

## ACHAREY MOT KEDOSHIM 5764 INTIMACY

**This morning I would like to talk to you about INTIMACY. Now I know that some of you have already begun to wonder, “Why is the Rabbi speaking about sex?” That very thought is what I’d like to talk about.**

**Picture, if you will, a California courtroom, sometime in the near future. The District Attorney approaches the witness stand confronting Scott Peterson and intimidates him by asking, “Before your wife disappeared, were you intimate with that message therapist Amber Frey?”**

**Intimate! As if the word referred to some salacious sexual act. Is that not the connotation we attribute to it? Yet we know very well that there can be sex without intimacy, even as there is intimacy without sex. Intimacy is a basic, powerful need, a bonding without which we just don’t feel complete.**

**In today’s Torah portion Gd warns us (18:3-4): “Do not follow the ways of Egypt where you once lived, nor of Canaan where I will bring you. Follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees, for I am the Lrd your Gd...since it is only by keeping them can a person truly live.”**

**What follows this warning? What is it that Gd has in mind? Illicit sexual relationships! Why? Because the bonding, the love, the intimacy needed to sustain a relationship that will complete a man and a woman, that will provide both with soul-mates, cannot be present in these relationships. For in the end, it’s just sex!**

**Not too long ago, The Masters & Johnson Institute held a seminar in Miami for physicians, clinicians, and therapists that attempted to address the crucial question: “Why do we have such difficulty in achieving intimacy in our personal lives?” And although there were many approaches offered, the one that gained the most consensus is that we live today in a “transactional world.” More often than not, even with those who are closest to us, we are engaged in an exchange of services. You do this for me, then I’ll do this for you—you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours. Yes, it’s important to negotiate deals all the time in our relationships, but it must never become a substitute for real intimacy.**

**One therapist explained that many people—usually, but not exclusively, the men—find intimacy substitutes. He recounted the instance of a woman who**

**complained bitterly: “My husband never spends any time with me anymore, not since he went out and bought this new video computer game. I bet he spends more time with that machine than with me. I bet he’s making love to it!” And in one respect, she wasn’t far from the truth. We often transfer our affections to substitutes when we cannot deal with the real thing.**

**Masters & Johnson delineate between 2 types of intimacy: “proximal” and “affectional.” Proximal intimacy refers to a couple that is physically together. They live together, sleep in the same bed, eat their meals at the same table, appears at parties and functions, arm in arm. And I certainly do not belittle that. It’s a wonder that any 2 people can live in close quarters without killing each other! He likes to fall asleep watching television and she by reading a book. Already there are grounds for disagreement, if not divorce. To share communal turf is no easy task!**

**Yet it is the 2<sup>nd</sup> type of intimacy, affectional, that the Torah has in mind in listing the forbidden sexual relationships in today’s *parsha*. Affectional intimacy can be so hard to achieve. It requires one to reveal his/her innermost self and when we do that we become vulnerable. We risk exposing our emotional wounds that may give our partner power over us. On the other hand, it just may give our partner an understanding of why we react the way we do to things, and that understanding can give our partner a tool to help us heal.**

**Some of our problems with intimacy are a result of social conditioning. Being intimate is for women, we are taught. Men have been conditioned over the centuries to react with a cold and unfeeling façade—a projection of man as one who can do it on his own, like Jack Palance in “City Slickers.” He was the loner, the macho man supreme, who rides off into the solitary sunset, who doesn’t need anyone else to survive. Men often turn to sports because it is a transactional activity where feelings and vulnerability can be disguised, if not avoided altogether.**

**A Colleague tells the story of a funeral. When the service was over, the husband refused to leave the graveside. The Rabbi tried to lead the man away saying, “The service is over now. We do have to leave.” But the man shook him off and said, “You don’t understand, Rabbi...I loved my wife.” The Rabbi said, “I’m sure that you did, but the service is over now and people are standing and waiting for you on the line of condolence.” The man shook him off again and**

said, “But you don’t understand...I loved my wife...and once, I almost told her.”

A surprising number of us don’t have the capacity to relate in an intimate manner. If there is just one person who will truly listen with interest, someone from whom you don’t have to hide your feelings, then life will feel infinitely more complete.

Intimacy does involve some risk, however, and some very great demands. It makes us more vulnerable, but it is the major place for us to find true healing, to find the wholeness we all thirst for. Intimacy compels us to confront fears and trepidations that are not always easy to face: fears of dying, of growing older, of being alone, of getting sick, of losing our jobs, of being rejected or ridiculed. But if we fail to take the risk of being intimate in order to guard against feeling some pain, then we are going to pay the price of not really living.

From my experience as a therapist, I can tell you that in a relationship of shared intimacy, a sacred space is created between the parties—a space of trust and hope and healing. It’s fascinating to me that the Hebrew word for space, *makom*, is also a name of Gd! Space can be truly sacred and Judaism teaches that a relationship between a man and a woman has the potential of creating a space so holy that the *Shechina*, the Divine Presence, will dwell among them.

This is illustrated by the famous Midrash on the Hebrew words for man and woman: *ish* and *isha*. They’re spelled the same—with an *alef* and *shin*—except for the *yud* in *ish*, “man,” and the *hey* in *isha*, “woman.” So when man and woman come together, they bring the *yud* from man and the *hey* from woman, spelling Gd. What the Midrash is telling us is that we have the power to bring the presence of Gd into the sacred space of our relationships.

But if you take the *yud* and *hey* out of a relationship, if Gd is not a part of a relationship, then you are left, for both man and woman, the same Hebrew letters—*alef* and *shin*—which spells *eysh*, or “fire.” Relationships begin with *eysh*, with fire and passion. But if that’s all there is, then fire consumes and destroys. A relationship built on sex alone cannot sustain itself.

What follows in the Torah immediately after the forbidden sexual relationships? *K’doshim tih’yu, ki kadosh ani Hashem Elokeychem*, “You shall

be holy, for I Hashem your Gd am holy.” The deeper message is that Gd is imploring us to seek sexual relationships that are holy, that create a sacred space, a place of true intimacy. How do you do that? How can you create enough trust to make your partner feel safe enough to be really intimate with you? If your partner has a problem with intimacy, you have to understand that part of the problem is that he/she doesn’t feel safe with you. So how do you create that feeling of safety?

Yes, it may take some therapy. But I have found that one essential tool is to emulate the Divine attribute of *chesed*, which is usually translated as “kindness,” but means infinitely more. *Chesed* really means love—a love that evokes kindness, compassion and understanding. But it is still more. It is the willingness, even the desire to leave your world for a moment and try to enter your partner’s world—to see the world through your partner’s eyes so that you can understand their fears and anxieties and how to best meet their needs. That’s what Gd does when he acts with *chesed*. He sees the world through our eyes and understands our fears and anxieties and needs, and that’s what we need to do. It’s the ultimate act of love. In union where *Chesed* is the abiding principle, there will be the kind of love and intimacy that will bring down the *Shechina*, the Divine Presence to bless us and dwell among us.

My friends, opportunities for love and intimacy and holiness confront us everyday in all our relationships. Let us not run from them as Scott Peterson did, let us make the most of them instead. Amen!

Rabbi Mark Hillel Kunis  
5/1/04 (5/2/92+++++)