

The Cultural Repression of Sexuality
Handout Summary of Presentation at Nefesh 2017

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“In general, if the community allowed for sexuality to be spoken about more openly, it could avoid a lot of the depression that people go through.” Marc, 28

A. Defining Cultural Repression

- Systematic, Multifaceted Social Phenomena
- Emerges from an intricate matrix of power relationships, traditions, and teachings and can be best understood in socio-historical context (both Jewish history and secular history/trends)
- Unconscious, pervasive and ingrained social force
- Transmitted verbally and non-verbally early on throughout education, socialization and family
- Can promote feelings of deep inner shame and self-hatred that give rise to other unpleasant affects and/or maladaptive behaviors
- Can derail the person’s natural capacity for genuine closeness and physical, sexual bonding

B. Three Components of Cultural Repression:

1. Conspicuous Silence and Denial of Reality
2. Educational Gaps & Shortcomings
3. Neglect or Criticism of Internal Experience

1. Conspicuous Silence and Denial of Reality

“In the yeshiva world there are just certain things you can’t think or say.

How could you really know somebody as a life partner without having some kind of physical contact with them? It just seemed crazy to me.”

- a) *Around media, sights or sounds, body parts, observations of other people’s behavior*
- b) *Language block: Words are avoided or disguised, even when necessary to communicate*
- c) *Thought Block: observations and obvious sexual cues are not given a context or explanation*
- d) *Denial of Cultural Discrepancies: laws and values of Judaism are not explicitly compared to those of secular world*
- e) *Adult does not own or explain their own sexual avoidance or discomfort/squeamishness*

2. Educational Gaps & Shortcomings

“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.

I know that Judaism has a really positive take on sexuality and considers sex as something very holy, but I wish I connected to it in that way.”

- a) Exaggerated punishment/threat/humiliation of sexual behavior without explanation of what is wrong (differently than any other law)
- b) Laws/Rules are not clearly explained or discussed and not given a meaning or personal value – exist in a vacuum of reasoning and reality
- c) Words, stories and Jewish laws are skipped over or discussed in a dismissive, perfunctory way
- d) Equating or not discriminating between prohibited sexual action and sexual desire
- e) Silence is idealized under the cover of a Jewish value (tznius)
- f) Sexual disownership and double identity is tacitly or explicitly promoted (yetzer hara)

3. Neglect or Criticism of Internal Experience

“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.

When Rabbis say things like ‘we all have these urges and you got to learn to control them’ you assume that everybody around you is, and that you can’t.”

- a) Sexual Laws are romanticized or glorified without attention to challenging emotional realities or changing cultural norms
- b) Sexual behavior is condemned without validating the specific difficulties involved or without giving people the tools to manage their urges
- c) Normal feelings of sexual pleasure and longing are minimized, denied and condemned
- d) Normal feelings of sexual religious conflict are minimized or condemned, especially at a time where this may be very common (singlehood, niddah)
- e) The person’s sexual development is ridiculed, belittled or ignored or demonized

C. **What Magnifies the Effects of Cultural Repression?**

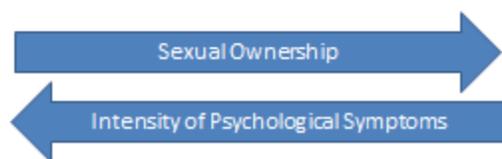
- 1) Teachers/Leaders/parents cut off from their own sexuality, generational transmission
- 2) Do the sexual freedoms of today's modern world make Religious communities "double down" on sex?
- 3) Communities/families highly invested in maintaining sophisticated, refined, appearances
- 4) In environments that emphasize religious perfectionism, conformism and religious zealotry

D. **Psychological Effects of Cultural Repression:**

Constriction/regression or delay in *Sexual Ownership Process* (Internalization/Integration) of Psychosexual development.

Sexual Ownership Process

Internalization Concerns	Integration Concerns
Desires is inside or outside force?	Desire is isolated or connected to other needs, motives, wishes?
Outside fear or punishment vs. internal guilt?	Superficial or productive Guilt?
Cycles of sexual acting out and painful remorse/attempts at changing	Sexual behavior is owned, guilt is tolerated or if possible used to strategically do better
Desires are random and out of control	Desires are connected to other thoughts, needs, motives or conflicts
Intense and unexpected Internal Conflict	Conflict is expected and manageable



E: Undoing the Effects of Cultural Repression: Ourselves, Our Communities & Our Patients

1) Ourselves

"We live in a highly sexualized culture, as evidenced by the media, while at the same time, open, intimate and real conversation about sex elicits feelings of embarrassment and shame. Therapists live in this culture, and so for us to ask probing questions about sexuality, requires that we overcome our inclination not to." - Anne Stirling Hastings in ***Treating Sexual Shame (1998)***

2) Our Communities: Discussion in Family & Schools:

- a) “Naming the Monster” of Repression
 - b) Teaching and normalizing psychology and biology of sexual development
 - c) Giving permission to say sexual words and think about desires
 - d) How to understand and approach media
 - e) Deeper Understanding of Jewish Laws of Values
 - f) Support and validation for those who struggle with desire
 - g) Help people go beyond blanket phrases and label to explain problems: ex. addictions, erectile dysfunction, Yetzer Hara, shmiras habris etc.
- 3) Our Patients
- a) Creating a Space for Desire
 - b) Identifying the Core of Shame and the defenses around this
 - c) Naming the “Repression Elephant”
 - d) Facilitating Reflection on Desires: Going beyond categories and labels