LIFELONG EROTIC SEX IN MARRIAGE: REPLACING INFATUATION WITH INTIMACY

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Regardless of the current fashion, whether it’s de rigueur to belittle or to champion marriage and family, sociologically they are extraordinarily important institutions. The explanation is uncomplicated: marriage and family have formed the foundation of historically productive social life. We see this in the linkage of the micro family to the macro society. Healthy marriages disproportionately produce healthy families, which disproportionately produce healthy communities, and healthy communities disproportionately produce healthy institutions, which ultimately are the bulwarks of a healthy society. Certainly, there are many forces other than marriage and family that affect the health of society. But when large numbers of marriages and families break up, whatever the reasons, the education and upbringing of children—the coming generation of citizens—suffer dramatically. The upshot is that we begin to see the decay of ever-larger communities, and eventually the failure of the institutional underpinnings of society when it all becomes epidemic.1

As the Talmud (Shabbat 10b) teaches, we often find that when situations go wrong in family life, “the matter evolves” (רָבָדַּה לֵגְּלַגְתִנ) far beyond its innocuous beginnings.2

Deuteronomy 24:5 provides a clear statement3 of Torah perspective on the national importance of marriage and family—to wit: even when the nation is engaged in war, its national interest in establishing a solid foundation of marriage and family may be prioritized over drafting a newlywed to serve in the Army or continue in business.4 It’s an explicit policy confirmation of the critical linkage between marriage, family, community, and nation—that marriage and family are of pivotal importance to the survival and success of the nation. “The bride and the groom, then, are also on the front lines, not fighting external threat, but rather preventing internal erosion.”5

From a rabinic pastoral counseling perspective, marriage and family are extraordinarily important because many people we see professionally come to us presenting problems related to marriage and family breakdown, which in turn have destructive secondary consequences, especially for their children. And often we’re positioned to help people avoid situations of marriage and family life that have a high probability of failure.

Destructive Cultural Ideas
Part of the explanation for the large number of marriage and family breakdowns—certainly why more couples fail to successfully renew them—we ascribe to popular cultural ideas about love and sex, and the promotion of those ideas in the mass media.

One of the widely circulated misunderstandings about sex and marriage is that lust—the intense sexual desire experienced before sex—is an essential quality to maintain in a marriage, and that when it dissipates one or both partners are susceptible to someone outside of the marriage who reignites those feelings of intense desire.6 The implication is that lust is essential for continuously satisfying erotic sexual acts, but nothing could be further from the truth. Lust per se is neither a predictor nor a measure of consistently fulfilling erotic sex for one or both members of the couple.

The idea that a primary goal in relationships is to satisfy our lust is problematic on two counts. First, “satisfying lust” is an oxymoron. The nature of such intense desire is that we remain perpetually unsatisfied, because it is an essentially self-serving search for perfect sensual gratification, which is unobtainable. As Rabbi Chaim Navon teaches, it also requires objectifying one’s sexual partner to satisfy one’s own needs,7 which is why engaging in an endless series of unsatisfying short-lived sexual relationships is so common and popular.

Second, it’s important to distinguish between lust based on infatuation and passion based on intimacy, a distinction we’ll consider in greater detail. Withal, seeking to satisfy one’s lust for its own sake is problematic, even for someone who is single, but certainly in marriage and family life, the hallmarks of which are reciprocity.

Another popular idea is that it’s difficult or impossible to maintain sexual desire with the same spouse over decades of marriage. However, research suggests that, for any individual’s previous year, the happiness-maximizing number of partners is one.8 The common belief, nonetheless, is that monogamy is no more natural to humankind than it is to our closest primate relatives. The mistaken conclusion is that the challenge to contemporary marriages is not infidelity per se, but our lack of honesty about extra-marital relationships. This belief has two fundamental flaws, apart from the obvious distinction that human beings are unlike all other primates in that we have the capacity to make free-willed moral choices:

First, it implicitly treats sexual desire apart from sexual experience (which is a hallmark of infatuation), but in fact sexual desire continues unabated if one’s sexual experience is continuously
erotically fulfilling. The obstacle in most marriages is not the loss of desire (or lust), but the lack of a broad spectrum of intimacy needed to sustain erotic experience when making love.

Second, monogamy is not merely an abstract moral principle, but ancient cultural wisdom regarding an essential condition of successful family life. Multiple sexual partners have the insidious effects of dividing and confusing children’s loyalties, straining extended family relations that are essential support for nuclear family, and diverting the marriage partners from fully investing themselves in their marriage and family—which may explain why many “open marriages” lead quickly to divorce.9

The epitome of misguided popular ideas circulating about long-lived sexual pleasure may be the so-called “gag” book, Sex After 50, which contains only blank pages.10

Marriage and family troubles follow from external social forces that cause centrifugal pressures on them, and because of internal dynamics that can have a centrifugal effect, pulling them apart. We understand and respond to problems of marriages and families in two ways: organizing and lobbying aimed to bring about legislation and remedial policies; and counseling and therapy aimed at individuals, couples, and families. This paper focuses on some of the internal dynamics that pull apart marriages and long-term relationships, particularly the dynamics related to sexual activity.

At the outset when considering marriages and families, there is an aphorism to keep in mind as a pastoral counselor. The therapeutic goal is to help clients achieve happy, productive and fulfilled lives of moral spirituality. But as Rabbi Avi Shafran teaches, we need to understand—which means helping those we serve also to understand—that true happiness begins with the realization of what does not really make us happy.11 So it’s often necessary to help people let go of attitudes and actions that monopolize their time, effort, resources, and spirit, but fail to make them happy—more of which we’re about to consider.

Sex-Based Roles & Activity
Successful family life begins to a significant extent with sex-based roles and the sexual activity related to them. And a great deal of that has changed in the last 50 to 100 years in the United States. For example, half a century ago, in the mid-1960s, typically there were two or three women in first-year law school classes. Currently, women make up half of first-year law school classes. But even with dramatic changes in women’s access to rights, roles, and resources traditionally monopolized by men, some very important aspects of social life have remained largely unchanged: American culture still powerfully conditions females to excel at emotional intimacy rather than exercising power. In contemporary American society, although exceptions are common, we condition females from their early years to be capable and comfortable with expression and acceptance of emotion. Males from their early years are still powerfully conditioned to excel at exercise and acceptance of power rather than emotional intimacy.

Given these sex-based differences, there are common patterns when sexual relations of young men and women are self-destructive or dysfunctional and persist into later adulthood. Young men commonly focus on sexual conquests of young women. Their use of sex to experience emotional intimacy with young women may lead to destructive porn addiction and a diagnosis of “intimacy disorder” in later adulthood. Young women commonly grant or withhold sexual favors to control young men. Their use of sex to exercise power over young men may lead in later adulthood to selling themselves for drugs or money they don’t need but which gives them an experience of exerting power.

What about the sex itself? We might reasonably think that for most young people, certainly from their late teens into their mid-twenties, the immediate experience of sexual activity is inevitably physical pleasure.12 But that’s far from universally true, which may partially explain the long-term trend of fewer young people engaging in sexual activity.13 The immediate psychological and emotional outcomes of sexual activity for young people are often problematic. Not uncommonly, young women feel cheapened, even degraded or exploited by the experience.14 Ironically, what they may have embarked on to exercise power and control over their male partners leaves them feeling powerless.15 They then suffer a loss of self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence, sometimes trauma, possibly related to attachment disorder.16 Not uncommonly, young men feel alienated by the experience. Ironically, what they may have launched unwittingly to remedy their emotional intimacy deficit leaves them emotionally alienated from their partners and themselves, also possibly related to attachment disorder.17 They then suffer greater relationship-isolation, and a need to compensate by promoting intimacy with male friends, typically through physical contact in sports or a false intimacy achieved by proclaiming their sexual prowess.18

Despite these problematic aspects, such sexual relations often serve as the misguided drivers of long-term relationships, marriages, and families, in chronological as well as psychological and emotional respects. So, to a significant extent, socially
defined sex-based roles and much of the sexual activity that follows from them do not provide a healthy foundation for family life and, instead, are often precursors of marital infidelity.

Costs of Sexual Infidelity
The essential commitment that accompanies marriage for most married couples is “sexual fidelity,” which they don’t necessarily expect when simply living together “without benefit of clergy,” as we once described cohabiting. And nowadays, although young people rarely use the term “adultery,” their marital expectations nonetheless include sexual fidelity. Yet even so, we estimate that approximately 50 percent of married men and 25 percent of married women are unfaithful. So, in modern society, since unrestrained sexual license has become commonplace, it’s useful to consider some of the typical consequences of infidelity—which include:

- Lying
- Acts of deceit
- Violations of vows and shattering of trust
- Emotional trauma to spouses and children
- Disease
- Family breakup and divorce
- Compromised long-term support for children
- Violence and, occasionally, murder

Despite these destructive consequences, adultery is not a crime in more than half the states and rarely prosecuted where it is still against the law; and most Americans concluded long ago that we should not criminalize adultery. That criminal laws can’t fix many serious social problems tells us that morality, potentially, plays a critical role in social stability. And most Americans regard “cheating” on one’s spouse, having extra-marital affairs, although normative and often not illegal, as immoral—that is, they view adultery as something one chooses to do although, as we’ve noted above, it causes great harm, pain and injury. What’s the point of labeling unfaithfulness in marriage as immoral—why should we bother? By doing so, we acknowledge the potentially devastating consequences of infidelity, in contrast to treating it simply as a matter of “personal preference” or “lifestyle choice.”

Are extra-marital affairs a social problem? The question harkens back to why society labels them as immoral. Consider that extra-marital affairs are significantly correlated with the breakdown of marriages; the breakdown of marriages is significantly correlated with high divorce rates; high divorce rates are significantly correlated with children’s various psychological, mental, and emotional problems and, in turn, with juvenile delinquency and adult crime; family disintegration and the dysfunctions that accompany it are significantly correlated with community breakdown, particularly in inner-city areas; and the breakdown of communities in the inner cities is significantly correlated with a general weakening of the nation’s institutions.

Infatuation Foundation of Marriage & Family
To understand what can and cannot provide a healthy foundation for marriage and family, it’s useful to begin by considering what constitutes a “family.” What are the benchmarks of what we call family?

Ordinarily we consider members of a nuclear (in contrast to an extended) family as related by blood, marriage, or a legal process, and we tend to expect that they’re living together in the same household. Nowadays, however, we count as nuclear families, unmarried couples that live together for many years, and maybe even have children. The “politically correct” definition of family is that a family is whatever any group of people say is a family, which obviously is not an adequate definition to qualify for public benefits—say, for example, as a surviving “spouse” of a deceased soldier. Administering legislated benefits would be a bureaucratic nightmare if qualifications to receive them were a matter of self-definition. And it’s not an adequate definition of family to qualify for private benefits—say, for example, membership in a synagogue; religions would not be able to maintain their unique systems of belief, teaching, and practice in the face of myriad self-selected unbelieving, even hostile members. So, as a society we recognize that marriage offers advantages over more informal and casual arrangements.

Governmental license and religious ritual positively sanction marriage and the family arrangements to which it commonly leads. Those two formal sanctions, the license that legally certifies marriage and the ritual that religiously sanctions marriage, have very different functions: The legal document ensures legal rights, roles, and responsibilities, such as the equal division of community property in the event of divorce, which we acknowledge as beneficial or at least marginally useful. The religious ritual presumably denotes a shared commitment to specific moral and ethical values, principles, and practices, such as telling the truth to one another, for the couple’s life together.

Yet what are some of the most popular reasons that couples choose to marry nowadays? Certainly, they look for shared interests, common desire regarding children, and economic, educational, and social compatibility. But in contemporary marriages, having “fallen in love” is the sine qua non. As the foundation of marriage and family, what do we mean when we say that people have fallen in love?
How do we define falling in love? Is it that feeling you get when you bump into “the right one”? Consciously or unconsciously, most people seem to believe that falling in love is a sensation, based on physical and emotional attraction—one that magically and spontaneously generates when Mr. or Ms. “Right” appears.

Another way to approach the question of falling in love is to ask: What happened to the people who fell in love when they fell out of love and divorced? We all know such people. Is it the case that, speaking more precisely, initially they became infatuated with one another without knowing one another’s personality and character? When we drill down into these commonplace circumstances, we find that most women and many men expect that their marriages will provide a spectrum of special and exclusive intimacy—emotional, intellectual, and spiritual, which not surprisingly is disappointed when their spouse reveals him or herself as unable or unwilling to engage in such intimacy—which was unknown beforehand because the basis of the marriage was infatuation.

And what is “infatuation”? The word infatuation comes from the Latin, meaning: “made to be foolish” or, in effect, easily fooled. Binky’s “Guide to Love” humorously portrays the better-known features of infatuation:
When a couple that began with infatuation start to know one another’s personality and character, they often find that they easily fooled themselves and their partner, because they don’t particularly like what they discover. There is a further, ironic complication to youthful infatuation. When we are young and infatuated, we not only leapfrog knowing the character and personality of the person with whom we fall in love, we may not have sufficiently matured to truly know our own character and personality—which ultimately has the same effect as superficially knowing the object of our infatuation.

But one may ask, why in this specific aspect of life do human beings universally become easily fooled? The pattern repeats across virtually all cultures. We like to believe that when we fall in love, it’s a choice we’re making about another individual, although an emotionally charged choice. It seems, however, that the answer to our question is not in the vein of romance or emotion. The overwhelming response to the “special other” is not based on emotion or the result of the sex drive, notwithstanding our powerful emotional and sexual responses.

The experience of infatuation reflects our inheritance of the mammalian brain system for choosing mates. There is a specific neural brain mechanism that “. . . motivates the . . . chooser to pursue a preferred mating partner, the courtship attraction system.” Brain imaging pinpoints in this regard the release of dopamine in the brain reward centers. So, it now makes perfect sense when we hear the love-struck declare, “it washed over me like a tidal wave.” And it’s no surprise that what we might call the “electrifying” dimension of “falling in love,” now identified as mostly reflecting a chemical process in the brain, is not a good predictor of a successful marriage—although it certainly feels like “divine ecstasy” for the brief six to 18 months it lasts.

What many people subsequently experience as a uniquely personal loss of romantic excitement in relationships, peculiar to oneself individually, is in fact a widespread phenomenon, one researched, studied, and reported in the social science literature under the rubric of “hedonic adaptation.” The key idea is that the “honeymoon” phase of a relationship—marked by extraordinary preoccupation with one’s partner, ecstasy, optimism, and euphoria—is not sustainable. Hedonic adaptation dictates that, as we increasingly achieve a desirable objective or object, such as a romantic partner, it becomes increasingly less attractive to us.

Lyubomirsky notes that “Sexual passion and arousal are particularly prone to hedonic adaptation.” Bao and Lyubomirsky have also noted that, “. . . when adaptation does begin, it may accelerate more rapidly than in less passionate relationships, such as when an individual suddenly gets a clear-eyed view of her partner’s failings. . . . Of course, some will be tempted to reset the adaptation process altogether by swapping their relationship for a newer and more exciting one. . . .” However, although hedonic adaptation has been described as a “treadmill,” it does not necessarily develop in the same way for every individual.

Romance

Often when we say that people fell in love, we have an image of a romantic relationship. And for those who imagine they’ll have such a romantic relationship with the one with whom they fall in love, we might ask, what would be the benchmarks of the relationship—what would make it romantic? One of the benchmarks of successful marriage is the partners’ long-lived fulfilling sexual relations. Imagine that as a pastoral counselor you have a congregant who looks forward to finding a romantic partner and having a romantic relationship. It’s not likely that any of the following potentially long-lived conditions correspond to your congregant’s ideas of romance:

- That the fulfilling quality of making love lasts for a year or even a decade, but for a lifetime—literally, into one’s old age;
- That when making love, one almost always feels safe, secure, and satisfied—before, during, and after—again, for a lifetime; and
- That making love is an indispensable part of continuous lifelong intimacy—emotional, intellectual, and spiritual—with one’s partner. This group of characteristics does not correspond to what we usually think of as romance. In a similar vein, we might ask a congregant we’re counseling, which of the following two situations would be preferable?
  - First, that you become sexually aroused by the thought of your partner’s physical attributes, or the thought of physical contact between you and your partner.
  - Or second, that you become sexually aroused when you are physically close and not thinking about anything physical, but instead thinking and possibly talking about why and how you love your partner.

What’s the difference between the two situations, and why might we prefer one more than the other? Obviously, the first situation reflects not having fallen in love, but having “fallen in lust” or sexual desire. It’s a virtual certainty that infatuation with the physical aspects of one’s partner will diminish notably in a relatively short period of time. In this respect, romance is a blind alley. The sec-
ond situation reflects having come to love another person, which is based on authentic intimacy in the relationship—that is, on a spectrum of intimacy—and on the character of the partners that’s revealed in their day-to-day life together. It’s likely that, based on such authentic intimacy and admirable character, the erotic aspects of the relationship will be durable and deepen over time.

The commonplace experience of young people is that infatuation-driven sex begins marked by sexual excitement but becomes increasingly boring over a relatively short period of time; while sex based on a growing spectrum of intimacy commonly begins unremarkably but becomes increasingly erotically satisfying over time.

One of the major complaints in relationship breakups is “sexual incompatibility.” The partners voice their dissatisfaction with their sexual relations, and they regard this condition as a relationship deal-breaker. Obviously, there are many potential reasons why two people may find it difficult or impossible to achieve sexual pleasure and fulfillment together, including:

- If one or both partners as individuals have serious psychological or emotional baggage, such as insecure attachment from childhood, mutually fulfilling sex is far less likely;
- If the couple has serious unresolved psychological or emotional baggage, such as unresolved betrayal trauma, sexual frustration is inevitable;
- If one or both partners have serious physical health problems or limitations, such as age-related diminished libido or atrophic vaginitis, diminution of sexual activity is possible;
- If the couple or family system is under severe financial or other pressure, the potential for satisfying sex is severely limited; and
- If the couple is living in a place and time of natural catastrophe, war, or other cataclysmic events, opportunities for any kind of sex may be virtually nonexistent.

But even if none of the foregoing reasons apply, successfully making love may be largely impossible because of what we might superficially call “communication failures.” For example, many people find it difficult to tell their sex-partner, “I want to love you when and in ways that are pleasurable for you. Please tell me what you would like me to do and not do.” And many people find it difficult to be open and frank about what pleases them and does not please them sexually. We may feel awkward and self-conscious, even embarrassed, proposing that we’re entirely committed to someone else’s sexual pleasure, or responding to such proposals with an itemized list of our own sexual preferences. Moreover, the two members of the couple may simply lack the necessary attachment to communicate effectively altogether. Clearly, however, two people capable of and committed to satisfying one another to the extent that they would explicitly propose to do so, and respond to their partner’s proposal, with the necessary healthy attachment, would be more likely to have a fulfilling sexual relationship.

What makes it possible for us to be completely free in giving and receiving sexual pleasure? Sexual pleasure can’t simply be the result of mechanical technique, a matter of having the right physical moves, like a dog or cat, because we humans recognize and respond to ideas of right and wrong in one another, no two of us are alike, our capacity for intimacy varies greatly, and any individual human’s preferences change according to a variety of circumstances and conditions. However, consistently achieving such pleasure minimally requires unselfconscious, open, truthful communication on all levels—what we might call authentic intimacy.

**Authentic Intimacy**

What are the building blocks of such intimacy? We can rule out the popular beliefs—that intimacy is the result of enjoying the same activities together, sharing a sense of humor, learning and growing together, common intellectual interests, etc.—all of which are sources of relationship pleasure, even fulfillment, but not the kind of authentic intimacy that sustains lifelong erotic sexual fulfillment. What enables us to feel entirely free to communicate our interior life to our partner, and to affirm to our partner our compassionate understanding of the interior life our partner has communicated to us?

Authentic intimacy requires reciprocal empathy that builds trust and openness to vulnerability. It’s the basis of willingness to reveal one’s deepest beliefs, dreams, fears, hopes, faith, curiosity, wonder, and playfulness with an unalloyed expectation that one’s partner will not reject, ridicule, revile, lie, deceive, or attempt to manipulate us with what we have shared of ourselves. Instead, what we serve up emotionally to our partners, they return to us with understanding and support, and what they serve up emotionally to us, we similarly return to them—which is an outcome made possible by secure attachment, a capacity initially developed in infancy but with lifelong application.

It’s essential to recognize that authentic intimacy is not the result of a decision made at a moment in time regarding one’s willingness to be open and vulnerable. As we empathetically struggle in relationships with the inevitable demands of transparency, sacrifice, responsibility, duty, and partnership, we come to apply ourselves and learn how to meet the practical challenges of maintaining
intimacy over decades.\textsuperscript{31}

It is through relationships of socio-emotional trust—the adult outcome of secure attachment in infancy that enables the spectrum of intimacy—that we can begin to truly understand and relate to the personality and character of our partner with whom we make love, not just have sex.

It is now also clear, however, that experience causes brain neurons to fire and, when they do, they can rewire important parts of the brain, including emotions and how we relate to other people. In effect, the mind can change the neuron firing pattern, altering the architecture of the brain to overcome early insecure attachment.\textsuperscript{32}

Moreover, we now know from the last decade’s neurological research, that infant experience of attachment plays a critical role in neurobiologically based moral development and lifelong moral behavior patterns.\textsuperscript{33} Absence of secure attachment in infancy or failure to treat insecure attachment, doubtlessly compromise an individual’s potential for consistent moral behavior in adulthood. Withal, human beings have a built-in capacity for moral free will.

It’s wondrous that our moral capacity is essentially neurological; because, although largely out of fashion, it is a couple’s shared moral and ethical code and vision that continuously support the trust and vulnerability needed for authentic intimacy. It is the framework for their relationship, based on their telling the truth, unreserved kindness, unstinting justice, and exclusive commitment to one another. We know that, “Wherever there is unity of [moral] thought, purpose, and commitment, there is also personalistic [interpersonal] unity” [as a couple].\textsuperscript{34} When we view marriage in this way, the moral and ethical character and personality of one’s “intended” become the paramount considerations in the decision to join one’s life with that of another person. This understanding accords with the traditional Jewish view of sexual pleasure.\textsuperscript{35}

But values and principles of long-lived marital intimacy mean not simply that we love and live with another person, not even that we’re “committed” to that person, but that we have cast our fate with their fate. In effect, we accept that our two fates become one: the common fate is such that, whatever the character and actions of our partner, we share the consequences: “To love means to share an identity, one common destiny.”\textsuperscript{36}

The wonder is that, unlike infatuation-driven sex, the completely free giving and receiving is not short-lived. It doesn’t dissipate in weeks or months or a year or two, since it’s not based on infatuation. While a couple maintain their health—emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical—it can last a lifetime. Every other kind of “sex” is a pale imitation, both in longevity and erotic fulfillment. “It stands to reason that the warmth and intimacy of the conjugal union, and with it the pleasure sensation, likewise evolves over the years. In a marriage where the love grows, the experience of conjugality grows and becomes more fulfilling.”\textsuperscript{37} As Dr. Stephen A. Mitchell (d. 2000) has noted, “... ultimately, the emotional meshing and vulnerability of committed relationship can become the most rewarding source of eros.”\textsuperscript{38}

Marriage in the absence of a shared moral and ethical code is both visionless and “lawless,” one in which anything can happen and probably will—which explains why so many marriages are devoid of authentic intimacy, ultimately unfulfilling, destroyed by infidelity, and end in divorce.

Boring sex, the absence of erotic experience, reflects a failure of intimacy, not lust, and its root cause is a lack of attachment and shared moral spiritual vision by the partners. Withal, it’s possible to suffer in ignorance, deprived of pleasure, joy, and fulfillment without knowing it, because one has never learned the essential requirements to achieve these outcomes.

**Intimacy & Sexual Relations**

These considerations remind us of an issue that illustrates the importance of intimacy to achieving fulfilling sexual relations. We know that in many marriages and relationships, pornography has become an existential problem. Men regularly viewing pornography in the absence of their partners, in effect leading a double life, threatens marriages.

Is addictive or habitual viewing of pornography by men in relationships a problem that we should think about as pastoral counselors and, if so, why? The short answer is that pornography “de-spiritualizes” sex. Viewing pornography, which affects brain neurology,\textsuperscript{39} reinforces in the viewer the idea that the pleasure of sex is primarily physical, simultaneously reinforcing objectification of one’s relationship-partner\textsuperscript{40} and, when discovered, creating betrayal trauma.\textsuperscript{41}

The commonplace lesson learned by personal sexual experience, however, is that the pleasure of sex is not primarily physical, that the “hot” guy or girl who was initially attractive, very quickly turns out not to be a source of continuing erotic sexual fulfillment. There is very little connection between initial attraction and consistently fulfilling sex over time. Typically, in a relatively short period of time, we discover that the “hot” person has unattractive character and personality traits, or at least traits that don’t mesh well with our own, and they have the effect of poisoning the “sexual atmosphere” between us. Often this occurs in a matter of days or weeks, but rarely takes longer than a few months.\textsuperscript{42}
The explanation is simple: The wellsprings of consistent erotic sexual pleasure are the psychological, emotional, and moral spiritual conditions that foster intimacy—not physicality. It’s a matter of having a common “spirit” with another person in terms of our thinking and feeling, and pornography inculcates an entirely contrary understanding. So, thinking that pornography is not healthy or constructive is not a matter of prudishness, but insight into what makes for long-lasting erotic sexual fulfillment in a relationship. Of course, condemnation of pornography also reflects awareness of its highly destructive effects, on both marital relationships and the society at large.43

There’s a postscript to this subject on a slightly different but related theme. When counseling with young people, we suggest to them, “You might ask yourself: ‘Do I want others to want me mostly for my body—that is, my physical attributes—or mostly for my personality and character?’ If it’s the former, then you should dress and act in a sexually provocative way, and attract others who want you for your body or physical attributes. But if your desire is for others to want you for your personality and character, then you should dress in a way that doesn’t distract from those things.” Many come to understand that they can always reveal the physical part of themselves later to potential partners who have shown that they want them for the parts of themselves that really matter.

Young adults, typically discombobulated and revolted by the thought of their parents having sex, suggests the importance of intimacy in sexual relationships. Some have told us they imagine unattractive aging bodies engaged in intercourse, which they find repulsive. In other words, when younger we find erotic stimulation primarily in the physical appearance of the object of our sexual desire. When young we’re unfamiliar with the more mature experience of consistent, completely fulfilling erotic sexual pleasure as largely the consequence of psychological, emotional, and spiritual considerations. That experience reflects the presence of authentic intimacy between the partners, and mature love based on that intimacy.

The irony in this picture, as we said earlier, is that what we initially regard as “hot” in a potential sex object—physical attractiveness and seductiveness—has little or nothing to do with the degree of sexual pleasure we experience over time, which is not surprising given its neurological basis. Initial infatuation—in effect, playing the fool—may mislead us for a brief period, but it dissipates quickly as the personality and character of the “sex object” overcome the infatuating effects of what amounts to chemically driven attraction. This shouldn’t be surprising, because with infatuation, feelings lead thinking—often in self-deluded directions; with mature love, thinking leads feelings—so feelings are based on knowledge and practical realities.44

Foundations of Successful Marital Intimacy
Most of our ideas of romance are relatively superficial. There’s nothing quite as pitiful as a husband or wife whose marriage is falling apart and who seeks counseling to “renew the romance” they first experienced. This individual wants to recreate the state of infatuation that existed at the outset of the relationship, to enjoy the feelings that existed before the partners really knew one another’s character and personality.

Where do we get most of our ideas about romance? Obviously, every variety of commercialized media—newspapers, the Internet, magazines, books, television, films, billboards, and more—bombards us. They work to convince us that we’ll achieve romance with flowers and candy, sexy apparel, candlelight dinners, diamond rings and gold jewelry, perfectly clear skin or white teeth, a movie star’s body, walks on the beach in the moonlight, and so on. All these commercial “messages,” obviously designed only to sell products, nonetheless work their way into the popular culture, camouflaging infatuation as “true love,” and becoming customary relationship expectations.

When we consider whether and why marriages are successful or not, we find that mature love, in contrast to infatuation, is not a prerequisite for a fulfilling marriage. As Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb teaches, mature love is a “consequence of marriage based upon a common [moral] vision and goal of life,” and based on the perception that the partners are well suited to achieving that goal together.45 Marriages that don’t end in divorce typically begin with the partners sharing a vision and goal for their life together—supported by shared morals and ethics—which provides the basis for coming to love one another over time as they work together to realize their vision of that life.

If love is part of the foundation for successful marriage, what should we regard as mature love that might last a lifetime? Suppose we believe that, given our thoughts and feelings, we love someone.

To test whether what we think and feel is mature love, or something else, like infatuation, we should ask ourselves: What am I willing to give up for the other person’s benefit? The root of the Hebrew word עָדָה, “love” in English, is עָדָה, meaning to be “devoted completely to another.”46 The question of loving, then, is not what do we love about the other person, but how do we love that person—that is, what is it about our giving to that person (in contrast to getting) that fulfills us and makes our own life worthwhile?47
Rabbi Maurice Lamm teaches that, “A man takes a wife [or a woman takes a husband] and begins a life of giving. Only in the intimacy of marriage can one reach the higher levels of the ethical life, levels at which one can rejoice in supporting, helping, and strengthening others without expectation of reward. The taking in marriage cannot survive without the commitment to give. This ‘taking-giving’ moral lesson . . . described by Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, a twentieth-century ethicist. ‘Is the giving a consequence of love, or is perhaps the reverse true: the love a result of giving? We usually think it is love which causes giving. But the truth is that giving often brings about love, for the same reason that a person loves what he himself created or nurtured: he recognizes it as part of himself. . . . On this basis, we can understand yet another remarkable fact. Why do we find so often that this husband-wife affection does not seem to last? . . . People generally are “takers” not “givers.” . . . Each begins to demand from the other the fulfillment of his or her obligations. When demand begins, love departs.”48

The question we might ask ourselves about our “love” is this: What does my love and its object bring out in me? What does it reveal to me about my character and qualities? Does it reveal in practical ways my giving, selfless side, or does it reveal my taking, selfish side? And which part of myself do I most want to develop and experience? If it’s not obvious, this conception of love entails giving oneself up to the other—not by subordination of one’s will or principles, but by devoting one’s gifts to the other by empathetically responding to the needs of the other. But why should empathy be the measure of mature love? Because the roots of love demand reciprocity, empathy is essential—mutual “serving and returning” between two people. And, as we’ve said, this empathetic reciprocity makes possible the trust and risk-taking essential to achieving authentic intimacy.

What kind of practical giving might one do for the sake of a loved one? One might give up one’s popularity for a loved one’s health or well-being. One might give up one’s impatience to allow a loved one to express what’s important to him or her. One might give up personal preferences for a sport or hobby to enable sharing of activities with a loved one. One might give up one’s “face”—that is, endure embarrassment—for the sake of enabling a loved one to hear the truth. One might give up one’s bad mood to show kindness to a loved one. One might give that which uplifts or sustains the life of the other, including even one’s own life. All these examples reflect love transformed into words and deeds. They amount to devotion to bring the loved one near, to foster intimacy. If you doubt they would have that effect, imagine how you would think and feel about someone who was doing such things on your behalf.

One of the principles derived from these understandings is that before we find the right person, we must become the right person—a giver instead of a taker, capable of serving and returning along the entire spectrum of intimacy. In effect, “Conjugal dynamics, like marriage dynamics, is ideally the dynamics of self-transcendence rather than self-gratification.”49

We find Rabbi Reuven P. Bulka’s description of “true love” a most valuable summary statement on the subject:

“True love, it turns out, is a relationship which is not based on the needs that are fulfilled by a partner, nor on what the partner has which is the object of desire. . . . True love is a human expression of appreciation and admiration for what the other individual is. . . . It is not a love which is related in any way to sensual pursuits, but is rather a love which expresses a sharing of values. . . . the classic love in the Jewish home may not relate to the sensually exciting picture that society associates with love, but the classical love is more meaningful. . . . The uncompromising durability of that love is enough evidence for this. . . . The two members of the couple, while maintaining their separate individualities, fuse together into a spiritual whole, a valuationally viable unit. . . . Where love prevails, one finds caring and empathy, immersion in the health and welfare, physical and spiritual, of the other. One finds in true love a spirit of giving where the giver experiences the sensation of receiving from the act of giving.”50

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches that love without sacrifice of physical desires is a vain (i.e., empty) pretense.51 Research at the University of Virginia’s National Marriage Project seems to confirm this understanding. Researchers studied the role of “generosity” in the marriages of 2,870 men and women. They defined generosity as “the virtue of giving good things to one’s spouse freely and abundantly”—such as making coffee for the spouse in the morning; regularly expressing affection; and showing a willingness to forgive. They also defined generosity as going above the usual expectation to do one’s fair share of housework, childcare, and being faithful—small acts of service and making an extra effort to be kind and affectionate when there is no obligation to do so.

Men and women with the highest scores on the generosity scale were far more likely to report that they were “very happy” in their marriages, which almost certainly included their sexual relations. The director of the research project stated: “Living
that spirit of generosity in a marriage does foster a virtuous cycle that leads to both spouses on average being happier in the marriage."

If giving is more rewarding than getting, why is that true? In a study reported in 2016, the researchers found that "... the more participants reported giving support to others, the more caregiving-related neural activity they showed..." The researchers concluded, "... only support-giving was associated with beneficial outcomes," including health benefits. In other words, *interpersonal neurological processes* explain the intensity of the rewarding outcomes.

### Epilog

We conclude our consideration of authentic intimacy and mature love in contrast to commercialized romance and infatuation—giving versus getting—with the findings of a recent study that suggest one final motivational key to happiness in relationships. The study surveyed 80 adults to determine whether they relied mainly on hedonic sources of well-being, by consuming things; or instead relied on eudaimonic sources of well-being, by "striving toward... noble purpose beyond simple self-gratification."

Individuals who revealed higher levels of hedonic sources of happiness had significantly higher levels of inflammatory-producing gene expression than individuals who reported higher levels of happiness from eudaimonic sources. And studies have linked inflammatory-producing gene expression to diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease, and greater susceptibility to infection. In effect, what we do with our mind "... changes the epigenetic molecules that are sitting on top areas of the genome that help prevent inflammatory diseases. ..."

Thus, even if there were no other considerations, it’s in our self-interest to emphasize giving over getting in relationships, to improve our own prospects for avoiding the morbidity and mortality associated with chronic disease. As the rabbis teach, lust—strong sexual drive sharply focused on one’s own sensual gratification—drives us out of the world of the living.

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1. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) describes the origins and implications in his commentary, compiled and adapted in *The Hirsch Haggadah* (Jerusalem & New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1988), pp. 14-15: "If one wishes the spirit of ethical integrity to permeate this society, then there is only one way: ‘build houses’ (Yirmeyahu 29:5), for such a spirit can flourish only in the dedicated atmosphere of a home. *There exists no substitute for the home*, and if one is looking elsewhere for the source of peace and prosperity, he is searching in vain. All of a nation’s politics and diplomacy, its theories of national economy and institutions for mass education, its trade and industry, its schools and community centers—none of these will save the people from extinction if they let the parental home become a parody. Are children born for the sake of the state’s false concern instead of the warm love of parents? Does the census show ever-growing numbers of children without parents and parents without children? Does the nation's high society make a mockery of morality and modesty? If so, then all the palaces it is building are founded on quicksand."

2. For example, “the matter evolved” is an apt description of what happened in the story of Joseph (Bereishit 37:1-22).

3. The verse reads: When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out in the host [army], neither shall he be charged with any business: he shall be free for his house one year, and shall cheer his wife whom he has taken.

4. The rabbis interpreted the Torah to suspend exemptions from military service, however, for wars of obligation—for example, against invaders or to conquer Eretz Yisrael. See Sotah 44b for disagreements on the subject, such as whether a war to reduce the number of idolaters that might come upon Israel is a pre-empptive war and thus discretionary or not.


6. Rabbi Shmuley Boteach mentions a variation of this misleading perspective in *Kosher Sex, A Recipe for Passion and Intimacy* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 54: “Lust leads to sex, and sex leads to love, and love leads to further commitment—and we should not impede what comes naturally and is healthy.”

7. See “Lecture #12: The Woman in Creation,” published online by The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash [http://vbm-torah.org/archive/bereishit/12bereishit.htm].


9. We have found almost no reliable research on the subject; however, our own professional experience is that openness to what many now refer to as polyamory, signals the end of long-term relationship for most couples.


12 It might be reasonable to imagine as much, but given contemporary hook-up culture and social media domination of social life, the issue of sexual consent alone is confounding for many young people. See Jessica Bennett and Daniel Jones, “45 Stories of Sex and Consent on Campus,” New York Times (May 10, 2018).

13 From 2011 to 2015, the number of students surveyed by the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System who had ever had sexual intercourse dropped from 47.4 to 41.2 percent. The number who had had sexual intercourse during the three months before the surveys dropped from 33.7 to 30.1 percent. Those who had sexual intercourse with more than four persons dropped from 15.3 to 11.5 percent. See: “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2011,” Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 61(4):1 (June 8, 2012) [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]; and “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2015,” 65(6):1 (June 10, 2016) [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention].

14 See Adena M. Galinsky, “Relationship Commitment, Perceived Equity, and Sexual Enjoyment Among Young Adults in the United States,” Archives of Sexual Behavior, 42(1):93-104 (January 2013).


18 Regarding the causes and consequences of young men’s fear of intimacy, Phillip G. Zimbardo and Nikita Duncan, in The Demise of Guys: Why Boys Are Struggling and What We Can Do About It” TED, n.d.), note that male fears are often tied to lack of critical social skills needed to navigate intimate social situations (loc. 152). In “The Demise of Guys, In record numbers guys are flaming out,” Psychology Today (May 23, 2012) [https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hero/201205/the-demise-guys], the authors describe a “. . . pattern [that] has escalated into adulthood where grown men remain like little boys, having difficulty relating to women as equals, friends, partners, intimates, or even as cherished wives.”

19 In a 2013 Gallup poll, 91 percent of respondents indicated their belief that it is morally wrong for married men and women to have extramarital affairs. See Frank Newport and Igor Himelfarb, “In U.S., Record-High Say Gay, Lesbian Relations Morally OK, Americans’ tolerance of a number of moral issues up since 2001,” Gallup, Politics, May 20, 2103 [http://www.gallup.com/poll/162689/record-high-say-gay-lesbian-relations-morally.aspx]

20 However, the Uniform Code of Military Justice, Article 134, still prescribes punishment for adultery. For example, see “Rapid Fall for Army General Accused of Sex Crimes,” New York Times (January 4, 2014).

21 Helen Fisher reports that, “91 percent of American women and 86 percent of American men would not marry somebody who had every single quality they were looking for in a partner, if they were not in love with that person.” See “Why we love, why we cheat,” TED2006 * 23:27 * Filmed Feb 2006 [http://www.ted.com/talks/helen_fisher_tells_us_why_we_love_cheat/transcript#t-865000].


23 This effect is a variation on the psychological process of deprivation-satiation and the sociological process of declining marginal utility—that is, the less we have of something, the more we value it; and the more we have of something, the less we value it.


27 Rabbi Avraham Peretz Friedman reminds us that, “The Torah’s objective is to maximize intimacy—emotional, spiritual, and psychological intimacy. The term for this most intimate relationship between a couple is ‘dvekk’ (lit., union, attachment),” in Marital Intimacy: A Traditional Jewish Approach (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), p. 56.


34 From “Torah and Humility,” “Virtual Beit Midrash divrei Torah [http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/humility.html], based on a lecture by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt”l, originally delivered in 1971, and adapted by Rav Ezra Bick.

35 Rabbi Friedman teaches that, “. . . Pleasure is a happy and not unwelcome by-product that accompanies and results from the proper observance and fulfillment of many of our God-given obligations,” in Marital Intimacy: A Traditional Jewish Approach, p. 16.

36 From “Torah and Humility.”

37 Bulka, p. 125.


42 This outcome accords well with the typical consequences of sexual objectification, “representing or treating another person like a sex object, one that serves another’s sexual pleasure,” which include: depression, eating disorders, body shame, depressed cognitive functioning, sexual dysfunction, and lower sex-esteem. See Caroline Heldman, “The Sexy Lie” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMS4VJKeW8].


44 For additional insights in this regard, see Bulka, pp. 7-12.

45 See “The ‘We’ Relationship,” published online by Torah.org [http://www.torah.org/features/parkids/weltnshp.html].


47 “Intimacy for its own sake (solely for the producing and enjoyment of the incomparable physical pleasure it affords, without thought or intention of achieving greater marital bonding) is frowned upon by the Torah and does not enjoy the Torah’s encouragement. This type of hedonism and/or selfishness in sexual indulgence runs contrary to the Torah’s entire conception of sexual enjoyment . . . ,” in Marital Intimacy: A Traditional Jewish Approach, p. 57.


49 Bulka, p. 126.

50 Ibid, pp. 71-73.

51 See Hirsch commentary on Deuteronomy 6:5.

56 See Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers), 4:21.

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