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**Sexual issues in Jewish law**

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INTRODUCTION

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## INTRODUCTION

In the creation tale of Genesis man discovered his nakedness and the Bible began to deal with sex openly; that frankness was followed by the rest of the Bible in wild stories, very specific laws, and graphic poetic imagery. Large parts of the rabbinic literature deal with sexual questions both in entire tractates of the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi and throughout the rest of its pages.

Sex has always played a major part in human life, and Judaism dealt with it openly, regulated it, but did not seek to suppress it. Nothing was left undiscussed; though the issues that raised questions varied through the centuries. In recent years we have been concerned primarily with medical issues as science has discovered new methods of birth control and reproductive technologies. The older questions of ritual cleanliness, sexual conduct, marriage and family continue, but have often been seen in a different light. This volume deals with a limited number of these issues.

We have begun with two overviews that treat the role of sex in Jewish theology. The Bible waged a struggle against pagan deities that mirrored human sexual life at its best and its worst. That struggle succeeded so that the God of Israel remained asexual, but sexual notions continue to play a major role in the theology of Jewish mysticism.

Jewish law, which governs and directs Jewish life, has dealt with human sexual issues. The female body with its reproductive cycle needed to be confronted. That need and the rituals connected with it in the contemporary world have been discussed in one essay.

Even ordinary sexual life can be complicated. To be helpful the classical literature discussed it and repeated those discussions in later centuries. A portion of those has been the subject of one essay.

The emotions aroused by sex have been a constant source of danger to individuals and to society. Temptations have always existed, and Judaism has sought to understand them and to find an appropriate way to deal with them. Efforts to respond sometimes brought legislation which sometimes succeeded and on other occasions

failed because it was too ambitious. That has been traced in two essays.

The first commandment directed toward humanity was the simple "be fruitful and multiply" – a direct result of sexual union that leads to the next generation. Birth is joyful, not always easy, and the development of a child unpredictable. Modern medical technologies are at the edge of dealing with some of these issues by eliminating potential health and genetic problems and providing untold options. These advances bring a new set of ethical issues, explored in the concluding essay.

The selection of responsa demonstrate the range of problems seen from the people's point of view. Issues that were widely debated in previous times are absent, whereas others that hardly played a role at all now loom large. Most of the responsa deal with either the changing morality of contemporary society or the evolving technologies. This is a selection taken from published responsa.

As with previous volumes, only a few matters could be discussed, and we hope to return to related questions in the future.