

The Orthodox Sex Guru

By Daniel Bergner

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In one of her early sessions with the patient, Bat Sheva Marcus, an Orthodox Jewish sex counselor, drew up a list. The patient, who was in her 20s, wore the uniform of her rigidly devout sect: a dark suit with a shapeless skirt reaching well below the knee, dark stockings, a plain blouse buttoned up to the neck and both a wig and a crocheted hat covering her head. She had come to Marcus's offices in Midtown Manhattan from a cloistered community in Borough Park, Brooklyn, because she had been recoiling from sex with her husband. There was pain, and, more problematic for Marcus, there was no desire. The pain, Marcus and her staff deduced right away, was a result of muscle constrictions stemming from childbirth; this could be treated effectively with dilators — and without objection from the patient's rabbi. But the deeper aversion was more complex. Talking with the woman at a round table in a room decorated with still lifes of pears and berries, Marcus wrote a list of ways that the patient and her husband could make sex, for her, more appealing.

The suggestions ranged from the seemingly modest to the more direct, from reading romance novels to kissing with the lights on to wearing a lacy nightgown to his touching her clitoris to the use of a vibrator. The woman would take the list home to her husband, and he would take it to their rabbi, who would rule, one by one, on whether these interventions were allowed.

"She'd just found out what and where her clitoris is, after her third child," Marcus said. "She'd told her OB-GYN that she was having pain," and during their conversation he informed her about her anatomy. Merely having this basic knowledge put her ahead of plenty of Marcus's Orthodox patients, who tend to be from the Satmar sect, one of the most strictly observant groups within Hasidic Judaism. Their circumscribed upbringings, in sections of Brooklyn or in Monsey, N.Y., a hamlet north of New York City, have been utterly insular, their worlds devoid of secular books, let alone television and the Internet. About sexuality, their minds have been kept free of information and infused with fear. "They have zero — zero — connection to pleasure," Marcus said. "And there's no vocabulary to start with them. We have an intake form to fill out, and they get to 'orgasm' and go to the receptionist and ask, 'What is this?'" When Marcus begins to explore whether they've ever been aroused, they have no understanding of the concept.

How widespread sexual aversion is among ultra-Orthodox women is impossible to say, and the question is made especially difficult because there is a host of movements and sects with varying statutes and customs. But there is an erotic ideal that all these cultures share. After a young woman marries — often, like the Satmar wife Marcus told me about, to a man she has met and

spoken with only once before the wedding — she's supposed to feel that sex is a blessing, a union full of Shekinah, of God's light, not just a painful or repellent reproductive chore. Quietly, rabbis refer struggling wives to Marcus's care. Her task is to instill desire in them.

Marcus, who is 53, is stringently observant. At her synagogue, at the northern tip of the Bronx, the men sit separate from the women, partitioned by a wooden screen. She keeps her legs concealed past the knees, her arms past the elbows. Until menopause, she obeyed the laws that surround menstruation. During the time of her period and for seven days thereafter — for 12 or more days each month, until she was permitted to visit a mikvah and purge herself in the special waters there — she slept apart from her husband and didn't touch him in any way at any hour. In her tainted state, she didn't so much as pass a dish of food directly to him, no matter if she took care that their hands made no contact. To touch the same platter at the same moment was forbidden.

Yet to anyone within the Orthodox realm, she's clearly not Haredi, not one of the exacting. She was raised and remains not ultra-Orthodox but modern Orthodox. She doesn't button right up to the neck. She sometimes wears pants. Her synagogue divides the sexes side to side instead of men in front and women in back. The screen is only shoulder-high. And women are encouraged to make their voices audible in prayer, rather than to muffle or mute themselves, lest the sound of their chanting tempt the men into sinful thoughts.

Below her brown bangs, Marcus's eyes fill with tears sometimes when she talks about how Orthodox Judaism — and above all the most restrictive branches of Haredi Orthodoxy — can quash female eros by imbuing a physical shame and a nearly apocalyptic sexual terror, by teaching that if the laws of tzniut, of modesty, are broken, calamity will come. One Haredi rabbi I met likened eros to “nuclear energy”: Sex could bring disaster to the world, but, he said, “the careful regulation” of it can connect a couple to God and beckon “transcendent experience.”

Marcus, though, sees more repression than transcendence. She recounted a tale taught to her as a girl, and taught to schoolgirls still, about a Jewish woman who is about to be persecuted by Cossacks. She is to be roped to a horse and dragged through the streets until she dies. But before this happens, she manages to pin or sew her skirt to her lower legs, stitching fabric to flesh so that, during her torturous execution, the garment won't reveal anything that would, in unspecified ways, infect the thoughts of Jewish men and bring disaster to the Jews in general.

One young woman I spoke to from the Pupa sect of Hasidism — who asked that I not use her name to protect her privacy, as did most of the Orthodox women I spoke with — told me she remembered hearing versions of this story repeatedly from the age of 8 or 9, and recalled going with her eighth-grade classmates to a fair at another yeshiva for girls in her Brooklyn neighborhood. The fair took place in an auditorium that featured a life-size diorama of a mother bathing her daughter eternally in boiling water — a punishment for some undisclosed failure of physical modesty.

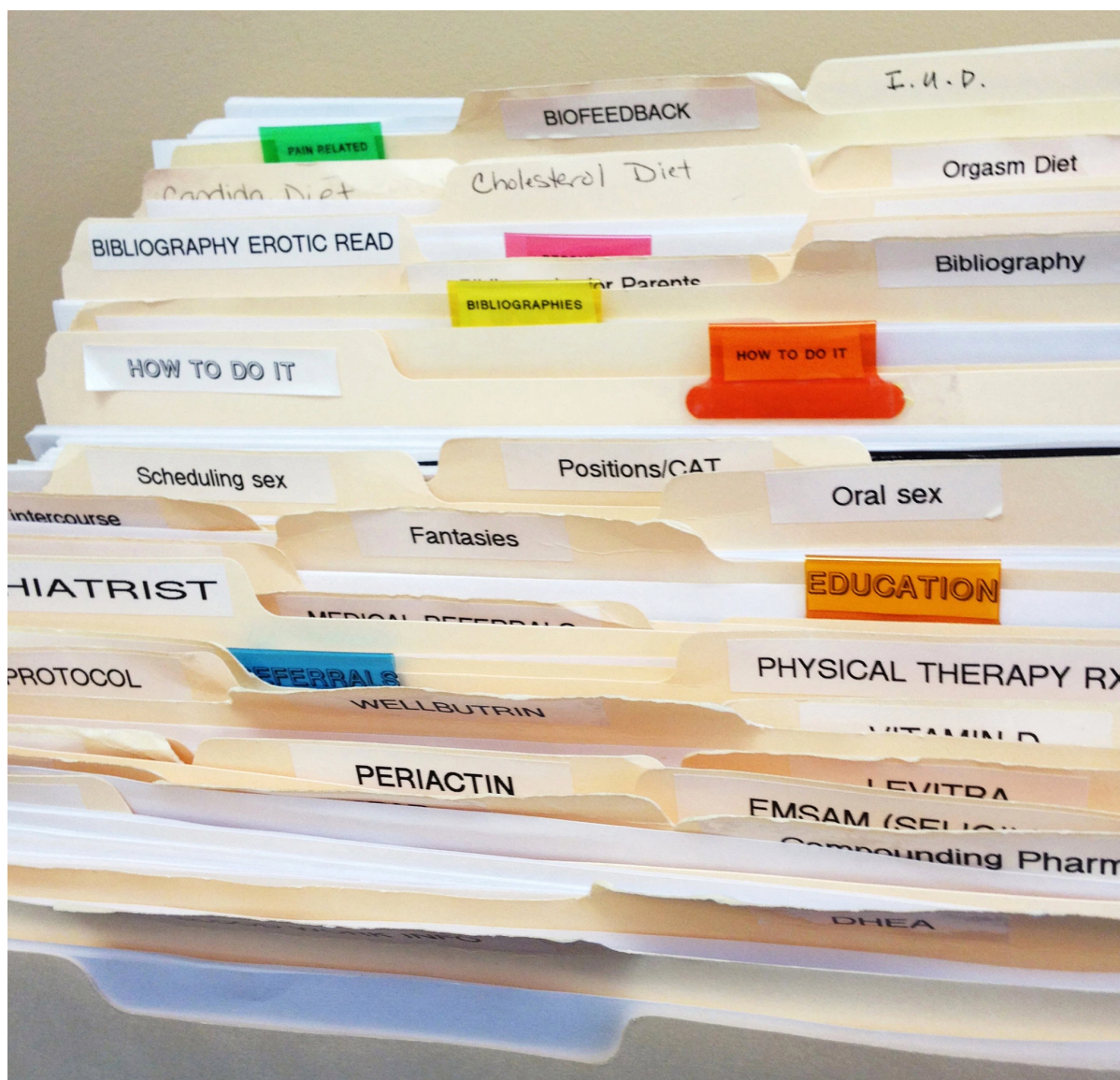
For Marcus's Haredi patients, the entirety of their sexual education has most likely come just before their weddings in classes or tutorials with a kallah instructor, often a rabbi's wife, who teaches the sacred rules of sexuality. The semiquarantine of menstruation is a crucial lesson, and is usually followed by a summary of what is and isn't permissible in the bedroom during the remainder of the month, along with some minimal practical guidance, like suggesting the use of a lubricant in preparation for sex.

One morning at the burnished round table where she talks with her patients, Marcus handed me a bride's manual given out by kallah teachers. This particular book was written for the modern Orthodox; it is relatively progressive. The clitoris, for instance, is mentioned twice. Even so, the overwhelming emphasis is on the wife's responsibility to keep the relationship on the right side of the law. The Talmud "indicates that during marital relations, the husband may not look at or kiss the wife's makom ervah," her private place, the manual warns. The lights should be off, a sheet should cover the couple, the position should be missionary — the wife is charged with keeping sex spiritual, keeping it chaste.

If she doesn't, a parable in the introduction implies, God's Chosen may "fall over the edge" of a cliff. "And that book," Marcus reminded me, "is modern." Her Haredi women seem to feel that their bedrooms are all but laced with Talmudic "trip wires," she said, where one wrong move can cause destruction.

When she starts therapy with a new patient, Marcus told me earlier this month, "I feel like I'm in a canyon and need to find some footing." Searching delicately, painstakingly with each of them, she helps the women to remember moments, recent or running back to girlhood, "when they felt something fluttery, something crinkly in the stomach, funny feelings, a warmth in their genitals," though they may never have identified the sensation as sexual at all. Despite their flat, resistant voices and bewilderment, she coaxes them to recollect these fleeting experiences, to link them with eros and to understand that the feelings are positive. "That gives me the footing," she said. "Then we can start pulling ourselves up." And all the while, she added, "I have to get past their fear: How do I know that where you're leading me won't make me want to do terrible things?" She reminds them that God wants a husband and wife to be close and assures them that she is "leading them to a better marriage and to being closer to God."

Marcus traces her route to her vocation back to her father. He "would tell you that he is absolutely not a feminist," she said, yet he was appalled that as all his children went through modern-Orthodox schools, only her brothers began studying the Talmud when they reached fifth grade. Girls weren't supposed to read the hallowed text at any age, a restriction that has since given way in some segments of Orthodoxy. At home, he assigned Talmudic pages to his daughters from the time they were 10; early on, he endorsed paths of independence.



The sex files, from Marcus's practice at the Medical Center for Female Sexuality in Westchester.

Marcus chose a secular college, partly because the only religious option open to girls seemed repressive. But during her undergraduate years she felt shame about all things sexual; her father had been open-minded about Talmudic education, but the family had been completely silent about sex. At college, the topic put her into a tongue-tied panic, and she couldn't even bring herself to say the word "breasts." While getting a master's in social work, though, she made friends among a small group of modern-Orthodox feminists and gradually discovered that she could talk about sex after all.

She was working with a Jewish organization, trying to get young professionals more involved in philanthropy, when, in 1998, she met a urologist, Michael Werner, at her synagogue. He asked if she would join his practice as an administrator and assist him in setting up a sperm bank and

fertility clinic. In 2000, she and Werner opened the Medical Center for Female Sexuality in Westchester (and later, the one in Manhattan). She treated secular patients with sexual issues, including low libido, while she studied toward a doctorate in human sexuality.

Then, about five years ago, a Haredi rabbi, who asked me to swear never to reveal his name — most Haredim are, to say the least, guarded about discussing the erotic — started to refer patients to her. The rabbi is affiliated with a prominent Orthodox fertility organization; he advises women and couples whose problems with sex are interfering with becoming pregnant or threatening their marriages. Other rabbis also send him cases. He winds up hearing a lot about women's antipathy toward sex — a role that isn't as unlikely as it might sound; throughout much of Haredi Orthodoxy, rabbis are the ones who rule on private matters, even when the domain is the female body. (If a woman is unsure whether her period has begun, she'll put her underwear in a plastic baggie, which her husband takes to a rabbi, who inspects the spotting and renders a decision.)

For years, this rabbi sent sexually troubled women to OB-GYNs to be checked for medical problems and sometimes, as a last resort, to secular counselors. The outcomes were poor. The women might conceive, he said, but most told him they still were resistant to sex. Then the rabbi learned about Marcus through Werner, who worked with some Orthodox men on fertility issues. The rabbi went to the center's website, read its testimonies from women and met with Marcus. He felt encouraged by her Orthodox observance and decided to give her a try. Other rabbis then heard about Marcus's work and sent women her way. Haredim now make up about one-fifth of her practice.

"We were amazed," the rabbi said, referring to his colleagues. "We couldn't believe the difference." Even among women who'd already been to other counselors unsuccessfully, he now heard reports of desire, of happiness, signs of Shekinah in the bedroom. "When it comes to how to help these young ladies, she's like an Einstein in our days." He said that Marcus's religious faith and knowledge made her especially sensitive; they helped her win the women's confidence. "No one walks into that place and feels like she's just a patient. They feel like they're her daughter, her only child."

When Marcus suggested that her patient try the romance novels, the nightgown, the kissing with the lights on — as a way, she told me, to move sex "metaphorically out of the dark," away from teachings of fear and shame — the Satmar woman answered that she was willing to try if her rabbi consented. But she declared that she was uneasy. She didn't want her intimacy with her husband to be prost — the Yiddish word for vulgar, debased. "We don't want to think about it the way the other world thinks about it," Marcus recalled her saying. The woman soon reported back that the rabbi ruled no on all three.

Earlier, the rabbi cautioned against the husband's attending to her clitoris; he'd asked permission after his wife's OB-GYN appointment. Now, though, the rabbi relented: The husband could touch it if this was truly required for arousal. He gave the same reluctant approval for the vibrator.

The logic of rabbinical rulings can be counterintuitive and confusing to Marcus, and the decrees vary from rabbi to rabbi, but a line seems to be drawn between the physical and the psychological. A vibrator can be viewed merely as a piece of machinery to be applied medically to the body; racy literature or lingerie might damage the mind. (To finesse her way around the prohibition against reading soft pornography, Marcus once hired a cousin who majored in creative writing to produce some Haredi supersoft porn, and soon she was handing women a printout culminating in a Hasidic husband's running his hands over his wife's fully clothed hips and giving her a "meaningful kiss." But the tepid scene didn't seem to do much for her patients.)

For Marcus, urging her patients to use a vibrator is a way to build on the memories of sensations she has drawn from them. Though she usually introduces the idea of vibrators during her initial sessions, she doesn't tell her patients to actually try one until later. First, she solidifies trust, clarifying over and over that all is — as God desires — for the benefit of the marriage. Meanwhile, she asks the women to learn about their own bodies, alone, at home, with their hands — a suggestion that, for whatever reason, few women have taken to their rabbis. Last fall, though, one of Marcus's patients did; she was refused. Marcus appealed directly to the rabbi, a step she occasionally takes. Careful to avoid the word "masturbation," she gained his permission.

After several sessions with the Satmar woman, Marcus brought out a wicker basket and set a series of vibrators on the table, starting with a small battery-operated model and concluding with a forearm-size plug-in version. Marcus sent her patient into an exam room to try out the devices and to choose one to take home. The Satmar woman did this obediently but made it clear that she would never extend pleasure to the point of climax, an experience Marcus had described decorously to her. Over the following months of counseling, of checking in on whether her husband was becoming at all comfortable about touching her with the vibrator, the woman's proscription against orgasm did not lift. She was willing to be turned on to make herself more receptive to him, to bring them emotionally closer. She did not want to go past this holy purpose.

"I tell them our values are the same," Marcus said about winning over her Haredi patients, "but in a way, I'm being disingenuous." In addition to working one on one with women, she holds seminars for kallah teachers. She is on a kind of crusade, a fledgling effort to carry new ideas about eros into Orthodoxy, to educate the educators, to persuade them to give brides an abundance of detail about the anatomy of pleasure, about orgasm.

Not many teachers attend her classes; 18 here, eight there. And so far, almost all of them have been modern, though she hopes for a ripple effect, for her perspective to somehow influence other Orthodox cultures. "What is holy sex?" she asked at one of the seminars I observed. "What is Jewish sex?" She abandoned the delicacy of her therapy sessions and put forward the idea that bondage might be sanctified. She discussed oral and anal sex. She cited the Talmud on what is called biah shelo k'darka, which translates as "sex in the non-normal manner"; she argued that passages like this imply that all pleasurable acts between a couple can be sacred.

But it is not always easy for her to reconcile her criticism of Orthodox codes with her own strict faith. After one of her seminars, I asked about her own adherence to the menstrual laws, and about why, even now, she doesn't speak out against them, though she told me they can be profoundly harmful to women's appreciation of their bodies and to their sexuality. She went silent. She sighed. Suddenly her eyes were more than welling up. "I don't know why I'm crying," she said.

Later, she emphasized how vital her religious observance is to her. "I'm part of a system that I hold dear, that I love," she said. At their best, she went on, the rules governing sexuality can make sex feel godly. For her, the regulations related to menstruation had done this. In a practical way, she recalled, the imposed separation helped to restore her erotic drive despite the chaos of young children in the house, and in an ineffable way, the monthly purification in the waters of the mikvah had "made the coming together again feel beautiful, holy — that's what ritual does."

Within her, the contradictions are sometimes wrenching; the repressive and the transcendent in Orthodoxy are intertwined and at odds, and at moments it is a blessing not to think, not to dwell on the paradoxes. "Jewish law is woven into your life," she said. "Often you just don't consider it."

Yet her work forces her to consider it, to wrestle within herself. She embodies the contradictions, endures them, refuses to let them undermine her resolve. And if she has her way, she said, fewer women will be "living in the darkness."

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