



## Why is it Man's Mitzvah to Please his Wife in Bed?

### The Right of the Lowly Maidservant

We learn the laws of marital relations from the rights of the maidservant – a girl sold into slavery by her father who is unable to provide for her. It's a mitzvah for the master to either marry this girl or marry her off to his son. That way the future of this poor girl is secured. From this maidservant, we also learn the rights of wives for all times. Should either the master or the son, turned husband, want to take an additional wife, he is only permitted – even at the time of polygamy – if he is able to continue providing clothes, food and intimacy for his first wife, the maidservant:

**ספר שמות פרק כא פסוק י' אם אחרת יקח לו שארה כסותה וענתה לא יגרע:**

"If he takes another [wife] for himself, he shall not diminish her sustenance, her clothing, or her marital relations" (*Shemot* 21:10).

This teaches us that every woman – no matter how lowly her status may be – has basic marital rights. Every husband is obligated by the Torah to provide his wife with food, clothing and physical intimacy to the best of his ability. The word *ענתה/onata* denotes 'her marital relations,' yet it also means 'her prescribed times.' From this word, the Talmud learns that it is the husband's obligation to fulfill his wife with marital intimacy at prescribed times (*Babylonian Talmud, Ketuvot* 47b). This mitzvah applies at all times and places, but only to men (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 240). In contrast to the secular world, in which the woman is often made into a sexual object, in the Torah it's rather the other way around. The word for making love, used in the Talmud and Halacha, is *תשמיש/tashmish* which literally means 'to serve' – i.e. serving his wife.

### Why is it the Man's Mitzvah to Provide Sexually for His Wife?

Hashem created men and women differently. Whereas a woman integrates her spiritual, emotional and physical sides, a man's physicality is often detached from his emotional and spiritual aspects. This is because his particular role – such as for example serving in the army – may require special focus and detachment from his emotions and family ties. In contrast, a woman naturally integrates all parts of her being which facilitates her role as a multitasking mother. These general differences between men and women play out in the marital bedroom. Whereas a man can be physically aroused, without a spiritual or emotional connection, a woman needs to feel a loving, spiritual bond in order to awaken physically to her husband. She, therefore, needs deep spiritual affinity, sincere words of endearment, kisses and gradual caresses in order to enjoy her marital intimacy. This inherent nature of women requires the husband to communicate his feelings of love in more expressive ways, which helps make the connection between them deeper and more complete. Thus, when a man 'serves his wife' in the bedroom, she helps elevate his physical desire to her integrated connection between the physical and spiritual domains. Rather than focusing on his own physical pleasure, it is the husband's mitzvah is to make his wife happy (*Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim* 72b). Fulfilling this mitzvah in the highest way, requires that the husband strive to bring his wife to climax (Rav Eliezer Melamed, *The Happiness of the Home and its Blessing* p. 19).

## Why Does the Torah Give Prescribed Times for Marital Relations?

The Torah prescribes how often a husband must be available for relations with his wife, if she so desires. The frequency depends on his occupation. The times for conjugal duty: for independent men (who don't work), every day; for workers, twice a week; for donkey-drivers, once a week; for camel-drivers, once in thirty days; for sailors, once in six months (*Ketubot*, Chapter 5, *Mishna* 6). A wife can give her husband permission to be away from her for longer periods of time, for example, for the sake of supporting the family. However, it is her right to demand that he finds work closer to home. If he was a worker when she married him, he is not permitted to become a camel driver without her permission. For most regular couples today, the prescribed time for marital intimacy is twice a week (Rav Melamed p. 36). It is preferred that one of these times be Friday night when we have the mitzvah of *oneg* (taking pleasure in) Shabbat (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 280:1). In addition to the prescribed time, a husband has a mitzvah to be with his wife whenever she desires him (*Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim* 72b). This is understood from the additional meaning of the word עֲנֵתָהּ/*onata* – “responding to her.” The reason for fixed times is to encourage a healthy, stable, intimate relationship. Otherwise, there might always be something pressing that comes in the way, especially when being together is no longer new and special. It would then be easy to push off the mitzvah, due to tiredness, headache, upset stomach, a disturbing event etc. Over the years, I've had several clients who shared with me that they hadn't been with their husbands for several months. I had to explain to them that living without physical expression the connection between marriage partners will weaken their love and eventually distance them completely from one another.

## The Holiness of Marital Relations

Marital intimacy is the holiest act possible in this world. It causes the Shechina (Divine In-Dwelling Presence) to reside in the world and opens a window to the World-to-Come. Marital union makes us partners with Hashem in bringing down holy souls into the world. Even when no actual child is conceived, souls may still be conceived. From the holy intentions of Avraham male souls were brought down. From Sarah's holy intentions, female souls were brought down into the world (*Zohar* part 3 168a). Physical love between husband and wife mirrors the spiritual love between Hashem and the Jewish people. Therefore, when Hashem was pleased with Israel, the male and female golden figures on top of the ark with the Tablets of the Ten Commandments in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle were embracing. When Israel turned away from Hashem, these cherubs would turn away from one another (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra* 99a). We were redeemed from Egypt in the merit of the women who aroused their tired and worn husbands to marital union. Each woman revived her husband from the despair of bondage. It was as if she told him, “Although you may be a lowly slave, in my eyes you are important and dear. I am as delighted with you as if you had returned home from an honorable job. Therefore, I came to you in the field to wash your tired feet and massage your aching body sore from whipping, because you are my beloved husband.” Then she would flirt with her husband while looking together with him in her copper mirror. The mirrors of these holy women became the washbasin that purified the Kohanim and prepared them for their holy service. G-d insisted that Moshe accept these mirrors, “Because through them the women reared those huge hosts in Egypt. Therefore, these are more precious to Me than anything” (*Midrash Tanchuma Pekudei* 9); (Rashi, *Shemot* 38:8). Although it is man's mitzvah to please his wife, it takes two to tango! Bringing redemption is attributed to the women who work on feeling desire for their husbands and express their loving, marital, affectionate yearning. More than anything, this is what brings down the Shechina into the world!