

Debunking a Myth of Jewish Intimacy

Rabbi Yehoshua Lewis & the Olami Resources Chaburah June 27, 2018

This shiur introduces a series of classes inspired by Rabbi Yehoshua Lewis, founder of Olami affiliate Mesorah NJ, addressing myths held by outsiders of Judaism. Rabbi Lewis prepared a class on the *Top Five Myths in Judaism* including a source sheet and shiur outline. The Olami Resources Chaburah, using materials from the Olami/NLE Morasha Syllabus, is working together with Rabbi Lewis to expand each myth into a separate shiur. In the coming weeks, BE”H, we will address several Jewish myths, suggest why they may have arisen, and explain the actual Jewish approach to the topic.

Due to the sensitive content and importance of properly addressing this week’s topic, we recommend teaching this class separately to men and women to allow the full expression and exchange of ideas. Judaism advocates dedicating considerable time to prepare engaged couples for marital intimacy and learn the laws of *Tabarat HaMishpachah* (family purity) by one to one mentors. It is a most private and personal affair. In fact, the Talmud (Ketubot 8b) strongly comments, “Everyone knows why the bride enters the bridal canopy, yet anyone who [explicitly] says so speaks most crudely...” We therefore treat this topic with utmost respect and sensitivity.

Invariably, when polling rabbis and educators about the top myths in Judaism, the “hole in the sheet” is way up there. The goal of this class is to show: 1) there is absolutely no basis to this myth, 2) a theory of what might have led to this misconception, and 3) and a deeper exploration of the Jewish approach to love and intimacy.

Part One. No Basis to the Myth

There is absolutely no basis to the myth of having something intervening during the union of a husband and wife. The Talmud clearly teaches that there must not be anything interfering during intimacy of a husband and wife. Moreover, such interference is viewed as so detrimental and foreign to a healthy Jewish marriage that a spouse who requests to wear clothes during relations must divorce:

1. Talmud Bavli, Ketubot 48a – No clothing during intimacy.

Rav Huna ruled that a husband who says, “I will not perform my marital duties unless she wears her clothes and I mine,” must divorce her and also give her the ketubah settlement [the monetary settlement agreed to in the marriage contract].

Judaism understands that intimacy is not only integral to marriage, it is essential to guarantee the very future of the Jewish people. This is illustrated by a striking episode during the oppressive Egyptian enslavement when the exhausting labor caused the men to lose interest in their wives. The wives responded by using mirrors to seduce their husbands. After their liberation from Egypt, the mirrors were donated by the wives to cover one of the holy vessels in the Tabernacle.

2. Shemot (Exodus) 38:8 with Rashi – Mirrors used to seduce husbands during the Egyptian slavery subsequently covered a holy Tabernacle vessel.

<p>Exodus 38:8 He made the laver of copper and its pedestal of copper, from the mirrors of the women who performed tasks [tza'vu] at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.</p> <p>Rashi The daughters of Israel had in their possession copper mirrors that they would look into when they would beautify themselves. Even these they did not withhold from bringing to contribute to the Mishkan. But Moses rejected them because they were made for [accomplishing acts of] the evil inclination. The Holy One, blessed be G-d, said [to Moses]: “Accept [the mirrors] because these are the dearest to Me of all, for by means of them, the women established many legions [tza'vaot rabot] in Egypt.” When their husbands would be exhausted from the oppressive work, their wives would go and bring them food and drink and feed them. Then they would take the mirrors, and each would view herself with her husband in the mirror and entice him with words, saying, “I am more beautiful than you.” By these means, they would bring their husbands to desire and would have sexual relations with them, become pregnant and give birth.</p>	<p>וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת הַכִּיּוֹר נְחֹשֶׁת וְאֶת כַּנּוֹתָיו כְּמִרְיַת הַצְּבָאוֹת אֲשֶׁר צָבְאוּ פְתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד:</p> <p>רש"י בנות ישראל היו בידן מראות שרואות בהן כשהן מתקשטות ואף אותן לא עכבו מלהביא לנדבת המשכן והיה מואס משה בהן מפני שעשויים ליצר הרע א"ל הקב"ה קבל כי אלו חביבין עלי מן הכל שעל ידיהם העמידו הנשים צבאות רבות במצרים כשהיו בעליהם יגעים בעבודת פרך היו הולכות ומוליכות להם מאכל ומשתה ומאכילות אותם ונוטלות המראות וכל אחת רואה עצמה עם בעלה במראה ומשדלתו בדברים לומר אני נאה ממך ומתוך כך מביאות לבעליהן לידי תאוה ונזקקות להם ומתעברות ויולדות שם.</p>
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A deeper understanding of the Jewish view of love and intimacy is discussed in Part Three below.

Part Two. A Theory of How This Myth Arose

Clothing is a fundamental part of human existence. Judaism views clothing as an external expression of a person’s inner being. Although we may not hold the expression “You are what you wear” to be entirely true, we may adopt it as a concise way of saying, “What you wear is (usually) a good expression of who you are.” The Torah contains a fascinating Biblical commandment to tie tassels, known as tzitzit, to the corners of a four cornered garment we wear. This mitzvah is so central to Judaism that it is even mentioned in the Shema. The garment is collectively referred to as tzitzit, and is fitted with a hole in the middle of the garment to enable draping over the head. In the pre-dryer age, people could readily see their neighbors clothing and linens drying in full view.



It is possible that over the generations, onlookers unfamiliar with Jewish law mistakenly surmised that couples used this “sheet” during intimacy. Hence, the myth.

But what purpose do these tzitzit actually serve? What effect can some hanging strings have on our life? The clothing we wear can influence not only ourselves, but even others as well. This dual role is pronounced in the mitzvah of tzitzit. The tzitzit attached to our clothing serve as a constant reminder during our action-packed days that the Jewish people aspire to connect with G-d and infuse life with profound ethical ideals.

1. Bamidbar (Numbers) 15:37-41 (translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, The Living Torah) – The Torah source for the mitzvah of tzitzit, recited morning and evening in our daily prayers.

<p>G-d spoke to Moses, telling him: Speak to the Israelites and have them make tassels (tzitzit) on the corners of their garments for all generations. They shall include a twist of sky-blue wool in the corner tassels. These shall be your tassels, and when you see them, you shall remember all of G-d's commandments to observe them. You will then not stray after your heart and eyes, which [in the past] have led you to immorality. You will thus remember and keep all My commandments, and be holy to your G-d. I am G-d your Lord, who brought you out of Egypt to be your G-d. I am G-d your Lord.</p>	<p>ויאמר יקוק אל משה לאמר: דבר אל בני ישראל ואמרת אלהם ועשו להם ציצת על כנפי בגדיהם לדרתם ונתנו על ציצת הכנף פתיל תכלת: והיה לכם לציצת וראיתם אתו וזכרתם את כל מצות יקוק ועשיתם אתם ולא תתרו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם אשר אתם זנים אחריהם: למען תזכרו ועשיתם את כל מצותי והייתם קדשים לאלהיכם: אני יקוק אלהיכם אשר הוצאתי אתכם מארץ מצרים להיות לכם לאלהים אני יקוק אלהיכם:</p>
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Tzitzit, which is literally an extension of our clothing, extends the concept of clothing in a figurative sense as well.

2. Rabbi Shimon Schwab, On Prayer, p. 108 – Tzitzit extend the moral calling of clothing to an even higher level for the Jewish people.

The idea of clothing is a reflection of the idea that there is “more to Man than just animal.” Mankind’s supremacy over animals lies in his ability to control his animalistic nature. While a human body functions much like those of animals, with all its desires and urges, he has the unique ability to control them. For example, man can choose to fast even when food is available, whereas

an animal is incapable of making such a choice. He even has the ability to elevate and sanctify his physical urges.

However, as far as the Jewish people is concerned, a person's ability to subdue his animal nature grows and flowers into an even higher moral calling, that of acceptance of the mitzvot of G-d. Where moral decency – with which all humanity is charged – ends, *at the corners of their garments*, there the specifically Jewish mandate begins. The Torah presupposes the highest form of decency and dignity. We, as the Jewish people, are to make “extensions” of our clothing to symbolize our special mandate. So, when we look at our tzitzit we are reminded that our membership in the Jewish nation, through the acceptance of the mitzvot, extends our humanity to a higher moral calling.

The tzitzit tassels attached to our clothing express a level of ethical behavior higher than that expressed by ordinary clothing. They symbolize an attachment to something beyond our actual physical existence and point to a lofty purpose, as indicated by the *petil techeilet*, the single blue string (one of the four strings at each corner). Although most people do not wear the *techeilet* nowadays, its significance has not been lost.

3. Rabbi Aaron Lopiansky (Dean of Silver Spring Yeshiva), Class given in 2001 – The tzitzit strings attached to our clothing symbolize our purpose.

The word for the color *techeilet* (sky blue) is related to the word *tachlit* (purpose), as we can see with the sky (and anything infinite), which takes on a hue of techeilet, embodying the purpose that it represents. The tzitzit strings, among them the string of techeilet, connects our clothing – our external manifestation – to this purpose (see Ramban [Nachmanides], Bamidbar/Numbers 15:38). Even in our current lowly state, our external deeds, and the superficial manifestation of our clothing, are connected and directed towards this purpose.

הצבע תכלת נגזר מלשון 'תכלית', כפי שרואים עינינו שהרקיע (וכן כל דבר אין סופי) מקבל גוון תכלת, כנגד ה'תכלית' שמגולם בו. חוטי הציצית, וחוט התכלת שבהם, מחברים את הבגדים – את הביטוי החיצוני של האדם – אל התכלית (ראה רמב"ן, במדבר ט"ו:ל"ח). גם במצב הירוד של היום, המעשים החיצוניים שלנו, והביטוי החיצוני של הלבושים, מחוברים ומכוונים אל התכלית.

4. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Tzitzith, A Thread of Light, pp. 2-3 – Tzitzit represent our striving to live according to Jewish ideals.

Have you ever thought about the really important questions in life? Have you ever asked yourself why you were born? What is the purpose of life? What are your responsibilities? Have you ever tried to develop a philosophy of life and then live by it? One of the world's greatest philosophers came to the conclusion that “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Socrates, in Plato's *Phaedo*). Have you ever examined *your* life?

Of course, we all know the main problem is not so much developing a philosophy of life, but living up to it. If we think, we know what is right and what is wrong. But when it comes down to the crunch, we tend to forget.

Deep down every Jew realizes that Judaism offers a philosophy of life that is without equal. One does not have to be overly sophisticated to realize that a philosophy of life that has survived for over three thousand

years, and has dealt with every possible human problem in every possible society, must have an overriding validity. Looking at it that way, the fact that it originated with G-d seems almost perfectly obvious.

5. Ibid., p. 3 – Tzitzit serve as a constant reminder in the rush of everyday life.

Yet, in the heat of everyday life, there are many things that draw us away from G-d and Judaism. There are friends who pull us to conform, good times that beckon, and a desirable world of pleasures that tempts us away, even from the truths that we recognize. Above all, there is the strong itch of desire that sweeps us along, often against our very will.

We may know what is right, but there are so many things that make us forget. It is so very hard to remember.

G-d realized this, so He gave us a commandment to serve as a constant reminder. The Torah clearly spells this out when it says, “They shall be your tzitzit, and you shall see them and remember all of G-d’s commandments and obey them, and not stray after your hearts and eyes, which lead you to immorality.”

In the simplest sense, then, tzitzit serve as a reminder. We bind them to our garments just as one might tie a string around his finger or belt in order to remember something...We wear them as a constant reminder that we must obey G-d’s commandments, and not be led astray by our desires.

For further discussion see:

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Tzitzith, A Thread of Light.

Olami /NLE Morasha shiur on [Unraveling the Mitzvah of Tzitzit and Tallit](#).

For insight into women and tzitzit see the Ner Le’Elef Booklet [“Women and Judaism II,”](#) pp. 123-125.

Part Three. Deeper Insights into Love, Marriage and Intimacy

I have sifted through roughly 50,000 stories that have crossed my desk. I have noticed people wrestling with...[one] question...above all others. “How do I find love?” (From Daniel Jones, Editor, Modern Love, www.nytimes.com Jan. 31, 2014)

If we ask, “Is nuclear power good or bad?” the answer would be: “It depends on how we use it. It can be horribly destructive, or it can revolutionize our modern energy crisis.” Everyone agrees on one point: Nuclear energy’s massive potential can be harnessed only under very special conditions.

From a Jewish perspective sexual desire is like spiritual nuclear energy. Used correctly, it can help bring a couple to perfection. Misused, it can reap massive emotional destruction.

When used with the proper conditions, what does it help build?

Oneness.

1. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Made in Heaven, pg. 8 – Love Creates One from Two.

...the Hebrew word for love, *ahavah*, has the same numerical value as the Hebrew word *Echad* meaning “one.” In its deepest sense, love takes two people and makes them into one.

Let’s ask: Why is love so exciting for us? What spiritual concept is love supposed to teach us?

In order to teach us about the ultimate experience possible – connection with the One Infinite Source of All – G-d packaged it in one of humanity’s most exhilarating experiences: love. Funny enough, our desire to fall in love shares the same goal. The goal of man and woman in love is the same goal as spiritual connection – to bring us to oneness. This will sound especially strange to those of us who were raised in a culture where some religions deny expressions of sexual desire and condemns them as sinful. However, Judaism sees love and sexual desire as gifts that are central to marriage and reflect a yearning for a deeper spiritual awareness of unity, as well.

The Talmud, in fact, relates marital harmony to a home blessed by G-d's Presence, and marital discord to the lack thereof.

2. Talmud Bavli, Sotah 17a – The appropriate union of man and woman brings G-d’s Presence.

<p>Rabbi Akiva taught: When a man and woman are worthy of it, G-d’s Presence is found between them. When they are not worthy, a fire consumes them.</p>	<p>דריש ר"ע איש ואשה זכו שכינה ביניהן לא זכו אש אוכלתן.</p>
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3. Rashi to Sotah 17a – Male and female are only separate because G-d is not between them; when He is, they are one.

<p><i>The Presence is between them</i> – For G-d divided His Name (<i>Yud-Hey</i>) and placed it between the two of them: the letter <i>yud</i> in the word <i>Isb</i> (man) and the letter <i>hey</i> in the word <i>Isha</i> (woman). <i>When they are unworthy, a fire consumes them</i> – For G-d removes His Name from between them and they each remain as “fire.” (Man and woman in Hebrew each consist of <i>alef</i> and <i>shin</i>, which together spell <i>aish</i> [fire]; as well as a third letter, <i>yud</i> in <i>Isb</i> and <i>hey</i> in <i>Isha</i> – Ed.)</p>	<p>שכינה ביניהם – שהרי חלק את שמו ושיכנו ביניהם; יו"ד באיש וה"י באשה. לא זכו אש אוכלתן – שהקב"ה מסלק שמו מביניהם ונמצאו אש ואש.</p>
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The tremendous energy and excitement felt between a man and woman can be compared to the power produced by the nuclear power plant. This energy can be used constructively to create unity between them.

4. Rabbi Akiva Tatz, The Jewish Teenager’s Guide to Life, pg. 60 – G-d created love so exhilarating to serve as a metaphor of the ultimate connection – to Him.

<p>[Regarding marital intimacy] What is the meaning of the potency of human experience compressed into this area? Why is there a sense of timelessness and ultimate “having arrived” inherent in this particular interaction?</p> <p>The secret here is startling in its depth: the source of all that is contained in the intimacy between man and woman in this world is in fact the nature of existence in the world to come. The ecstasy of the next world...is the bond between the...elevated human soul and the Creator. In that great relationship is contained the ultimate sensation, the knowledge, of having arrived. In that state of togetherness, ultimately and absolutely, there is no other place to go. There, in the deepest sense possible, time and motion stretch into the infinite meshing of soul with its Source at a cosmic intensity. There, two become one in essence. And there, in the most essential sense, life is conceived.</p>
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All experience in this world reflects its source in the higher experience. When that higher experience is the ultimate and eternal relationship between the Creator and the human soul, the parallel experience in this world which it generates must be exceptionally potent and ecstatic.

Under the wrong conditions, man and woman together produce destruction. A faulty relationship turns into a consuming conflagration that leaves only destruction and pain in its wake, similar to nuclear power unchecked. (On a personal level, anyone who has been used in a relationship or suffered a breakup may easily relate to this idea based on the emotional pain they experienced.) The fallout is that one may be afraid to invest in a relationship of unconditional commitment.

A discerning person will flip the stereotype of “marriage as old fashioned,” and discover just the opposite. The Jewish marriage is totally revolutionary. It sets up the ideal conditions to bring two passionate people to perfect oneness in body and soul. Every detail of the Jewish marriage has only one goal – to make the couple unified here on earth, as they are on the level of their root soul in heaven.

From here we learn the opposite as well. Those involved in relationships lacking a framework to build a deeper bond move toward lesser levels of commitment and end up feeling separate and alone, cast into a world of self-estrangement.

One of the ways we create unity in marriage is by giving to the one we love. The desire to give rather than take is seen as the litmus test for love. In fact, the Hebrew word *ahavah* – love, comes from *hav* – to give.

5. Rabbi E.E. Dessler, Strive for Truth, Vol. I, pp. 126, 131, 133 (translated by Rabbi Aryeh Carmell, Feldheim 1978) – Giving leads to love.

We see that love and giving always come together. Is the giving a consequence of the love, or is perhaps the reverse true: is the love a result of the giving?

We usually think it is love which causes giving, because we observe that a person showers gifts and favors on the one he loves. But there is another side to the argument. Giving may bring about love for the same reason that a person loves what he himself has created or nurtured: he recognizes in it part of himself...

Perhaps [we would think that the love between man and wife] is merely something implanted in us by the Creator as part of His deep-laid plan for the maintenance of the world, just as hunger is given to us to ensure the preservation of the body. But this seems most unlikely. To achieve this end the biological urges of physical desire and yearning for children would suffice. What is the point of this additional emotional attachment?

...[T]his love arises between husband and wife because they complement each other... Alone, every person is defective and unable to carry out his proper function...by giving each other this completion they come to love each other, on the principle we have already established: the one who gives, loves.

...The best relationship between husband and wife [is] when both achieve and practice the virtue of giving. Then their love will never cease, and their lives will be filled with happiness and contentment for as long as they live on this earth.

6. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Made in Heaven, pg. 8 – Differentiating between love and lust – selflessness vs. selfishness.

Love and lust should not be confused. While love wants to give, lust only wants to take. Love is a reciprocal sentiment, where one identifies with the wants and the needs of the beloved.

When the Torah provides a paradigm of love, it says, “You shall love your neighbor like yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Love means feeling about another person exactly the same as one feels about oneself. When you love a person, the person’s happiness is as important to you as your own happiness...

Becoming a giver is part of the challenge and purpose of marriage. A spouse who focuses on giving the other one pleasure, receives the greatest pleasure from pleasing the other.

7. Rabbi Moshe Bleicher, Shechinah Beineihem, pg. 70 – Simple gestures of care and companionship foster love.

The basis of the relationship between man and wife is the unity that resides within them. Therefore, any expression of unity – any simple action that helps create a positive relationship between the two; any action that brings about closeness, pleasantness and sympathy between them; every smile, every drop of attention paid to the other, every act of giving – each of these exercises the “unity” muscles and actualizes the potential for unity, slowly building, even if it is not easily discernible, a deep sense of oneness.

In conclusion, sexual desire is perhaps one of the most potent forces that exist. Within the proper parameters, it produces oneness from two. Unchecked, it causes suffering and hinders our ability to reach oneness. Jewish marriage sets up the ideal conditions to bring two passionate people to perfect oneness in body and soul. Giving leads to love. It creates unity, allowing each partner to become complete, building a deep sense of oneness.

For further discussion see:

Olami / NLE Series on [Dating, Relationships, Love & Marriage](#)

Olami / NLE Series on [Finding Your Soulmate](#)