

THE MAGIC TOUCH PART II

by Gila Manolson

I have never met a woman who says she does not want to be loved for who she is. Nonetheless, counterproductive to this desire, we tend to delude ourselves into thinking that if we dangle our sexuality on a hook and a guy responds, we can afterwards gain his love. In general, it doesn't work this way. If you're lucky, it may happen, but don't count on it. Your partner must first develop an appreciation for who you are, and this is accomplished by keeping the whole physical business on the side until you really have something substantial between you.

The Jewish view is that there are no shortcuts to intimacy, because by definition it is built over time, with investment of emotion, thought, interaction and communication. If you create an arena in which two souls can actually meet without physical interference, you have a greater chance of developing a bond of emotional wholeness. As a result, physical closeness will express something real, rather than illusory.

If you define sexuality in strictly physical terms, at some point you're going to run up against a wall, since "physical" is finite by definition, while "spiritual" is infinite. If you rely on the spiritual to consistently empower the physical, there's no end to how profound a relationship you can have. The whole point of refraining from physical contact when you're dating is to build up the spiritual bond that the physical side can later express.

There is a kind of bonding that occurs through verbal communication and spiritual connection that, as profound as physical closeness can feel, is still qualitatively different. This idea underlies the Jewish laws of family purity. (While we will touch on the concept of family purity, it is beyond the scope of this lecture to detail its laws and practices. For further discussion please see *The Waters of Eden*, by Rabbi Areyeh Kaplan). A marriage marked by the regular periods of physical separation mandated by family purity allows husband and wife to strengthen their spiritual bond, which in turn deepens the quality of sexual relations, once they resume.

On a practical level, family purity has its challenges and frustrations. At times I've said to my husband, "You know, I feel like a darn hypocrite, up there lecturing in front of all these women, talking about the great communication that's supposed to be happening during this time of the month. Got it? You know, can we talk?" In other words, family purity doesn't always work out the way they paint it in books. But its powerful, centering effect is authentic.

In terms of the Jewish practice of refraining from physical contact while dating (shomer negiah), this

approach is meant to be used in marriage-minded dating situations. Once a couple decides they want to commit, they basically get married as soon as possible. Celibacy is not normal and it's not natural.

It's something you're supposed to do for a limited time before marriage. A couple once came to me and said, "We're becoming more observant and we would like to take on shomer negiah. How would you suggest we begin? We go to UC Davis together and we're in most of the same classes, we spend all of our free time together, and we're not planning on getting married for at least a couple of years. So how would you suggest we start being shomer negiah?" You know what my answer was? "Beats me!" No, I'm serious. Hanging out for two years, becoming increasingly emotionally close to somebody that you're dating, but are not going to touch, is not what I call a healthy situation.

It's definitely difficult to be celibate - to be shomer negiah for however long it takes, but it's a very important carrot on the stick. Otherwise, as long as you continue to delude yourself with less-than-ultimate relationships that you stay with because of their physical side, you can kind of coast for a long time. The fact that you're saying, whoa, I am never going to do anything physical again unless it's with the right person, should be an incentive to really get your act together, look at yourself and think about making the real thing happen. So, I mean, it's painful to be single for a long time, but the alternative would obviously not be better.

Without the prospect of physical contact, people often wonder whether religious dating is at all romantic. In my opinion, what could possibly be more romantic than having somebody say to you, "I've known you for however many months or however long it's been, and during that time I've really gotten to see what makes you special, I've gotten to see the beautiful person you are inside. I've also seen some of your bad sides, too, and I can deal with that part of the picture. I take the package deal. And I want to spend the rest of my life with you, even though I don't even know what it feels like to kiss you, hug you or touch you, because I love you and I want you for who you are."

Gila Manolson is an internationally renowned author and lecturer. Her topics are Jewish modesty (tsniut), family purity (taharat ha mishpacha) and their potential for enhancing the life of the modern Jewish woman. Ms. Manolson's books, The Magic Touch and Outside Inside.

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