

***Kedushah*: The Sexual Abstinence of Married Men in Gur, Slonim, and Toledot Aharon**

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Abstract *Kedushah* (holiness) developed as a pietistic ideal for the virtuous few, encouraging married men to limit to the minimum the frequency and modes of sexual intercourse with their wives. Today, the hasidic groups of Gur, Slonim, and Toledot Aharon (Toldes Aaron) radicalize this ideal by imposing it on the community as a whole. Gur's version is the most restrictive and the only one formalized as a set of ordinances (*takunes*), while Toldes Aaron's version is the most lenient.

The radical *kedushah* norms have given rise to controversy and dissent. Prominent rabbis have argued that they were at odds with the *halakhah*, offensive to women, and harmful to men, while marriage guides within the Gur community have debated their rigidity and universal applicability. The hasidic Rebbes themselves are reticent about the topic, addressing it only in unpublished homilies and personal letters, from which excerpts appear in print for the first time in the present paper.

The rise of these *kedushah* norms in modern Hasidism should be attributed to (a) the inherent hasidic quest for spiritual renewal, which has generated a range of “mysticism substitutes”; (b) resistance to modern “promiscuity”; (c) the historical legacies of these particular hasidic groups, which they strove to revive after the Holocaust by generating new spiritual energies that would attract “virtuous” young men to their ranks. One of the ways to achieve this was to renew the old battle against the traditional enemy—the sexual drive.

Keywords Hasidism · Israel · Gender · Women · Sexual Abstinence · Family

Hasidism is often presented as a movement that opposed asceticism.¹ This characterization has recently been shown to be only partially accurate.² The traditional ascetic piety of the kabbalists did survive into eighteenth-century

¹For a survey of the literature on this topic, see Gadi Sagiv, “Tikun haberit vesiah hasagefanut behasidut tshernobil,” *Mehkerei yerushalayim bemahshevet yisra'el* 23 (2011), 356–7 n. 3.

²See Sagiv, *ibid.*, 353–406, especially 357–8; David Biale, “The Lust for Asceticism in the Hasidic Movement,” in *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality*, ed. Jonathan Magonet (Providence and Oxford, 1995), 51–64; *id.*, *Eros and the Jews* (New York, 1992), 121–45; Tsippi Kaufmann, *Bekhol derakhekha da'ehu: tefisat ha'elohut veva'avodah begashmiyut bereshit hahasidut* (Ramat Gan, 2009), 227–8, 355–6, 418–23, 457–63, 493–4, 517–8. See also David Assaf, *Derekh hamalekhut* (Jerusalem, 1997), 52–3; Louis Jacobs, “Aspects of Scholem's Study of Hasidism,” *Modern Judaism* 5 (1985), 95; Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism* (Hoboken, 1999), 339; Arthur Green, *Tormented Master* (Woodstock, 1992), 28, 35–40, 167–71.

Hasidism, at least in some quarters, although much of it seems to have been attenuated or abandoned over time. One ascetic value, however, was maintained by some in the course of the nineteenth century. This was the value of *kedushah* (literally, holiness, in this context connoting sexual restrictiveness) whereby, in a number of hasidic groups, married men were instructed to limit to the minimum the frequency and modes of sexual intercourse with their wives. However, at that time, this ideal was posited only in abstract terms, and we have no evidence that the *hasidim* were adopting it as an obligatory practice; at most, they took it to be a personal directive issued to individuals, as in the hasidic communities of Kobrin [Kobryń] and Kotsk [Kock].

Today there are three hasidic groups, Gur [Góra Kalwaria], Slonim [Słonim], and Toledot Aharon (commonly pronounced and henceforth referred to as Toldes Aaron, in Ashkenazi Hebrew) that take this ideal to extremes by imposing it on the community as a whole, thus turning what had been an elitist practice (i.e. addressed to the virtuous few) into a universal norm and a banner of group identity. In the present paper I intend to explore this phenomenon from both the theological and the socio-historical perspectives, tracing the reasons why the ideal of sexually restrictive *kedushah* began to be promoted as a norm in the twentieth century. Notably, the present-day hasidic community is extremely reticent about this topic, holding it to be highly sensitive and keeping it out of its public discourse. I shall therefore rely on documentation that is not readily available to outsiders, and on oral testimonies I was able to obtain personally.

It should be noted at the outset that in one form or another, the supererogatory ideal of *kedushah* is common to almost all hasidic groups, and in many of them it manifests itself as sexually restrictive behavioral norms. These often include instructions designed to limit intercourse to the minimum necessary for procreation, and to refrain from “animal-like” behavior aiming at sheer physical pleasure. The famous “hole in the sheet” mode of intercourse is probably practiced by no more than a small minority,³ but similarly restrictive methods are not uncommon. In many of the hasidic texts that relate to the restrictive sexual norm of *kedushah*, these methods are presented in terms of the old hasidic ideal of “worship in corporeality” (*avodah begashmiyut*), namely, the investment of physical acts with holiness by surrounding them with numerous restrictions. Notably, this interpretation of the ideal is at odds with the one most commonly ascribed to it in academic scholarship, where “worship in corporeality” is understood in the sense of utilizing the proper holy

³Amnon Levi went too far in denying the existence of this practice altogether. See Amnon Levi, *Haharedim* (Jerusalem, 1989), 120.

intention as a means of sanctifying and affirming rather than restricting physical acts. It is not impossible that the old value has been charged with new meaning in recent generations, but it may well be that even early Hasidism was more stringent in this respect than scholars have assumed under the influence of romanticized notions of Hasidism. It seems that the whole question requires re-evaluation, a task that lies beyond the scope of the present paper. In what follows, I shall present only the three hasidic groups that have turned *kedushah*, specifically in the sexually restrictive sense, into one of their central values, limiting the frequency of sexual intercourse between husband and wife beyond what is prescribed by the halakhic commandment of *onah* (the husband's legal obligation to perform sexual intercourse),⁴ in order to reduce it to the bare minimum.⁵

***Kedushah* in Gur: The Ordinances of R. Israel Alter, the Beys Yisroel**

Gur Hasidism is a historical offspring of the hasidic groups of Pshiskhe [Przysucha] and Kotsk. Even though Kotsk had its own ideal of abstinence,⁶ there is no indication that this was fostered by Gur until after the Holocaust and certainly not as a norm for the entire community. It was the fourth Gerer Rebbe, Israel Alter (1895–1977), known in Ashkenazi Hebrew as the Beys Yisroel (after the title of his collection of homilies, the *Beit Yisra'el*), who brought about the change when he re-established Gur Hasidism in the newly founded state of Israel. Shortly after his nomination as Rebbe in 1948, he inaugurated the Ordinances on Holiness, known in short as the *takanot*, and commonly pronounced *takunes*.⁷ They have never been published nor, in all probability, ever formulated systematically. He communicated them to some of his senior *hasidim*, who later became the community's first marriage guides (*madrikkhim*), and they passed them on to the community as "oral law." The ordinances are known to many, even outside Gur, and, as I was able to

⁴See M. Ketubot 5:6; *Shulhan arukh*, Orah hayim 240:1.

⁵Full discussion of the sources of the concept of *kedushah* as sexual restrictiveness in earlier halakhic and ethical works has not been included in the present paper. I hope to publish such a discussion elsewhere.

⁶See Menahem Mendel of Kotsk, *Emet ve'emunah*, ed. Yisrael Yaakov Araten (Jerusalem, 2005), §§612, 809, 812, 895. Biale estimates that the Kotsker was "perhaps the most extreme ascetic in the whole history of Hasidism" (Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 130), adding in a footnote that "Ger Hasidism, which derived from Kotsk, lacks this ascetic element" (*ibid.*, 272 n. 30). This has certainly not been the case from the time of the Beys Yisroel on.

⁷See Levi, *Haharedim*, 126–7. The ordinances and their impact on marital life in Gur have been thoroughly studied by Nava Wasserman in her doctoral dissertation, "Hevrat hakedushah: tahalikh hakamat habayit bahasidut Gur" (Bar Ilan University, 2010).

verify in conversation with a number of Gerer *hasidim*, they consist of the following:

- The couple shall have sexual intercourse only once a month, on *leil tevilah* (the night after the wife's immersion in the *mikveh* at the end of her halakhically prescribed menstrual period).
- The couple shall refrain from sexual intercourse from as early as the seventh month of pregnancy.
- After the wife has given birth, the couple shall refrain from sexual intercourse for a further period of six months.
- During intercourse, the couple shall aim to minimize physical contact. The husband shall wear some of his clothes, including his *tsitsit* (considered a *segulah*—supernatural remedy—against the sexual drive) and will not hug or kiss his wife or engage in any behaviour that is not required for the performance of the act of intercourse itself.
- The husband shall direct his thoughts as far away as possible from the sexual act.

Besides these ordinances, the couple's conduct in everyday life is governed by certain additional norms that relate to the ordinances without fully belonging to them. For instance, the husband should never walk alongside his wife in public but must always keep a distance of at least four cubits (about two meters) between them; the husband should not address his wife by her first name; etc.

Notably, the ordinances are all addressed to men. In Gur, only men are full-fledged *hasidim*, and the hasidic religious endeavor (*avodah*, commonly pronounced *avoyde*) is their duty alone. Ironically, Gerer women were traditionally known to pay close attention to their external appearance and to dress more fashionably than most other hasidic women. When a few years ago the current Rebbe first imposed some limitations on women's dress, this was received with consternation in anonymous Gerer forums on the internet.

There are individuals who serve as marriage guides, either for men or for women, in all *haredi* communities,⁸ but under the impact of the ordinances, the men's guides in Gur play a much more dominant role in the young couple's life. Usually they prepare the bridegroom for his wedding night, and continue to accompany him during his first months or even years of marriage. Often they advise him on marital problems, but above all else, they are authorized to introduce him to the ordinances. One of the older *madrikhim*, R. Avraham Yosef (Avrum Yoysef) Irenstein, is considered a supreme authority in matters of *kedushah*.

⁸See Levi, *Haharedim*, 128–30.

The ordinances do not function as rigid norms. In particular, the length of the period of abstinence following childbirth is subject to variation. The Beys Yisroel had recommended a whole year, but the limit he actually set was six months. His brother and successor, R. Simhah Bunem (the Lev Simhah, 1896–1992), lowered the bar to three months. He also allowed the *hasidim* to have sexual intercourse not only on *leil tevilah* but also on the subsequent Friday night. The next Rebbe, their half-brother, R. Pinhas Menahem (the Penei Menahem, 1926–96), recommended that the limit be shortened to six months, and the present Rebbe, R. Yaakov Aryeh (born 1939), the Lev Simhah’s son, has again tended toward relative leniency. There are also special circumstances in which the marriage guides allow and even suggest certain leniencies to the young couple. A Gerer *hasid* has told me that when he traveled with his wife to the United States, his guide instructed him to increase the frequency of sexual intercourse, because America is “a country of promiscuity.”

The ordinances have had far-reaching social implications. By presenting the Gerer *avrekhim* (young married men) with a demanding religious challenge, they have raised their collective pride and enhanced their sense of group identity, distinguishing them from other hasidic groups. On the other hand, the ordinances have had a detrimental effect on the demand for Gerer bachelors in the *haredi* matchmaking market, and there are Gerers who complain that the ordinances are too stringent or even question the need for them. Consequently, from time to time, rumors spread that the ordinances are to be revoked or attenuated, although this may reflect wishful thinking rather than the Rebbe’s actual intention. Recently, it was rumored that the Beys Yisroel had addressed the ordinances only to an elite group of virtuous men and not to the entire community, but all the reliable sources point to the contrary. This is a typical attempt to re-write the past in order to gain legitimacy for tendencies or aspirations emerging in the present. In truth, it is likely that no Gerer rebbe would ever be able to revoke the ordinances, as they have become something of a Gur “trademark.”

***Kedushah* in Slonim: The Morality of Aspiration**

Another hasidic group that adopted an ideal of marital abstinence is Slonim. Here we find no ordinances. The Slonimer rebbes only preach the ideal of *kedushah* as a religious value, leaving it for each individual to decide to what degree he is able and willing to fulfill it—*kol had kefum shi‘ura dileih* (each according to his own [spiritual] degree). In Lon Fuller’s terminology, the

ideal of *kedushah* in Slonim is not a “morality of duty” but rather a “morality of aspiration.”⁹

Slonim is a historical offspring of the hasidic groups of Lechovitch [Lachowicze] and Kobrin, where some elements of the ideal of *kedushah* may have been fostered, though probably with different emphases and to a lesser degree than in present-day Slonim. The practice of sexual abstinence within marriage apparently began—though it is impossible to establish this with certainty—with the third Slonimer Rebbe, R. Avraham (Avrom) II (1884–1933), known by the title of his homiletic work, *Beit Avraham*, as the Beys Avrom. At that time, Slonim was a small hasidic group, and there is no way of knowing how effectively he was able to control it. Subsequent Slonim rebbes have tried to instill the value of *kedushah*, with varying degrees of insistence.

The most impressive figure in the history of modern Slonim is R. Shalom (Sholem) Noah Berezovsky (1911–2000), known by the title of his major work, the *Netivot Shalom*, as the Nesives Sholem or, in short, the Nesives. He was the son-in-law of R. Avrom III (1889–1981), and as such was nominated in the 1940s to be head of the Slonimer yeshivah in Jerusalem. In that capacity, he played an important role in the restoration of Slonim in Israel, preserving and publishing its oral traditions, and advancing Torah learning within the Slonim community. He also maintained a relationship of mutual appreciation with the Beys Yisroel of Gur. When his predecessor R. Avrom III was incapacitated by illness and near the end of his life, the Nesives was crowned the next Slonimer Rebbe by the majority of the *hasidim*. This was exceptional and in terms of traditional hasidic ethics even outrageous.

After the passing of R. Avrom, a minority that refused to accept the leadership of the Nesives followed R. Avrom IV, husband of the late rebbe’s granddaughter, who established his court in Bnei Brak. The group that followed the Nesives, known as Slonim Vayse (Weisse—the White Slonim), is considered more liberal than its rival, known as Slonim Shvartse (Schwarze—the Black Slonim), but their liberal approach is mostly confined to their attitude to modernity and Zionism, while on matters of *kedushah*, the Weisse are as strict and perhaps even stricter than the Schwarze. Even though the Nesives was otherwise relatively moderate and even open-minded, in regard to *kedushah* he had a strong urge to revive and even radicalize the old values of the past. Still, when addressing the topic in public, he used the most abstract and elusive language, trusting his audience to understand the internal codes, and he was even more careful in this respect in the published version of his addresses to the *hasidim*.

Kedushah in Slonim was never promoted as a set of formal ordinances, and the rebbes did not set any fixed standards of abstinence. The only rule has

⁹Lon R. Fuller, *The Morality of Law* (New Haven and London, 1969), 5–6.

been to refrain from sexual intercourse on the Sabbath. Both Slonim and Gur place a theological emphasis on the sanctity of the Sabbath, but the practical implications of this for each group are different. In Gur, the Sabbath is the day when a second monthly sexual intercourse is allowed, while in Slonim it is forbidden, as if the crude physical act of intercourse would defile the spirituality of the holy day. There is even a Slonimer saying that a man who has sexual intercourse on Friday night is not allowed to recite the *Nishmas* (shorthand for *nishmat kol hai*)—a paragraph in the Sabbath morning prayer, considered one of the high points of the Sabbath service in the Slonim tradition. The Slonimer rebbes have encouraged their followers to dedicate Friday night to hasidic communions that often end late at night. Besides the value that Hasidism normally places on such communions, it is quite clear that they are also designed to encourage the men to stay away from home during the hours in which they are most liable to be sexually “vulnerable,” and perhaps even to create a tacit mechanism to ensure compliance with the *kedushah* goal of abstinence.

The fact that the Slonimer rebbes have not standardized the *kedushah* restrictions as ordinances does not mean that they have treated them lightly. The Slonimer *hasidim* can be very radical in their practice of sexual abstinence, and some of them avoid intercourse for very long time-spans. According to current rumors, some *hasidim* complain that the very proximity of their wives is a distraction from the endeavour to attain the desired goal, but we may assume these cases to be unusual.

***Kedushah* in Toldes Aaron: The Milder Version**

The third hasidic group that adopted the *kedushah* norms of marital abstinence is Toldes Aaron. Reb Aharon Roth (1894–1947), known as Reb Ahrele, was born in Hungary and came under the influence of the rebbes of Belz [Bełz] and Blozhev [Błażowa]. He immigrated to the Land of Israel in 1925, returned to Hungary, and in 1939 finally settled permanently in Jerusalem. While still in Hungary, and subsequently in Jerusalem, he established small groups (*havurot*) of *hasidim* who adopted high standards of religious observance. In particular, he called for the investment of great effort in prayer, mutual assistance, and modesty. The latter, in contrast to the Gur norm, entailed an emphasis on women’s dress and on men’s duty to refrain from looking at women (*kedushat ha’einayim*), as well as a strict prohibition of masturbation (*shemirat haberit*). Reb Ahrele also emphasized the attainment of *kedushah* in other spheres of physical activity, such as eating. He, too, issued ordinances for his *hasidim*. The printed version, published shortly

after his death, does not refer to sexual intercourse, but we may assume that he did issue directives on sexual matters, which probably circulated orally.

Shortly after R. Ahrele's death, his hasidic following split into two groups: a minority followed his son, R. Avraham (Avrom) Hayim (1924–2012), who later settled in Bnei Brak, while the majority followed his son-in-law, R. Avraham Yitshak (Avrom Yitshok) Kohn (1914–96), the Rebbe of Toldes Aaron in Jerusalem. Surprisingly, R. Avrom Yitshok was a former disciple of the Satmar Rebbe, who had come into conflict with his father-in-law, R. Ahrele, in Hungary. He brought to the group some of the robust characteristics of Satmar, including a stronger emphasis on the anti-Zionist stance. Toldes Aaron Hasidism soon became a symbol of ultra-Orthodox extremism and social enclosure.

The Rebbe of Toldes Aaron, too, urged his *hasidim* to observe the norms of *kedushah*, but the standards he set were somewhat lower than those of the otherwise moderate Gur and Slonim. He permitted sexual intercourse not only on both *leil tevilah* and *leil Shabbat* (Sabbath night, i.e. Friday night),¹⁰ but also whenever the wife expressed her desire for it (never overtly but rather by subtle indications such as self-adornment or the use of perfume). Moreover, the Rebbe permitted the moderate expression of physical affection between husband and wife. Hugs and kisses are allowed, and during intercourse are even recommended. No directives to distract the thought from the act were given. He even published a short pamphlet entitled *Divrei kedushah*, based on his talks addressing this issue. The outer cover of the pamphlet contained the warning: “Intended for married men (*avrekhim*) only; bachelors (*bahurim*) are not permitted to read this text.” *Divrei kedushah* does not issue any detailed instructions, but the basic rules can be read between the lines, and the language is certainly more explicit than that used by the Rebbes of Gur or Slonim. On account of the relative openness and leniency of the *kedushah* discourse in Toldes Aaron, Gur, and Slonim *hasidim* often scorn it as being crass, but this is probably part of the generally condescending attitude of all Polish and Lithuanian hasidic groups toward Hungarian Hasidism.

At some stage, the Rebbe appointed Rabbi Daniel Frisch (1935–2005) to be the official Toldes Aaron marriage guide. Rabbi Frisch was a renowned kabbalist, the author of the voluminous commentary on the *Zohar*, *Matok midevash*, who commanded a great deal of prestige in his community. His function was to seclude himself with every young bridegroom immediately

¹⁰This naturally refers only to those times that fall outside the woman's period of menstruation. Given that the halakhic prohibition on sexual relations with the menstruant covers a period of approximately twelve days, the leniency provides for no more than two additional nights per month, which is only one night more than the frequency prescribed by the Beys Yisroel.

after his *hupah*, at the peak of the wedding excitement, in order to explain to him in detail what he should expect and do on the first night of his marriage. The explanations would be very explicit—“only pictures were missing,” as one of my informants added with a smile—and quite shocking to many of the young men, who were being exposed to the facts of life for the very first time. Some would even receive a short written document with practical instructions.¹¹ Often they would need guidance even after the first night, if they had failed in the task of consummation or just wished to relieve their anxiety about it. Evaluations of Rabbi Frisch’s personality by renegade Toldes Aaron *hasidim* vary: some describe him as the “horror of the bridegrooms” while others portray him as a considerate person who did his best with the unprofessional tools at his disposal.

Rabbi Frisch wrote a number of books and pamphlets on Jewish laws, customs, and ethics (*musar*), of which one became particularly influential: *Kedushah utseni ‘ut* (Holiness and Modesty). First published in the 1970s, the book ran into many editions, growing larger and more comprehensive from one edition to the next. Except for the introductory chapters, it is, in fact, a selective anthology of quotations from standard books of ethics, kabbalah, and Hasidism—a strategy adopted as a defense against potential critics of the book. It is also furnished with a large number of endorsements (*haskamot*) by prominent rabbis and hasidic rebbes, including the Rebbe of Toldes Aaron. The Rebbe’s own pamphlet, *Divrei kedushah*, was incorporated in the later editions of Rabbi Frisch’s book. Frisch copied verbatim the warning on the cover of the Rebbe’s pamphlet, pasting it on the front page of his own book. It is available in *haredi* bookstores, but generally sold only to married men and never displayed on the open shelves (booksellers would pull it out on request from a concealed storage place), which is hardly surprising: *Kedushah utseni ‘ut* is probably the most explicit hasidic text on the norms of sexual life. While being written in a delicate rabbinical idiom, it refers to almost every aspect of the physical interaction between husband and wife.

The relatively mild character of *kedushah* in Toldes Aaron is surprising but may be explained by the socio-cultural background of the group. In Hungarian Hasidism (and possibly in Hungarian-Jewish culture in general), the family is considered a very important institution. Family cohesion is held to be a foremost value in the life of the individual and an important element contributing to the fortitude of the community as a whole. The idea that affectionate relations between husband and wife might interfere with man’s religious “ascent” is almost inconceivable in this culture.

¹¹I am grateful to Mr. Leon Wieseltier and Prof. Gershon Greenberg, who sent me one such document, probably written by Rabbi Frisch, containing three pages of detailed instructions, some of them embarrassingly explicit.

***Kedushah* in its Theological Context: The Beys Yisroel of Gur**

The Beys Yisroel enacted the *kedushah* ordinances only after he became rebbe in 1948. However, there is some evidence to suggest that his stringent conception of *kedushah* was developed and implemented even earlier, albeit on a small scale. We know that when he was still in Warsaw (1914–40), he cultivated a select group of young married men at the Gerer *shtibl* (prayer and meeting house) on Nalewki Street. Here he may have initiated them into his notion of *kedushah*, for according to at least one historical testimony, the Gerer *hasidim* of the Nalewki *shtibl* were observing stringent sexual restrictions as early as the 1920s or 30s.¹² In addition, a letter he sent during the same period from Warsaw to a Gerer *hasid* in Haifa instructs the addressee on the practice of *kedushah*, emphasizing the prohibition on looking at women (*kedushat ha'eynayim*). Instructions on sexual intercourse are mentioned in the letter only once and very allusively. This is hardly surprising, given that when he subsequently became rebbe, R. Yisroel refrained altogether from referring to sexual restrictions explicitly, both in writing and in his public addresses. The addressee of the letter, Moshe Rosenstrauch, had apparently complained that he was unable to devote enough of his time to Torah study. R. Yisroel assured him that this omission was not too grave, stressing instead what he believed to be a more important challenge:

If at present you do not have enough time for learning, you are not at fault, and the Lord Almighty may yet help you find more time for learning. But those things that do depend on you, you should observe meticulously. Once again, I tell you expressly that I do not mean [abstaining from] things that are done unintentionally or out of real necessity but rather [from] those that are not absolutely essential. You should *take care to observe the same standards as a married scholar (avrekh) six months after his wedding*, or as a bachelor who follows the path of Hasidism. You must guard your eyes as much as possible and close them altogether whenever necessary, as it is written: “[He that] shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.”¹³ By this you would avoid evil thoughts. I ask you not to take the matter lightly, because it is the main thing. [...] You should know that in my opinion, the very essence of Hasidism (and even of Judaism) depends on this.¹⁴

¹²See Ita Kalish, *Etmoli* (Tel Aviv, 1970), 95–6.

¹³Isa. 33:15.

¹⁴Israel Alter, “Mikhtav hadrakhah vehizuk,” *Tsefunot* 5 (1989), 63; the emphasis is mine.

There is no doubt that the phrase emphasized above refers to limitations on sexual intercourse within marriage. Even at this early stage of his development, the Beys Yisroel had adopted the idea that *kedushah* was the essential tenet on which Hasidism, and even the whole of Judaism, depended. In later writings, he often used the term “a fundamental principle in Judaism” (*yesod bayahadut*) and sometimes even “the fundamental principle of Judaism” (*yesod hayahadut*). Consequently, Gerer *hasidim* often refer to *kedushah* as *yidishkeit* (Judaism or Jewishness). This rhetoric suggests that R. Yisroel conceived of *kedushah* as a timeless and immutable value, although a subsequent passage in the same letter implies that he regarded it as particularly relevant to the challenges of his own time:

In our times, when concerns about livelihood are so great, and while hearts and minds are small, the main challenge for a man is to guard himself so as to avoid committing those acts from which it is possible to refrain. Given that it is so difficult to comply with “Do good . . . ,” it is even more necessary to observe “. . . and depart from evil.”¹⁵ This is why I consider this particular point a great principle.¹⁶

The Beys Yisroel states clearly, then, that his interpretation of *kedushah* stems from his understanding not only of Hasidism but also of the challenges facing his own generation, a generation which has deteriorated both morally (hearts) and intellectually (minds).

When the Beys Yisroel became rebbe, he stressed these ideas time and again in his discourses (*sihot*), especially on the Torah portion of Kedoshim (Lev. 19:1–20:27). He often took as his starting point the conflicting interpretations by Rashi and Nahmanides of the verse “Ye shall be holy” (Lev. 19:2). Rashi interprets it as follows: “Separate yourselves from the forbidden sexual relations [mentioned in the preceding verses] and from sin.”¹⁷ Nahmanides, by contrast, sees the injunction to be holy as relating to all spheres of life, and emphasizes that it calls for a more restrictive standard than that required by the explicit Torah prohibitions.¹⁸ He warns that one should not be “a sordid person within the permissible realm of the Torah”¹⁹ and that therefore, one should refrain from drinking wine to excess, stay away from impurity,

¹⁵After Ps. 34:15 (KJV: 14); 37:27.

¹⁶Alter, “Mikhtav,” 63–4.

¹⁷Rashi on Lev. 19:2. The term “sin” (*averah*) may itself refer to sexual transgressions, as in the tannaitic sources. See on this Rabbi Meir Gruzman, “Lemashma‘utam shel habituyim ‘averah’ u‘devar averah’ bileshon hakhamim,” *Sinai* 90:1 (1987), 260–72.

¹⁸Nahmanides ad loc.

¹⁹Ramban [Nahmanides], *Commentary on the Torah*, trans. Charles B. Chavel (New York, 1974), 282.

avoid gross overeating and coarse speech, and, in the same spirit, “minimize sexual intercourse.”²⁰ In a discourse dating from 1950, the Beys Yisroel typically suggests that the two medieval commentators do not necessarily differ in their interpretation of the verse. Even Rashi, who reads “Ye shall be holy” as referring to no more than the halakhic norms, would admit that in order for these norms to be observed properly, they must be “fenced around” by additional prohibitions. Consequently, quoting the talmudic statement “Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you,”²¹ he calls upon the individual to “sanctify” himself by refraining even from activities that are not sinful in themselves:

Not everyone is the same. There are great men who do not fear the evil inclination, as their heart is dead within them,²² for they have slain their evil inclination; they can sanctify themselves by that which is permitted to them. But people who are only just embarking on divine service should begin by refraining [not only] from sins [but also] from those things that may induce them to sin, for this would make it easier for them to conquer their evil inclination. Only then would they graduate to the level of sanctifying themselves by that which is permitted to them. [...] This is alluded to in reference to the virtuous generation [of the Exodus], about whom Scripture says that “all the congregation are holy, every one of them”, [and yet] they were commanded: “Holy shall ye be”²³ [i.e., you must still attain a higher level of holiness], for holiness has no measure [i.e., is an infinite scale].²⁴

This statement implies that at this stage of his career as a rebbe, the Beys Yisroel still saw *kedushah* as the merit of the few, and an ideal to be aspired to by each individual according to his own spiritual capability. Similarly, in his early discourses, the Rebbe stressed that the main aspect of *kedushah* was “the Holiness of the Eyes,” and that the endeavor to achieve *kedushah* belonged mainly to “the days of youth” (an allusive reference to the struggle to refrain from masturbation). Yet all these motifs become quite scarce in the Beys Yisroel’s later discourses, where—although he does not directly address the issue of marital abstinence—the most recurrent themes, stressed

²⁰Ibid., 282–3. He is referring to sexual intercourse as prescribed by the commandment of *onah*—the husband’s obligation to have sexual intercourse with his wife according to standards set by the *halakhah*.

²¹See B. Yevamot 20a: “Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you.”

²²After Ps. 109:22.

²³Num. 16:3 and Lev. 19:2 respectively.

²⁴Israel Alter, *Beit yisra’el: Leviticus* (Jerusalem, 1980), p. 158 (Kedoshim 1950).

time and again, are that whoever sanctifies himself “from below” receives assistance from Heaven and is sanctified “from above,” and that one should try to disseminate *kedushah* to others. Nevertheless, some allusions to the more stringent restrictions on marital sex entailed in *kedushah* do occur here and there in his collection of homilies. One example is the homily on the Torah portion of Yitro, dating from 1957. According to Scripture, God said to Moses: “Go unto the people, and sanctify them *today and tomorrow*.”²⁵ Moses, however, said to the people: “Be ready *for the third day*, come not to your wives.”²⁶ The Sages had already noted that “Moses added one day out of his own understanding,” i.e., at his own initiative.²⁷ The Beys Yisroel interpreted this addition as an example of “Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you.”

“Come not to your wives”—[not even] next to [your] wife.²⁸ And the point of *kedushah* is, as it was written: “Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you.” The verse may imply that Moses added an extra day [...] even though this had not been commanded [by God]. And this is the point of *kedushah*, to sanctify oneself beyond what is decreed. The verse “sanctify them today and tomorrow” teaches that the idea of sanctifying oneself by what is permitted refers to all the generations, and that the addition [namely, the requirement to go beyond the *halakhah*] is the method of attaining *kedushah*.²⁹

In this homily, it is clear that the Beys Yisroel is referring to *kedushah* in terms of conjugal relations, and that he calls for “additions” in this sphere that go beyond the requirements of *halakhah*. These additions allude to the extended duration of sexual abstinence (as Moses “added an extra day”) and to the avoidance of such actions as do not directly relate but may lead to intercourse (“[not even] next to [your] wife”). A few lines further in the same homily, the Beys Yisroel explains that these restrictions are conducive not only to the attainment of *kedushah* in the future but also to the atonement for sins committed in the past. Moreover, he is no longer speaking about an individual scale of values but rather is setting a norm for the whole of his flock.

These shifts of emphasis—from “holiness of the eyes” and “sins of youth” to holiness specifically in reference to conjugal relations, as well as from

²⁵Ex. 19:10.

²⁶Ex. 19:15.

²⁷B. Shabbat 87a.

²⁸After Targum Onkelos ad loc.

²⁹Alter, *Beit yisra'el: Exodus*, 1957, p. 122 (Yitro 1957).

informal individual directive to universal norm—do not necessarily reflect a change in the Beys Yisroel's stance. While the evolution of his rhetoric should be noted, Gur Hasidism deals with *kedushah* very discretely, and the Rebbe may well have been deliberately refraining from making explicit reference to sexual intercourse. However, his persistent reliance on the interpretations of Rashi and Nahmanides on this point is not very convincing. His own idea of *kedushah* is neither Rashi's nor Nahmanides'. He takes the emphasis on the sexual sphere from the former, and the notion of "sanctification within that which is permitted" from the latter, but at the same time he discards both Rashi's notion that *kedushah* is attained through the observance of ordinary halakhic norms, and Nahmanides' understanding of *kedushah* as relating also to the non-sexual spheres of life. Both commentators' views seem quite far from the Beys Yisroel's idea of standardizing *kedushah* by way of ordinances.

***Kedushah* in its Theological Context: The Nesives Sholem of Slonim**

Rabbi Sholem Noah's voluminous work, *Netivot Shalom* (commonly pronounced *Nesives Sholem*), which is based on his addresses to his *hasidim*, contains many discussions on the concept of *kedushah*. He writes that the requirements of *kedushah* are pertinent in two spheres of activity: eating and coition. Food nourishes the blood, and thus eating "for the sake of Heaven" renders one's blood holy and pure. Similarly, as sexual desire comes from the "boiling of the bloods," he who engages in sexual intercourse "not in order to satisfy his lust," but rather to "elevate his evil desires according to God's will," manages to "purify and refine his blood so that it does not boil for sin."³⁰ *Kedushah* is very difficult to attain because man is born with the "capacities for lust," and because, if he fails to "guard the holy covenant" (i.e. engage in sexual sins, especially masturbation), his failure damages spiritually not only the organ that committed the sin but also his entire body. In fact, *kedushah* cannot be achieved by man alone, without the help of Heaven.³¹

The Slonimer Rebbe often refers to sexual matters as *midat hayesod*, namely, the human equivalent of the kabbalistic attribute (emanation) of the godhead known as the *sefirah* of Yesod. This *sefirah*, the ninth in the order of divine emanations, is symbolized by the male sex organ. The Slonimer Rebbe contends that sins related to this attribute are the main cause of the exile, and therefore the practice of *kedushah* in respect of the sexual sphere of life is the key to the redemption. This holds true for "the redemption of the

³⁰R. Shalom Noah Berezovsky, *Netivot shalom*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1982), 107.

³¹*Ibid.*, 108.

collective” just as it does for “the redemption of the individual.”³² Thus the battle against the sexual urge is man’s most important task:

Just as in a war between adversaries, the decisive battle is fought over the strongest fort, [. . .] so it is in the war against the [evil] inclination: the main battle takes place at this attribute, the attribute of Yesod, which is called the attribute of desire—the gateway to the body, the gateway to all that is corporeal and material, at which the decisive battle is waged between the divine soul, which comes to man from above, and the animal soul. [This determines] whether the divine soul will prevail, so that one would be holy and pure, like an angel from Heaven, or whether, Heaven Forbid, the animal soul will prevail, and one will be reduced to living like an animal.³³

Against potential moderation in this respect, he reiterates a statement, which he attributes to the Beys Avrom, and adds:

There is no middle way in worldly affairs; [rather, there is] either a commandment or a transgression. As has been transmitted by the true *tsadikim* with regard to “Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you,” you may imagine that something is permitted, but the truth is that nothing is permitted; everything is either an obligation or a prohibition.³⁴

Eighteenth-century Hasidism spoke about turning the ego (*ani*) into naught (*ayin*), or the nullification of one’s sense of existence (*bitul hayesh*), advocating what would seem to be an ideal of mystical self-annihilation.³⁵ Later Hasidism, however, took the same terms to denote an ethical ideal demanding the ultimate degree of humility.³⁶ The Nesives invests these terms with yet another meaning: one should nullify one’s material existence, namely, purify

³²Ibid., 110.

³³Ibid., 111.

³⁴Ibid., 119. A similar saying is attributed in Polish Hasidism to R. Menahem Mendl of Kotsk (see below, n. 109). It is noteworthy that the Beys Avrom was married to his great-granddaughter.

³⁵See Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth-Century Hasidic Thought*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Jerusalem, 1993), 67–9; Mendel Piekarz, *Bein ideologyah umetsi’ut: anavah, ayin, bitul mimetsi’ut udevekut bemahshavatam shel rashei hahasidut* (Jerusalem, 1994), 55–94.

³⁶Piekarz, *ibid.*, 104–49. Piekarz discerns the beginning of this shift of meaning already in the teachings of the disciples of the Maggid of Mezerich, but it became dominant among the post-1815 hasidic leaders.

it to the extent that it becomes spiritual.³⁷ In other words, one should direct the energies of one's physical desires to the love and worship of God.³⁸

An attitude that allows no room for compromise with the evil inclination is typical of many radical religious movements. But Slonim is not a radical religious movement. The Rebbe is consistent in his view that this uncompromising stance should be adopted only in respect of the one important battlefield—sexual desire—where human nature is least likely to comply with a restrictive discipline.

In *Netivot shalom*, the Slonimer Rebbe addresses the community as a whole. Personal directives he may have issued to individual *hasidim* are hardly to be found. This is why I ascribe great importance to two letters he wrote in the years 1956–7, long before he became rebbe, to students in the Slonimer yeshivah. Neither of the documents has ever been published. The Slonimer *hasidim* regard them as confidential and give them only to “serious” bridegrooms (warnings against delivering them into unauthorized hands appear in both of them). The letter of 1956 is called “The Wedding Day Letter” (*Mikhtav yom hahupah*), and is handed to them a few hours before their wedding, as part of their marriage guidance, and the one of 1957 is called “The Three Months Letter” (*Mikhtav gimel hodashim*) because it is given to them after three months of marriage. A few years ago, I managed to obtain copies of these letters, which turned out to be quite abstract, conveying the same ideas as those encountered in R. Sholem Noah's homilies. However, while the Wedding Day Letter is altogether theoretical, the Three Months Letter adopts a somewhat more intimate tone and speaks a little more explicitly:

It is against my nature to write about these matters, but I am concerned, and I care about you [...], as I have brought you up, fostered and guided you up until now, [showing you how] to be wholesome during the days of your youth [=bachelorhood]. But now that you are a married man, I see that once again, you stand alone, engaged in a raging battle that is even fiercer than the previous one. For in that [first battle, i.e. before marriage], it was prohibited, while in this [second battle, i.e. within marriage], it is permitted. Many have already been slain, and many others will be slain [in this battle]. Only the elect few [*yehidei segulah*], whom God has preserved and planted in every generation, can emerge from it [unharmed] and gloriously victorious. By virtue of this they go on to illuminate other realms [of life] as well. I pray that you, my beloved, will be among them.³⁹

³⁷Berezovsky, *Netivot shalom*, 120.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 132–5.

³⁹Three Months Letter, §1. I am grateful to the anonymous Hasid who gave me a copy of this letter and to Prof. David Assaf, who sent me copies of both of the letters.

Notably, the picture drawn by the Nesives is quite the opposite of what we usually find in the Talmud and the traditional ethical literature, where the challenge of controlling the sexual drive confronts man before his marriage, while after marriage, he “has bread in his basket” (*pat besalo*),⁴⁰ namely, he is able to satisfy his desire lawfully. In the struggle to control the sexual drive, marriage is traditionally presented as the solution, not the problem, and yet here the position is reversed: the most difficult struggle takes place within matrimonial life, precisely because in marriage, sex is *prima facie* permissible.

Following previous rebbes in the Lechovitch-Kobrin-Slonim tradition, the Nesives holds that the battle against the sexual drive before marriage, when it is focused on the sin of masturbation, and the battle after marriage, when it is fought on the arena of conjugal relations, are interdependent: “If one keeps the holy covenant [i.e. refrains from masturbation], one attains pure faith, and false thoughts do not confuse one’s mind, God forbid.”⁴¹ This idea comes from the Kabbalah, where the *sefirah* of Yesod, which is the divine power symbolized by the male sexual organ, is connected with the upper *sefirot* of the godhead’s brains (*mohin*), a belief which sprang, as Scholem noted,⁴² from the ancient medical notion that semen originated in the brain.⁴³

In his letter, the Nesives stresses at length the importance of overcoming the urge to masturbate: “This virtue is greater and loftier than all the merits and virtues that a Jew serving God may attain.” The reason for this is twofold. Firstly, most good deeds are performed in public and can be appreciated by others, while here “no one knows, and it is [performed] for God alone.” Secondly, the struggle against the evil inclination is as all-consuming “as a flame of fire,” and the damage that is caused by masturbation affects not only the sinner himself but also his children. “That is why our Rabbis [. . .] consider the attribute of Yesod [namely, control of the male sexual organ] as the most fundamental principle (*yesod hayesodot*) in divine service.” As in his more public addresses quoted above, here, too, the Slonimer Rebbe describes the battle against the evil inclination in militaristic terms: Just as in war there are local as well as global victories, so, too, in the war against the evil inclination, total victory is achieved only “after fierce battles [have been waged, claiming] many victims.”⁴⁴ Here the Nesives turns to the supererogatory value of

⁴⁰See B. Yoma 18b.

⁴¹Three Months Letter, §2.

⁴²Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Philadelphia, 1987), 154.

⁴³This theory is often attributed to Galen but was developed long before him. See Vivian Nutter, *Ancient Medicine* (London, 2004), 123.

⁴⁴Three Months Letter, §3. The “militaristic” expressions are quite common in this context. See Levi, *Haharedim*, 122.

kedushah. Following Nahmanides, he advocates self-restraint even in regard to acts that the Torah has permitted: “Husband and wife—the Divine Presence (*Shekhinah*) dwells among them; their home is like a minor Temple [...], their table is like an altar, their bed is like the Holy of Holies, and he [the husband] is like the High Priest who enters its innermost part (*lifenei velifenim*) to offer sacrifices.” By contrast, if the husband simply indulges his sexual urge, he is labeled an adulterer even though sexual intercourse with his wife is permitted by the Torah. “[Physical] contact that is not required [for the fulfillment of the commandment of *onah*] falls under the prohibition of “thou shalt not approach” (Lev. 18:6).⁴⁵

How does this understanding of *kedushah* accord with the religious ideals most commonly associated with Hasidism of earlier times? The Nesives seems to entertain no doubt that his own view is perfectly in tune with the pietistic ideals and lifestyle of his illustrious hasidic predecessors:

The early *hasidim* of the previous generation, whom we were privileged to witness, had shed their sweat and blood in the struggle against permitted pleasures, in just the same way as those who struggle [to refrain from] the most strictly prohibited acts. They struggled more to resist a commandment that pleasures the body than [they struggled to resist] a transgression that gives the body no pleasure at all. The Sages had said: “He [should] love [his wife] as his own flesh,”⁴⁶ and they [i.e. the early *hasidim*] interpreted: but not as his own soul. When someone once said to Rabbi Abraham the Angel, who practiced strict sexual abstinence,⁴⁷ that by this he was bound to lose his [share in] the World to Come, he replied: “The World to Come is worth losing in order to avoid the pleasures of This World.” Some of them would weep copiously every *leil tevilah*. They would repent the required [and permitted sexual act] just as one repents a grave sin, lest their bodies experience physical pleasure. They feared the *kelipah* [evil force] of permission more than the *kelipah* of prohibition. [...] and our Rebbe [the Beys Avrom], of blessed memory, told us that R. Mikhl Sofer of Kobrin did not realize that his wife was lame even after three years of marriage. Such was their holiness. And we—what are we by comparison, whose hearts are weak and whose brains are dull?! For when the heart and the brains fail to function, the

⁴⁵Ibid., §4.

⁴⁶After B. Yevamot 62b; Sanhedrin 76b.

⁴⁷See *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* [*Shivhei ha-Besht*], translated and edited by Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz (Bloomington, 1970), §75, p. 98; Biale, “The Lust for Asceticism,” 56.

liver, where lust dwells, takes hold of the body. The boiling, impure blood overflows, and the evil inclination burns like fire, even among those who are engaged in Torah [study] and *mitsvot* all day long.⁴⁸

Only sincere and profound fear of God can cure this burning. He who guards the holy covenant by day will remember God by night, when he is vulnerable to the temptation of the sexual drive. God is described as a consuming fire,⁴⁹ namely, He who consumes fire, because He eats, so to speak, the fire that the Jew sacrifices to Him—the fire of lust.⁵⁰ The *hasid* should control himself by all available means. Even when the impulse “burns within him, and he has no escape”—he should first withhold it, then refuse it, then “slaughter” it as a sacrifice to God. But the preferred method of dealing with lust is “to return all of one’s desires to their source [in God], and to invest all the yearnings of one’s soul in one’s love of God, like a son clinging to his father.” One way of achieving this is to inject enthusiasm into one’s prayer. The person who prays with enthusiasm “beholds the beauty of the Lord,”⁵¹ and all the desires and pleasures of his animal soul are reduced to naught.⁵²

Following many *musar* and hasidic thinkers before him, the Nesives maintains that the challenge of observing *kedushah* lies mainly in the first year of marriage, the year that determines the husband’s conduct for the rest of his married life: “When Satan sees a young husband who strives to excel in his divine service, he instigates a quarrel between him and his wife, and this enables him to ensnare the husband in whatever he does.”⁵³ The idea is that a quarrel between husband and wife during the day is likely to lead to reconciliation (namely, sexual intercourse) by night, and this is precisely what should be avoided as much as possible; it is even offered as a rationale for maintaining peaceful relations in the home! Moreover, when sexual intercourse does take place, to fulfill the *mitsvah* of *onah*, the husband must act “as one compelled by a demon”⁵⁴ and avoid thinking about his wife for the rest of the day. When he “faces all manner of physical and mental temptations,” while at the same time “having compassion” [for his wife, who is assumed to crave marital intercourse], he should “resist all this with [the dedication of] self-sacrifice, for the Torah endures only in him who sacrifices himself for it,⁵⁵

⁴⁸Three Months Letter, §5.

⁴⁹Deut. 4:24; 9:3.

⁵⁰Three Months Letter, §6.

⁵¹Ps. 27:4.

⁵²Three Months Letter, §6.

⁵³Ibid., §7.

⁵⁴B. Nedarim 20b.

⁵⁵B. Shabbat 83b; B. Gittin 57b.

becoming cruel to himself and to members of his household. Only then [...] would his mouth and heart open up with Torah and prayer.”⁵⁶

The Rebbe urges his addressee not to despair, promising him great rewards in this world and the next if he rises to these challenges. However, he indicates that “when confronting the enemy face-to-face, rational argumentation is of no help [...] One should know how to act as a faithful soldier who is willing to die for the sake of victory, not sparing either his own life or that of his wife and family members. Self-sacrifice, blood, tears, and sweat are required, [...] for a life of happiness and joy is a life of abstinence and purity.”⁵⁷ He makes only a few allusions to the practical aspects of *kedushah*: The frequency of sexual relations is not regulated by a fixed standard; rather, every individual is free to determine it for himself, so long as he restricts himself by constructing various “fences” around the commandment of *onah*, such as not speaking to his wife during coitus, and generally distancing himself from her in everyday life. And the Rebbe concludes: “Be thou strong therefore, and show thyself a man⁵⁸—a man, and not a woman.”⁵⁹

***Kedushah* in its Theological Context: Toldes Aaron**

R. Avrom Yitshok Kohn, the Rebbe of Toldes Aaron, also invokes the rhetoric of religious “ascent,” stressing the need to guard oneself against the “street,” but he dwells much more on the detrimental outcomes of unholy conduct. His pamphlet, *Divrei kedushah*, opens with his favorite topic—the requirement to overcome the evil inclination “in youth,” namely, to refrain from masturbation. But he soon arrives at the main issue, quoting a tradition attributed to R. Aharon II of Karlin (the Beys Aaron):

The difference between the *hasid* and the ordinary person is that the *hasid* says: “That which is forbidden is certainly forbidden, while that which is permitted—I nevertheless do not have to do it.” The ordinary person, on the other hand, says the opposite: “That which is permitted is certainly permitted, while that which is forbidden—I can nevertheless seek permission to do it.”

And he concludes: “Even that which is permitted requires a great deal of careful attention and prudence in determining how to behave rather than being eager to satisfy one’s lust. And this is what the Sages meant by ‘Sanctify yourself by that which is permitted to you’” [B. Yevamot 20a].⁶⁰

⁵⁶Three Months Letter, §7.

⁵⁷Ibid., §10.

⁵⁸1 Kings 2:2.

⁵⁹Three Months Letter, §10.

⁶⁰*Divrei Kedushah*, chap. 5, p. 9.

The Rebbe focuses on the destructive consequences suffered by the child who is the product of unholy coitus. By contrast, children conceived in holiness are righteous and better equipped to overcome their own sexual drives. Such children possess the “grace of holiness” and display a better aptitude for Torah and prayer. On the other hand, those who fail to comply with the requirements of holiness and who indulge their physical desires would never truly feel the love of God. Even if occasionally they may be stirred by a certain “liveliness” in prayer, none of it would endure.⁶¹

Kedushah, however, applies not only to sexual intercourse but also to other areas of family life:

It is one of the principles of Hasidism, as well as the rule for our group, that husband and wife do not walk together in the street. Many other hasidic groups also observe this strictly. And if the couple must walk together, as, for example, when they return from their parents' home, the husband must walk ahead with his wife behind him. Now there are those who not only walk together but almost touch each other, and this is very unsightly and reproachable [. . .] Some [married couples] take care not to pass [to each other] an object from hand to hand even during [her] days of purity,⁶² especially if this may be observed by others, because others are not supposed to know at what stage she is in her menstrual cycle. Whoever can act in this manner should do so, although in truth, this depends on one's own feeling: If he is not affected by this [contact with his wife], and if it makes no difference to him whether he hands her the object or puts it on the table—then, according to *halakhah*, there is no need to observe such a stricture. However, he who is affected [by such contact] and experiences lust or an erection, God forbid, should take it as an absolute prohibition, as the Sages said “He who brings himself to a state of erection will not be allowed to enter the division of the Holy One, blessed be He” [B. Niddah 13b],⁶³ and this is a very grave sin. And if his wife does not agree to comply with this stricture, he should explain to her the gravity of this transgression.⁶⁴

The Rebbe goes on to emphasize the importance of “holiness of the eyes” (*kedushat ha'eynayim*), urging his followers to refrain from looking at women,

⁶¹Ibid., chap. 11, p. 19.

⁶²The *halakhah* forbids such contact only when the wife is considered impure, namely, on the days of her menstrual period and the following week. See: *Shulhan arukh*, Yoreh de'ah 195:2.

⁶³Isidore Epstein characteristically translated the opening words euphemistically: “He who excites himself by lustful thoughts” (The Soncino *Babylonian Talmud*, Nedarim, p. 88).

⁶⁴*Divrei kedushah*, chap. 12, p. 20.

especially “in our times,” when “the streets are full of obscenity and promiscuity, and it is very difficult to guard oneself.” Under these conditions more than ever before, whoever does manage to keep his eyes “holy” is “highly esteemed in Heaven.”⁶⁵

Even though the pamphlet touches upon practical aspects of *kedushah* in a language that is much more explicit than that used by the rebbes of Gur or Slonim,⁶⁶ it nevertheless remains virtually silent about the most important issue, sexual intercourse itself. For the Rebbe’s thoughts on this, we must turn to other sources.

The frequency of sexual intercourse prescribed in *Toldes Aaron* for most married men is approximately three times a month: *leil tevilah* followed by the next two Friday nights—a standard that complies with the *halakhah* on the frequency of intercourse appropriate for “scholars” (*onat talmidei hakhamim*), which, according to later halakhic authorities, may be adopted by laymen as well.⁶⁷ There are no specific prohibitions on displays of physical affection such as hugging and kissing; all that is required is that during intercourse, one’s thoughts should be holy and focused exclusively on the fulfillment of the *mitsvah*. But an interesting three-way correspondence from 1977, between the Rebbe of Toldes Aaron, R. Daniel Frisch, and an individual whom, to protect his privacy, I shall call Y, sheds additional light on this issue. The correspondence has never been published, but through personal contacts I was able to obtain copies of the letters written by the Rebbe and by R. Frisch, while the background of the correspondence was explained to me by members of the community who remembered the events described.

Y was a prominent follower of Toldes Aaron, a member of one of the most respectable Jerusalem-Hungarian families. Immediately after his wedding, while R. Daniel Frisch was instructing him on the conduct of his first marital night, he apparently fainted. Sometime later, he became acquainted with the Beys Yisroel of Gur, and was so impressed by him—especially by his attitude to *kedushah*—that he became a Gerer *hasid*, turning his back on his former hasidic community. He clearly considered the ordinances of Gur superior to those of Toldes Aaron by virtue of being more stringent and more demanding, and he was particularly critical of R. Daniel Frisch as the Toldes Aaron marital guide, although the specific points of his criticism remain unclear.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶The Toldes Aaron texts are probably more explicit on sexual matters than any other hasidic texts on the subject, and Gerer *hasidim* sometimes mock them as gross.

⁶⁷See *Mishnah berurah*, §240, 6, and *Be’ur halakhah* ad loc. See also Simhah Ben-Tsiyon Rabinovitch’s addendum to his major work, *Pisekei teshuvot*, which appeared as a separate booklet under the title *Pisekei teshuvot al shulhan arukh umishnah berurah* §240 (Jerusalem, 2002), 599. Since §240 deals with the issue of *onah*, the addendum booklet is sold only to married men. The author is the son of the late Rebbe of Biala.

One of the allegations he leveled was, apparently, against the permission to engage in hugs and kisses during intercourse, acts that are strictly proscribed in Gur. Gur received Y with open arms, while the Rebbe of Toldes Aaron was naturally distressed by his desertion. To appease his former Rebbe, Y wrote an apologetic letter explaining his move, which he sent to the Rebbe via an intermediary—the very same R. Daniel Frisch, of whom he had earlier been so critical. Frisch wrote back to report that the Rebbe was refusing to read Y’s letter, quoting him as saying angrily (in Yiddish): “He [Y] is of no interest to me. He has made a mockery [*leitsanut*] of me, and a mockery of our whole community, including his own father, as if whoever wanted to be a [good] Jew had to run away from us.”⁶⁸ R. Frisch also responded to the accusation Y had leveled at him:

You referred in your letter to me, too, claiming that I was inadequate as a marital guide, and that on account of this, all our young married men are rolling in filth, etc., etc. I really do not understand; for surely, the act [of sexual intercourse] as such may be performed in a lustful and degenerate manner [even though it is a *mitsvah*], while—with the right intention—it is possible to engage in hugging and kissing [which are not required for the fulfillment of the *mitsvah*] in a state of holiness and purity. I know that there are [diverse] views about this among the *tsadikim* of our generation, but the main thing is to direct one’s heart to Heaven.⁶⁹

To his next letter, R. Frisch attached a letter from the Rebbe, and he offered Y the opportunity to restate his original grievances in more polite terms, so that he would be able show them to the Rebbe. The attached letter from the Rebbe, which is quite long, was addressed to Frisch, but it is quite clear that the arguments in it were addressed to Y. It begins with an expression of concern for Y and for the souls of his children, and then proceeds as follows:

Now let us consider the crux of the matter. Even if, by means of this self-sacrifice, he appears to be committed to maintaining himself in holiness and purity, and his intention [appears to be] good, it is nevertheless clear from the addenda of R. Tsvi Elimelekh of Dynów to the book *Turn Aside from Evil [and Do Good . . .]*⁷⁰ that if a person adopts stringencies and departs from the ways of the world [i.e., strays from the accepted norms of conduct], he draws upon himself accusations [from Heaven] [. . .], and who knows

⁶⁸Unpublished letter by R. Daniel Frisch dated 21.4.1977 (?).

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Tsvi Elimelekh of Dynów, *Hosafot mahartsa al sur mera va’ase tov* (Jerusalem, 1997), §36, p. 28.

whether he would be able to withstand them. It is explained there that this was the intention of Aharon and Miriam when they spoke against Moses who had adopted the path of abstinence that diverged from the ways of the world. The Lord told them that this [i.e. the ways of the world] applied to other people but not to “my servant Moses” [Num. 12:7]. [...] You also know that according to the Zohar,⁷¹ this was why [Satan] accused Job, for he had sacrificed only burnt offerings, which are entirely consumed by fire on the altar, and he did not give any share to the *sitra ahra* [the Power of Evil]. Had he sacrificed peace offerings [which are partly consumed by the sacrificer], then Satan would not have accused him. Now the Lord has given us his Holy Torah, and whoever follows the path of Torah receives Heavenly assistance and protection from above. But he who pursues a path that lies beyond his reach, Satan eventually collects his share from him.⁷²

The rebbe adds a homiletic interpretation of Exodus 15:9, from which he seeks to demonstrate that to overcome the evil inclination one must “share the spoils” with it, i.e., satisfy it to some degree.

I assume that this unpublished correspondence is the most outright and explicit formulation of the idea underlying the relative leniency of Toldes Aaron regarding *kedushah*. Although it is apologetic about this leniency, it justifies it in theological terms that conceal psychological sensitivities: the Evil Inclination cannot be suppressed altogether, and any attempt to achieve such a goal is liable to lead to undesirable consequences. Therefore, one should “bribe” the Evil Inclination⁷³ with leniencies, satisfy and placate rather than provoke it to a full confrontation. This approach reflects a willingness to allow precisely those compromises to which the Nesives so staunchly objected.

The *Kedushah* Polemic

The ideal of *kedushah* as posited by Gur, Slonim, and Toldes Aaron met with opposition within the broader Orthodox camp. Shortly after the Beys Yisroel enacted his ordinances, prominent Litvish (mitnagdic) rabbis criticized them

⁷¹Zohar II, 33a.

⁷²Unpublished letter by the Rebbe of Toldes Aaron to R. Daniel Frisch, 26.6.1977 (?). The Rebbe concludes by taking credit for Y’s victory over the sin of masturbation in his youth, protesting that not everything he had learned about abstinence had come to him from Gur.

⁷³Cf. Ibn Ezra on Lev. 16:8 and Nahmanides’ explanation ad loc.; Zohar II, 33a, 172a; III, 258a–b.

sharply both on halakhic and on *musar* grounds. The polemic eventually subsided, and *kedushah*, though rejected by many, gradually came to be viewed as a legitimate hasidic norm. However, in Gur itself, the ordinances became a controversial subject. Here no one denied their validity, but the *hasidim*, especially the marriage guides, disagreed over their interpretation.

Already in pre-war Poland, a prominent hasidic teacher (but not a rebbe!) criticized the application of the *kedushah* ideal in Hasidism, although his criticism was not publicized until the 1990s. This was Rabbi Avraham Shimon Engel-Horovitz (known as Reb Shimon Zhelichover), the renowned *mashgiah* (ethical guide) of the famous rabbinic academy in Lublin (*yeshivat hakhemei Lublin*). In a letter to one of his newly married former students, he acknowledged that “one should take great care to avoid thinking about sexual matters, even in reference to animals or to one’s own wife,” but he sharply criticizes those who took the ideal of sexual purity to extremes:

As for sexual matters—I am fully aware that many have fallen into this trap. They broke down on account of what they had read in the books or had heard from their rebbes, which they failed to understand correctly. They believed that if a Jew was not as pure as an angel he was worthless and there was no hope for him. This drove many to despair and desolation, which in turn prompted some to withdraw from the permitted and fall, Heaven forbid, into the prohibited, even though they were virtuous and righteous [. . .] Even some of our own men have adopted excessive stringencies, [and there is no need to spell out] the damage that they have caused; the Lord Almighty knows the truth.⁷⁴

The most famous document criticizing the *kedushah* norms is a letter by R. Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, known as the Hazon Ish (1878–1953), who was the most influential *haredi* leader in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Even though he does not mention any group or person, it is quite clear that the letter addresses the conjugal norms of Gur. The Hazon Ish does not refer to sexual abstinence as such—he himself is reported to have practiced it, refraining from physical contact with his wife once she refused his divorce proposal⁷⁵—but rather focuses on the Gur *kedushah* norm of “distancing” the husband from his wife in everyday life. The Hazon Ish is particularly outraged by the Gerer *hasidim*’s adoption of this practice even in the first year of marriage, about which the Torah says: “He shall be free at home one year,

⁷⁴R. Avraham Shimon Engel-Horovitz, *Kuntres kitevei hakodesh*, cited in: http://www.bhol.co.il/forum/topic.asp?whichpage=8&topic_id=2466988&forum_id=19616. A slightly more moderate version appears in his book *Naharei esh* (Brooklyn, 1997), letter 50, p. 161.

⁷⁵Hayim I. Kulitz, *Hahozeh milita* (Jerusalem, 1990), 61.

and shall cheer up his wife which he hath taken” (Deut. 24:5). He insists that to “cheer up” means “striving to demonstrate affection and intimacy through conversing with one’s wife often and addressing her in placating terms,” since “at times, a formal and respectful attitude can express lack of intimacy.” It is therefore preferable for the husband to adopt “a jocular and light-hearted manner” in addressing his wife. He also advises the husband “to tell his wife where he is going whenever he leaves the house, and on his return, to share with her [news on] what he has been doing, and [to discuss with her] other such trivial matters, to encourage and gladden her heart.”⁷⁶

The Hazon Ish probably wrote this letter in Bnei Brak in the early 1950s. At approximately the same time and in the same place, another Litvish rabbi, R. Yitshak Isaac Sher (1881–1952), the head of the prestigious Slobodka yeshivah, wrote an article entitled *Kedushat yisra’el* [the Holiness of the Jewish People], which dealt somewhat more bluntly with the same sensitive issue. It is no wonder that his article remained unpublished for many years and has only recently been posted on an internet site.⁷⁷

Rabbi Sher begins by drawing attention to an apparent controversy between Maimonides and Nahmanides, the former condemning sexual desire and the latter condoning it as holy. Rabbi Sher concludes that there is no real disagreement between them: sexual desire, like all other physical desires, is natural and should be condemned only if it is indulged by way of excessive pleasures, but it is holy when it functions within the boundaries set by the Torah, namely, in order to fulfill the commandment of *onah*. He proceeds to analyze the views of Rashi and Nahmanides on the matter, concluding as follows:

One does not observe the *mitsvah* [of *onah*] properly if one performs it only in order to fulfill one’s obligation. [...] In truth, he who performs coition without ardor violates [the commandment] “her duty of marriage [= *onah*] shall he not diminish” (Ex. 21:10).⁷⁸ [...] Just as it is prohibited to abstain altogether from the act itself, which is the husband’s duty of *onah* in respect of his wife, so it is prohibited to refrain from physical intimacy with her, which is what the wife craves—to enjoy her physical intimacy with her husband. This entails desire that goes beyond what is required for [the performance of] the act itself. The husband is commanded to satisfy her desire as she pleases. And see [B.] Yevamot

⁷⁶Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz et al., *Igeret kodesh me’et gedolei hador* (1968; repr., Bnei Brak, 1986), 1.

⁷⁷R. Yitzhak Isaac Sher, *Kedushat yisra’el* (n.d., n.p.), in: http://www.bhol.co.il/forum/topic.asp?whichpage=13&topic_id=2466988&forum_id=19616.

⁷⁸This verse is the source of both the term and the commandment of *onah*.

62 and Pesahim 72, where it is stated explicitly that whenever she desires and yearns for her husband—this is her [rightful] *onah*, even if it exceeds the prescribed minimum.⁷⁹

Rabbi Sher goes on to attack the hasidic understanding of *kedushah*:

I have heard that some pretended God-fearing and pious men [*mithasedim*] take great care to fulfill this *mitsvah* for the sake of Heaven, without any desire.⁸⁰ Such a person would busy himself half the night with Torah and prayer [. . .] and only then, after midnight, would he come home and wake up his wife, prattle to her placatingly in order to fulfill this *mitsvah*. [Naturally,] she allows him to do with her as he pleases, and he is proud of having managed to fulfill this commandment without [succumbing to] the evil inclination, [namely], without any impure lust. He later wonders why the sons he has produced in this way have turned out to be wicked or stupid!⁸¹ Surely, the reason is the false belief that it is wrong to perform the commandment [of *onah*] with desire, whereas [the truth is that] a son conceived without desire turns out to be foolish, as is well known, and when intercourse takes place without the wife's full consent or desire, that is, when she would rather be asleep and is angry with her husband for disturbing her and doing with her as he pleases rather than as she pleases, then he violates a Torah prohibition, and his sons will possess the nine evil traits⁸² of the rebellious and sinful.⁸³

The Children of Israel, he contends, are so holy that they are able to “delight themselves in the Lord”⁸⁴ through eating and coitus, just as Adam had done before the Sin of Eden.⁸⁵ For the Lord wishes his children to “delight

⁷⁹Sher, *Kedushat yisra'el*, 6–7.

⁸⁰Cf. the quotes in Moshe Rosman, “Al nashim vehasidut: he'arot lediyun,” in *Yashan mipenei hadash: mehkarim betoledot yehudei mizrah eiropah uvetarbutam. Shai le'Imanu'el Etkes*, ed. David Assaf and Ada Rapoport-Albert (Jerusalem, 2009), 1:160–1.

⁸¹He scornfully cites a conversation he had with a *tsadik*—presumably the Beys Yisroel himself: “I once put the following question to one of the *tsadikim*: If this [i.e. the sexual norm of *kedushah*] is the good way, then why are their [i.e. the *hasidim*'s] children not good, and often stupid or wicked? He replied that while this was one of the secrets of Creation, even king Hezekiah, who was righteous, begat king Menasseh, who was wicked” (*Kedushat yisra'el*, 4).

⁸²See B. Nedarim 20b.

⁸³Sher, *Kedushat yisra'el*, 7.

⁸⁴After Isa. 58:14.

⁸⁵The source of this idea, though without reference to the sexual context, is in the teachings of Rabbi Nathan Tsvi Finkel (1849–1927), the founder of the Slobodka yeshivah and its Musar theology—as well as Rabbi Sher's father-in-law. See my article: “Gadlut ha'adam

themselves in His goodness.” This is why they are able to perform physical acts “for the sake of Heaven,” while those who endeavor to shun the physical pleasure of sexual intercourse end up diminished mentally and spiritually. For even if they declare in advance that they intend to perform the sexual act only in order to fulfill the commandment of *onah*, they know all too well that when it comes to the act itself, they are bound to be distracted from their purpose by the inevitable stirring of their natural desire, and they end up performing the whole act lustfully.⁸⁶ To convince the *hasidim* that his understanding of the matter is correct, Rabbi Sher appeals to their view of themselves as heirs to the kabbalistic tradition by adducing a series of quotations from the Zohar to corroborate his position.⁸⁷

As an adherent of the Musar movement (*musarnik*), which developed in the Lithuanian *yeshivot* in the late nineteenth century and called for ethical self-improvement, R. Sher acknowledges that the couple achieve sanctification by ensuring that during coitus they focus on nothing other than the ethical and religious significance of the act. He takes this significance to be (a) the creation of a new human being, which resembles the work of God; (b) the union of male and female in the image of God, by which, “through the power of desire,” they come to resemble Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; and (c) a means of enhancing their love for each other, which is not only a virtue in itself but also serves to enhance their love of God and of their fellow human beings. He admits, however, that the virtue of love “is not properly developed among us [the *haredim*]. Those who have claimed in their learned books that marital love is contingent on transient factors (*ahavah hateluyah badavar*)”⁸⁸ are wrong. “For surely, this love is natural, and it is a *mitsvah* to enhance and develop it properly,” which includes the husband’s obligation to satisfy his wife whenever she desires him.⁸⁹

It is for this reason, Rabbi Sher contends, that when the couple come together, the husband must address his wife in a way that conveys not only “awe, piety, and chastity,” but also tenderness, affection, and erotic love (*agavim*). He clearly anticipates the reader’s astonishment at the latter: “The point of erotic love seems difficult to understand,” but he quotes the Zohar and Maimonides to bolster his argument that the husband must speak to his wife explicitly even “about her [physical] beauty.”⁹⁰

vehaktanato: temurot beshitat hamusar shel yeshivat Slobodka,” in *Yeshivot uvatei midrashot*, ed. Immanuel Etkes (Jerusalem, 2007), 248–50.

⁸⁶Sher, *Kedushat yisra’el*, 7–9.

⁸⁷Ibid., 9–12.

⁸⁸See M. Avot, 5:16. The translation is based on the Soncino edition of the *Babylonian Talmud*, Nezikin 70.

⁸⁹Sher, *Kedushat yisra’el*, 12.

⁹⁰Ibid., 15.

Without expressly mentioning the Gerer *hasidim*, he condemns what he calls the bad habits arising from a common misunderstanding of the ideal of *kedushah*:

As for the bad habits that many of them have adopted in error, believing that in order to maintain themselves in holiness they must refrain from talking to their wives—the rabbis must strive to make them realize that this kind of holiness is the very essence of impurity [. . .] and that the husband must speak to his wife, addressing her with wondrously affectionate words of placation.⁹¹

Having elaborated on how coition is to be performed by both parties, each according to his or her nature, in order to achieve the appropriate mental state during the act,⁹² R. Sher admonishes the *hasidim* (to whom he consistently refers as *mithasedim*, namely self-proclaimed, sham pietists) who rely on the talmudic statement that the husband should perform the sexual act “as one compelled by a demon.”⁹³ This, he explains, is not meant for ordinary people but only for the small minority of those who are “perfect.” Among the *mithasedim*, however, the following situation prevails:

With the passage of time, when the husband’s passion has died down and his love has evaporated, he begins to boast about [performing the act in] holiness, as if compelled by a demon. This is a grave error, which gives rise to numerous problems: the wife loathes her “righteous” husband and quarrels with him—about other issues, of course, as she is embarrassed to tell him what really upsets her and what she really misses; there is no harmony (*shelom-bayit*) in the home, and the children are neglected, deprived of a good education on account of the quarrels. May God have mercy upon them.⁹⁴

Rabbi Sher repeatedly criticizes the *mithasedim* for presuming to perform the sexual act without experiencing any pleasure. In truth, “they are wallowing in lust, like animals, as dictated by nature.” They think that they are fulfilling a *mitsvah*, while in reality they are committing a sin.⁹⁵ He calls on all teachers and parents to explain to their young charges that it is a *mitsvah* to awaken sexual desire, as this is a means of harnessing nature to the service of holiness, through an act that enables man “to delight in the Lord and to sanctify himself with His sanctity.”⁹⁶

⁹¹Ibid., 27.

⁹²Ibid., 16–8, 22–4.

⁹³See above, n. 54.

⁹⁴Ibid., 20–1.

⁹⁵Ibid., 25.

⁹⁶Ibid.

What seems to bother R. Sher is not so much the violation of the halakhic norm of *onah* but rather the imbalance that results from the Gerer *hasidim*'s practice of *kedushah*. It creates an unhealthy, self-deluded, unbalanced personality, while also disturbing the balance of the commandments that regulate the relations "between man and God" as against those that govern the relations "between man and man" (to which the commandment of *onah* belongs). Both these sensitivities are typical of the Lithuanian Musar movement, in which Rabbi Sher was a prominent figure.

Another important document on the subject of *kedushah* is a letter written by the Hazon Ish's brother-in-law, R. Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, known as the Steipler (1899–1985). The Steipler was of hasidic origin, but he grew up in the extremist Litvish musar yeshivah of Novardok [Nowogródek] and was very much influenced by his illustrious brother-in-law, the Hazon Ish. After the Hazon Ish's passing, he emerged as one of the most prominent leaders of the *haredi* community in his own right. The letter, often titled *Igeret hakodesh* (The Holy Epistle), begins with praise for the ideal of *kedushah*, advocating self-restraint in the realm of sexuality, but it soon turns into a staunch attack on the extreme versions of this ideal:

It is true that to abstain from worldly pleasures is a great merit, [...] but this does not apply unless a person fulfills his obligations as prescribed by the Torah. When, as a result of [observing *kedushah*], he fails to meet his obligations as stated in Torah law, [...] his actions become undesirable [...] Even if he imagines that he is thereby ascending higher and higher, it is his arrogance that leads him to deem himself so very virtuous. In reality, he causes spiritual damage to himself as well as to others. Sometimes his actions are exposed as being downright shameful, as eventually he is bound to break an actual prohibition, which I know for a fact to have happened, God save us. *Onah* is a positive biblical commandment, just like the eating of *matsah* [on Passover]. He who violates it at the time when his wife is likely to conceive (if she did not forego her entitlement to it truly and wholeheartedly) is an absolute sinner. Such a sin is one of the transgressions "between man and man," for which even the Day of Atonement or death cannot atone.⁹⁷ Such a man is comparable to a thief and a robber, as he steals from his wife that which he is obliged to give her. This amounts to killing his wife, as it is known that a woman's utmost aspiration is to have a loving husband, and when she sees that this is not the case, she is so disappointed that at times her very life

⁹⁷M. Yoma 8:9.

is in danger, on account of her great sorrow and grief at being as lonely as a widow while her husband lives.⁹⁸

The Steipler goes on to refer the reader to the halakhic sources for the commandment of *onah*, reminding him that it should be performed only with the wife's willing consent, but he then resumes his criticism of the excessive hasidic strictures of *kedushah*:

If the husband performs the duty [of *onah*] abruptly [*hotef uvo'el*], without intimate contact with his wife, if he withdraws just as soon as the act is over and keeps his distance from her, he may think that he has thereby ascended to a high [spiritual] level, but in reality his lust and his [sexual] impulse have not diminished at all. Rather, they have been fully satisfied and pleased, while his wife has experienced no pleasure at all. On the contrary, she is distressed and humiliated, weeping in private [. . .] This undoubtedly [. . .] brings down [heavenly] judgments upon him, God forbid, and he deprives himself of the help of Heaven in both spiritual and material affairs. The notion he has of himself as one who ascends to ever higher degrees [of holiness] is illusory and utterly false, for sins and transgressions can only damage and defile, not elevate.⁹⁹

Insisting that physical affection and intimacy—"hugs, kisses, etc."—are an integral part of the duty of *onah*, the Steipler promises that so long as the husband offers them "for the sake of Heaven and out of compassion [for his wife], so as not to upset and humiliate her," he will attain true *kedushah*.

Notably, the Steipler acknowledges, at least implicitly, that sexual abstinence represents an even higher degree of holiness. In the next paragraph, he recognizes that "many talmudic scholars and God-fearing men" do practice it in certain circumstances, but he insists that their freedom to do so depends on the full and wholehearted consent of the wife, which she grants only once she has ascertained that her husband "truly loves her, and that he disciplines himself only for the sake of Heaven," or else when she is so virtuous that she genuinely wishes her husband to attain holiness, or if she happens to be married to an "illustrious *tsadik*." Yet he emphasizes again that abstinence is strictly forbidden "if it hurts the wife, who depends on her husband, and if she is not wholeheartedly willing to forego his obligations to her."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸*Igeret kodesh*, p. 2, §§1–2. Another version of this letter appears in Avraham Horovitz, *Ore-hot rabenu* (Bnei Brak, 2005), 5:29–31. Horovitz claims that his version is the most authentic and had been copied from the Steipler's own manuscript.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 3, §4.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 3–4, §6.

We do not have a response to these accusations by any of the prominent hasidic leaders. If they did engage in some form of dialogue with the Litvish rabbis who criticized them—indications of this appear in Rabbi Sher’s letter, quoted above—none of it was recorded. To account for this apparent silence, it should be noted that the *haredi* community as a whole is not inclined to air intimate issues in public, especially not when they are the subject of intense dispute, and the *hasidim* for their part do not require public explanations or justifications of their rebbes’ directives, which they are expected to follow without question or argument. We do, however, possess one hasidic response to the Litvish allegations, written by one of the most prominent figures in Gur—Rabbi Nahum (Nuchem) Rotstein, current head of the all-hasidic Nezer Hatorah Yeshivah in Jerusalem.¹⁰¹ The undated letter, which—in the form in which it circulates is replete with grammatical and typographic errors—was undoubtedly addressed to a Litvish personality during the “reign” of the Beys Yisroel.

Rabbi Rotstein begins with the declaration that he is not authorized to speak in the name of the Rebbe (to whom he does not refer explicitly even once), and is therefore offering only his “personal point of view”:

I am not authorized to speak, as this [authority] rests with the ship’s captain, who guides his ship in the stormy sea of our difficult times.¹⁰² Strong winds are blowing, and the turbulent waters sweep away everything that is good; abysses have opened up, and the boundaries that fend off promiscuity have been breached. Only the very few are holding fast, but their heads are spinning around, and all eyes turn to the captain, who is guiding his ship to a safe haven.¹⁰³

Gur, he contends, does not advocate that path of abstinence [*perishut*] that calls for abstention from all worldly pleasures, beyond the requirements of the *halakhah* as set out in the *Shulhan arukh*: “In Gur one is not required to stray, God forbid, from the path of the *Shulhan arukh* even by an iota; the only requirement is to maintain and reinforce the path of the *Shulhan arukh*.” Gur aims to ensure that the *hasidim* do not conduct themselves like animals or roosters,¹⁰⁴ guiding them instead to a life marked by “gentility, peace and

¹⁰¹See http://www.bhol.co.il/forum/topic.asp?whichpage=13&topic_id=2466988&forum_id=19616.

¹⁰²The text reads “*bitekumateinu*,” but this is probably a typographic error, and it should read “*bitekufateinu*.”

¹⁰³Nahum Rotstein, Letter, 1.

¹⁰⁴This is a reference to the talmudic saying that scholars of the Law should not copulate with their wives as frequently as is the habit of roosters (B. Berakhot 22a).

tranquility, domestic harmony, delicacy, and good manners.”¹⁰⁵ This is certainly an apologetic claim, as the values it promotes are alien to the practice and internal discourse of the Gerer *hasidim*, who disdain all manifestations of what they view as sheer sentimentality.

Rabbi Rotstein claims that the path of Hasidism belongs not only to those who call themselves *hasidim* but is “the most fundamental principle of the Holy Torah, as Scripture has it: ‘Holy shall ye be for holy am I, the Lord your God’.”¹⁰⁶ He interprets the verse, following Nahmanides, to mean that the explicit commandments of the Torah refer only to what is appropriate for everyone at all times, while extra norms may apply at certain times to certain individuals or to particular generations. It is the duty of the spiritual leaders of each generation to decide which extra norms are applicable at what time and to whom. If they see that the standard of their own generation has deteriorated, they must apply stricter norms by adding certain limitations to “fence around” the basic, universally applicable commandments. Thus, the extra limitations or fences that have attracted criticism are not new but have always formed part of the commandment “Holy shall ye be.” If a person does not know with which norm to comply, he should consult an authorized leader.¹⁰⁷

In language that is reminiscent of the Slonimer Rebbe’s pronouncement on the same topic,¹⁰⁸ Rabbi Rotstein refers to the “early *hasidim*” who feared the days on which marital sexual intercourse was permitted more than they feared the days on which it was prohibited. He also quotes the Kotsker’s statement that “there is no such thing as permission; everything is either an obligation or a prohibition.”¹⁰⁹

According to Rabbi Rotstein, the norms of *kedushah* should be explained to women “gently and agreeably,” to “win them over to the paths of Torah.” He elaborates at length on how the husband should convince his wife that the *kedushah* restrictions are beneficial to their mutual spiritual growth.¹¹⁰ He even develops a quasi-platonic, noble ideal of marital love, suggesting that when the couple are united physically, their union is “animal-like,” they are “immersed in fleshly lust,” and their love is conditioned by transient factors, whereas if their love is based exclusively on the common spiritual goal of fulfilling the commandments, the bond between them is profound, permanent,

¹⁰⁵Rotstein, Letter, 1.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 1–3

¹⁰⁸See above, at n. 47.

¹⁰⁹Rotstein, Letter, 3. As we saw above (n. 34), a similar saying was attributed to the Beys Avrom of Slonim, who was married to the Kotsker’s great-granddaughter.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 4–7.

and unbreakable. Thus they are able to invest with holiness the crude and unavoidable physical act that is entailed, by dint of their “created nature,” in the commandment of *onah*, so long as they fulfill it only “for the sake of Heaven, just like all the other commandments of the Torah.”¹¹¹

Anyone familiar with the Gur ethos is bound to look at this text with some amusement. The Gerer *hasidim* are known for their rough, brisk manner—in their dealings with family members at home just as much as in other areas of life where displays of tender feelings, which they deplore, might be expected of them. The notion that they distance themselves from their wives in order to love them better would seem to be absurd. It is no wonder that the idea was ridiculed by a number of *haredi* internet surfers on the Israeli Hyde Park website in 2009.¹¹²

Rotstein goes on to explain that only the person who has reached the highest degree of spirituality is allowed to follow the practice—associated with Isaac Luria, the “holy Ari”—of hugging and kissing his wife during intercourse,¹¹³ since only such a refined person can “raise” or restore to their divine source the “holy sparks” that have fallen into the “lowly” domain of corporeal sexuality. For the ordinary person, on the other hand, “corporeal acts are very dangerous, as it is extremely difficult to transcend [the domain of] materiality, and very great care is required to avoid remaining in it.”¹¹⁴ With these claims R. Rotstein is effectively inverting the conventional view, advocated in all the traditional halakhic sources, whereby those who are permitted physical intimacy with their wives are the ordinary men, while members of the intellectual and spiritual elite are allowed to refrain from it! Rotstein corroborates his conclusion with what he presents as the lesson of experience:

The person who does not follow the path of Torah, and who expresses his love [for his wife] physically—even though he does his utmost to display the intimacy between them outwardly, and even if, as he does so, he imagines that nothing in the world is more precious to him than his wife, nevertheless, you find that in most cases, sooner or later, he becomes bored with his wife, betrays her, and turns to other women, God save us. This shows that

¹¹¹Ibid., 4–5.

¹¹²http://www.bhol.co.il/forum/topic.asp?whichpage=1&topic_id=2466988&forum_id=19616; http://www.bhol.co.il/forum/topic.asp?cat_id=24&topic_id=468645&forum_id=1364.

¹¹³For the kabbalistic-theurgical underpinnings of the practice of kissing and hugging during intercourse, R. Rotstein refers the reader to Hayim Vital’s *Sefer hagilgulim* as quoted in Yaakov Emden’s *Sidur beit ya’akov*, “Hanhagat leil hashabat,” chap. 7, 3[should be 2]:6 (Zhitomir, 1881), 163a.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 5, 11.

his displays of intimacy never expressed his true love for his wife but rather [his love] for himself, as all external manifestations [of love] are not genuine and do not reflect the state of affairs as it really is.

Thus a man may delude himself that he is fulfilling a commandment, while in fact he is doing nothing other than satisfying his lust. The only way to escape this is to “arduously learn books of *musar* and Hasidism, and to totally submit oneself to a *tsadik*.”¹¹⁵

How does this comply with the commandment of *onah*? R. Rotstein acknowledges that according to the *Shulhan arukh*, marital intercourse should normally take place on *leil tevilah* and on Friday night, but “if there is a circle of married men” who abstain from it “in compliance with the guidance of a spiritual leader, not only are they not contravening the law of the *Shulhan arukh*, they are actually observing it!” This is because, unlike other violations of *halakhah*, this violation is not driven by the urge to satisfy “the body’s needs” but rather the opposite—it is clearly motivated by genuine “anxiety” at God’s Word and represents the “fences and restrictions” that surround the actual commandments in order to make it harder to violate them, especially when the generation is as promiscuous as the current one is. Fences and restrictions that go beyond the law should not be taken as breaches of the law.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, even if a person takes such restrictions upon himself without being instructed to do so by a spiritual leader, he may still be complying with the law, so long as he genuinely feels that he cannot fulfill the commandment [of *onah*] in the proper mental state, i.e., with “awe and fear,” without physical pleasure, and while focusing all his thoughts on the fulfillment of the *mitsvah* for the sake of Heaven.¹¹⁷ As for his wife—if she agrees to marry him knowing in advance that he is committed to performing *onah* less frequently than is required by the general norm, she is effectively giving him her willing consent and approval.¹¹⁸ Finally, R. Rotstein reminds his reader that the frequency of *onah* prescribed for scholars (*talmidei hakhamin*) in the halakhic sources is not a rigid standard and may change in a variety of circumstances.¹¹⁹ He also justifies the practices that are associated with “this particular circle”—the Gerer *hasidim*—of “distancing themselves from their wives by not walking alongside them in the street or in the market place,” and of never referring to their wives by their first names, by arguing that

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 7.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 8–9.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 10. R. Rotstein is referring to the varying frequencies of *onah* prescribed by the Mishnah for a range of common professional occupations. See M. Ketubot 5:5.

¹¹⁹Rotstein, Letter, 10–11. See above, at n. 67.

these are not new norms, and skillfully finding earlier sources in which to anchor them,¹²⁰ even though they have never been adopted by the leading halakhic authorities.

Rabbi Rotstein concludes by calling on his readers not to challenge these exacting norms but rather to strive to adopt them, and to admire the Gerer *hasidim* (“this circle”) for managing to guard themselves against the pitfalls “of our times.” For “not only do they battle internally with their own [evil] inclination, and struggle to obtain the cooperation of their households [namely, their wives], they also have to cope with external opposition dressed in rabbinic garb, purporting to defend the honor of the *Shulhan arukh* while in fact aiming to break their spirit and to provoke their households [wives] against them.” In recognition of all this, anyone who honors the Torah should honor these men for their “supreme heroism” and help them persevere with their efforts.¹²¹

This valiant defense notwithstanding, the Gerer *hasidim* are well aware of the damage the *kedushah* ordinances have caused to their standing within the *haredi* community. Gerer bachelors often find it difficult to secure a marriage, as even young women brought up within Gur prefer to marry other *hasidim* in order to escape the strictures of the ordinances. From time to time there are rumors about men who have failed to comply with the *kedushah* norms, or about marriage guides (*madrikhim*), who are being called to resolve complex marital crises. Indeed, the *kedushah* norms have attracted not only external censure but also internal disapproval and some dissent. Following the fluctuations in the norms prescribed by the Gerer Rebbes who succeeded the Beys Yisroel, an internal debate erupted among the community’s marriage guides. Some called for greater flexibility in the implementation of the ordinances, while others insisted on maintaining the more traditional stringent line. The debate continues to the present day, conducted within the closed confines of Gur’s inner circles, without allowing any of the arguments to circulate in writing. Nevertheless, one of the community’s more lenient marriage guides, Rabbi Avraham Mordekhai (Avrum Mordkhe) Roshetzky, anonymously published a hasidic *musar* book in which he alluded to his position on the subject. The book deals with a variety of topics and expresses systematically and vividly the basic tenets of mainstream contemporary Hasidism. When it comes to *kedushah*, which occupies only a very small proportion of the book, the author has this to say:

Apart from [the ordinary commandments], the Holy Torah ordered us, as the Sages put it: “Sanctify yourself by that which

¹²⁰Ibid., 11–12.

¹²¹Ibid., 12.

is permitted to you” (B. Yevamot 20a). [...] This requires a great deal of insight and prudent caution. [One has] to grant the body what it needs without becoming inflamed, swept by or attached to the permitted material excesses. [*How to go about*] *this is up to the discernment and consideration of anyone who seeks the proximity of the Lord*. This applies to all the other commandments that are to do with cleaving to God, which have been given to us without setting precise standards.¹²²

To the outside observer, this text may seem to be harmless and even banal, but in the internal Gerer discourse, it is almost subversive to suggest that the norms of *kedushah* are not determined by fixed standards, and that they may be adapted to the needs of every individual to suit to his own character traits and particular circumstances. R. Roshetzky seems to suggest that the individual is free to determine the standards for himself, although elsewhere in the book¹²³ he emphasizes the great importance of the guidance provided by a *tsadik* in every sphere of life.

A much more public dispute about the *kedushah* ordinances erupted in the Israeli arena in 2009, when a Gerer woman, Sarah Einfeld, appeared in a short documentary film entitled in English *Shrew* (in Hebrew *Soreret*). During the filming she decided to desert Gur and to adopt a secular way of life. In her blog, she reported on the “repression” of women in Gur and in the *haredi* community as a whole, highlighting the suppression of sexuality and intimacy under the regime of the *kedushah* ordinances.¹²⁴ Among other details, Einfeld described how a female marriage guide had suggested to her that whenever she felt the desire for intimacy with her husband, she should find solace in chocolate, which had a similar effect on the brain. As is typical for Israeli mass culture, Einfeld soon became a media star. Israeli journalists, most of them secular and anti-haredi, presented her as a heroine who had fought bravely and overcome the forces of darkness.¹²⁵ But she attracted at least as much interest within the *haredi* world, where many took it upon themselves to denounce her as a renegade talebearer on numerous websites.¹²⁶

¹²²Avrum Mordekhai Roshetzky (anonymously), *Tenah beni libekha li* (Bnei Brak, 2003), 117. The emphasis is mine. See also *ibid.*, 217–8.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 184–90.

¹²⁴<http://www.tapuz.co.il/blog/userblog.asp?foldername=sdin>.

¹²⁵For example: <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART1/954/942.html>; <http://my.ynet.co.il/pic/judisem/all.pdf>; <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3793087,00.html>; <http://video.tiscali.it/canali/truveo/1325422598.html>.

¹²⁶For example: http://www.bhol.co.il/news_read.asp?id=12879&cat_id=3; http://www.bhol.co.il/forum/topic.asp?cat_id=4&topic_id=2698489&forum_id=771; http://www.bhol.co.il/forum/topic.asp?cat_id=4&topic_id=2696383&forum_id=771; <http://www.bhol.co.il/forum>

Within a few days, thousands of comments and talkbacks accumulated over the internet, many of them addressing the issue of sex life within the *haredi* community, and they sparked a debate on the question whether or not the marital sexual act was to be performed among *haredim* through the proverbial “hole in the sheet.” Einfeld, who used the phrase as the title of her blog, insisted that it was,¹²⁷ while other *haredi* women testified that it was not.¹²⁸ Be that as it may, Einfeld contended that her bitter experience was shared by many other hasidic women, who did not dare to take the radical step she had taken. Even if she may have exaggerated the extent of the women’s discontent, we may assume that the Gur ordinances, and the sexually restrictive norms adopted by other hasidic groups, are controversial even within the hasidic community.¹²⁹

It seems obvious that the *kedushah* norms—especially in Gur but also in the other hasidic groups that have adopted them—no longer serve their original purpose. They were initially conceived as a means of injecting fresh rigor and spiritual vitality into a hasidic community that had faced near-extinction and was struggling to re-establish itself in an unfamiliar post-War environment. But the ordinances soon gave rise to new problems, placing the entire community under strain. The more institutionalized they became over time, the more they came to be viewed as a burdensome duty rather than an invigorating challenge, and the more they proved to be unfit for universal implementation. However, the rebbes of the hasidic communities that adopted these norms in the first half of the twentieth century are no longer able to revoke them. Most persist in the rhetoric of religious “ascent,” to which they presumably continue to subscribe, but it is no longer possible for them to abandon the practices that have become group-identity banners for their followers.

***Kedushah* in its Historical Context: Why the Twentieth Century?**

Sexual abstinence within marriage is not a hasidic invention. In the Christian tradition it was the framework that eventually became known as “spiritual marriage”—a controversial institution promoted in Late Antiquity by

[/topic.asp?cat_id=4&topic_id=2701197&forum_id=771](http://www.bhol.co.il/forum/topic.asp?cat_id=4&topic_id=2701197&forum_id=771); http://www.bhol.co.il/forum/topic.asp?cat_id=4&topic_id=2701694&forum_id=771; http://www.bhol.co.il/forum/topic.asp?whichpage=1&topic_id=2702096&forum_id=771; <http://www.haredim.co.il/ViewArticle.aspx?catID=3&itmID=3691>.

¹²⁷<http://www.tapuz.co.il/blog/userblog.asp?foldername=sdin>.

¹²⁸For example: <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3789248,00.html>; <http://www.tapuz.co.il/blog/ViewEntry.asp?EntryId=1583511>.

¹²⁹See for example the letter cited in Hayim Shaulson’s blog: http://bshch.blogspot.co.il/2012/11/blog-post_6897.html.

the Church Fathers Ephrem of Syria and St. Augustine of Hippo but ardently opposed by St. John Chrysostom.¹³⁰

In her comprehensive book on the topic, Dyan Elliott shows that in the early middle ages, the practice of spiritual marriage was fostered as an ideal mainly outside the institutional church, which strove at the time to fortify the notion that celibate clerical careers or monastic status were the only means of achieving the ideal of a chaste life. However, spiritual marriages continued to occur, and since the twelfth century, were often attributed to the saints in hagiographic works. Although Elliott sees spiritual marriage as an outlet for feminine spirituality, she claims that it was quite often dominated by the male elites, and featured as a means of establishing masculine “sanctity” as part of the medieval phenomenon of remitting sexual intercourse within marriage.

The usual doctrinal justification for spiritual marriage was that it provided the challenge of abstention from sex precisely where sex was readily, legitimately, and freely available. This was comparable to the ascetic practice of fasting for the entire forty-day period of Lent while keeping food and water constantly within reach. The chaste couple (and at times one man with several female companions) would share a house and even a bed in order to prove that they were able to resist the temptations of carnality.¹³¹ Abstinence was thus viewed as the means to the attainment of a higher spiritual level—holiness, if you will—within the marital state. Some scholars suggest, however, that spiritual marriages were based on mutually beneficial practical arrangements: women needed men to protect them and to look after their property, while men required the domestic services that women were able to provide.¹³² This view, however, has been challenged on the grounds that it sprang from the critique of spiritual marriage,¹³³ although it cannot be denied that at times, the institution presented itself as a solution to practical problems arising from poverty or illness.¹³⁴ Another explanation is that spiritual marriage provided a substitute for the monastic life in regions where there were no monastic communities.¹³⁵ In addition, it functioned as a *de facto* solution to the problem confronting married couples wishing to separate but unable to divorce, as the Catholic marriage bond was unbreakable. There were, however, couples that mutually undertook a vow of sexual abstinence as an act of

¹³⁰See Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom's Attack on Spiritual Marriage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2001), 75–100; Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, 1993), 34–60.

¹³¹Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows*, 76.

¹³²Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 33–34, and the references provided there. See also Glenn Olsen, *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study* (New York, 2001), 102.

¹³³Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 33.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 245–8.

¹³⁵Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows*, 82.

piety, often following many years of normal conjugal relations, and having previously produced any number of children.¹³⁶

Spiritual marriages have survived into the modern era, as is evidenced by the case of Luigi and Maria Quattrocchi-Beltrame (1880–1951 and 1884–1965 respectively), who contracted such a marriage and were beatified by the Catholic Church in 2001, becoming the first married couple to attain this status.¹³⁷ The relevance of the issue is also manifested by the fact that the Church was forced to deal with the question whether such unconsummated marriages were legally valid.¹³⁸

Might this Catholic institution have inspired the *kedushah* ethos of Gur, Slonim or Toldes Aaron?¹³⁹ Given that the three hasidic groups originated in diverse geographical regions, each with its own version of Christianity and distinctive cultural tradition, this seems most unlikely: Gur emerged in Catholic central Poland, Slonim in the predominantly Russian-Orthodox region that is now Belarus, where local Catholics were a minority, and Toldes Aaron in Jerusalem, where all the Christian Churches were represented. Even if the twentieth-century boundaries between Orthodox Jews and their Christian neighbors were more permeable than we think, the three hasidic groups could hardly have encountered in the three respective regions of their provenance an identical version of Christianity, or indeed, of spiritual marriage. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of *kedushah* in all three groups is quite similar to the rhetoric promoting the analogous Christian institution, inasmuch as it expresses the aspiration to transcend carnal desire. Admittedly, unlike some of the Christian champions of spiritual marriage, the hasidic rebbes do not advocate abstinence within marriage as being more testing and therefore more rewarding than life-long celibacy, but they do state that it is an even

¹³⁶Margery Kempe (1373?–1438) embarked on a spiritual marriage having earlier given birth to no less than 14 children. Kempe, the author of one of the earliest autobiographies in English literature, describes a visionary experience in which Jesus called on her to desist from carnal relations. Following this, she developed a physical aversion to sexual intercourse with her husband. See Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 228.

¹³⁷http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/tribunals/apost_penit/documents/rc_trib_appen_doc_20060713_stafford-fatima2_en.html; http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20011021_beltrame-quattrocchi_en.html; <http://www.savior.org/saints/corsini.htm>. The Quattrocchis are expected to become the patron saints of married couples and families.

¹³⁸The question is addressed in a 1938 doctoral dissertation, and is answered affirmatively. See John Ford, “The Validity of Virginal Marriage” (PhD Diss., Pontifical Gregorian University, 1938).

¹³⁹For the suggestion that Avraham the Angel’s mortifications and sexual abstinence were reminiscent of the practices attributed to “Jesus the Nazarean” see S. A. Horodetsky, *Ha-hasidut vehahasidim* (Tel Aviv, 1951), 2:54). But see Assaf, *Derekh hamalekhut*, 53 n. 13, where he qualifies Horodetsky’s suggestion as an overstatement.

greater challenge than the sexual trials of youthful bachelorhood. However, the Christian rhetoric also reflects the Platonic-Pauline notion whereby freedom from carnality is the key to the attainment of a noble, spiritual ideal of pure love. Such an ideal of love does not feature in any of the hasidic rebbes' pronouncements on *kedushah*, and when it finally does appear in Rabbi Rotstein's defensive letter,¹⁴⁰ it is clearly apologetic and designed to appeal to what the author presumes to be the critical reader's modern romantic sensibilities.

Hasidic *kedushah* is quite distinct from the Catholic notion of spiritual marriage in terms of the role it ascribes to women in the religious life. As I mentioned above, Dyan Elliott claims that spiritual marriage was one of the outlets for Christian female spirituality during the Middle Ages,¹⁴¹ and that women often played the more active part in constructing this model of chaste matrimony. Her analysis may find resonance in Foucault's claim that the Christian ideal of abstinence and chastity—in contrast to the Greek ideal of sexual temperance—did not center on men's ability to control their sexual desire but rather on women's virginity and their purity.¹⁴² Foucault's characterization of the Greek ethic of sexual restraint in contrast to the Christian ethic is illuminating in this context:

[T]his [Greek] ethic was not addressed to women. It was not their duties or obligations that were recalled, justified, or spelled out. It was an ethic for men—an ethic thought, written, and taught by men, and addressed to men—free men, obviously. A male ethic, consequently, in which women figured only as objects or, at most, as partners that one had best train, educate, and watch over when one had them under one's power, but stay away from when they were under the power of someone else.¹⁴³

As we saw, the hasidic ideal of *kedushah* is closer to the Greek approach, not only because it does not idealize virginity, but also because in all the three hasidic groups that subscribe to the ideal of abstinence within marriage, the *kedushah* ordinances are directed exclusively at men: the obligation, the challenge and the reward are all theirs, as is the blame for any violation of the norms. All that is expected of the women is that they help their husbands

¹⁴⁰See above, at nn. 103–111.

¹⁴¹See Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 109, 208–10, 227–31.

¹⁴²Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2 (New York, 1990), 14, 22–3.

¹⁴³Ibid, 22. See also Victor J. Seidler, "Reason, Desire and Male Sexuality," in *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, ed. Pat Caplan (London and New York, 1987) 82–112. Moshe Rosman has already pointed out the indirect Greek influence on hasidic concepts of women. See Rosman, "Al nashim vehasidut," 156–7.

in their endeavor to “ascend.” In short, men are the subjects of the *kedushah* norms while women are their objects.¹⁴⁴

The counterpart of *kedushah* for men is *tzeni‘ut*—modesty—for women, especially with regard to clothing and head covering. In recent years this value has become a central and defining norm for all *haredi* circles, but at the time when the Beys Yisroel first issued his *kedushah* ordinances, it was only one out of many other religious values that were being mobilized in the struggle to keep modernity at bay. In Toldes Aaron, the rebbes were advocating *tzeni‘ut* as if it were a key concept that had marked the community since its earliest beginnings, and the ideal of *kedushah* for men was promoted alongside the ideal of *tzeni‘ut* for women, so that married couples were conceived as partners in the common enterprise of keeping the community “pure.” In Gur and Slonim, by contrast, *tzeni‘ut* did not become a central issue until relatively recent times. Up until then, the Gerer women—especially during the Beys Yisroel’s period—were regarded as being better-dressed, more inclined to cultivate their physical appearance, and more independent than most other *haredi* women.¹⁴⁵ Even today, some Gerer women have professional careers of their own, not least in such modern fields of employment as design and computer technology. But this may be the result of the fact that the Beys Yisroel had alienated the female members of his community by taking no notice of women and never addressing them as an integral part of his constituency.¹⁴⁶ When the present Gerer Rebbe promulgated the new ordinances on *tzeni‘ut*, some Gerer *hasidim* in anonymous internet forums expressed their shock at the prospect of having to talk to their wives about their style of dress,¹⁴⁷ as Gerer men have always been known for being totally indifferent

¹⁴⁴See Rosman, *ibid.*, 158–61.

¹⁴⁵This impression emerges also from Tamar El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant* (Boulder and London, 1994).

¹⁴⁶In all hasidic groups, the study and practice of hasidic teachings, including personal contact with the rebbes, are the prerogative of men. There are no *hasidot* (female *hasidim*), only [male] *hasidim*, and a woman is identified as “hasidic” primarily by virtue of being the daughter or the wife of a *hasid* (Habad is a notable exception in this respect). Still, in many hasidic groups, some attempts have been made to engage the women in certain communal–religious activities, although the Beys Yisroel never embarked on any such initiatives, which emerged in Gur only after his passing. See on all this, e.g. Naftali Loewenthal, “‘Daughter/Wife of Hasid’ or ‘Hasidic Woman’?” *Jewish Studies* 40 (2000), 21–8; Ada Rapoport-Albert, “The Emergence of a Female Constituency in Twentieth-Century Habad Hasidism,” in *Yashan mipenei hadash: mehkarim betoledot yehudei mizrah eiropah vetarbutam, shai le‘imanu’el etkes*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert and David Assaf (Jerusalem, 2009), 1:English Section, 7*–68*; Marcin Wodziński, “O bocianach z żabiej perspektywy, czyli Kobiety i chasydyzm,” in *Nieme dusze? Kobiety w kulturze jidysz*, ed. Joanna Lisek (Wrocław, 2010), 77–104; *id.*, “Women and Hasidism: A ‘Non-Sectarian’ Perspective,” in the present volume.

¹⁴⁷The responses appeared in a closed forum named *heder shaket* (a quiet room), within the *Behaderei haredim* (In innermost *haredi* chambers) website, but has been deleted since then.

to such matters. Consequently, while *tzeni'ut* is now becoming an established norm for women even within Gur, *kedushah* is by no means an expression of their spirituality. And even if *tzeni'ut* is regarded by some as a comparable spiritual value for women in contemporary Judaism (a questionable notion, to my mind), *kedushah*, especially in Gur, is decidedly man-centered. In this respect, too, it differs from the Christian ideal of spiritual marriage.

In view of all this, the development of *kedushah* in all three hasidic groups would seem to be primarily an internal-Jewish, and probably even an internal-hasidic, dynamic. If any Greek or Christian ideas underlie the hasidic practice of abstinence within marriage, they would have penetrated the early Jewish sources that inspired the *hasidim* rather than influencing them directly.¹⁴⁸

One way of accounting for the emergence of *kedushah* as a norm is to view it as a response to modernity, especially to modern permissiveness in sexual matters. This is often adopted by scholars as a default explanation for virtually every recent development within Jewish Orthodoxy. Admittedly, in the case of *kedushah*, this explanation is not implausible: almost all the rebbes who set *kedushah* as a norm referred to permissiveness as a characteristic of our times, deploring the promiscuity one constantly encountered “in the street,” and Rabbis Frisch and Rotstein, who also addressed the same issue, advocated the suppression of sexual stimuli as the only defense against such modern promiscuity.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to reduce the *kedushah* ideology to a mere strategy for coping with the perils of modernity. The themes that feature most prominently and consistently in the hasidic *kedushah* rhetoric are the aspiration for spiritual ascent and closeness to God. Anti-modernist sentiments give a certain edge to this religious quest but they are probably not the real driving force behind it. Admittedly, a Foucaultian analysis may give rise to the argument that *kedushah* is part of a more general system that empowers certain groups of men who are at risk of losing such power as they once enjoyed, by providing only them with the opportunity to attain “holiness”—the most highly prized ideal within their community. However, for such an analysis to be convincing, it must demonstrate that the hasidic groups that have embraced the ideal of *kedushah* have been more vulnerable to the perils of modernity or more militant in their opposition to it, which is not the case

¹⁴⁸Even if we focus only on the hasidic groups that originated in predominantly Catholic countries—Gur in Poland and Toldes Aaron in Hungary—we cannot assume any connection between the hasidic notion of *kedushah* and the Catholic tradition of spiritual marriage without carefully examining the prevalence of spiritual marriages in Poland and Hungary during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as the nature of the relationship between hasidic Jews and their Catholic neighbors during the same period. Such an examination requires further research.

with the three hasidic groups under discussion. In reality, the mildest version of *kedushah* has developed in Toldes Aaron—the most staunchly anti-modernist of the three groups, while the harsher and more rigorous versions of *kedushah* emerged in Gur and Slonim, both of which are considered mainstream and even moderate in their attitude to modernity—the secular world, Zionism, and even, as we have seen, the role of women in society.¹⁴⁹ In all spheres of religious life other than *kedushah*, the Gerer *hasidim* are not particularly stringent by comparison with other *haredi* groups, and according to R. Moshe Sternbuch, current chief rabbi of the Haredi Congregation (*ha'edah haharedit*) of Jerusalem, the Beys Yisroel had explicitly told him that he objected to the imposition of excessive strictures on his constituency, except in matters relating to *kedushah*.¹⁵⁰ Resistance to modernity can therefore serve as a partial but by no means a full explanation of the emergence of *kedushah* as a modern hasidic norm.

I suggest that the rise of *kedushah* stems from the combination of three major factors. One is indeed how to cope with modern permissive culture. The other is the overall tendency to stringency (*humra*) in contemporary Jewish Orthodoxy, which has been analyzed in the scholarly literature and is often viewed as a response to modernity.¹⁵¹ The third, and perhaps the more important in this context, is the development in later Hasidism of what I propose to call “mysticism-substitutes.”¹⁵²

Hasidism originated as a movement whose central ideal was the religious experience often referred to as *deveikut*—mystical union or communion with God.¹⁵³ It was full of spiritual vitality and charged with mystical energy that,

¹⁴⁹A few Gerer *hasidim* have suggested to me that the Beys Yisroel conceived the *kedushah* ordinances as a means of protecting hasidic women from intercourse that may be problematic for them, especially following a pregnancy, or even as an indirect method of family planning. But these explanations, too, are at odds with the character of both the ordinances and the Beys Yisroel himself.

¹⁵⁰R. Moshe Sternbuch, *Mo'adim uzemanim*, vol. 8 (Bnei Brak, 1981), tractate Beitsah, 50–1, §143, n. 1.

¹⁵¹See, for example, Menachem Friedman, “The Market Model and Religious Radicalism,” in *Jewish Fundamentalism in Comparative Perspective: Religion, Ideology, and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Lawrence J. Silberstein (New York, 1993), 192–215. The classic statement of this thesis is Charles Liebman’s “Extremism as a Religious Norm,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22 (1983), 75–86.

¹⁵²I hope to present this theory more fully in a separate study.

¹⁵³See Gershom Scholem, “Deveikut, or Communion with God,” *Review of Religion* 14 (1949/50), 115–39 (reprint: G. Hundert, ed., *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present* [New York, 1991], 275–98); Mendel Piekarz, “Hasidism as a Socio-Religious Movement on the Evidence of *Deveikut*,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (London and Portland, 1996), 225–48; Ada Rapoport-Albert, “God and the Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship,” in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, 299–329; Moshe Idel, *Hasidism—*

for various reasons, began to dissipate within a few decades, so that by the mid-nineteenth century it had effectively disappeared from the great majority of hasidic groups.¹⁵⁴ I would like to suggest, however, that mystical energy may be thought of as subject to the same law that governs the conservation of physical energy. In other words, when a great mystical force appears to be exhausted, it does not actually vanish but is rather transformed. In these terms, it is possible to argue that the high mystical tension that marked Hasidism at the start was gradually transformed in the course of the nineteenth century into a range of “mysticism-substitutes”—a variety of new directions into which the religious energies of the movement were now being channeled. Thus Habad, for example, channeled its energies into theological inquiry, and later into messianic fervor; Ziditchov [Żydaczów] focused intensely on learning kabbalistic texts;¹⁵⁵ Pshiskhe focused on rabbinic learning and the attainment of individual authenticity; many Hungarian hasidic groups fostered a militant anti-secular and anti-modernist stance, while Kobrin and Kotsk concentrated on combating the body and its appetites, such as food and sex. In most hasidic groups, mystical tension was replaced by an atmosphere (or ethos) based on communal life around the rebbe at his court or in the local *shtibl*, where songs, dress, and numerous other customs invested each group with its own distinct identity and sense of solidarity.

It seems to me that *kedushah* can be viewed as yet another manifestation of the mysticism-substitute dynamic. Those twentieth-century rebbes who felt that a fresh religious ascent was called for and who hoped to capture the enthusiasm of the young by demonstrating that Hasidism was spiritually vital, even after the mystical path of the founders had been blocked, challenged their followers with the demand that they concentrate their spiritual energies on the struggle to subdue their physical nature by the practice of sexual abstinence within marriage. In fact, even Nietzsche, who described the suppression of sexuality as the suppression of human vitality,¹⁵⁶ admitted that in some people—in particular those with power-denying or vitality-denying personalities, whom he despised—the suppression of sexuality may actually generate vitality and power. Such people, he contended, may derive

Between Ecstasy and Magic (Albany, 1995), 86–9, 223–5; id., *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism* (Budapest and New York, 2005), 143–66.

¹⁵⁴For the gradual decline of mystical tension in nineteenth-century Hasidism, see Piekartz, *Bein ideologyah umetsi'ut*, 55–178; id., *Hasidut polin bein shetei hamilhamot uvigezerot tash-tashah (hasho'ah)* (Jerusalem, 1990), 37–80.

¹⁵⁵Komarno—a historical offspring of Ziditchov—is one of the very few exceptions inasmuch as it revived some of the mystical ideals of early Hasidism, including the ideal of *devekut* as a mystical experience.

¹⁵⁶See F. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, iii, §§10–11, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1968), 551–4.

a therapeutic benefit from sexual abstinence, which frees “these sportsmen of Sanctity,” as he disdainfully calls them, from their innate tendency to depression.¹⁵⁷ When viewed in these terms, the capacity of *kedushah* to generate vitality and to empower may well account, alongside the Beys Yisroel’s personal charisma, for his remarkable success in attracting to the ranks of Gur significant numbers of orthodox young men from the Litvish *yeshivot* and even from Religious Zionist/Modern Orthodox circles, some of whom were subsequently to emerge as part of the backbone of Gur’s reconstructed community in Israel. The same can be said of the Nesives, who established the Slonimer yeshivah in Israel, and who was apparently engaged in similar recruitment activities. The empowering challenge of *kedushah* was capable of endowing each one of the three groups with a proud sense of its own identity against the background of proliferating hasidic communities that were becoming virtually indistinguishable from each other.

Summary and Conclusion

We can now summarize our findings and put them in perspective. The ideal of *kedushah*—holiness—is deeply rooted in the talmudic-rabbinic tradition. It often signals an ascetic orientation emphasizing the suppression of sexuality, and more often also the suppression of other physical needs, especially food and drink. However, the ideal of ascetically tinged holiness within marriage was balanced by the halakhic commandment of *onah* (sexual obligation toward one’s wife) and the ethical postulate of striving to avoid causing distress to one’s fellow-man, understood in this context as one’s wife. Various thinkers have placed varying emphases on each of these competing values, but throughout the history of Jewish tradition, the norm of ascetically-oriented *kedushah* has always been aimed at the individual, or the virtuous few, and not at the entire community. The same is true of early Hasidism. Only in the twentieth century do we encounter three hasidic groups—Gur, Slonim, and Toldes Aaron—adopting sexually restrictive *kedushah* as a banner, and turning it into a norm that would be binding on all male members of the community. Of these three groups, Gur produced a version of *kedushah* that was the most restrictive, and the only one to be formalized as a set of ordinances, while Toldes Aaron’s version was the most lenient of the three. The requirements of the *kedushah* norm are taught to the *hasidim* in general terms by their rebbes and in more elaborate detail by their authorized marriage guides.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., §17, p. 568. The source of the metaphor might be 1 Cor. 9:24. Foucault similarly describes the sexually abstinent ascetics as “athletes” (*History of Sexuality* 2:20), echoing the etymology of “ascetic,” which derives from the Greek verb meaning “to exercise.”

The rationale for these norms has never been aired in public, as the Orthodox world considers it immodest to treat sexuality as anything other than a strictly private matter, but the rebbes have addressed the topic in their homilies, and have elaborated on it in their personal letters, some of which are quoted and discussed in print for the first time in the present paper. Alongside the promised rewards of sexually restrictive *kedushah*, such as the birth of righteous children, and the presentation of *kedushah* as a fence against the moral decrepitude of secular culture, the main theme of the rebbes' pronouncements on the subject is the claim that the norm of *kedushah* has been fundamental to Hasidism from the outset, as the means of attaining spiritual ascent and proximity to God.¹⁵⁸

The *kedushah* norms have given rise to controversy and dissent. Prominent Litvish rabbis have pointed out that they were at odds with the *halakhah* while also being offensive to women and harmful to men's mental and moral wellbeing. Rabbi Y. I. Sher even accused the *hasidim* of hypocrisy. Most of these criticisms have been directed at Gur—the largest hasidic community in Israel and the most restrictive in its application of the *kedushah* norms. The Gerer *hasidim* have not responded directly, but R. Nahum Rotstein's letter contains a long list of arguments in defense of the Rebbe's ordinances. Some of his arguments, especially those that advocate *kedushah* as a means of establishing a more permanent, faithful, and purer bond of love between husband and wife, are clearly apologetic and cannot be taken to reflect the true motivation for *kedushah*. In reality, the Gerer *hasidim* are well aware of the damaging consequences of the ordinances for family life within their own community, and their negative impact on the standing of Gur men within the Orthodox community as a whole. This has given rise to internal debate, often beneath the surface but sometimes more openly, among the marriage guides as well as the ordinary *hasidim*. The ideal of sexually restrictive *kedushah*, which was meant to facilitate and enhance the religious ascent of the entire community, has proved to be both inappropriate for universal application and sometimes detrimental to family life.

Why this style of *kedushah* should have emerged in these three particular hasidic groups, and why specifically in the twentieth century, is not entirely clear, but the most convincing explanations will be based on the three following factors: (a) the inherent hasidic quest for spiritual renewal, which in time

¹⁵⁸This historical claim is not altogether unfounded, as some of the early hasidic texts do indeed advocate renunciation and sexual abstinence, but most of them should be understood as aiming this elitist norm at distinguished individual and not at the entire community. Furthermore, the approach they represent never became a consensus in early Hasidism. In this respect, the "historical" claim is at least in part an "invented tradition." The topic lies beyond the scope of the present paper and will have to be addressed elsewhere.

generated a range of supererogatory mysticism substitutes; (b) the overriding Orthodox tendency toward halakhic stringency; (c) the hasidic struggle to resist the promiscuous sexuality of modern society, which prompted the rebbes to construct defensive fences even around the limited sphere of sexual activity that is permissible within the boundaries of *halakhah*. That these stringent sexual norms emerged in these particular groups may be ascribed to the fact that all three viewed the ideal of *kedushah* as their own hasidic heritage. This is especially true of Gur and Slonim, which strove to rehabilitate themselves after the destruction of their Eastern European centers in the Holocaust. They hoped to achieve this revival not only by reconstructing their old courts but also by generating new spiritual tension and energies that would attract to their ranks a new generation of virtuous young men. One of the best ways of realizing this aspiration was to renew the old battle against the traditional enemy—the sexual drive, a battle which seemed timelier now than ever before.

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