimate relationship:

(Mark) “When I met Jessica we both ‘were shomer negiah from moment one’. We never talked about it, nor did we think about it. It was just kinda what we did.”

Later he discussed feeling this sense of gut transgression when he encountered the possibility of touching this same girl:

(Mark) Sometimes we would spend hours just talking somewhere outside sitting really close - I mean it was wonderful. But... I felt this really strong “religious impulse... like this strong feeling inside” that this was the wrong thing to be doing. That it was “bordering on a transgression”. I didn’t feel guilty for actually violating anything yet but the feeling of coming close to “breaking the boundary” was powerful enough to make me want to try and prevent anything from happening.

B. Impulse/Desire

These next two anxieties involve expressions related to ones impulses and desires:

1. Out of Control

(Mark) “I view it (masturbation) as almost an addiction its like the thing you really want to do, but you can’t, or that like you know keeps like cycling back into it even when you do progress out of it” .

(Joel) You sort of like forget that you are doing it but your body is so in control of the situation.” I don’t want to use the word not in control but I guess that is what it feels like. “Feeling like I have to go through with this, just so strongly is the urge to keep moving along these lines.”

This anxiety refers to a sense of not being able to control or regulate a major part of ones life, which often leads to a sense of failure and diminishing self esteem overall and even more often to a deeply anxious feeling of being controlled by something overbearingly powerful that they cannot attain mastery over. Impulse control anxieties are much more commonly experienced around masturbatory activity as opposed to interpersonal.

Sometimes underlying the concern of impulse control is an element of surprise and shock as men’s burgeoning sexuality confronts them with unprecedented challenges to their identity and faith where they are unable to regulate or control themselves as they can with other urges and desires like hunger or aggression. Part of the anxiety individuals seem to have over auto-erotic sexual expression is the expectation that they *should* be able to control this just as they can control other impulses. Mark articulates this rather poignantly:

(Mark) With that first relationship I had... it was like the first moment where my desires really came into conflict with what I was taught, with what I was supposed to be doing um. Before nothing really ever bothered me like it didn’t bother me to keep Shabbat or to go to minyan or like you know do a lot of the tasks of religious Jews and like I always loved it and, you know, this is my first time that that’s really at cross purposes...

In fact, individuals can become shocked, confused and disturbed when they come face to face with the massive contrast between the control they have over their sexuality and rest of religious life as Joel notices:

(Joel) I was exacting and rigorous with religious rituals but, seemingly, had no control over my sexual actions. It didn't make sense.

Learning about sexual prohibitions, rather than helping people to control their impulses more, often seems to increase people's anxieties about not being able to control themselves as Mark here comments:

(Mark) "When rabbis say things like we all have these urges and you got to learn to control them... you just kind of assume that everybody around you is, and that you can't".

Anxious preoccupation over masturbatory behavior may cause some individuals to defensively emphasize the control that they *are* able to exert over interpersonal sexuality so as to ameliorate their sense of having no control. Jacob makes an implicit comparison between the pride he has in controlling himself interpersonally that he is unable to do in masturbation.

(Jacob) I was "the cool kid that could have had girlfriends" but chose not to. "I never touched a girl, never fooled around, I was clean as a whistle – by choice". People really respected me for that and I felt good about myself. When I masturbated, however, I felt really bad. It seemed inconsistent with the rest of who I was and I didn't know how to stop. At certain points, "I'd keep track of how many times I did it per month to try and bring the number down." I felt really guilty.

Some individuals, like David implies in this next quote, express a wish to understand the meaning and purpose of the sexual laws specifically so that they could better adhere to them and control themselves. “In general, if I am going to work at something I have to be much more attached to its personal meaning and relevance.” This indicates that individuals may struggle much more in their adherence to sexual laws when they are introduced as a blanket prohibition that leaves out an understanding of the personal and ethical value that the law represents, and that neglects the real experience of living with such restrictions. As we will see later, when individuals become more active and engaged in understanding the evolution and meaning of these restrictions, they may begin to actually feel more control over their sexual life, regardless of their real level of adherence.

When individuals are able to control their urges whether in relationships or alone, they may feel a sense a great sense of accomplishment, holiness, and internal peace with themselves as Isaac is here able to describe:

(Isaac) And I was proud. “In my commitment to things I could be like really impressive and committed to them. Self control is like in that ascetic realm of something that I like, you know, work hard at and am proud of and value about myself.”... .”

2. Dirty and Impure

(Mark) “I feel like I’m messing with my body...”

(Isaac) I just have “a more gut feeling of it. It’s a little gross, it’s a little like... perverted.”

This refers to a gut sense of feeling like a disgusting, dirty “specimen” on account of one’s sexuality. Jacob uses the metaphor of “I was clean as a whistle” to describe his sexual innocence in high school alluding to the clean/dirty dichotomy that may be experienced here. Narratives indicate how these dirty feelings can be applied towards either the sexual act itself or towards their overall experience of self. This sense can certainly be solidified by the actual physical “mess” of sexual actions and bodily fluids. Regarding masturbation, this sense may also be propagated by the volumes of Jewish text which speak of this act as murderous and unforgivable capable of destroying worlds and creating angels of death.

The sense of being dirty and soiled is also something that subtly but unmistakably comes through in the interviewee’s use of language and non-verbal communication. For example, David uses very uncharacteristically informal and slang-like talk when discussing two of his more anxiety provoking sexual experiences, a casual “hook up” and his use of pornography: “If I’m cruisin’ the internet and I’m lookin’ at porn...” And “She was visiting the city and needed a place to stay, was gonna crash on my couch, instead crashed in my bed um, with me...” During the interview itself, the sudden shift in David’s tone was highly palpable. Jacob explicitly discusses his disgust over certain sexual acts:

(Jacob) Giving a hand-job, fingering a girl.... eating a girl out or giving a blow job... they’re a lot nastier they’re more off color in a sense than having sex – sex is pretty clean you use a condom and there’s really no mess and its you know its mutual ...

These anxieties can be more muted in interpersonal sexual encounters, at least when it involves a person whom they care for. (Perhaps, for example, with a more casual encounter such as a random sexual affair or prostitute, the concern of being dirty and disgusting would apply as well.) In fact, sometimes an experience of interpersonal sexuality during this phase can help lower the intensity of negative sexual feelings felt about masturbation, allowing sexuality to become more positively valenced than before and perhaps leading to significant relief with these impurity anxieties. Mark discusses this very clearly when he describes his first interpersonal sexual experience:

(Mark) I had so much inner guilt about my sexual feelings from adolescence, just “to know that somebody else out there was feeling the same way that I was and wanting to express it in the same way that I was made, made things a lot better for me in certain ways... just made me feel more comfortable with the desires that I had”. For the first time I didn’t feel weak or bad about my sexual feelings, I felt like we were experiencing something together.

Often the sense of being dirty on account of one’s sexual actions “spills” into one’s overall perception of themselves as Dan discusses:

(Dan) It’s always possible that part of what fuels my overall sense of badness, and my need for external praise and admiration about my religiosity, is the very fact that I masturbate.

Some interviewees, like Joel discusses in the following quote, experience their sense of disgust over a specific sexual act in the form of concerns of how utterly reprehensible and unacceptable they may seem to others.

(Joel) If girls knew what I did they wouldn't want to date me. "It makes me dirty, bad, evil and not desirable." I'm not sure if I could tell them about this experience... "It's such a bad thing." I think they would react "with a sense of disgust"... Maybe I'm projecting my own feelings onto others more than anything else.

In contrast to this, when individuals are able to adhere to these laws they may feel a sense of purity, wholeness and sanctimony as Isaac expresses about the time when he was able to withhold touching his girlfriend.

(Isaac) I remember "it felt like wholesome", more than what I remembered of the time when I was being physically intimate.

C. Religion and Religious Identity

1. Identity Confusion: Who am I supposed to be?

(Jacob) "Going on an actual date just seemed outrageous to me. I wasn't supposed to be doing that as a yeshiva boy coming back from Israel!"

This describes the experience of contradiction between individual's behaviors and the labels, institutions and categories they are beginning to identify with and define themselves by. "Who am I supposed to be or act like" is often the type of question posed by this conflict – a question typical of adolescent development in general.

(Joel) "I felt very awkward because there were times where we'd wind up sleeping in her apartment um and you know a rabbinical student sneaking out in the morning feeling guilty and whatever... not really caring but you feel guilty anyways, um..."

(Joel) Like I'm a yeshivah boy going to this place, that it a really bad thing.

This kind of identity conflict consists of confusion in external identifications such as “yeshiva boy” or “rabbinical student” versus “boy who dates” or “boy who sleeps at girlfriend’s house”. Individuals may not yet experience the kind of dissonance that occurs with two contradictory sets of internal experiences such as “boy who believes in listening to G-d and who wishes to serve him” versus “boy who has intense desires to have a sexual encounter that is against God’s wishes.”

In earlier stages of religious identity formation the person struggles to fit novel experiences into one’s burgeoning sense of self. At first the anxiety is based upon disruptions and confusion around the very creation of an identity. This is why we refer to this as Identity Confusion - the anxiety experienced has more to do with themes of belonging to a group or and being able to organize and label ones experiences. Later however, threats to an established identity, where novel experiences directly challenge ones perception of who they already consider themselves to be, may create more intense levels of anxiety as they threaten the person’s sense of cohesiveness and integration. This is called Identity Conflict.

2. Identity conflict.

(Isaac) I was learning and growing and loving this new community but there was just this like “glaring omission” that felt “incongruous to my yeshiva life”.

(Joel) “Like there’s this side of me that feels, you know, learning Hilkhos Shabbas and Tanach, being close with many different Rabbis, and that can’t be the same me who, you know, is doing some of this stuff”.

On account of a deepening of religious identity, one is more prone to experience “identity conflict”, the uncomfortable feeling of having thoughts, feelings and actions conflict with one’s sense of who they are. Since religious identity and general identity, becomes more solidified through early childhood, the questions posed by this conflict may be “How can I be religious and do these sexual things at the same time?” Counter to the quotes from Identity Confusion, the two quotes from above describe conflicting feelings and actions as opposed to labels. This indicates a level of conflict that is more internal and probably also more disruptive. Mark echoes this feeling by saying:

(Mark) “I don’t feel like that’s how I’m supposed to live my life. It makes me feel like a hypocrite. I stand for certain values but I don’t act in accordance with them. It’s not a very good feeling.”

With a greater solidification of religious identity, there is a stronger more internal sense of dissonance, diffusion and conflict. After Mark’s first physical interaction with a girlfriend, which he finds relief and pleasure in, he is challenged with having to fit this new behavior into his view of himself.

(Mark) I also remember “all these feelings of like hypocrisy, well how could I be doing this, well this isn’t who I am?”

Interestingly, Mark becomes very conscious of this new internal feeling of contradiction - one that he was protected from experiencing prior to this because of his deep enclosure within this community’s social structure that ensured his continued adherence to sexual

laws. Before kissing his girlfriend in a public park outside of his Orthodox community he acknowledges:

(Mark) But I guess this was the first time in a while that we weren't surrounded by other religious people or our campers. The only time I was in public with her before was in a community where there were a lot of other Jews. If I was wearing my kippah I felt this pressure to stand by the values that I outwardly represented. But here we were in a nice private area of a park with just a mix of regular people. If someone saw us touching they'd think nothing of it. There was no way anyone could find us here and so "that pressure had all been released". In camp if you're caught fooling around you get thrown out. Now there weren't any of those fears and pressures.

Identity conflicts are often felt as particularly intense because aside from the contradiction of self versus self, there is the added contradiction of "alone self" versus "community self" since one's religious identity is so much wrapped up in one's social identity and in one's affiliations to family and community – institutions that offer continuous forms of mirroring, supporting and validating that identity. Sexual behaviors do not only compete with the internal construct of "religious self" but also with "family and community self" thus intensifying the feelings of dissonance. In the case of Mark, for example, even though he can at times resolve the conflict for himself of being religious and sexually active with his first girlfriend, what he struggles more intensely with is how his sexual behaviors must be kept hidden from everyone, as if their discovery would

render him an outcast and would undo how he is perceived by family and community, who he has otherwise made a very positive impression on.

3. Religious Shame: Disappointing Oneself or Severing Connections with God

(Joel) I have to repair my relationship with God because I feel like I did something wrong.

When individuals develop a more personal relationship with their deity - talking to Him, working through problems and asking for help - they can also begin to feel a stronger sense of internal disappointment from their deity or themselves. Whereas before, shame may have been relegated to the realm of control as in “I’m so ashamed I can’t control myself” now shame may center around religious feelings where one sees their spirituality to be sullied and tarnished. Genuine feelings of guilt, remorse and in some cases repentance, may endure. David illustrates his feelings about this rather clearly in these quotes:

(David) “That was the first time that I really decided to take on the laws of not touching women seriously um of trying to, trying to, really try to conquer my desires um in masturbation, in touching... trying to avoid, which is trying to avoid thoughts of of of sex and of attraction when, you know, not necessarily looking at someone who’s dressed in a way that might stimulate those thoughts and feelings, um being more careful about, or I should say, dealing with the issues in being more careful, the kinds of media I allowed into my life whether movies or TV or whatever it is...”

My understanding of the sexual laws was more “black or white”. The obligation was clear. “If I'm not meeting it, that's a bar I need to work

towards.” It was just “a given”, “a way of life”, not something I was able to choose or play with or challenge. I tried so hard to conquer my urges to masturbate but when I failed, I would feel really guilty and bad about myself.

In contrast to these feelings of religious guilt, individuals capable of holding back on expressing sexual urges may feel an unparalleled sense of religious growth and closeness to their deity or community as Isaac articulates here:

(Isaac) I was so “wholeheartedly on board. I was really sold on the idea, like shomer negiah, that’s the right way to be. Even if I could still maybe have an intellectual critique of it, that was like muted by a sense of like this is what I’m doing, this is what I should do, this is like the standard of the community.” If this was halakha, then this is what God wants from me. As much as I might be critical of it, I am an eved hashem (a servant of God) so there’s nothing more to talk about. “It was uncomplicated to me at the time, it really was.”

D. Personal and Ethical Concerns

Often if other anxieties become more tolerable, or their strength is diminished later on, the person may have the room to experience more ethical anxieties. Two anxieties are described below, the guilt of hurting others and the guilt of sexual pleasure.

1. Hurting Others

These two quotes illustrate David’s guilt about hurting others with his sexual acts:

(David) My sexual life can seep into more causal interactions with women whether the concern is how I might look at strangers in a sexual way, how

I interact with women at my workplace or how I talk to female friends. And it's wrong to have these ulterior motives. I should somehow try to squelch these feelings because it is terrible to treat women as sexual objects.

(David) It's a horrible thing to make someone feel vulnerable and hurt them and say – Ya, it feels like usury. I'm using someone else's body for your own – you know, using anything for your own gain, where it hurts someone else is awful but using someone else's self, their body, their mind, whatever, their heart is ah I think its an awful thing and so those I'm really pretty sure I'm not okay with, and so maybe I need to do my thinking in that area a little bit better.

Isaac also sees a moral problem in taking sexual satisfaction with another person, which he considers selfish when it is not perfectly aligned with the level of feelings in the relationship or perfectly in synch with the other's intentions.

(Isaac) For a long time I was hard on myself when thinking about those early explorations. Like those were abusive... I was just thinking about my own physical desires and not the other person's feelings. Or even if we were consensual like to kiss, each of us just, it was out of desire it wasn't in consonance with a relationship that I had feelings about the other and building something together... At times you know I maybe even would have called it consensual abuse.... I think I beat myself up sometimes thinking back about that.

In the quote below, Isaac can partially locate the source of his anxiety over objectifying women in his role model's teachings, therefore implicating his education as creating this type of ethical concern:

(Isaac) Cuddling was nice for me and nice for her and I imagined that touching her breasts would be sexually pleasurable for me and no matter what it felt like for her, I would be only be thinking about me so we never got past there in our physical intimacy... In my head I have the voices of role models saying things like "Objectifying! You're objectifying a woman! You're looking at her as a sexual object and breasts are sexual."

2. Guilt in Taking Sexual Pleasure

For Isaac the theme of selfishness that surrounds his sexual pleasure permeates his fantasy life and therefore beyond the concern of hurting another.

(Isaac) I think an old part of me would have said that fantasizing is "objectifying... it's abusive, its just that you're not actually doing it with a person, you're doing it to a mental image of them... it perpetuates a thought... still pretty one sided about your desire... like I'm not always wholesomely imagining this as like a fruition of a great relationship..." If I actually acted on that today I think I would feel terribly guilty for a whole host of reasons. Then again it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world but its certainly not healthy, respectable behavior even with two consenting adults. It's lower than the standards I try to set for myself in my way of living and treating other people

David's concerns about the strength of his sexuality as somehow sabotaging other interests and values, is more directed towards modulating his own desires as opposed to how he might hurt others.

(David) Now that I made a religious decision to bracket these laws and no longer feel as badly, I find "myself to be overly sexual and not restrained enough", which is a different kind of torture. Though I've made a religious decision about what's ok for me, I worry about sexuality "in terms of healthy relationships with those I meet, with those who I care very much about and ultimately someone who I hope I would like to spend the rest of my life with... I don't want that to be a governing factor."

E. Deviance

1. Am I the Only One?

(Mark) What makes it even worse is that you start to believe that you're the only one doing it. When rabbis say things like "we all have these urges and you got to learn to control them... you just kind of assume that everybody around you is, and that you can't".

These concerns are shown to be quite common and prominent. This describes the disconcerting sense of feeling like the only one who was sexual desires or who does certain sexual actions. In terms of feeling desire, the fear is more common to masturbation than interpersonal sexuality, because of the taboo and heightened anxiety that surrounds it and because its purpose is much less clear. The desire for interpersonal sexual experience, however, is understood to be more common and socially acceptable.

Concerns of deviance in the interpersonal realm are therefore focused more upon sexual actions and less on ideation and feeling as Mark discusses explicitly:

(Mark) “It made perfect sense that I would have sexual feelings for my girlfriend and it was a totally natural thing, something that I was totally absorbed in and totally happy about, it was just that, just a problem that we weren’t married.”

These types of worries are directly related to the particular behaviors of the individual’s peer group. Jacob described anxiety towards even going on a first date because this went against the grain of his social group at a certain time.

(Jacob) “Of course I liked her and probably wanted to see her but it just seemed really inappropriate, especially since none of my friends were even thinking about dating yet.”

Isaac’s peer group on the other hand was much more permissive. His sexual experiences in early adolescence were not infused with fears of being different in this way. Joel’s deviance concerns were about his sexual abstinence, which was unusual compared to his peer group.

Comparison to one’s social peer group can have the effect of creating further motivation to adhere to sexual restrictions, especially when the person is religiously competitive. Isaac and Dan, for example, used other people’s breaking the sexual laws as an opportunity to “win” over others and feel better than them:

(Dan) The fact that my peers have thrown them away doesn’t lead me to change my stance. In fact, it only strengthens my resolve and fuels my determination to stay the course.

Dan describes this feeling throughout his narrative. The element of beating the competition here may be an incredibly satisfying motivation and result of adherence as Isaac also describes:

(Isaac) In general, during college I still felt that fierce religious intensity that yeshiva introduced me to. Specifically, I sort of walked around feeling like “a role model, being like a bearer of the flag kind of thing.” While everyone else slacked off in their religious observance including shomer negiah, “I wanted to show my strength” maybe to prove to my Israel rabbis that I could stay strong even though I was in America and in college. I felt like I also wanted to be “holding down the frum fort” because I knew that I was more committed than others. And even though I was really curious to know what everyone else was doing sexually, I would make an extra effort to turn the other way, which was also easy to do since I didn’t go to the parties and clubs that my friends went to. “It was part of my like noble responsible stance.

Deviance is both a primary and secondary anxiety - a fear both in and of itself and one which acts upon and exacerbates the other four anxieties. This next quote depicts deviance as a primary anxiety.

(Isaac) But it seemed like most guys all around me in yeshiva were trying to be shomer negiah and I was not. There was just this “general culture” of keeping halakha, “just sort of committed to the system” or at least that’s what was implied by the “rhetoric of all of our teachers and mentors”. For some guys it seemed that “it wasn’t even like a question, it was just like

straight up, this is how I was raised and this is what I do.”... Feeling a bit like an outsider...

These next two quotes depict deviance as secondary to *impulse anxieties*:

(David) People don't talk about sex or masturbation too openly so I've sometimes wondered if everyone is walking around with the kind of urges that I do, but my hunch is that really I'm pretty different.

(David) “I'm probably more of a sexual being than it seems a lot of my friends and more, I don't know, horny or whatever the term you would use is”.

The taboos around sexuality, which makes individuals uncomfortable discussing, sharing and reaching out to others for help, or at least for normalization, causes this to become an even greater source of personal shame and ongoing disappointment.

III Defenses, Compromises and Adaptations:

This section will describe four broad types of defenses, compromises and adaptations that individuals use in response to the above anxieties discussed. The first is a behavioral approach and the next three are more cognitively and emotionally based. These are called *Phase 1: Denial and Dissociation, Phase 2: Coping and Phase 3: Acceptance*. All four categories consist of defenses, which are often seen to cluster together in a given person at a given time. For simplicity, we will use the word *defense* to refer to this general category.

A. ***Behavioral Approaches:***

1. Hiding and secrecy

(Jacob) We would have to make out in awkward, secretive places because we were so ashamed of our actions. We led this double life that no-one else could know about. I become really distant with my friends and family. “It was like the two of us and everything else was like closed out. Like I just, I just, became a little bit of a loner.”

External based anxieties related to social consequences of sexual actions can often be resolved by hiding and being careful to avoid getting caught, obviously a more pertinent concern with more minor expressions of intimacy and affection that are acceptable in public such as holding hands or light kissing. A reliance on secretiveness in this area, however, can lead to tremendous feelings of loneliness and alienation from family and peers, a concern that almost all participants expressed. Not being able to share a major part of their emotional life, whether pleasurable or conflicted, with friends and family can in itself lead to tremendously powerful feelings of isolation and sadness. These resolutions obviously do not address fears of their deity knowing, nor the emergence of internal guilt.

2. Control and Avoidance

(David) There were times where I was able to withstand the desire to masturbate such as by falling asleep or finding a distraction... These moments were rare.

(Joel) Soon I became able to “start and stop before anything came out. In other words masturbation would continue just without ejaculation, without completion”.

Individuals often describe trial and error phases where typical “behavioral plans” are applied to controlling masturbation or interpersonal sexuality, with varying degrees of success. They may also distract themselves from sexually charged moments such as by falling asleep, exercising or finding an activity to do. Or they may try to remove themselves from sexually stimulating objects and environments, (something incidentally that is also built into Jewish law in the form of more minor restrictions against deliberate exposure to sexually stimulating objects, which may lead to greater levels of sin). With masturbation they may keep track of how many times they do it a month or may find other techniques to help them control their behavior, such as masturbating without climax. David and Isaac describe how they each used control and avoidance to curb their fantasizing and masturbation.

(David) When I was learning in Israel and then in college I was very conscious of the religious problem that looking at immodestly dressed women posed for me. I worked very hard to try and avoid thinking sexual thoughts, was careful about the movies I watched and the images I looked at in general. So I would try not to look twice at something appealing “that might stimulate those thoughts and feelings”.

(Isaac) In college I felt like I should try to stop myself from fantasizing and I was sometimes able to turn my attention elsewhere.

Behavioral resolutions for interpersonal sexuality, on the other hand, become entangled in the dynamics of the relationship. But even so individuals here too may engage in various control strategies to prevent them from transgressing, whether they openly discuss these with their partners or not. They may avoid being alone with their

girlfriends at night and may adhere to the laws of *Yichud* as a way of preventing further escalation of sexual urges. They might maintain a certain physical distance with their partner or perhaps insist on being together only in public. Many participants, like Dan and Isaac, felt that they could prevent themselves from touching their girlfriends by communicating affection, including their desires to do specific sexual acts with them. In general these types of techniques are commonly utilized as an immediate first response to guilt-ridden sexual activity.

3. *Compromised Activity:*

(Isaac) I was still committed to trying to both maintain both the letter and the spirit, but I was willing at this point to sacrifice the spirit and just stick with the letter that felt like a reasonable compromise that I was gonna make at that time.

This describes where either only part of the law is broken such as by holding hands but making sure to not have “sexual activities” per say, or where in violating the “spirit of the law” such as by having phone sex or sitting really close together, the technical law is still adhered to. In both cases the person feels less guilty about their actions. Other examples of compromised activity include masturbation without ejaculation, rubbing partner with clothes on, sitting closely to one another, phone sex, and so forth. Mark, Isaac and Joel describe their sexual compromises as a way of handling anxieties.

(Mark) We also started to become “very descriptive over the phone”....

“We still weren’t touching each other but we were “so close that I was breathing on her neck and then she was touching like my shirt or

something like that, like, you know, just like signs of intimacy that weren't actually touching".

(Isaac) So the compromise was that we won't touch but we'll try to be alone together a lot and just put a shoe in the door and I'll use affectionate words as some kind of a middle ground. In terms of touching though, I was completely successful in holding back within these relationships... I remember saying things like "I really wish I could kiss you right now um I, you know, I want to touch your face that kind of stuff um... Ya just maybe like complements, I think you're very beautiful, you're, oh, you're really really beautiful, um I like your hair that kind of thing." This compromise was "satisfying without being frustrating" and the tension was actually mitigated... I sort of like leaned around her and breathed on her neck and sort of like eased into like a, just like what I described before breathing on each other, reaming around each other, like looking very closely into each others eyes...

(Joel) "I spent the entire summer sleeping next to but not touching the girl I was going out with. We had a body pillow, that was our mekhitzah".

Many will go into these "spiritual violations" believing that they are doing nothing wrong but then later reflect upon these actions as problematic. And like sexual activities themselves, which tend to intensify over time, these compromised actions, whether actual touching or not, also intensify over time, often acting as precursors to actual touch or more involved sexual activity. In some cases the awareness of this

“slippery slope” effect may motivate men to recommit themselves to the laws and go back to the original boundaries that protected them from further violation.

Mark is one participant who fluctuates back and forth with his first romance between behavioral controlling, avoiding and “compromised sexual activity”. After some experimentation with these compromised activities, he returns back to telling his girlfriend:

(Mark) “I felt like we were getting to the point where like we were breaking this, you know, where we were starting to touch each other and I said I didn’t want that to happen and she said fine so let’s try to be better at it, let’s try to not be so close, try to set firmer boundaries”.

But compromised activities are not only utilized in the beginnings of sexual discovery but throughout the beginning stages of each novel sexual experience. For example, other individuals who accept sexual foreplay with girlfriends may enter a more intense sexual experience cautiously using some form of compromise to deflect the psychological impact. At the more extreme, using a condom in intercourse, for example, can also be thought of as a compromise for some individuals who consider “real” intercourse problematic.

Phase 1: Denial and Dissociation

1. Denial

(Mark) “We often sat really close together talking on park benches. There was a lot of accidental touching. “You just kind of like find spaces how you are like not touching but you are like... just as well might be.”

(Isaac) We weren't touching ... maybe like our thighs were next to each other.

Denial or minimization allows the person in the sexual moment to perceive it as either non-sexual or accidental, even if individuals are able to reflect upon the act afterwards as purposeful and sexual. David for example reaches a stage where he touches girls more casually in a way that he depicts as not only innocent but even as part of a religious ritual.

(David) I became freer with physical affection with my friends, such as by wishing a girlfriend Shabbat shalom in shul with a hug and a kiss on her cheek.

Later he himself reflects upon his actions as being much less innocent:

(David) Casual touch isn't always so innocent, such as with female friends who I feel emotionally connected to. What happens if there is also a sexual interest when I get close to them like that? With many of these girls, it's not so simple. "There's always that other element lurking there".

There may be two types of denial. One that is used in a moment, which represents a desperate and regressive "emergency" response to anxiety as in the examples above where individuals are later seen correcting themselves. The other type of denial is more fixed and is not usually corrected. This next quote from Jacob illustrates this more permanent version of denial.

(Jacob) "I don't feel like I really had sex... I feel like I'm pretty much still a virgin, that's how I feel. I mean, I haven't had that much of it, I don't

have like crazy sex... I haven't had sex with a girl that I was emotionally connected to and doing it for a while..."

2. *Externalization of Desire.*

(Joel) A feeling of "not being in control, like I have to do this, total like compulsion... Um while I was involved in this activity, let's say, I would feel like taken over, possessed, by you know the yetzer hara, whatever, I didn't put it into those terms but I sort of felt like an excitement or a drive that was not part of my normal state of being."

With heightened levels of sexual activity that simply cannot be denied, or that cannot be thought of as accidental or non-sexual (unless one is delusional), other resolutions are called upon, which allow the person to express their sexuality but at the same time relinquish responsibility for it. This is accomplished by perceiving the desire or action, whether in the moment or afterwards, as not belonging to oneself – therefore, they cannot be blamed for it. Individuals may use outside sexual stimuli to "cover for" and disavow what is felt inside, or they may perceive themselves as helpless victims of imposing and overwhelming urges coming from outside the self.

As one would expect, the more conflict there is around a particular act, the more inclined the person will be to perceive themselves as passive victims of external sensations. David and Joel discuss these feeling rather eloquently.

(David) Sometimes the experience of the urge to masturbate was so powerful and relentless that it didn't feel like it came from me. It felt imposed from the outside, maybe from "the yetzer hara, the evil inclination... this separate being"....

(Joel) You sort of like forget that you are doing it but your body is so in control of the situation.” I don’t want to use the word not in control but I guess that is what it feels like. “Feeling like I have to go through with this, just so strongly is the urge to keep moving along these lines.”

At times, this sense of desire outside of the self is reflected more so in the language they use to describe sexual scenarios such as can be seen here with Isaac.

(Isaac) But in this relationship as opposed to others, there was more of “just sexual desire which just sort of pushed us to try to find more satisfying ways to bridge that gap... like long longing looks, like pretty deep focused looking into the other persons eyes, not talking during that time, maybe heavy breathing a little bit.”

Sexual desire is described as an outside force with a life of its own capable of “pushing” people into doing things they don’t want. This quote demonstrates the difficulty Isaac has in seeing the sexual desire as coming from within.

In contrast to this approach, Isaac’s language later on in the narrative shows how he, at least tentatively, perceives his desires as internal and as part of his self:

(Isaac) As opposed to other relationships “here, there was much more actual like um sexual stimulation, like you know I had an erection lets say... there was much more of like sexual potency in that interaction um that that was helpful, that was somewhat effective, um we liked it.”

Notice in the above statement two different progressive sequences of first seeing desires as outside of himself and then saying they were his. In each sequence he gradually permits himself to internalize feelings that first felt as originating outside of himself: 1)

“There was... sexual stimulation... I had an erection”. 2) “There was sexual potency...that was helpful....that was somewhat effective....um we liked it.” This may reflect a slow movement to a phase of development that allows sexually conflicted actions to become internalized and owned, which happens more commonly in Phase 2 as we will discuss.

Externalizing sexual urges not only allows one to relinquish responsibility for forbidden feelings and actions but also paves the way for continued expression as David here says:

After enough of these failures, I began to just think of myself as “a weak willed person”, which made my failures almost self-determined. They became “a crutch to lean on”, or perhaps, a loophole that allowed me to follow my desires in a less conflicted way.

While at first this perception of one’s desire is an unconsciously mobilized defense - they consciously believe and feel these urges to be not theirs - individuals may continue to rely upon this understanding of their desires even when they “know better” and are psychologically more capable of seeing desires as coming from within such as that occurs in Phase 2 as we will describe. In Phase 1, externalization of desire is specifically referring to an unconscious defense rather a one that becomes more conscious.

As many individuals who use this approach come to describe, defensively relinquishing ownership and control over sexual feelings and actions creates an intense “anxiety cost” whereby after the sexual act or release the person is left feeling like a helpless victim to forces outside of their body as this next quote reveals:

(David) When I think about the conflict as my own will versus this external urge, my failure seems like a lost battle with a more dominating force.

Some individuals use battle imagery to depict this sense of a strong loss of agency, of an inability to control and regulate one's mind and body such as David says here:

(David) I tried so hard to conquer my urges to masturbate but when I failed, I would feel really guilty and bad about myself... It just seemed like the "buildup" of emotional intimacy had simply "conquered" the boundaries that I had initially established. The desire was so powerful, I felt helpless against it.

There are also the instances where individuals externalize their desires onto others as Joel explicitly does after having sexual intercourse for the first time with a prostitute.

(Joel) After the fact I was upset at her cause I sort of felt victimized, like she made me have sex with her, which was like my immediate approach... because I didn't expect to lose my virginity that night and I did.... that might have been the way for me to deal with some of my guilt, like it wasn't my fault. I'm the victim here.

3. Removal of Sexual Tension through Sexual Action

(Mark) "Sometimes I do it just to get it off my mind so I won't be so distracted with those urges and the conflicts they bring up for me."

Often the sexual tension is so intensely distracting, intolerable and disturbing, the individual will masturbate or engage in sexual interactions simply to remove the unbearable and distracting tension.

4. Dissociation/Splitting Off:

In this case they may be prone to splitting off from the rest of their self all sexual feelings and actions perceived to be particularly conflictual and therefore not reconcilable in any other way. Here all things considered intolerable to one's self are placed in a "wastebasket" of the mind, in a vague linguistically unsymbolized way. As such, many of these experiences become unable to be spoken of and therefore are not explicitly discussed within these narratives. When individuals are open about some aspects of sexuality and then curiously shut down when other sexual actions are implied or inquired about, there is some hint that these experiences are overwhelmingly shameful, and may require resolutions that are more pathologically split off.

One specific instance comes to mind with a highly intellectualized participant whose narrative was so overloaded with Orthodox legal jargon and sociological ruminations about the nature of Jewish law in modern time that no actual "sexual data" had actually emerged – the narrative was therefore not even used for this study. Yet it was curious how his intellectual productions focused so exclusively on interpersonal sexuality and physical affection between couples. It led me to ask rather suddenly, "What about masturbation?" Shrinking in his seat, the individual, like a deer caught in headlights instinctively replied "I'd rather not talk about it". A millisecond later the discussion picked up right where it left off, as if the irritating itch had been dealt with and was no longer existent.

Another participant, whose narrative was also too intellectualized to make good use of for the study, described the decision to have physical affection with his girlfriend as the best way to deal with distracting sexual tensions in the relationship. "People run

red lights” was the mantra he used to describe his full acceptance of being religiously imperfect, which he was willing to take responsibility for. He proudly discussed how on Yom Kippur he no longer felt scared about his sexual sins, how he was essentially at peace with himself.

Not wanting to “burst his bubble” I gently asked in several different ways, if he could describe how he presently experienced or dealt with any kinds of sexual anxieties. The individual over and over again denied having conflicts like these anymore, insisting that he had it all worked out. Again struck by how he neatly his inner life and sexuality all fell into place and his glaring omission of masturbation, I asked if he could also say something about his experiences with this area of life. The individual froze, turned bright red and offered, “I wasn’t aware that this interview was going to be about that.” While this anecdote and his reaction could be explained in many ways, I suspect that the conflicts around his masturbatory activities or even ideation were so severe that they led these feelings and behaviors to be relegated to another part of his mind altogether, one that remained closed off to thinking and discussion.

This type of response to conflictual anxiety represents the most pathological aspect of Phase 1, one which fortunately was not seen all that much in our narratives and study sample. Nevertheless, though its use as a permanent defensive posture may be limited and rare, the degree to which it is used by those with underdeveloped ego structures in highly anxiety provoking instances, cannot be underestimated. It is also very likely that what individuals depict as different forms of compartmentalization and repression may in reality be the experience of splitting and dissociation, which is more difficult to put into words.

Phase I Summary:

If the behavioral approaches of avoidance and control resolutions run their course and are unable to curtail or put “a good enough” stop to conflicted sexual activity, individuals may come to rely on other more subversive or indirect ways of having sexual experiences while “paying tribute” to the prohibition and the guilt they feel about breaking laws.

They begin to feel that their only other choice for continued sexual expression is to either remove the sexual “tinge” from ambiguous sexual situations or remove their agency from these by seeing their role in them as accidental. In the case of more obvious and intense sexual acts that cannot be justified with denial and minimization, individuals will externalize or disown their desires and see themselves as passive victims of outside sexual urges. Unconsciously viewing oneself as “out of control” also paves the way for continued sexual expression but then brings about anxieties related to this very out of control that they themselves defensively orchestrated.

Therefore, many individuals in this first stage often depict torturous but futile battles with their urges, feelings of enormous post-activity guilt and anxiety, the expectation and sometimes provocation of punishment as well as exaggerated, superficial and short-lived attempts at repentance and forgiveness. This feeling, often described as “an addiction” or an endless cycle of fighting urges, is often the result of psychological processes that aim to strip the person of their own agency during sexual acts in order to allow them to take place. At this point, it is both necessary and highly distressing for the individual to relinquish control. This Catch-22 is what accounts for the feeling of being in on ongoing and painful losing battle, which over time can become extremely emotionally

taxing. When this feeling lasts over the course of many years, individuals may come to settle into the fact that sexuality controls them, leading to continued sexual activities that are irresponsible, dangerous and split off from the self.

Many individuals going through this cycle will discuss the extent of their “religious guilt” over masturbation or interpersonal sexual experience. The religious injunction against sexual activity becomes an easily accessible explanation for their intensely disturbing feelings of being out of control – a feeling that is also actively mobilized as a defense.

The interviews as well as my own understanding of this phenomena both point to the distinct depressive presentation of an individual going through this phase. David alludes to his own perception of this type of person:

(David) In general I was not the kind of person to get overwhelmed with feelings, looking like “that walking wreck that we stereotype”.

Jacob discussed it more clearly:

(Jacob) That whole year I got really depressed. I stopped talking to my friends. I would sleep in really late and avoid classes. It was a really hard year. “I think I was just really guilty...It seemed like there was no way out.

He came to even recognize this in others:

(Jacob) It was easy to spot the guys who were depressed about their sexual experiences and having religious struggles. These were the ones who were sleeping in, missing classes and walking around with their head down... I think sexual-religious conflict is the “driving force” for much of the

depression that most people my age go through. In fact, I think almost every modern orthodox kid goes through this kind of psychological experience.

Mark alludes to the universality of such a stage in his community:

(Mark) I remember talking to an older friend of mine once about shomer negiah and he was like “oh ya, that’s what does it for everybody... ya, that’s just what pushes people over the edge”.

Seemingly there are those who are also “pushed over the edge” with the disturbing power of this stage alone. Jacob’s case seems to exemplify this very well, as the struggles which he endures during this early stage of conflict causes so much grief and anguish that he is left with little recourse but to back away from religion entirely and maintain only a superficial connection to it in order to appease his friends and family.

Often, the feelings of not being in control become mixed up with external anxieties such as punishment, alienation or being discovered as well as internal ones including deviance from others, feeling dirty and impure and out of control. Individuals are unable to talk to peers or role models in their communities given that the very taboos which engender these conflicts are the ones that prevent them from seeking help, sharing their burden with others or talking through their problems.

Behaviorally, cycles of acting out and anxiety persist in both the auto-erotic and interpersonal realm. Men may initiate relationship break ups and make ups over and over with these sexual conflicts at the heart of this pendulum, as Jacob admits: “I, on the other hand, kept initiating the breaks in our physical relationship and couldn’t even keep to them. I was so conflicted.”

Masturbation also continues to occur in compulsive and then regretful ways, leading to short-lived and ultimately superficial commitments and re-commitments to refrain from continued activity. Anxieties from both realms then spill over into the person's general functioning often leading those who are especially predisposed, towards depression, low self-esteem, religious alienation and sometimes, a general shutting down of the self.

Phase 2: Coping

1. Compartmentalization

(Mark) I knew this (kissing girlfriend) was challenging my religious identity but it really felt right to me. I wanted to stay in the moment and put these questions aside.

This is the ability to cordon off sexual actions from other conflicted experiences of self. A more concrete division within the self allows the person to maintain the strong connection to religion that they wish for, while also allowing sexual urges to be expressed that are not easily integrated along with other parts of self. Mark's putting the questions aside represents his almost conscious way of compartmentalizing feelings of identity conflict that threaten to get in the way of his sexual pleasure that he has no desire to stop.

The divisions made in ones self must be maintained through some kind of suppression of thought or even repression. But when both conflicted parts are consciously brought together in the mind, the anxiety experienced will usually cause the person to use an additional defense such as denial or rationalization, unless they can tolerate the dissonance without having to use a defense, something that is more characteristic of the

Phase 3 position. For example, when Mark consciously contemplates his experience of contradiction in the interview while discussing his first sexual activity, he remarks: “I probably figured I was going to marry her anyway. I suppose I may have been “just seeing it as caving into my desires”. As long as the conflict is not made conscious or explicit, compartmentalization continues to work through.

This particular compromise may allow the person to create a Jekyll/Hyde persona where sexual actions can occur but only at certain times, places or only with certain types of people. Compartmentalization can be used as a one-time response to conflict or as a more solidified and long-lasting defensive posture that is used to justify sexual actions both “in preparation” for the act, and afterwards in response to the anxiety as Isaac here implies:

(Isaac) “Like this is my zone where I do what’s either a little asur or a little not nice... I’m just allowing myself that.”

Individuals may experience different levels of success with this defense. Some may require more pathological and split off levels of separation and defense to maintain the illusion of self- consistency such as fragmentation and dissociation as discussed earlier.

2. Repression (also includes Projection and Displacement)

(Mark) “I just lost like... that like ability (to stop masturbating). Its driven me to a certain like type of apathy or I just like, I just like don’t want to deal with it anymore. I just like try not to think about it.”

Deeper or more unconscious psychological resolutions are sometimes called forth which allow the person to be both religious and sexual at the same time. Forgetting ones’

sexual feelings and actions support compartmentalization. Repression leads to forgetting events that bring anxiety into awareness as David discusses:

(David) Though I felt bad about masturbating I was able to put those feelings at the bottom of the “guilt pile”. I remember experiencing the failure and disappointment as pretty short lived because, in general, “I don't really get so upset at myself”.

As David continues he illustrates how repression and compartmentalization act in tandem with one another:

(David) I'm aware of the disparity between this perception of myself and my recollections of feeling horrible after I masturbated and this may represent my ability to “function with blinders” to “compartmentalize” and to “not feel the direct weight of things even if they are very significant in my life”. But since I saw this is a losing battle from the start, it didn't seem like a major failure each time and was easy to forget about, even if it did feel pretty bad right after. Luckily, I am well adjusted and so I was always able to distance myself from these bad feelings.

Although Mark is able to “function with blinders” he still expresses how the constant use of repression had begun to wear him down.

(Mark) As the immediate intensity of such conflict and guilt seemed fleeting and also manageable, I believe that the “torture” here was related to the long term duration of the struggle – ever since the age of 12.

Though forgotten, the long term effects of this latent anxiety seemed to take a toll on his mental life.

Repression is often acknowledged by the person as the only solution left to stop feeling bad about their continued sexual expression:

(Joel) I was starting to hate “the endless cycle of violence” feeling bad about something that I knew I couldn’t really stop. I felt that the struggle I had endured for eight years had “hurt me” and made me feel terrible about myself. “At that point it just sort of became, okay, fine, this is just something that I do”. I probably still felt guilty but would just be able to put it more behind me, move on and focus on other things.

Sometimes the anxious feelings that are repressed “remain behind” only to be projected or displaced. Jacob, David and Mark, for example, suspected that their years of depression had much to do with unresolved sexual guilt. Dan’s masturbation contributed to his lingering sense of failure and shame, projected onto others people’s negative perception of him. Mark gave up on controlling his masturbation urges through repression of guilt, but then imagines that his secrets could destroy future relationships: “I try not to think about it... it could ruin a relationship.”

He also represses his ongoing conflicts only to be found externalizing and projecting this guilt onto his religion and leaders, toying with atheism and launching into bitter intellectual tirades against Jewish law and community. Here is a quote that makes explicit the connection between the emotional struggle of his sexual activity and the beginning of his angry and difficult religious journey:

The summer after the relationship ended I was getting sort of depressed and “had to see a therapist”. “The shomer negiah thing was behind me” but I had a lot of religious questions... At the time I was fooling around

with my first girlfriend and telling myself that breaking the law was the right thing for me, there was always this question underneath the surface. “Why does this have to be so hard”. And this idea is what may have pushed me in the direction of thinking that maybe religion wasn’t always good, moral or even correct... I was angry that “religion made me feel so guilty about all my, like, sexual activity that I viewed as failings, like, for like making me feel guilty about something that was so natural, so like I was upset about that”.

3. *“It Just Happened”*:

(Joel) I fell into a situation which is, which is, how I like to see myself in it but I guess there’s more...active parts of this on my part, which I am still trying to figure out.

In Phase 1, whether through denial, splitting, externalization or relief of a sexual impulse, conflict is more or less precluded by unconscious processes. In Phase 2, conflict can be consciously held in one’s mind at least for a moment such as when compartmentalization and repression fail. In this case, the person’s conscious experience of conflict puts them in a position to respond in several different ways, one of which includes the person’s continued insistence that sexual actions were out of their control – that “it just happened”.

Unlike the “Externalization” of Phase 1, this defense is a conscious way that individual’s justify their actions, knowing full well that they did have more control than they would like to admit. The person may continue to rely upon the prior and familiar sense of not having agency in sexual situations, but actually understand this as their way

of rationalizing through a conflict. As seen in the following examples, when individuals use this resolution in Phase 2, they are often found reflecting self-consciously on its truth and validity, signaling how their sexual actions are owned more and how conflicts can at least be tentatively tolerated and thought about.

(David) I find myself saying “it just happened” very often in sexual situations. And even though I am aware of how irresponsible it is to absolve myself in this way, it seems to be my automatic way of reasoning through these situations.

David wavers back and forth about his agency – did he really have these desires and did he really choose to act on them, seems to be the question at hand:

(David) It just seemed like the “buildup” of emotional intimacy had simply “conquered” the boundaries that I had initially established. The desire was so powerful, I felt helpless against it... Even though I don’t reflect upon that moment as much of a decision because it was so intense, it would be hard to say that it wasn’t premeditated given the amount of thought that preceded it in the weeks before. I had been holding back and analyzing what to do for so long. After this endless cycle of unproductive ruminating, I eventually said to myself, “I’m just gonna do it”.

His final admission *I’m just gonna do it* which he is clearly trying to avoid saying, points to one of the biggest challenges that these individuals have regarding their sexual life – taking ownership of and responsibility for their actions, saying to themselves that they want to do or have already done something that is forbidden. Throughout the narrative, David is seen to be struggling immensely with this task:

(David) “From my end I would have been interested (in a fling)...

probably, or or, that’s not that not the right way to say it. - from my end, in the very in the um absolving myself of any responsibility, which is a very irresponsible thing to do, I would have said it would have just happened.

Jacob is similarly seen to be struggling with his ownership of sexual actions, wavering back and forth about whether he caved into outside pressures or pursued his own desires:

(Jacob) “I was pressured into it, but it was something that I was ready to do and I was enticed to do.” So I guess I really wanted to do this.

While taking ownership of sexual actions is laden with conflicts about taking responsibility for doing the forbidden - and therefore tolerating attacks from perceived external agents as well as the superego - what motivates individuals to move in this direction and retract upon their self-perceptions as passive victims to outside urges is the feeling of immense discomfort and anxiety that is generated when individuals strip away their agency, whether in action or thought, that only leads to increased anxieties about losing control of their urges. David goes on to describe this anxiety quite well when claiming how much it bothers him to think of sexual actions as being out of his control:

(David) “I reflect on that experience of no choice with disdain”. Though they feel like they happened automatically without my participation, I would like to think of them as active decisions. I need to be control of my actions and live with the consequences of them.

That they continue to use the defense of “it just happened” despite the resulting anxiety of losing control, indicates how much more anxiety they must imagine having to experience if they took full responsibility for their sexual behavior.

4. Rationalization and Intellectualization

(David) Around the time I began working... I was shaking girl’s hands and touching women more casually. I decided that if I was touching women at work, I wasn’t going to stop touching them in “my weekend life”. So I became freer with physical affection with my friends, such as by wishing a girlfriend Shabbat shalom in shul with a hug and a kiss on her cheek.

Aside from “It Just Happened” Phase 2 brings about other “answers” and forms of justifications, especially during moments when the person acknowledges their control and agency over sexual actions. A rationalization does not necessarily mean that it is “incorrect” or some distortion of reality, but rather refers to the way an argument is used by the person to justify their guilt – whether it is “true” or not. The narratives were replete with such statements. Here are some examples from Isaac:

(Isaac) I would say things like this is “psychologically damaging, its unhealthy, you know, this is a natural healthy growth thing and in a committed relationship it’s a really important part of expressing feelings and it just seems crazy. How could you really know somebody as a like a a life partner or a love partner without having some kind of physical contact with them? It just you know seemed crazy to me... you just shouldn’t keep this halakha, this halakha is wrong, this halakha is misunderstood...

halakha is good, Jewish law is good, Judaism great ... but like some things are just crazy and this is crazy and this is wrong... This must be made up.”... I feel a little guilty about it but “I’m being so good in everything else - sometimes that’s like an answer to the guilt” and sometimes that even precludes any experience of guilt whatsoever.

In this next quote Isaac takes a break from his highly intellectual rationalizations, by simply admitting that he just doesn’t care all that much about the restriction anymore, a feeling that is presumably at the heart of his rationalizations that is not easy to admit and therefore only rarely acknowledged:

(Isaac) I don’t know, it gets really hard to sort out how I think about this stuff. I think I reached close to a breaking point of sort of saying there are things that feel incongruous, like I will kiss my friend’s mom when I see her in shul... And my friend’s mom who is a married woman, is maybe even more asur than my unmarried girlfriend... I reasoned that “this isn’t much different than a hand shake and people have allowed hand shaking because... it’s between a social business greeting and an affectionate, but non sexual greeting, so like there’s a difference between hand shaking and hugging but its not huge... so some of it was like a halakhic style argument. And some of it was just ah, I don’t care, I don’t care enough about this halakha to keep it, its so often both of those things.

As soon as Isaac makes this admission he returns to another type of rationalization:

(Isaac) Even though I couldn’t deny that I was breaking it “I still want to make this halakhic argument that this is not so sexual, its like loving, but

its not like... a big turn on. It doesn't have like that old like building up, intensifying, escalating feeling to it... it doesn't feel erotic...its physically stimulating... but its not the same.”

This next quote from Jacob shows the interplay of “It Just Happened” types of resolutions and rationalization and also illustrates how the issue of owning sexual actions can underlie so much of the person’s fluctuations:

(Jacob) I finally decided to kiss her. It felt really scary, like I was losing control of the situation. I didn't really know what I was doing and why I was doing it, or at least that's what I told myself.... In retrospect, I must have also wanted to kiss her but these thoughts weren't in my head at the time. I had restrained myself for so long. How much more pressure could I possibly withstand? I knew it was only a matter of time before it would just happen anyway.

As we see, both from “It Just Happened” and these other rationalizations, individuals are capable of seeing their desires in motivating sexual acts – a major change from Phase 1 - but have a very difficult time staying with the idea that they did so consciously and willfully, unless they have an easily accessible “escape hatch”, such as Joel discusses below.

(Joel) “48 hours before the summer program ended, um, I said enough of this. It's right before *Elul* (The Jewish month where *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* fall out on). I can do this and then do *teshuva*... so we wound up holding hands and hugging. Really, really it was great. It was totally addictive, it was unbelievably releasing um it was great. It was awesome!”

After that instance I went right back to being shomer with other girls I was dating.

Joel's immediate plan to repent for his sin enables him to experience the ownership of the act and the pleasure of it as if it were a one-time "freebee" to do what he pleases.

5. Reaching Out

(Isaac) Once in college when I was more torn about it, I went to ask my Rabbi what he thought about my fantasizing.

On account of their guilt, suffering and isolation, some men may beseech the help and guidance from authority figures or even their deity. They may consciously or unconsciously seek to normalize their struggles, and concrete advice or reassurance that they are still acceptable. Some are relieved of their heavy burdens by sharing this part of themselves – others are even more disheartened and hurt by it.

A major turning point in Jacob's narrative occurs when he talks to a relative who for the first time normalizes his sexual experiences saying that many people in their community engage in premarital sexual activity – far more than he was aware of.

(Jacob) "I came to understand that my expectations to be shomer negiah were totally unrealistic. I wasn't the only one dealing with this and I didn't need to feel so down about myself."

Jacob uses this discovery to justify his actions and take out his anger on his family and community. For other participants, who perhaps had not suffered as much as Jacob had before his discovery, normalization serves to increase resilience to conflict, tolerate

failure and mistake and conceive of religious development as a process rather than an all-or-none authoritative experience.

David experiences this type of normalization not from reaching out to people, but from reading books, both Jewish and secular, that demystify his desires and contextualize his actions. Later, he also admits to having talked to God about his plight.

(David) When I used to think that God was directly involved in my strong urges, I would sometimes pray for the strength to overcome those urges or to just not be tempted by these thoughts. I remember phrases in the liturgy like "*v'taher libeynu l'avdecha bemet*" (and purify my heart to serve you truthfully), that talked about purity which would often trigger those kinds of personal requests. Sometimes I would ask God for help outside of a formal prayer just on my own.

The significance of speaking to others about these conflicts, however, is not necessarily in what the advice is, but rather, as Joel alludes to, the fact that the burden is shared, that the trouble is able to be expressed in words and heard by another and therefore become containable and manageable.

(Joel) I went to a religious friend of mine, a married guy who came from a much more liberal background than me so I felt comfortable talking to him about this stuff. I said, "okay, here's what happened, you know, talk to me, help me out". I needed to reconcile some of this stuff that had just happened. After I spoke to him I felt a lot better about it.

In the case of sharing their struggles with their deity, not seeing the help that they ask for and need – and perhaps unconsciously not wishing for it to come – men can often

feel disappointed, rejected and abandoned, thus reinforcing the bitterness and aloneness that they already experience. Mark puts it best:

(Mark) “There was a lot of just asking for the strength to stop... I would even say its something I still do... but its just a lot less often... my whole experience of God is different now. I mean I don’t really feel God’s presence in my life anymore and when I did it wasn’t something I really expected him to respond to in the way that I would be able to see him...”

6. Anger at Religion

(Mark) “You could say that I was angry at religion for like keeping me from certain things that I wanted to experience... I was angry that “religion made me feel so guilty about all my, like, sexual activity that I viewed as failings, like, for like making me feel guilty about something that was so natural, so like I was upset about that”.

As a way of handling the anxiety or guilt produced by sexual-religious conflict, or as a way of paving the way for future sexual acts, individuals can express their anger and frustrations outwardly towards the laws, institutions, at particular people, or their deity who they fault for either introducing or exacerbating the pain that surround their impossible quandaries. Anger is expressed in variegated forms.

This anger in some situations is seen as the main agent for individuals to consider leaving their religious communities or of questioning the existence of God.

(Mark) “Why does this have to be so hard?”. And this idea is what may have pushed me in the direction of thinking that maybe religion wasn’t always good, moral or even correct.

Some people express anger over having to adhere to laws that seem to have no greater purpose or value – as if they arbitrarily had to abstain from any physical contact with women for no reason at all.

(Dan) So it's more often than not that I have trouble understanding the purpose of these laws as they are relevant to me. It upsets me that I'm still required to keep them despite this. It feels unfair. Why are they asking me to do this? What do they want from me!?!

And individuals may also have a diffuse sense of frustration and anger without quite knowing exactly where to direct it. This points to part of the etiology and function of this anger – to turn feelings of guilt and anxiety outwardly onto others.

(Dan) My anger doesn't always have a clear object. Sometimes I direct it at Rabbis who are dismissive or insensitive as to how confusing and hard it is for people, especially kids – as if these restrictions were easy to keep, as if they actually made sense, as if they were being taught properly and as if people didn't try their best... I am disappointed and angry at my community who avoids this particular kind of conversation by invoking "tzniut" – the religious imperative to talk, act and dress modestly. This is a blatant misuse of the concept and it provides a convenient excuse to avoid uncomfortable discussion.

Mark describes how his diffuse feelings of anger towards "religion" led him towards broader questions about morality, God and religion.

(Mark) At the time I was fooling around with my first girlfriend and telling myself that breaking the law was the right thing for me, there was

always this question underneath the surface. “Why does this have to be so hard?”. And this idea is what may have pushed me in the direction of thinking that maybe religion wasn’t always good, moral or even correct. Nevertheless, these difficult questions are later described as originating, in his own guilt:

(Mark) “You could say that I was angry at religion for like keeping me from certain things that I wanted to experience... I was angry that “religion made me feel so guilty about all my, like, sexual activity that I viewed as failings, like, for like making me feel guilty about something that was so natural, so like I was upset about that”.

As seen quite clearly with Jacob, on account of the various types of conflicts, particularly that of identity conflict, which for him, involved very deep contradictions between sexual behaviors and an entire social-philosophical-familial system, individuals may transform some of their anxiety and guilt into anger at the institutions which support these laws and that essentially are seen as the agents causing these conflicts. These angry expressions may also be the way that individuals try to share their own psychological burdens with others, as if implicitly asking for validation or permission to feel troubled and conflicted and also hoping for some form of more explicit acceptance and understanding from community leaders who are expected to acknowledge the emotional difficulties of trying to deal with such laws.

This anger, which individuals may see as incompatible with their religion, may lead many to leave their community. Thus the anger that may be generated by these conflicts can take several different forms and lead individuals to several different places. Jacob’s religious departure, for example, begins as what he believes to be the only

resolution to his sexual religious conflict. “Although I wasn’t totally able to shed my allegiance to religion, it was generally much easier for me to forget about halakha when it came to sexuality.”

But what begins as a defense for him then gradually becomes solidified as a belief and attitude towards sexuality and religion – one that over time leads to an even more severe rejection of his religion overall. “I came to believe that “physical relationships were not only healthy, not only not bad, but... should be embraced in a relationship... The other option just didn’t seem right... Religion wasn’t going to get in the way of my relationships”.

His ambivalence towards faith and the difficulties he has in containing the religious contradictions that become central to his life from early adolescence, gradually transform into a rebellious rejection of religion overall that is tinged with anger and great disappointment. As opposed to both David and Mark, Jacob seems to have less capacity to contain the contradictions in his religious observance and soon needs to actively exclude from his faith not only the sexual restrictions, but almost all of the rituals and laws including ones that used to inspire and move him.

In this sense, his “divorce” represents an attempt to establish more religious consistency and self cohesiveness. Jacob’s constant reminders to himself and others, that sexual activity is normal and healthy, that religion overall is hurtful and unhealthy and that he feels no guilt about abandoning aspects of his faith, reveals just the opposite of what he feels inside – tremendous unresolved guilt. Jacob continues to elicit endless validation and reminders from others that he isn’t as bad as he unconsciously feels himself to be. His anger is therefore less a cathartic expression of pain as we see more

with Dan, Mark, and David, and more so a justification for leaving his religion, which he considered to be the best way out of the paralyzing contradictions that led to years of depression and self hatred.

Some participants like David cloak their resentment and frustration in more indirect, subtle and intellectualized ways, such as in this quote where the Rabbis are blamed for their failure to address the psychological difficulties of fighting sexual urges:

(David) “It would have been a powerful statement for a teacher or Rabbi to have told us, “You know everyone talks about how you’re not supposed to masturbate, but everyone does. I did.” This could have had a “major impact” on people’s lives... “I think it would be an interesting thing if a high school rabbi or a yeshiva rabbi said, ‘You know, I know these are the norms. They are not norms that I kept and, frankly, I don’t know what to tell you about it.’”

Phase 2 Summary

In this second phase, anxieties of external punishment, sexual impulse, identity and deviance are no longer resolved with denial or dissociation as much as they are psychologically taken in and then either set aside (compartmentalization) forgotten (repression) justified (rationalization and intellectualization) externalized (anger) or discharged and validated (reaching out). Desires and actions are understood to be coming from within but there is a strong undercurrent of hatred and dislike towards it as if ideally they would like to rid themselves of these uncomfortable and distracting feelings and actions, as if asking themselves “did I really do this sexual activity or not, and if I did do

it, what do I do with these anxieties?” Sexuality is often perceived in this stage as a “pathological symptom”, which needs to be managed.

Phase 3: Acceptance

1. Tolerance of Guilt and Imperfection

(David) I’m also okay with the sexual decisions I’ve made though they are against halakha. The guilt or discomfort that is attached “isn’t such an awful thing” to have to live with. If I view “halacha or torah as a separate set of norms for close to perfect existence, I’m ok with not being perfect. Certainly at the age of 26, I’m ok not being perfect”.

(Joel) I don’t feel like I could justify to people if they were to ask me point blank, halachically... I’m not trying to justify it halachically, I guess that’s the answer. “This is where I’m at.”

Since in this position the prohibition is “softened” and less heavy than before, the person may develop a greater tolerance for being religiously imperfect in the sexual realm. With a decrease in anxiety over violating sexual prohibitions, a person may be able to also exert more control over their urges or at least not feel as threatened when they are temporarily responding to powerful bodily urges.

(David) If this (Judaism) is a system of perfect existence, it makes sense that people would not live up to it entirely... but this is what I’m pushing towards.” By making more sense of my sexuality, and by seeing halakha as more patient and forgiving than I used to believe, I was able to “tackle” my masturbation habits more strategically, such as by setting smaller goals for myself or by distracting myself in a more heated moment. The guilt

wasn't as paralyzing as it had always been. Failing didn't pose as strong of a "visceral emotional reaction". These thoughts were what I would call the "start of enlightenment" for me.

This tolerance can be furnished by a more consciously determined and permanent form of compartmentalization, which from the get-go allows the person to create different categories of law based on the reality of being able to adhere to them, thereby also creating different expectations for oneself. What may have begun as a defensive cordoning off of conflicting experiences, in this Phase becomes a posture that one knows they are using in order to experience both religion and sexuality in relatively non-conflicted ways. The compartmentalization of this phase does not require as rigid of a separation, it is therefore considered by the individual as a *preferred* mode of conflict management rather than a *necessary* one.

(David) I remained observant but "bracketed" many of the sexual laws that I was previously concerned with... I was able to comfortably tell myself that these are not rules that I'm addressing at this point. The issue is on "the backburner". Perhaps "the bracketing was just such a thick and successful cordoning off" that I simply stopped feelings religious guilt in this area.

Often what also supports their increased tolerance of guilt is a greater acceptance of physical and sexual pleasure not as a "naughty" act but as an added dimension of interpersonal relationships.

(Isaac) "I also sort of resumed a little more like social hugging with sort of non orthodox female friends... it felt like a relief and a return to a self that

I knew better. Like a high school self. It felt a little more whole and healthy.” My old friends told me how much they liked that and missed that from me.

This increasing tolerance for sexuality is often predicated upon the individuals decreasing concerns about those laws which they violate. Yet interestingly, very few individuals are able to articulate this diminishing concern, presumably because of the difficulty in acknowledging their rejection of a culture and system of thought that they were reared in and that they continue to be highly invested in.

David and Isaac are both able to momentarily acknowledge how at the end of the day, after all their rationalizations, they simply cared less about violating sexual restrictions:

(David) My intense relationship with this girl together with the expansion of my religious worldview led me to care less about the laws restricting touch between men and women.

(Isaac) I don’t care, I don’t care enough about this halakha to keep it, its so often both of those things... I’m serious about it but there’s just some things that are like, seem unrealistic and unhealthy and not who I am and not the way I was raised and I’m just not doing those and I’m not worrying about them... That ‘me’ felt like a healthier person, felt like a happier person like, had more energy to like live a good life. Sometimes I feel like weighed down by these halakhot in a way that they like get in the way of that sort of youthful, creative, energetic self, you know? So part of

me felt good and freed again by sort of saying like ok that's done, yichud is done

2. *Discovery of the Man Behind the Curtain:*

(David) I started “exploring and expanding my view of how I approach the law, of how tradition has played a role in the development of my community and how I want it to play a role individually”. This approach took the place of the more authoritarian one of “though shalt not masturbate, though shalt not touch women, though shalt not fool around”. At the same time I began to take a more academic approach to sexuality, including its intersection with Judaism. I found books in the library which taught me about sexual norms and practices. I read essays in Jewish intellectual journals and books... In terms of Judaism I began to explore the evolution of sexual restrictions, their purpose in society and how they applied to modern life. I began to see myself as someone who could understand the system as it applied to my life and then opt into or out of it if I chose to. I started to look upon these laws as more of “an outsider”. “Learning a halakhic system allows you to think about it as a system, rather than, you know, what you hear in camp or in school, or on the playground, which kind of just becomes internalized as organizing principles which you never think about.”

Especially for those with a more intellectual predisposition may engage in objective and analytical investigation to study the origins of Jewish restrictions on sexuality, applying critiques and legal loopholes to them, and demystifying both the

gravity and dangerous mystery that has previously loomed around them. Discovering “the man behind the curtain” gives individuals more control over their sexual and religious choices and ability to think through the values that Jewish laws are trying to uphold.

While there is some difficulty in being able to tease apart this resolution from different types of rationalizations as they are discussed in Phase 2, and while these two approaches can be said to overlap, there is much utility in being able to conceptualize them as qualitatively different approaches. Where one is defensive in nature and acts specifically to ward off internal anxiety, the other represents a shift of identity and a greater ability to manipulate, integrate and especially develop a personal relationship to the demands and expectations of their culture. While no foolproof method of distinguishing the two is known, one can make an educated guess as to which it is from the tone in their voice, the context of when they describe the approach and other non-verbal cues.

This response importantly serves to especially demystify lingering childhood taboos that may have fueled other conflicts, David implies here: “The result was that I was able to demystify some of my perceptions of sexuality as a mysterious and uncomfortable part of life”. The overarching achievement of this demystification is that prohibitions become deconstructed or softened, leaving room for more flexible and peaceful resolutions to conflict.

3. These Laws Don't Apply Anymore

(Isaac) Halakha did indeed frown upon physical intimacy but only when it looked like the kind I might have had in high school; selfish, non-consensual and not in consonance with emotional feelings. But the

physical relationship that I was having with Stacy was not abusive or exploitative. The halakha, I convinced myself, wouldn't condemn it.

Some individuals who bracket these sexual laws may come to believe that they are no longer applicable to current times – again a belief that is subtly but importantly different from denial or rationalization. Even though these changes have not officially been made by Orthodox leaders, they may say, individuals can sincerely believe that premarital laws of sexuality are no longer binding, a thought that David plays with. “Since “there’s been a shift sociologically without a shift legally”, I sometimes believe that these laws are in fact no longer relevant... It doesn't feel like I'm even going against the law when I touch women.” Again, while the roots of such a personal philosophy may exist in a temporary defensive reaction against conflict, a buildup of these reactions combined with other beliefs and observations turn this into a more stable construct of their identity that is relatively not conflicted.

In this next quote, Isaac expresses his belief about sexual laws not applying anymore, but the intensity of his expression and the repetition of his words reveals a more defensive Phase 2 component towards such a belief rather than a stable non-conflicted posture.

(Isaac) I think at the time I would have even said something like “you just shouldn't keep this halakha, this halakha is wrong, this halakha is misunderstood... halakha is good, Jewish law is good, Judaism great ... but like some things are just crazy and this is crazy and this is wrong... This must be made up.”

With a buildup of temporary defensive reactions such as these, a more permanent attitude may come to be established.

4. Observing the Spirit of the Law

(David) Now, it doesn't bother me religiously to take a second glance at someone who's attractive. It's something I try to avoid "more out of respect in how I want to view other people"... The values that I am more concerned with now have more to do with respecting other people physically, to not send "mixed messages" to women, to be a supportive boyfriend if I am in a relationship and not just be interested in sexual activity with them. I want to eventually become a good husband who's not just interested in sex.

(Isaac) "I'm not formally keeping the halakha but I'm responding to that value or law by setting my own boundaries and parameters... But like I would never say to you at that point that we were observing halakha."

Individuals may also find a more steady resolution to their sexual-religious conflicts whereby adherence to more personal values comes to take the place of their adherence to technical law. These individuals may remain observant of Orthodox law overall but, in the sexual realm, adhere more to aspects of the law's "spirit" that they most relate to rather than to the technical "letter" of the law. David and Isaac seemed to discuss this approach more prominently than other interviewees.

(Isaac) I already had put aside the halakha of yichud because to me that prohibition was about preventing actual illicit sexual relations and I was

developing my own boundaries. And that was a big step for me. “Like there’s a straight up halakha. I’m just putting it aside”.

(David) I’m trying to figure out “what I’m ok with and what I’m not okay with in this new physical realm that I’ve entered into”. It’s possible that religious values will have some say in that and I may slowly start to “bring the religious stuff back into it” as this helps support the decisions that are best for me personally and socially. While I’m not doing that yet, I could see that happening in the future.

Some individual’s who aren’t able to adhere to the technical law, also consider the very fact that they are struggling and are remaining conscious of what law demands of them, as a way of respecting and adhering to the spirit of the law as Isaac discussed:

(Isaac) If someone would have said to me you’re doing something asur I would have said “I’m moving, I’m working on it, or maybe not working on it, but I’m responsive to it sometimes, I’m engaged with it, I’m not, I’m not flagrantly disregarding the halakha in a general sense, on a night by night basis. Maybe some nights I am disregarding halakha but I wouldn’t call it flagrantly because I’m engaged in the process of it.” Since then I’ve become even more patient with it. Rarely do I try and stop myself from fantasizing.

5. Overall Diminishing of Religious Practice

(David) In general I feel that “the religious system is not providing... a direct emotional religious experience. I don't really feel religious experience” any more.

Individuals may experience a more global diminishing of religious practice that might be led by their declining adherence to sexual restrictions. This overall diminishing may either be willful or more organic and automatic. What Jacob does with religion, essentially saying how he has difficulty taking it seriously in general, reveals how one's feelings towards sexual laws can adversely impact and spill over into their entire relationship to religion. If individuals feel that this area of law is unrealistic and "a joke", especially considering the fact that the difficulty adhering to them is hardly ever acknowledged, it may not be difficult to slowly come to take other aspects of religion and law less seriously.

Especially, if they feel that their religion makes a "mistake" in an area of existence that is absolutely central to their social and religious lives, then it might be difficult to maintain a sense of trust and loyalty to other laws or to the guardians of them. This is perhaps what Davis describes when he says, "I started to relax my adherence to other religious norms. I knew that sexual norms "probably was a sure next".

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The previous descriptive analysis of narratives reveals that under the surface of sexual religious conflict lies another more hidden narrative about the individual struggle to consciously attribute sexual feelings and actions to oneself. This challenge is what we will refer to as the “process of sexual ownership”, which describes the person’s ability to actively and consciously see their own will, agency, participation and pleasure behind sexual desires and actions, and thus to include their sexuality as part of the experience of “me-ness”. While the religious sexual restrictions may allow this psychological storyline to emerge in clearer relief within this population, the process of sexual ownership is considered a universal task of sexual development.

The argument this thesis makes rests upon several fundamental principles of psychoanalysis articulated best by both drive and ego psychology theorists. Rather than providing a detailed exposition of these theories, I will simply state my understanding of some basic ideas as they are most salient to what I propose. Some of this discussion also borrows from the psychoanalytic theories that were previously discussed in the literature review.

When individuals experience thoughts, feelings and behaviors that either threaten to attack (anxiety) or actually attack (depression) their sense of self esteem and self consistency, the mind is set off to do something in order to return the person back to their most optimal self. Self consistency and self esteem are the minds two main survival strategies, which when threatened, signal “the alarm system” of anxiety to repair the

sense of discontinuity and displeasure. The more extreme the threat the more desperate the mind is to find a way to fend these threats off.¹⁶⁷

While the mind has many different ways of repairing itself or of counteracting these threats, there are two broad approaches generally taken. One is keeping out those dangerous mental contents from consciousness so that the threat becomes hidden from the person's awareness and therefore not problematic. Denying, forgetting its existence or putting it onto someone else are some ways that the person can remove their agency from thoughts, feelings and behaviors that they have. While these may succeed in keeping threats out of consciousness, however, they may not be able to squelch and curtail the impact of these threats upon deeper, less conscious layers of the mind where they exert their influence in more subversive, secretive ways.

The other direction the mind can take in the face of threats to self-continuity and self-esteem is to allow those conflicting agents into consciousness and find different ways of reconciling the problem that does not involve the mental "removal" of any particular part of it. These mechanisms include "softening the blow" of the threat by convincing oneself that it isn't quite as dangerous, increasing one's tolerance towards experiencing inconsistency or badness and assimilating and integrating conflicting contents into a new sense of self that can hold and blend together disparate thoughts and actions once considered contradictory and irreconcilable. Both approaches to conflict - "blocking" and "accepting" are able to occur both because the mind is understood to have several layers

¹⁶⁷ These threats to self-consistency and self-esteem are subjectively determined according to the individual's understanding of the threat and expectations for oneself, both which are largely informed by their familial and socio-cultural environments, particularly from early childhood. Freud proposed that the sexual and aggressive instincts - constructs that described biological tension building/releasing functions overlaid with psychological themes as development unfolded - were to constantly be wrestled with as the individual sought out acceptable forms of sexual tension discharge that did not violate both the externally and self imposed expectations and restrictions which could threaten one's self continuity and self regard.

of consciousness and because the individual can choose what contents of the mind to attend to at any given time.

“Sexual ownership” is then a term that will be used in this discussion to designate how a person acknowledges oneself as an active participant in their sexual experience who chooses, plans, desires, feels and initiates sexual feelings, thoughts and actions. Sexuality that is owned allows anxiety laden sexual feelings and behaviors to enter into consciousness and then be dealt with in assorted ways. Disowning ones sexuality on the other hand, is one of the ways that the mind avoids bringing conflicting behavior and ideation into consciousness.

This discussion will highlight three separate ownership positions that determine how an individual handles the anxiety behind different sets of sexual experiences. Phase 1 is a stage of disownership where the person removes their agency from sexual experience in order to preclude feelings of conflictual anxiety – “I didn’t do it... I didn’t happen.... Someone or something else caused it”. Phase 2 is an intermediate “coping” level of ownership where conflicts that are allowed into consciousness and that disturb the person’s psychological equilibrium are actively stripped of their charge using rationalizations designed to diminish or “counter-attack” the threat – “I did it but it wasn’t that bad or I’m not that bad.” In Phase 3, the acceptance model, conflicts are more fully allowed into consciousness because the person actively acknowledges their participation in sexual acts and are therefore more able to find a stable resolution to them, either by developing a greater tolerance for anxiety or by creating a new self that organically fuses together these seemingly conflicting experiences.

As we will discuss, this ownership backbone, accounting for different clusters of psychological responses to sexual anxieties, can frame and anchor the psychological experience of sexual conflict while also bringing out individual differences and idiosyncrasies in clearer relief. It is the challenge of sexual ownership, the various shades of its continuum, how and why it is either delayed, avoided or embraced, why it can be fleeting or permanent, and the psychological ramifications of these “ownership positions”, that will be elaborated upon in the course of this discussion. The study rests on the assumption that the way a person owns their sexual feelings and behaviors can be determined from how they speak about such experiences; their choice of language, words and affect as these are explicit or implicit in the narrative.

While this discussion takes its lead from the data, a review of the literature as previously discussed does in fact allude to the notion of “sexual ownership” as a key process of sexual and emotional development, though it has never been elaborated upon as a central fundamental construct in the phenomenology of sexual experience per se. The concepts that are being defined and discussed may echo many well known psychoanalytic paradigms and constructs, such as integration, internalization, ego-autonomy, identity and self representations. Since these existing notions tend however to be conflated, vague and therefore used and understood in many different ways, this discussion wherever possible, will avoid using them and instead will try to stay as close and as experience-near as possible to the narratives and our descriptive analysis of them.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ That being said, being able to ground these concepts in existing ones would certainly help to refine and crystallize the theories being suggested here and perhaps in doing so would also very much help give shape to those existing theories. This task, however, as useful as it may be, is beyond the scope of this particular paper and will therefore be set aside as a possibility for future research.

The reader should take note that “sexuality” is loosely used throughout the discussion to include a broad set of thoughts, feelings and behaviors that may be tinged or infused with the phenomenological and psychobiological experience of sexual arousal. Considering this, hand holding in certain contexts of affection and desire, may be referred to as sexual behavior. Fantasizing about a stranger on the bus may also be considered an intense autoerotic sexual experience. Again we will follow the lead of our interview participants in how they define for themselves what is considered “sexual”.

Also, while colloquially “sexual activity” often implies sexual intercourse, the reader should bear in mind that this particular sexual act may be avoided much more by participants in this cohort, though obviously not by all of them, given the intense cultural taboos and restrictions surrounding it and that it is not a “sexual norm” for this particular community. When the term sexual activity is then used, it should not be confused with intercourse unless this act is explicitly mentioned.

Our discussion is organized as follows: First I present a preliminary observation about events that took place around the marketing and recruitment of study participants. Then I provide a detailed explication of the “sexual ownership” stage theory as supported by the previous chapter’s thematic analysis of data. When research participants directly discuss or allude to processes of sexual ownership, these will be mentioned. Then a more in depth analysis of a narrative will illustrate in real time how resolutions to sexual anxieties cluster around different ownership positions and how these positions fluidly progress and recede and also interact with environmental factors, life circumstances and other internal processes.

Next, we deal with some Orthodox cultural teachings that may hinder or interrupt sexual ownership and actually encourage disownership. These are illustrated using quotes from the narrative, as well as anecdotal evidence and aspects of my own experience. Additional findings from the study unrelated to the central thesis are then mentioned as these provide important insights into the phenomenology of sexuality and sexual-religious conflict and are considered worthy of further exploration.

Recruitment of Study Participants

Understandably, the advertisement and recruitment process of this study in the relatively small community of Jewish Orthodox American singles became highly publicized and, in turn, created some controversy and discussion: “It’s fifty years too late, but at least someone is dealing with this stuff now”. “This is such an important and common experience with our community, it’s hard to believe no one has ever studied it before”. These two quotes well capture the mood, and perhaps some of the hidden pain, that continues to surround this issue and that is rarely addressed in the Orthodox community.

Curiously though, despite its popularity, virtually no one volunteered to participate in the study or even respond to the various advertisements announced in different venues. Most people who were asked directly, including other clinical psychology trainees, either refused to participate outright or more interestingly - and also more common - offered to participate but then kept postponing or forgetting the appointment. Even among the participants themselves, the recruitment, scheduling and meeting process was replete with forgetting, postponing and misunderstandings around the meeting times and places. Admittedly, this came from the interviewer as well – me.

This information in itself is likely to explain something significant about how individuals in this population deal with sexuality, which might be compatible with and that can better illuminate what the “hard data” of this study suggests. We will return to this discovery after our ownership theory is laid out in further detail.

Principles of Sexual Ownership:

The data shows that sexual ownership, rather than being a fixed position that the individual reaches for all sexual activities at any given time, is more aptly considered a dynamic, fluctuating process that differs within one individual at any given time according to the type of sexual experience. Different sexual actions can be owned in different ways in the same person even at the same moment. Joel, for example, is clearly seen to have an entirely different way of owning his voyeuristic actions versus his sexual relationships. In the former he uses responses reminiscent of Phase 1 – externalization or even pseudo dissociative processes accompanied by compulsive release of sexual tensions and then followed by tremendous “loss of control” anxieties. During interpersonal sexual relationships, his slew of rationalizations, and his use of repression and compartmentalization, echo those responses contained within Phases of increased ownership. In another example, Isaac, who characteristically intellectualizes and externalizes his sexual desires, is able to actively own the desire and pleasure of holding a girls hand without his usual hesitations.¹⁶⁹

(Isaac) “Like it was great. It was really, really nice.” I hadn’t held hands with a girl in a while and it was “like riding a bike - it came back, circling

¹⁶⁹ Again, holding hands is for this member a source of subjective anxiety which is why we consider it “sexual”.

another person's arm, playing with the other person's hand um, it was great, it felt right for where we were. It was really nice."

But even within one type of sexual experience at a particular point in the person's life, the degree to which one is able to own that experience may fluctuate greatly. People's ownership seems to waver even as they speak in a particular moment such as David is seen doing in the following quote, reverting back to questioning the amount of deliberate ownership that he previously admitted.

(David) But still I can't fully explain why I allowed myself to get so physical with this girl... "I talk about it like as an active decision but its something which feels like it just happened."

This indicates that while one position or stage of ownership may be privileged over another by a particular individual towards a specific set of sexual experiences in a moment, it does not mean that they will necessarily be capable of holding it in mind permanently. In fact the transition from one phase to the next is typically a gradual, vacillating and even stormy process, where while the person adapts to more sophisticated ownership stages, older ways of managing conflicts are still leaned on for their familiarity in times of more intense distress.

Similarly, ownership within charged sexual moments may be entirely different than that agency which a person is willing to acknowledge retrospectively when reflecting upon that action. In this next quote, Joel first describes his role in the actual sexual event as passive but when evaluating his role in hindsight, depicts himself as much more active in his decision.

(Joel) “So we wound up holding hands and hugging. Really, really it was great. It was totally addictive, it was unbelievably releasing um it was great. It was awesome!”

(Joel) Sort of we were just like hanging out, and kind of deciding if we wanted to date and whatever, and you know one thing led to the other and you know we had motives we had a place to do it. That’s all. It felt great. so those experiences were very positive for me, in that respect... I made a decision... I was happy about what I did... My ability to make peace with these things also has something to do with being able to just say, “okay here’s what I want”.

The two statements above “we wound up” and “one thing led to another” stand out as strikingly passive expressions amidst the rest of the statement. Owning one’s sexuality, as relieving and pleasurable as that may feel, is an inherently difficult task that invites many different anxieties, and is therefore often fleeting, tenuous and strained. In the Catch-22 of sexual ownership, the anxiety of owning competes closely with the anxiety of losing control over oneself. There is no one problem-free way.

But the above quote also exemplifies how different parts of the sexual act can be owned differently; there is the initial desire, creating a plan, making a decision and doing the act. For example, in the above quote Joel owns the pleasure but is much more ambivalent about his initial planning of the event and decision to act on it. And even a specific sexual act can be further subdivided into many different types of actions, some more acceptable to the person than others.

Depending on the individual and the conditions they interact with, a “healthy” resolution can be defined as the best and most adaptive balance of both internal needs and external demands. Each stage can work effectively enough for individuals depending on their conflicts and life conditions. Among those whose sexual activity increases and intensifies over time, however, individuals tend to move progressively from Phases 1 to 3 within a given set of similar sexual acts, though this process is never linear and smooth-going.

From these narratives a trend emerges about the level of suffering people endure under each position assuming they continue to be “sexually active”. Phase 1 creates the most amount of emotional distress. While it may seem to be the neatest resolution as its goal is to preclude the awareness of conflict, there are significant “side effects” in trying to rid oneself of feelings and actions that originate in the self. Phase 3, on the other side, seems the least emotionally “expensive”, offering individuals more stable resolutions that solidify or become woven into their overall religious and sexual identity. Phase 2 appears to be an intermediate “distress position” and, not surprisingly, one that is perhaps most common.

How and why individuals move along or fall back upon this trajectory depends upon the type and degree of anxiety experienced per each type of sexual act and how these feelings are managed or tolerated. Of course when similar sexual actions are done repeatedly, their charge lessens for the person and the initial anxiety about a novel sexual experience may soon dissipate. But aside from the passage of time and experience, other changes in the “conditions” framing one’s sexual-religious conflicts, as described in the beginning of the data analysis section, impact these progressions and regressions. And in

turn, sexual experiences and sexual-religious conflicts impact back upon conditions, such as faith or peer group, creating a cycle of cause and effect.

Mark, for example, describes how his sexual experiences impacted his religious world-view, which then continued to shape to his ongoing sexuality:

(Mark) I think from then on everything like I was learning in school, opinions that were forming in my head that were starting to take shape and there was really a much larger process of needing to reevaluate my religious personality and how I looked at the world and how I looked at my religion.

But regardless of the interplay of factors there is a basic principle at work here: the movement from one stage to the next within one particular set of sexual acts depicts the reliance upon new ways to manage sexuality when old ways fail.

However, where the anxiety overwhelms the persons choice of response from any stage of this ownership process –they are not able to move smoothly and adaptively to the next level of responses for a variety of possible reasons – they are likely to “exit” the arena of conflict, either by spiritually leaving their faith and community or perhaps even by putting a psychological stoppage on their sexuality such as through the use of vast amounts of denial or repression.

Jacob, for example, begins to cope with the tremendous amount of impulse, deviance and identity related anxieties that both behavioral responses and Phase 1 responses are unable to effectively reach. Jacob’s choices are either to stay depressed and stuck in his predicament or to shake off what he believes to be the ultimate source of his pain, his religion and community. Mark too begins to toy with ideas of atheism, not only

out of sheer wonder or curiosity, but out of the intense masturbation anxieties that he continues to suffer with. Isaac's sexual conflicts from an early age may have frozen his sexual development, blocking access to erotic feeling. Now that basic principles of the sexual ownership theory are established we turn to the more precise features and dynamics of each phase.

Phase 1: Denial/Externalization

If behavioral resolutions are not satisfactory to the person in that the anxieties of continued sexual expression significantly “break through” the resolutions, the individual may then be forced to find more subversive and “secretive” ways of coping. Whereas before, an either-or mentality may subsume sexual conflicts and resolutions – they either sin or don't – now they permit themselves some degree of sexual expression but only if the act can be disavowed or cordoned off from the self using externalization, projection, denial or minimization or even minor forms of dissociation.

Presumably, in normal emotional development, specific sexual urges or actions may be experienced initially as foreign to the self and the person must naturally and slowly accept and incorporate these into their experience of “me”. But when the sexual desire or act remains fraught with danger and conflict, the individual may become highly motivated to continue seeing these experiences as outside the self and “not me”. In this case internally generated experiences are “blocked from entering the self” through various Phase 1 psychological resolutions. This is where denial, projection, minimization and externalization extends beyond a normal response to a novel experience to a more actively mobilized “fixation” of a natural developmental process.

Externalizing a sexual urge is a more common way that these individuals say “it does not belong to me” in Phase 1. They describe sexual actions and feelings as controlling them and as belonging to a force that feels outside of “me”. Narratives are replete with statements of individuals describing their sexual activity as originating from the outside or as battle between themselves and “their urges”. They are literally taking the “I” and “me” out of sentences describing their sexual feelings or actions. The resolution is therefore already present even before conflict enters into consciousness: it is not their behavior, they are not accountable for it, they do not own it – it is not their fault and not for them to reckon with. Whether in the form of another person that tempts or demands sexual activity from them or whether perceived as one’s “urges” - conveniently personified as an outside force within Jewish text as well ¹⁷⁰ – a statement of personal will and desire for sexuality is at this stage absent.

And also in Phase 1, an expression of the desire for sexual release, the need for affection or self-soothing or any of the important functions of a sexual act are missing. The self rather is said to be blindly led into the alleyway of sexual experience. It is no wonder that the result of the sexual act is so often a feeling of “out of control anxiety”, a feeling of being beaten and controlled by something outside of them.

Some individuals in Phase 1, who begin to move into greater levels of ownership may retreat back into the “comfort” of this original stage when they are still ambivalent about taking in the anxiety of active sexual decisions. For example, Jacob’s crisis with his own sexual-religious conflict leads him to regress from Phase 2 ownership levels to Phase 1, where he begins to strip away the active control that he first started to

¹⁷⁰ “yezter horah”, the evil inclination)

acknowledge over his sexual actions. This is demonstrated in the following description of a sexual moment with one of his girlfriends:

(Jacob) When I fooled around with her: “it was like ok you know we’re (sigh), I was more ready for it...the relationship was more ready for it... it just kind happened you know...it just kinda like it was the time...there was only so much you were gonna hold back - you can only hold back so much about certain things... I don’t recall what I was really thinking... I think we were struggling, I don’t know... I don’t think we were too iffy about it... maybe ya - after we did it the first time there was a day of reconsideration maybe yes maybe not maybe... We just ended up going with it.” But even with this boundary, I was still racked with guilt. I kept thinking “I could revert back to that Jacob that came out of summer camp the first year after college all refurbished. A year and a half later I was still wondering, should I be in a different relationship.” Eventually we broke up because of these doubts and tensions.

Unfortunately the passivity with which one enters sexual situations can “help” to preclude anxiety but then invites other impulse control anxieties to seep in such as Jacob hints to when remembering the sense of control that the old Jacob had. That guys, he says, was “clean as a whistle”. This guy is decidedly not. But making their desires passive and essentially disowning them, becomes a basic way that the individual can “get away” with their activity and still feel some sense of allegiance to the demands of their religion. And by doing so they succeed in avoiding an even more terrifying form of

anxiety – that of willfully and premeditatedly defying their family, community, deity and especially their own sense of self and religious identity.

The inability to acknowledge and articulate the experience of desire, to symbolize it as a thing in itself that could be held, tolerated, or channeled into another medium, is what contributes to the compulsive experience of tension-mounting and releasing sexuality followed by dreadful feelings of being out of control as if to then say “it could not have been me that felt these deplorable feelings and did these actions”.¹⁷¹

Joel describes his experience of the sensation of losing control when he goes to visit a prostitute:

(Joel) “I was working on auto pilot...I felt very strongly driven to have some sort of sexual contact with somebody... circumstances allowed that to occur... I was able to pull it off... Driven by a very strong need to be with another person or to have some sort of sexual release... The best non-

¹⁷¹ In fact, current theories of emotional regulation (Linehan, 1993) can help explain some of the felt impulsivity and rushed, lustful tension-release experience of sexual actions in this phase. These sexual moments are described by some as an experience where they feel no choice but to release sexual tensions, as if their body has completely taken them over. According to these theories when individuals feel the need to impulsively remove instinctual or bodily tension whether anger or sexual or anxiety in general, a deficit in emotion regulation can be inferred.

Children learn to tolerate uncomfortable and disturbing emotions on their own when their early environment mirrors, back tolerates, contains and validates those feeling for the child. Sexual feelings are rarely validated, treated kindly or patiently by familial, educational and cultural settings, especially in more faith-based communities. These feelings are in fact mostly invalidated by Western culture in general and certainly among Orthodox Jews where there are even more restrictions and taboos.

Thus it can be hypothesized that these men in particular may have difficulties tolerating and containing sexual desires in themselves without feeling like something has to be done with them immediately and without being able to hold them long enough to think through more “mature” solutions that more ownership affords them. That they cannot be spoken about at this stage also reveals the lack of symbolization or mentalization, which leads to its expression in action.

sexual analogy I could think of... if you haven't drunk anything, you know, post Yom Kippur let's say, you haven't drunk anything in 25-26 hours when you take the first sip, after that you don't even notice it, but you are constantly drawing liquid in from that cup... You sort of like forget that you are doing it but your body is so in control of the situation." I don't want to use the word not in control but I guess that is what it feels like. "Feeling like I have to go through with this, just so strongly is the urge to keep moving along these lines."

In fact, probably the biggest clinical issue of sexual ownership is not just that individuals continue to disown actions and feelings but rather that individuals have to deal with the ongoing and often crushing anxieties of not feeling control or a sense of mastery over one of a basic bodily function, as if they are ruled by an outside force.

David articulates this here:

(David) But as opposed to other religious conflicts and decisions, my free will and ability to choose whether I masturbated or not felt "extremely reduced." The urge felt too strong to contend with. Everything happens very quickly in the heat of the moment. "I guess it always felt like a losing battle. Some people, I think, had an easier time."

While the person may survive the turbulent battle between their anxieties and Phase 1 resolutions this interplay may also create the ideal psychological conditions for a person to feel badly enough to want to make substantial splits with their religion, community or family, as was unfortunately the case with some of the participants.

Because this phase is commonly applied to novel sexual situations or those that are most taboo, these defenses are found most commonly around late adolescence to earlier adulthood for interpersonal sexuality, where the person is “settling into” the novelty of physical intimacy in more substantial relationships, and sometimes throughout adulthood for masturbatory experiences that for many continue to be reprehensible.

We can conjecture that the psycho-religious profile of the “Phase 1 individual” consists of a world that is more concrete, polarized and rigid specifically with religious law which may be seen as all or none. Sexual actions may be religiously unforgivable and permanently staining. Some sexual urges may be viewed as feelings that should always be controlled and appropriate and are just as wrong as sexual actions. The person therefore is primed to deal with these urges, feelings and actions by keeping them rigidly locked in an ego alien position so they don’t threaten the person’s sense of integrity, authenticity and consistency.

Phase 2: Coping

In Phase 2 participants may be capable of reflecting upon sexual experience with some degree of conscious, willful desire and action that still requires, however, a safety net of mental acrobatics that essentially diffuses the feeling and behavior as if to say “I’m not that bad, this isn’t so horrible and these don’t conflict so intensely.” These include repression, intellectualization, rationalization, and compartmentalization. The effort and energy that is expended in keeping this up is often quite substantial.

In this second phase, sexual experience can no longer be attributed to outside forces. Reality is accepted, it has no choice but to be owned, so it must be dealt with either by repressing, compartmentalizing, or by more consciously saying “it is mine, but I

have to justify it somehow since making it not mine is no longer an option.” Sometimes sexuality in this phase is sadly perceived as a neurotic symptom that needs to be managed or gotten rid of.

In this stage ownership takes the form of “sex is in me so now what do I do?!” Participants may be able to reflect upon their sexual experience in this second phase with some degree of conscious, willful action. There is purpose and even joy to some of their sexuality but this will vary by participant and by type of sexual act. One participant in Phase 2, for example, described his sense of relief in masturbation which implicitly reveals how he viewed his actions as originating from within. Mark describes this also when saying, “I feel like its an outlet for like, to relieve stress and like, its like, you know like a mini escape from like the world for however long it is.”

In reaction to taking a degree of ownership over some sexual actions the person may retreat into an old way of resolving conflict – namely by insisting they in fact didn’t have control and are victims to their urges. This response referred to as “It Just Happened”¹⁷² is used immediately after Mark takes some ownership over his masturbation as seen in the quote above. He says, “I don’t feel like I have very much control over it.”

When these urges are seen as internal to the self, there enters into consciousness a great degree of conflict over how to reconcile these behaviors with their religiosity or sense of self. Interestingly, Mark does not resort to undoing his ownership of masturbation when he is armed with a better rationalization – such as it being prescribed

¹⁷² The externalization of Phase 1 is different than the It Just Happened of Phase 2 though in both there is an attempt to strip away desire will and decision. “It just happened” is a more consciously motivated defense that is designed to undo an acknowledgment of ownership that provokes anxiety – it is a post-conflict defense. Externalization, on the other hand is an attempt to preclude the conscious experience of anxiety in the first place rather than remove it once the conflict is already there.

by his medical doctor. If not for that he continues to undo the little ownership that he has taken and in turn suffers with the continued anxiety of losing control – a feeling that leads to great amounts of helplessness, sadness and failure.

So although individuals at this point are more emotionally capable of owning certain activities and struggling to consciously reconcile them, they may actually “miss” their prior state of disownership which does not require exhausting and ongoing efforts to sustain. Unfortunately this disownership, in whatever form it takes bring other forms of detrimental emotional and religious consequences.

In terms of interpersonal sexuality in this early phase, desire and ownership is more easily expressed than with masturbation, though ultimately it is still “a bother”. Mark, for example, expressed his relief, joy and normalization in his first interpersonal sexual encounter

(Mark) “I communicated on another level and that was something really satisfying... I was so relieved that I had somebody to share that with and that...”

But in detailing that actual encounter his feelings sound much more conflicted:

(Mark) “Right um like in the beginning I was like kissing her neck and then like there was like some not being able to like face up to her while doing it... Like if I was like kissing her lips then it would be kind like an admission face to face that like this is what I’m breaking um like this is me and I felt like there was a bit of a like hiding in the beginning...”

Both his physical and psychological tentativeness reveals that despite the relief and satisfaction that he can express, he is still uncomfortable owning his actions. This

explains why at the end of this moment he ends up blaming his partner for their illicit interaction – had she not expressed her desire he would have never faltered.

In another example, Mark demonstrates an intermediate level of ownership with his interpersonal sexuality.

(Mark) “Most importantly I realized how valuable and supportive physical communication was and how much you could gain from it. How could you not be physical with someone who you’re going to marry?”

But right after doing so he adds:

(Mark) “Again, I was kinda scared that I would mess up a good relationship just because I wanted to be physical.”

This reveals the part of himself that continues to deride his sexual needs and feelings despite his degree of acceptance. His worries are projected onto other people who will see his sexual urges as dirty and unacceptable.

In Phase 2, if ownership is acknowledged whether in the form of planning or deciding an act or acknowledging urges and pleasure, it also requires some form of excuse to justify it. David illustrates this process well:

(David) Around the time I began working.... I was shaking girl’s hands and touching women more casually. I decided that if I was touching women at work, I wasn’t going to stop touching them in “my weekend life”. So I became freer with physical affection with my friends, such as by wishing a girlfriend Shabbat shalom in shul with a hug and a kiss on her cheek.

Though he acknowledges and owns his decision to shake women's hands and hug them in shul, any hints of desire are stripped away. His decision is rationalized and even infused with a higher religious meaning. David himself later admits that his motives for kissing girls in shul may not be as innocent or as holy:

(David) I acknowledge though, that casual touch isn't always so innocent, such as with female friends who I feel emotionally connected to. What happens if there is also a sexual interest when I get close to them like that? With many of these girls, it's not so simple. "There's always that other element lurking there". If it's a girl who I would not be interested in being with long-term, but might be interested in sexually, it's much more conflicted for me.

Joel is also seen to be grappling with taking ownership of his visit to the prostitute – was he in control of it or not? Did he seek it out or did it just happen? As he fights to try and see himself as being out of control he has to deal with the emotional consequences of this very lack of control. He's dammed either way. The "making into passive" cycle continues on – especially in highly charged sexual situations - because the individual unconsciously wills it, but is as of yet incapable of saying such rebellious statements such as "I want this and I'm going to do it despite the fact that it is wrong."

Contrasting our first two phases, sexual actions and desires in Phase 1 are so troubling that they need to be split off from the rest of self so that conscious conflict will be avoided. Instead, however, the person's anxiety revolves around this very loss of control that they themselves unconsciously orchestrated. In Phase 2 sexuality is

unmistakably in the person though very much perceived as an unruly, disruptive force that needs to be forgotten, cordoned off or constantly reconciled and rationalized.

Phase 3: Acceptance

When the conditions are right and when resolutions mobilized in Phase 2 fail to adequately squelch the feelings of guilt, or when the persons sense of honesty or authenticity feels threatened under their increasing use of justifications, individuals may adaptively begin to move into the next phase – one which requires a more substantial change in the person’s religious and sexual identity. David articulates his process of moving to Phase 3:

(David) My “continuous failure to live up to standards that I thought were required of me um may have started to generate a system of thinking which would accommodate that... I had to create some kind of system whereby my behavior was still acceptable to go on living and to go on forward without being destroyed by guilt.” As I saw this guilt as very powerful, I needed to make some sort of acceptable compromise in this struggle. I began to tell myself that although “the system” had a certain standard, it was a totally different story whether I kept to that system or not. This “duality of system verses individual” represented my more “nuanced” approach to my relationship with these restrictions. As I always saw myself as more “sexually charged” than others, I didn’t think that I could continue to adopt a system so incompatible with my desires.

Phase 3 resolutions are then characterized by a more sweeping integration of religion and sexuality that affords a certain resting of conscious struggle. These

psychological responses have more finality and stability. In this mode the person does not feel forced to provide an answer to a conflict at each moment. Individuals in Phase 3 express more agency in the language they use to describe sexual scenarios as this example demonstrates.

(Isaac) I didn't want to say like, 'you know what Shelly, maybe we should go back and return to not being physically close, you know, I didn't, I didn't want to, like it was pleasurable... it felt in consonance with where we were.

Partially due to the prior long standing nature of sexual struggle in either Phase 1 or 2 as well as the tendency for one's overall religiosity to become relaxed and more flexible on account of the passing of age and the typical alienation from traditional Orthodox community that occurs with older singlehood, the person is in a better position to own their feelings and actions and does not feel as compelled to have to offer "play-by-play" excuses to them any more. This often may free people to take more responsibility and be more thoughtful about their sexual expression, whether alone or with others. In their social-religious environments individuals may move towards other progressive religious communities that support these changes and that make them feel more accepted. David explains this as the source of his identity shift:

(David) Another factor that led to the development of my more nuanced approach was graduating college. I was no longer exclusively friends with Orthodox people, and was exposed to many different kinds of religious expressions and ways of being observant.

Similarly individuals may be especially driven to find more harmonious and all encompassing solutions as they become more aware and more appreciative of the largely unnecessary suffering they had endured on account of ongoing conflicts and unsuccessful resolutions.

While different people may settle into very different sexual lifestyles at this stage - some are more comfortable with more religious adherence and others more comfortable with a more liberal lifestyle - individuals come to better integrate their religiosity, identity and sexuality in a more stable form that is less likely to fluctuate in as drastic ways as before. This is not to say that sexual anxieties don't continue to press upon the individual. An absolute and foolproof resolution would be an impossibility. Rather it is a matter of degree and in this third Phase the anxieties that individuals experience are more temporary, muted and organically resolved.

Individuals may take time for this Phase 3 comfort to crystallize. For example, even once Isaac acknowledged actively wanting and pursuing a sexual experience, he is still seen wavering throughout different relationships, even with the same girl, about how much sexual desire he was willing to acknowledge in himself as the following quote illustrates:

(Isaac) Ilana was decidedly not shomer negiah she had like a lot of – she thought it was absurd and stupid and um I wanted to be ready (laugh)...
 So I sort of, I wasn't sure how I felt but I sort of - I already wanted to swing around to her side a little bit and... I couldn't tell you whether that was really - and this is always a challenge I have - I couldn't tell you whether that was really because I wanted that for myself or because I

thought that would make her happy and be a compromise I could suggest off the bat.

But as Isaac experiments with this resolution more and more over the course of his narrative, there is a striking increase in the amount of ownership statements such as “I want this” and there is also a decrease in discussing his desires generally, passively and distantly such as through statements like “The desire was there between us”.

One way that increased ownership happens is through a change of religious identity, which includes a change in the perception of the sexual restrictions or one’s relationship to them: David says this directly:

(David) The way I have taken more agency over these conflicts has also strengthened my identity and my ability to feel like I can establish my own way in many different areas of life. I definitely have an investment in maintaining my religious observance overall. I haven’t simply thrown religion away.

Another way this happens is through the building of a greater tolerance for what one participant called “running red lights”. This refers to the ability to simply acknowledge and accept doing the wrong thing without saying anything further. Here are two good illustrations of this:

(Mark) “Ok I am not keeping with the system I’m not keeping this one thing and I was ok with that my whole attitude was always that God will understand... I started to think that the system was out of synch with the realities of relationships and was willing to deal with whatever guilt I felt in not being able to comply with it.”

(David) If I view “halacha or torah as a separate set of norms for close to perfect existence, I’m ok with not being perfect. Certainly at the age of 26, I’m ok not being perfect”.

The more formal identity change may occur when isolated incidents of “red light running” increase to the point that the individual feels required to create a more formal label to consolidate those experiences within a larger identity framework.

“Discovering the Man Behind the Curtain” was identified as another Phase 3 technique. By deconstructing and reinterpreting sexual law, analyzing one’s relationship to it and its evolution, purpose and context, individuals were able to gain a religious perspective that helped them think through or adhere to the values that technical laws were trying to uphold. This opens up the possibility of being able to abide by the “spirit of the law” as an additional compromise.

As previously discussed, Phase 3 offers the least emotional distress, though it may involve decreased religious observance overall at least to technical law. When individuals own their sexual feelings and actions, the burden of their anxieties seems to become lighter. Joel says this most directly:

(Joel) In general I realized that when it comes to sexual activities, when I make a more active decision, as opposed to a decision where I feel forced, either by my own physical body or by someone else, I feel better about those things. I don’t feel as anxious about them. But in situations where I feel more forced or driven, like with peeping or with this prostitute who I felt had forced me to have sex with her as absurd as that sounds, I don’t feel like I have very much control. “When I am in control of the situation,

whether the things come out the way I want them to or not... I feel better about those situations.” So with the girlfriends that I fooled around with, I didn’t feel overwhelmed with guilt, aside from feeling a little bit bad about breaking halakha. Like I knew I shouldn’t be doing that. But at least there I could say, okay, I want to do it.

Jacob: Case Example 1: The Movement Between Phases

The following sequence of conflicts and responses taken from Jacob’s narrative demonstrate ownership dynamics in real time and especially how distinct psychological resolutions cluster around different ownership positions. Jacob first describes his anxieties about going on a date with a young woman who is less religious than he is, or at least at first glance more sexually liberal:

(Jacob) Though we had an intense phone relationship, I didn’t want to meet her in person. Going on an actual date “just seemed outrageous to me. I wasn’t supposed to be doing that as a yeshiva boy coming back from Israel! I was just afraid of myself”, that I would fall into something I wasn’t ready for. I was very confused. Of course I liked her and probably wanted to see her but it just seemed really inappropriate, especially since none of my friends were even thinking about dating yet.

But this girl really liked me and she kept asking me out, almost insisting that we see each other. “She was really pushy”. Eventually, I decided to meet her. I figured it wasn’t such a big deal - it probably wouldn’t go anywhere. “I had no intentions of touching her in the whole sexual thing um and I guess marriage wasn’t out of the question”. In fact,

as the relationship developed more, we did talk about marriage. I guess it wasn't that unreasonable to meet her. She was trying to get me to touch her. "She would throw her scarf on my face... teasing me for weeks." With these pressures, I wasn't sure I was going to be able to hold my ground that much longer.

Here Jacob discusses feelings of deviance, identity confusion as well as control anxiety in not trusting his sexual impulses. At first he uses the behavioral resolution of avoidance. And while he can own the desire to see her ("I probably wanted to see her") he cannot acknowledge the sexual interest behind that yet.

Once he owns his desire to see her, Jacob externalizes the decision to actually go on the date, blaming her pressure instead of embracing his own will. Clearly because of the obvious sexual connotations, Jacob's anxiety brings him to try and strip himself of his agency so as to feel that he is not in charge of his salacious actions. But right afterwards he reclaims back his ownership, "Eventually I decided to meet her", and in doing so launches into anxiety fueled justifications that negate and flush out the sexual potential of his date, even reversing his guilt by infusing his intentions with a higher religious purpose. Finally, he tops these rationalizations off with a statement about his inevitable fall – that he may as well go ahead with it now if its going to happen anyway.

As the "innocent" date becomes more sexually charged the dance of ownership and disownership continues to be torturous:

(Jacob) "One month almost to the day", the movie we were watching had just ended and I finally decided to kiss her. It felt really scary, like I was losing control of the situation. I didn't really know what I was doing and

why I was doing it, or at least that's what I told myself.... In retrospect, I must have also wanted to kiss her but these thoughts weren't in my head at the time. I had restrained myself for so long. How much more pressure could I possibly withstand? I knew it was only a matter of time before it would just happen anyway.

Jacob boldly acknowledges that he had "decided to kiss her" and then immediately removes his decision and agency – he describes himself as losing control and confused. He doesn't know what he's doing. When retrospectively re-acknowledging his ownership over the action ("I must have also wanted"), he again formulates a slur of rationalizations that temporarily puts his conflict to rest. The anxiety of owning his sexual actions is first handled by disavowing his agency (Phase 1), and then once it is owned by rationalizing through it (Phase 2).

Jacob continues to describe how he deals with the ensuing physical relationship:

(Jacob) From that point on our relationship became very physical. But it wasn't such a big deal. Compared to what I do now, it doesn't seem like we really did anything crazy. "We didn't go below the belt" or anything. Soon enough, "I became comfortable with the things that we were doing". While the guilt and confusion gradually muted, I had a lingering sense of discomfort with this relationship. We would have to make out in awkward, secretive places because we were so ashamed of our actions. We led this double life that no-one else could know about. I become really distant with my friends and family. "It was like the two of us and everything else was like closed out. Like I just, I just, became a little bit of a loner."

The repetitive and ongoing nature of their sexual relationship can no longer be minimized, denied or externalized but they continue to provoke anxieties that require rationalizations. He can't claim confusion and out of control. These answers to his conflict however provide only temporary relief from anxiety because he still has not taken full ownership of his decision. He acknowledges the decision only because he has no other choice to – not because he truly feels resolved and at peace with it.

It is the degree of his unresolved anxiety that makes it impossible to more fully accept what he is doing without having to excuse his actions. The content of his anxiety as we see from the following quote, includes external/social, deviance and identity conflicts, which when heightened, become too overwhelming for both behavioral reactions, or Phase 1 and 2 resolutions to be fully effective. Because no resolutions offer a good enough way to bridge his sexual and religious life and ameliorate his pain, Jacob becomes depressed and hopeless seeing no escape from his distress.

(Jacob) Other kinds of moments would make me feel even worse about myself. I remember at my friends wedding, watching the bride and groom under the holy chuppah, surrounded by family and friends. I felt so jealous that I wasn't pure like they were. "Look they're getting married, they're so happy they probably didn't fool around. Wow that's what I want, that's where I was, that's where I am, that's where I need to be." It was those kinds of moments that would "kick the guilt back into me" and make me feel so lonely and alienated from the good yeshiva kid I once was.

Though I sort of got used to our physical relationship, I was never comfortable enough to stay with it. I kept trying to be shomer with her again and again, but we would keep breaking it. We tried this a whole bunch of times. “It was like this fight back and forth. It was very unhealthy.” That whole year I got really depressed. I stopped talking to my friends. I would sleep in really late and avoid classes. It was a really hard year. “I think I was just really guilty, like, I felt like I was a traitor to my self and a traitor to my family a traitor to my religion. It was really bad.” It seemed like there was no way out. There was no one I could even talk to.

The only solution left is to end the relationship and therefore remove one side of his conflict. The cost of doing so, however, is feeling utterly betrayed by his religion which imposed its harsh, unrealistic demands on his intimate relationship. Though his immediate conflict is removed, he remains deeply resentful and bitter that the best solution to his sexual conflict as he understands it, is to detach himself from a person whom he cares about.

Unfortunately, the timing of Jacob’s life-altering conversation with his aunt where he discovers that sexual relationships are normal in his community becomes layered upon an already malevolent build up hurt and distrust towards his religion. Why should he abandon the sexual part of his conflict, he wonders, when his religion steered him wrong and made him feel so unnecessarily abnormal and sinful? This leads him to dismiss religion overall, indulge in his anger and essentially use this to “drop” his community and therefore the other side of his conflict. And a much more satisfactory way of alleviating his struggle is found.

(Jacob) “From then on, I decided that religion was no longer going to be about showing a certain face and acting another way. I wasn’t going to let my fears about what others think of me, get in the way of doing what I wanted to do.”

While on the surface this depicts a degree of peace with his sexuality, it is unfortunately fueled by anger and disappointment rather than a genuine resolution to sexual conflict that can hold both his religion and sexuality at the same time. In fact the only thing that allows him to embrace his sexuality so intensely is his anger towards religion. This time Jacob takes flight from the opposite side of his conflict – his religion, not his sexuality – but it is still unresolved.

His solution is particularly self-defeating for him because it ignores his educational, social, familial and emotional investment in religion that cannot simply be discarded without leaving an indelible trace of loss, guilt and alienation. The guilt that he continues to feel and suppress is revealed in his ongoing description of sexual acts, which continue to be framed as his buckling to the pressures of others, as following urges blindly and not having a say in them. And from this surrendering position, he must constantly put out “the fires” of his passive sexuality: the guilt of hurting others in the course of casual sexual exploits, the loss of connection to meaningful religious rituals and feelings of hypervigilance in constantly monitoring and mending the distance between himself and his peers, deity and family that he suspects are deeply at odds with his actions.

But perhaps most disturbing is the “impulse anxiety” that he will continue to feel in relinquishing control over his desires as the following passage implies:

But I “fell into this relationship” with a girl named Suzie so I ended up working in the city that summer...I became friendly with her because I thought I might be able to help her become more religious and “bring her kinda into my fold”, which I had done for many other people before...We ended up getting physical right away... I never actively chose to date her. It only happened once we were physically involved which made it seem less deliberate, more organic, but also somewhat out of my control.

His palpable passivity allows him to continue having sexual experiences. But the lack of control that he feels, not only over his urges and body, but over his religiosity which he allows to slip from between his fingers, will cause him a tremendous degree of suffering. “I wasn’t so resolved about being sexual with her. I was often aware that “it just wasn’t getting me back on my religious track... This definitely worried me...”

Jacob’s process therefore demonstrates how ownership and disownership issues lie at the core of different types of feelings, cognitions and attitudes designed to manage sexual-religious conflicts. And this example especially shows how under more extreme stressors a person can “exit” the conflict by abandoning their religious faith, which may appear to be the only choice left at certain times.

Factors that Influence Sexual Ownership

As we have determined, what allows sexual ownership to proceed over time is a overall softening of the danger, taboo and prohibition that surrounds sexual feelings or actions. Narratives demonstrate how this can be furnished through many different external conditions and life experiences. Most obviously, is the psychological “survival” of repeated sexual experience that furnishes a greater degree of anxiety tolerance in this

area. It could also be facilitated by a person's increased interactions with modern secular culture, decreased religiosity overall and exposure to more progressive and relaxed religious communities less punitive of sexuality.¹⁷³

But probably the most common way that ownership is seen to occur is through peer group discussion and mirroring, which directly alleviates many of the external/social anxieties and concerns about deviance and indirectly mitigates the effects of other impulse and identity anxieties. Being able to voice their sexuality to another marks a serious step in this ownership process. It may be the strongest indication that the person has accepted his sexuality as part of "me".

In fact each one of the interviewees identified their reaching out to another - Rabbi, friend, family member or therapist - as a defining moment in the process of their sexual development enabling them to both move past the often crippling phases of ownership that they were stuck in and also find creative solutions congruent with their identity. More ownership can also take place when the person perceives their religion to be more process oriented, where mistakes are part of the religious growing experience and therefore more tolerable. This view of religion may come also with more emotional maturity overall.

These factors and conditions are some of the external conditions that allow ownership to flourish into subsequent phases. But internally it is the failure of the resolution to address either the mounting anxiety or the duration of it over time that becomes the ultimate "lead in" towards more sophisticated phases or resolution.

¹⁷³ It is unfortunate that sexual ownership coincides with a person's diminishing of religiosity and this may more accurately reflect the current social attitudes and interpretations of textual law rather than the law itself.

In terms of external or cultural factors that impede the process of sexual ownership there were several social and religious dynamics specific to Orthodox Jewish religion that were identified. Some of these may not necessarily be accurate or correct interpretations of Orthodox Judaism and Jewish law per se, but they are discussed below because they were either mentioned or implied in the narratives as having resonated with these individual's experience.

1. Religious Culture:

The current, negative “flavor” or attitude of religious culture and education discourages ownership regardless of when in the person's development they are introduced i.e.; childhood or later adolescence. Sexual narratives often point to the strong psychological influence of implicit and explicit messages that come from community and family conveying the extent to which sexuality is dirty and bad and how it should never be expressed, let alone thought about. Mark's parent's reaction to his pornography use and the fears, shame and self hatred that subsequently haunted him because of this, is a dramatic illustration of just how palpable a parent's non-verbal discomfort with sexuality can be and just how easily and powerfully the negativity of sex can be transmitted into the mind of a curious child.

2. Religious Education:

In religious educational environments the silence around teaching sexual restrictions leads children to harbor and then internally elaborate upon primitive fantasies or myths about sexuality and its consequences, while also leaving children to process the elements of their sexual environment with little guidance or understanding. David describes this well:

(David) Discussions would be triggered for example when, schools or camps introduced policy about boys and girl not being allowed to touch, or when individuals were caught breaking these rules. It was never addressed formally in a classroom which was really unfortunate. Kids were left to figure it out on their own alongside all the baggage they brought from movies and their own misguided experiences.

David also points to his rabbis as having an immense amount of power in being able to normalize or pathologize masturbation with just one simple sentence or gesture. Their failure to do so seemed to exacerbate his shame. Children and adolescents may also sometimes be taught religion in a polarized, rigid way such as by trying to portray historical Jewish figures as perfect and incapable of error even in the face of the most obvious sins. With little emphasis on religious process, growth or tolerance of mistakes, the individual may be set up to feel much guilt and have little patience for their own errors.

Children and adolescents, who are going to be struggling with masturbation may import these polarized attitudes into their sexual lives as well and suffer much on account of this. And because of the silence and taboo around it, they will not even feel free to question or approach authority figures for guidance or support. David wonders about his own religious education and makes many connections between his experiences in the classroom and the masturbation guilt that he continued to suffer with:

(David) I don't know why we don't teach people that perfectly observing all the laws, especially sexual ones, is a process and a goal to strive towards, rather than something that is expected to happen right away.

3 Concepts from Rabbinical Literature:

There are several ideas found within ancient texts that are taught to children and adolescents which can reinforce the evils of sexuality and therefore inhibit the degree of sexual ownership:

a) *Deliberate versus Accidental Sin: (Shogeg vs. Meizid):*

An individual who considered participating in this study told the following anecdote: A yeshiva boy runs frantically to his Rebbe one morning and says: “Rebbe, Rebbe, I’m so upset, I can’t believe this happened, I don’t know what to do now, I feel terrible... I slept with a girl last night and had intercourse with her”. The Rebbe looks at him intensely and strokes his beard deep in thought. He says to his student: “You know sometimes these things happen, it’s not such a terrible thing when our desires get the better of us, it’s ok, it was an accident, as long as no one gets pregnant or an illness, you should just get checked out...” The student then says, “Oh no Rebbe, that’s fine, I brought a condom with me”. The Rebbe retract his kind, patient words and retorts furiously” “You Bum! You good for nothing!”

A lack of sexual agency might be culturally endorsed. As long as its accidental and impulsive – a crime of passion, it is forgivable. But if its premeditated, even if it is safer and more responsible, it is sinful and reprehensible. This paradigm may be based upon a familiar religious dichotomy of “*shogeg*”, an accidental sin, and “*meizid*”, a premeditated one. In general *meizid* is judged more harshly than *shogeg*. Taking active sexual ownership can therefore be interpreted as sinning on purpose. Individuals become more motivated to claim their accidental participation in sins rather than fully owning them. Even acknowledging the presence of urges inside oneself may be loaded with the

anxiety of deliberately sinning. The person may therefore become so uncomfortable with the conscious ownership of the urge that they may act upon it simply to avoid this anxiety.

Furthermore, for religious sins that involve forgetfulness or one-time errors, people may be more flexible and tolerant towards themselves. But they may be more hesitant to acknowledge sexual sins which are more active and deliberate. And even when other active sins are committed, it is easier to avoid repeating them than with sexual sins, which are not as easy to correct and retract from, especially if they are taking place in a relationship. This active and rebellious quality that is inherent to most sexual activities is what propels many individuals, as we will see, to engineer or retrospectively perceive their involvement in sexual actions as passive. They were not in control of them and did not do them on purpose.

b) Illicit Thoughts: Hirhurim:

Textual Judaism also discusses the sin of having sexual fantasies and wishes. This serves to limit and discourage the person's motivation and capacity to reflect upon sexual feelings and ideation, which may be required to attain some kind of ownership of mastery over one's sexuality.

c) Jewish Texts on Masturbation:

There is a significant Rabbinical literature that expands upon the horrors of masturbation – mirroring the predominant social attitudes of the time - which contain rather frightening and punitive metaphors and consequences, both psychological, physical and metaphysical, that greatly heightens the anxiety surrounding it and the

ability for the person to actively acknowledge their will, intent, plan and pleasure in “committing this crime”.

d) Yetzer Horah:

What may also facilitate the individual’s externalization of their desires is another concept taught into Orthodox schools from an early age called *Yetzer Horah*, defined as “the evil inclination”. This concept is used to indicate the person’s constitutional primitive or libidinal yearnings, but it is personified as a separate external being, that imposes its presence from outside the person.

4. Social Criticism:

Ownership of desires may also be squelched by either actual or imagined social criticism. Especially in Orthodox community, the individual is constantly made aware that however much progress they are able to individually make in owning sexual desires and actions, they still need to hide them from everyone and therefore feel ashamed of what they are doing. Mark makes this clear when he says:

(Mark) As we continued seeing each other, we became even more comfortable touching... I broke the laws saying to myself that “if this is where it needs to go then this is where it needs to go.... But “I never fully reconciled the issue”. I continued to experience a lot of inner conflict... There was also a lot of hiding that needed to be done with our actions. No one could know what we were doing, especially my family. When we touched in public we constantly had to look over our shoulder or make out in the back seat of the car, paranoid that someone will see us... If

somebody in the community found out, they would definitely tell other people and it will spread around. It's such a clear violation of the Jewish law, it's inappropriate, "it's just something that's not done"... "There's just a lot of communal pressure to be that person I am not at that time." All of these feelings "really got me thinking about the whole thing".

As Mark begins to tolerate the guilt he feels, he is reminded of how his affectionate sexual relationship needed to still be hidden from his community, reinforcing the very shame that he is trying so hard to overcome.

5. Illicit Premarital Pleasure:

The immense pleasure of sexual experience brings the question even more to the surface "is this really allowed?" thus creating the dance of pleasure and fear, one that is more heightened by the fact that, overall, individuals understand the broad Jewish view of sexual pleasure – that is it reserved for the special marital relationship. Single people may believe that they do not deserve to have these experiences and feel special in this way when they are taken illegally. The increased danger and also pleasure may motivate individuals to strip themselves of their agency and responsibility during these acts. "Stolen waters are sweeter", the Talmud says referring to the greater pleasure of taking something when it is prohibited versus when it is allowed. But stolen waters, this study seems to imply, are also much more anxiety provoking.

Other Research Findings

1. Masturbation anxiety:

Ones' understanding and feelings towards masturbation and those religious prohibitions - as opposed to interpersonal sexuality - seem to develop independently of

orthodox subculture; they are described by participants across religious levels of observance as anxiety provoking situations originating from a very early age. This may be for two reasons. First, masturbation is culturally taboo. Regardless of religion or community, or individual attitudes, autoerotic behaviors are even less openly regarded in general society, and certainly within Orthodox Judaism. This only adds to whatever level of inherent shame and anxiety there may be.

Secondly, and more psychologically, as opposed to interpersonal sexuality, masturbation may be an inherently disturbing act because it requires the person to play both receiver and giver of pleasure simultaneously, which may arouse feelings of fragmentation that are hard to tolerate. At a more basic level, masturbation may engender intense feelings of shame and “dirtiness” because individuals feel as if they should “know better” than to entertain their fantasy life and imagination to the degree that is it played out in masturbatory experiences. Allowing the “pretend” to intrude on the “real” is a type of momentary regression that adults may be wary of. This idea is discussed further in Edrita Fried’s *The Ego in Love and Sexuality* (1960).

2. *Superego Development:*

It is also interesting to consider how superego development specifically around sexuality, and perhaps more so in this type of population, may lag behind other aspects of self-regulation (governance) and conflict management. This may be the result of specific cultural or familial attitudes.

Sometimes, for example, the harsh demands and consequences made upon ones sexuality by a particular community may leave very little room for the person’s independent process of working through conflicts. As they are always running from an

outside “pursuer” there is little opportunity to develop in internal sense of sexual right and wrong. Because of the strong social structure found within Orthodox community that prominently weaves its way through each stage of development, individuals in this group may be more prone to keeping their sexual anxieties directed towards this outside source, particularly when they are more entrenched in this structure.

In some communities the cultural restrictions are so stringently reinforced that superego development is entirely disrupted. More Ultra-Orthodox communities may value these harsh, coercive approaches to sexual education specifically to deny individuals the opportunity to engage in the twisted, and not always successful, process of “working through” sexual-religious conflicts independently. Particularly with so many competing forces in the secular world, the risks are imagined to be too high.

The way that Dan described his masturbation anxieties, for example, demonstrated how confusing it was to know whether he feared the community’s judgments about his actions or whether this manifest fear was the way that his internal guilt was experienced. Dan projected his sexual anxieties to such a degree that that he truly created a blurring of boundaries between his psychic experience and external world. Even when outside the direct watch of his community, knowing full well that he could not get caught, his masturbation continued to be loaded with fears of being discovered or found out – as if the community had access to his internal thoughts. “Ultimately I have a sense that other people can know things about me very easily, such as my masturbation, and will use “my stains” to substantiate what a bad person I am in their eyes.”

Social prohibitions echo in Dan’s mind, but have not been converted or tied into personal feelings and anxieties as he himself admits: “I don’t know how much internal

guilt I have about masturbating.” This only exemplifies how difficult superego internalization could sometimes be with a moral issue that is so closely monitored in the community and so intensely transmitted in the culture.

Conclusions

1. Comparison of Results and Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that issues of ownership, defense and self representation would be central themes in the narratives that would further our understanding of sexual-religious conflicts. The results concur with this hypothesis and can further refine the precise dynamics between these three constructs. Our data indicates that many different types of anxieties around sexual desire and behavior can threaten either the self-esteem or self-cohesiveness of the individual – in short their self-representations. These anxieties are handled behaviorally and through different combinations of defenses, compromises and resolutions that cluster around three distinct positions of sexual ownership. The positions facilitate different types of attempts made by the mind to create harmony among thoughts, feelings and actions so that overall the individual is able to maintain a sense of coherence and “goodness”.

How do individuals experience and manage their sexual religious conflicts? This study discovered several types of anxieties and defenses which are framed by and interact with other individual background conditions. Each anxiety and defense comes with its own set of religious and psychological risks and benefits. This research shows how the types that are experienced and used very much depend upon the person’s ability and willingness to consciously attribute sexual desire and action to their own minds and

bodies – in short sexual ownership. The greater the anxiety about a particular set of sexual actions the more difficult it is to own.

2. Comments On Study Recruitment:

The degree of repression evidenced in the initial interviewer recruitment stage I believe, points to the predominance of sexual avoidance, repression and denial in this particular cohort – perhaps as a way of managing sexual conflicts that echo Phase 1 sexual ownership. While this cannot be the only explanation – after all some individuals may be more “private” or concerned about confidentiality, or some may not be articulate, reflective or good at discussing their life-history or feelings in general, some may have just simply been busy – there is also good reason to believe that the way individuals reacted to the interview scenario can be viewed as a microcosm of how they approach sexually conflicted situations.

I also suspect that this study drew those who have at least once spoken to another person about their sexual life. Those who have never done so – regardless of how much actual sexual experience they may have (doing and talking are quite separate matters) – are likely to perceive a discussion on this topic to be too unsafe, though they may not be willing to acknowledge that to themselves. Those who did interview, however, were probably able to allow their sexuality to consciously reside within them, albeit in ways that may be straining and distressing. These individuals may be more in the Phase 2 or 3 sexual ownership positions.

3. Relief in Discussion:

As already discussed, many individuals struggling through conflicts of sexuality in any of the three ownership Phases, have specifically underscored the importance

reaching out and talking to others. This is one of themes identified as signaling Phase 2 ownership. Reaching out to others allowed many participants to share their burdens, normalize their problems while placing them into a historical, religious, legal or social context and demystify myths about sexuality and primitive, fantasy-laden fears. When others had simply listened, it seemed to implicitly give these men permission to think through their problems more complexly and creatively. Talking to others might also allow for the development of a personal sexual value system that is realistic and that blends their religious development and faith into this system. Any of these goals can potentially be achieved through this technique.

From the reactions and expressions of gratitude that I received after the interviews it seemed apparent that many individuals had never had a chance to really talk through their sexual history with another neutral other. And by doing so they may have taken much relief from simply being able to organize their thoughts and life history in a way that was never possible to do in their own minds before. The loneliness of the struggle, the feeling that the person must shoulder this great existential, religious and emotional issue all alone, can easily be relieved by allowing individuals to talk through their problems. Interestingly, and contrary to what one would think, not all individuals who were in psychotherapy took advantage of the opportunity to discuss their sexual-religious dilemmas, which reveals the degree of discomfort around this issue that therapists themselves may sometimes collude with.

What appears to also be implicit in many individual's sexual struggles is a lack of understanding why Jewish sexual laws are necessary and meaningful, particularly now when they seem so culturally discordant. Some individuals were seen to actively engage

these questions. Others seemed to be too buried in their own conflicts to have a perspective on this larger religious question. The Orthodox educational system as discussed is often silent and uncomfortable around issues of sexuality. From my own experience and research, as well from many discussions with others in the Orthodox community, the rationale that is sometimes given through literature or through those rare discussions of premarital sexuality are often dismissive, unrealistic, Pollyannaish and, as Dan seemed to feel, downright insulting.

When ethical standards are highly discordant with cultural values and with normal human desires, individuals will have great difficulty abiding by them if they do not have some kind of broader and more personal understanding of the law's purpose and function. Lacking this type of meaning, individuals have to fend for themselves, which often takes them into a torturous emotional journey or further away from their faith than may be necessary. Furthermore, the cultural divide that these men find themselves torn between, is likely to contribute to immense sexual pressures to act a certain way so as to fit in and feel normal. This blatant contradiction of values is rarely addressed in their religious culture.

As we identified earlier, many individuals for a variety of reasons, will not seek out this type of conversation whether with friends, in therapy or with other leaders of their community. The resistance encountered in the study recruitment process made this very clear. But from the more general curiosity that this study generated and from how receptive people were to discuss and engage the difficult issues with one another in less intimate settings, such as in a public forum as I had the opportunity to do¹⁷⁴, it became

¹⁷⁴ A two-part series entitled "The Tightrope of Desire" was held at Congregation Ohab Zedek on January 8th and 15th, 2008 where 200 single men and woman gathered together to share and discuss the

clear that there is both a great need for such continued discourse and that there is a great amount of willingness to discuss, share and grapple with these issues as a community.

Generalizability:

While the distinct sexual restrictions in this religious population allow the psychological storyline of “sexual ownership” to emerge in clearer relief, this process can be considered a universal task of sexual development. Given our understanding of sexuality as inherently conflicted, although mediated by cultural prohibitions, this process describes the evolving ways that the person contends with their sexual urges and experiences and how this fits into their identity and behavior. The story of the particular individuals that were discussed, demonstrate an internal process that is likely to be generalizable to a wider population should this dynamic be empirically tested. But the unique stories of these individuals, and the specific sexual and religious behaviors discussed, cannot be said to represent the kinds of behaviors that Orthodox single men typically engage in – a conclusion that would require extensive empirical testing to validate. In this thesis, however, I do propose that the process of sexual ownership – along with its vicissitudes and manifestations as this was revealed through the analysis of

psychological difficulties of trying to abide by premarital sexual restrictions. This research was the main focus of the presentation. The program included excerpts from the narratives of this study and a presentation of selected themes. The program was written up in a May 3, 2008 New York Times article. An internet reference and excerpt are provided below.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/03/us/03religion.html> (Quote from the article:) There are also pockets, like the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where there are many older singles, said David Pelcovitz, professor of education and psychology at Yeshiva University, who spoke at a two-session forum in January at a synagogue there, Congregation Ohab Zedek, that drew some 200 people. “We heard some of the frustrations and challenges of the Modern Orthodox single community, in terms of their sexuality,” Professor Pelcovitz said. “People were really happy that it was being addressed. They’re single for longer periods of time, and sexual human beings, yet living under ethical guidelines that don’t allow them to engage it.” “I don’t know that it would have taken place a few years ago,” he said of the forum. “Now, the community was willing to have it.”

six individual narratives – is a universal, meaningful and salient part of psycho-sexual development.

Bibliography

- Amsterdam, B. K., Levitt, M. (1980) Conscious of Self and Painful Self-Consciousness. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*. Vol. 35, 67-83.
- Biale (1997) *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America*. University of California Press. London, England.
- Brenner, C. (1982) *The Mind in Conflict*. International University Press, New York
- Chodorow, N. (2000) Foreword to Freud's Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality. Basic Books. USA
- Cochran, J.K. (1991) The Influence of Religion on Attitudes toward Nonmarital Sexuality: A Preliminary Assessment of Reference Group Theory. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Vol. 30, No. 1, 45-62
- Coyle, A. (2001) Jewish gays men's accounts of negotiating cultural, religious and sexual identity: a qualitative study. Vol 12 (4), 21-48.
- Dumas, D. (1997) *Sons lovers and fathers: understanding male sexuality*. Jason Aronson, NJ.
- Fishman, S., Ed. Rifka, B. (2007) *Perfect Person Singular: Unmarried Adults in Contemporary Orthodox American Jewish Communities*. Proc. of Gender Relationships Inside and Outside of Marriage. Orthodox Forum Series. Ktav Publishing, New York.
- Fonagy, P. (2008) A Genuinely Developmental Theory of Sexual Enjoyment and It's Implications for Psychoanalytic Technique. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, Vol. 56, (1), 11-36
- Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1: An Introduction. Random House, New York.
- Fried, Edrita (1960) *The Ego in Love and Sexuality*. Grun & Stratton, Inc. New York
- Freud, S.(1908) "Civilized" Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness. In *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*. Simon and Schuster.
- Freud, S. (1912) Types of Neurotic Nosogenesis. In *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*. Simon and Schuster.
- Freud, S. (1912) The most prevalent form of degradation in erotic life. In *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*. Simon and Schuster.
- Freud, S. (1953) *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Basic Books. USA.

- Gochros H. (1986) The Jewish People and Their Sexuality. *Journal of social work and Human Sexuality*. Vol. 4 Issue 3, 99-119
- Guterman, M.A. (2006) Modern Orthodox Judaism and the laws of family purity. *Method and Theory in the study of Religion*. Vol. 18 Issue 1, 92-100
- Klein, J.C., (1994) Religious Education as a Catalytic Environment: A Jewish Case. *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention*. Vol. 1, 140-144.
- Levine, J. (2003) *Harmful to Minors. The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*. Thunder's Mouth Press, New York
- Lichtenstein, H. (1953) *Identity and Sexuality: A Study of Their Interrelationship in Man*.
- Linehan, M. (1993) *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder*. Guilford Press. New York.
- Lowenfeld, H. (1970) Our Permissive Society and the Superego: Some current thoughts about Freud's cultural concepts. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*. 39 (4), 590-608.
- Marcusse, H. (1966) *Eros and Civilization. A Philosophical inquiry into Freud*. Beacon Press, Boston.
- McWilliams, N. (1994) *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis*. Guilford Press. New York.
- Menninger, R. (1974) Decisions in sexuality: An act of impulse, conscience or society. *Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality*. Vol. 8 (6), 56-91.
- Messler-Davies (1998) Between the Disclosure and Foreclosure of Erotic Transference-Countertransference: Can Psychoanalysis Find a Place for Adult Sexuality? *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* Vol. 8: 747-766
- Mosher, D. (1979) Sex Guilt and Sex Myths in College Men and Women. *Journal of Sex Research*. Vol. 15, No. 3. 223-234.
- Thornton & Camburn (1989) Religious participation and adolescent sexual behaviors and attitudes. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51, 641-653.
- Tobin. D.F (1997) *Premarital Sexuality and Jewish Observance in University Students*. Dissertation Study. Fairleigh Dickinson University.
- Parens, H. (1984) Adolescence and Developmental Breakdown: A Psychoanalytic View. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. Vol. 67, 522-525.

Parsons, M. (2000) Sexuality and Perversion A Hundred Years Ago: Discovering What Freud Discovered. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. Vol. 81, 37-49.

Person, E. (1986) Male Sexuality and Power. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*. Vol. 6, 3-25.

Person, E. (1999) *The Sexual Century*. Yale University Press, New Haven.

Person, E. (2005) As the Wheel Turns: Centennial reflection on Freud's three essays on the theory of sexuality. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. 53 (4), 1257-1282

Pine, F. (1982) The Experience of Self: Aspects of Its Formation, Expansion and Vulnerability. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, Vol. 37, 143-167.

Rizq, R. (2003) Leopards in the Temple: Disorders of desire. *Psychodynamic Practice*. Vol. 9, 5-23.

Rosenau, D.E. (1982) Sexuality and the Single Person. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*. Vol. 1. p. 30-36

Rosenheim, E. (1980) Sexuality in Judaism. *Journal of Psychology and Judaism*. Vol. 4(4), 249-260.

Schachter, E.P. (2004) Identity Configurations: A new Perspective on Identity Formation in Contemporary Society. *Journal of Personality*. Vol. 72 (1), 167-198.

Schapiro, D. (1965) *Neurotic Styles*. Basic Books, USA

Schmiderberg, M. (1933) Some Unconscious Mechanisms in Pathological Sexuality and their Relation to Normal Sexual Activity. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. Vol 14, 225-260.

Wulf J., Prentice D, (1984) Religiosity and Sexual Attitudes and Behavior Among Evangelical Christian Singles. *Review of Religious Research*. Vol. 26, No. 2, 119-131.