

SEX *in the*
PROMISED LAND

by BARBARA GINGOLD

Dana Kaplan is doing her doctorate on sex. She has discovered, in her research at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, that the women of Tel Aviv—the (other) city that never sleeps—are spending more time in bed these days. And having more fun. But in Jerusalem, where the high birth rate testifies that women are certainly having sex, the question is open: Are they enjoying it more, or less? And: Is there anything special about the sexual experiences of women in the Holy City?

The women who should know are the members of Jerusalem's Female Interdisciplinary Group for Sexuality (FIGS; the acronym sounds a bit like an off-color joke). This group includes gynecologists, sex educators and counselors, psychiatric social workers, an anthropologist, a nurse-midwife, public health activists, and others. For a while, an ultra-Orthodox doctor with 12 children, married to a rabbi, also attended regularly, as did a Ph.D. dedicated to getting women in touch with their senses through tantric yoga. The 13 core members are now mostly in their 50s or 60s, except for one 40-ish suburbanite who sells sex toys on the web. They have been meeting for more than 15 years to discuss women's sexual health and related topics, working together as a multi-disciplinary team to expand their professional knowledge. They share their findings through private practice and public lectures.

Their clients and case studies are, by and large, limited to Israeli Jewish women or couples who can afford their relatively expensive fees (which start at about NIS 225/\$60 per session). And it is no coincidence that the group, which one of its own members describes as "conservative," is based in Jerusalem, the bastion of religious Israel.

Until now, FIGS' approach has been consciously academic. But this past year its members have begun speaking among themselves about their *personal* lives and experiences.

THERE'S SEX. BUT IS THERE DESIRE?

Their monthly meetings—focused on subjects from fantasy, desire and trauma to sex addiction, gender fluidity, and "rabbis in the bedroom" have been addressed by the group's regulars as well as by visiting lecturers like sex-life luminary Esther Perel. FIGS' founder, Talli Rosenbaum, a sex therapist and former physical therapist, attended her first conference of the International Society for Women's Sexual Health in 2002, in Vancouver. When she got back to Israel, she called some of her colleagues to discuss what she'd learned, and FIGS was born.

"My own background was multi-disciplinary, and I felt that women needed an integrated approach to sexuality," Rosenbaum recalls. "But at the time [in Israel] sexual issues were categorized

as either physical, calling for medical help, or psychological. There was no appreciation of the fact that cultural, social and environmental factors were also important" and may have a profound—albeit subconscious—effect on a woman's desire.

The professional women who came to hear Rosenbaum's reactions to that conference were a cross-section of religious and non-religious practitioners. Experts in their respective specialties, they were all non-native Israelis who hailed primarily from North America. "We all had different perspectives, and challenged each other."

Among those challenges was Leonore Tiefer's "New View Manifesto," which condemned the "medicalization" of female sexual concerns and declared that "social, political, and economic conditions, including widespread sexual violence, limit women's access to sexual health, pleasure, and satisfaction in many parts of the world." Culture, adds FIGS' Michal Schonbrun, a fertility awareness specialist, determines priorities, budgets, and interventions. Given Israel's social, political and economic conditions, there are bound to be some characteristics that differentiate the sexual experiences of Israeli Jewish women from their Jewish (or non-Jewish) counterparts elsewhere, even, perhaps, differentiating between Jewish women in Jerusalem and those in Tel Aviv.

Take, for instance, a recent book review in the International New York Times, which declared matter-of-factly that most Americans "have come to regard sex—preferably passionate, hot, transformative sex—as central to our lives." On the same September weekend, Israel's daily Ha'aretz plaintively asked, "What can be done to increase the frequency with which Israelis have sex?" Its concern was based on a finding that "half of [Israeli] married couples have sex at least once a week, but at least 18% have sex once or twice a month at most." On the other hand, the report pointed out the relatively high frequency of sex among ultra-Orthodox Jews. If its statistics are accurate, more than a quarter of the tradition-bound married couples who populate Mea Shearim, Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox shtetl, are engaging in halachically sanctioned conjugal relations several times a week.

But these are no doubt a far cry from the liberated sexual activities that doctoral candidate Dana Kaplan is uncovering

between the sheets of Israel's "new, creative middle class" living in cosmopolitan Tel Aviv. Her research leads her to conclude that denizens of this realm not only endorse but uninhibitedly seek sexual experimentation, from anal eroticism to BDSM (bondage, domination, sado-masochism), as a leisure activity—on a par with gallery-hopping or theater-going—that expresses their individuality. Moreover, she says, their idea of genuine sexual pleasure "entails going against conventional sexual norms or scripts," a concept that would be a serious challenge for a conventionally religious Israeli.

The most blatant differences among Israeli bedroom practices would appear to lie in the great divide between secular and religious or ultra-religious populations. Other differences, however, may be significantly more subtle. Judaism, the historic common denominator of Israeli culture, has long grappled with questions of sexuality. Orthodox researcher and spiritual leader Dr. Jennie Rosenfeld notes the polarities: on the one hand were venerated rabbis and sages who defined marriage as "an intimate relationship whose sole goal is procreation, and is often ascetic;" on the other were shapers of Jewish tradition who valued sexuality outside procreation "as a means of pleasure, love, and companionship." Whichever side they take, Jewish sources agree that conjugal relations should not be approached lightly: lovemaking is a mitzvah, a holy act. While a majority of contemporary Israelis define themselves as non-religious, after millennia of adherence to Jewish law and culture perhaps more than a few fragments of tradition remain embedded in Israel's collective unconscious.

Some of this can be seen in Israel's emphatically pro-natal, pro-family mores. Both married and single women up to the age of 45 are eligible for state-subsidized fertility treatments for their first or second child. Single women who choose to have children usually do so with the blessing of their friends, employers and health funds. And, despite Orthodox Judaism's unbending strictures against male homosexuality, the religion's ultimate regard for the family unit can override even homophobia. Lee Walzer, author of *Between Sodom and Eden: A Gay Journey through Today's Changing Israel* (2000), points out that the Israeli LGBT community has created a new, gay version of the original Zionist ideal: The contemporary Israeli poster child is two kids being wheeled around "by two [male] IDF combat veterans living happily ever after..."

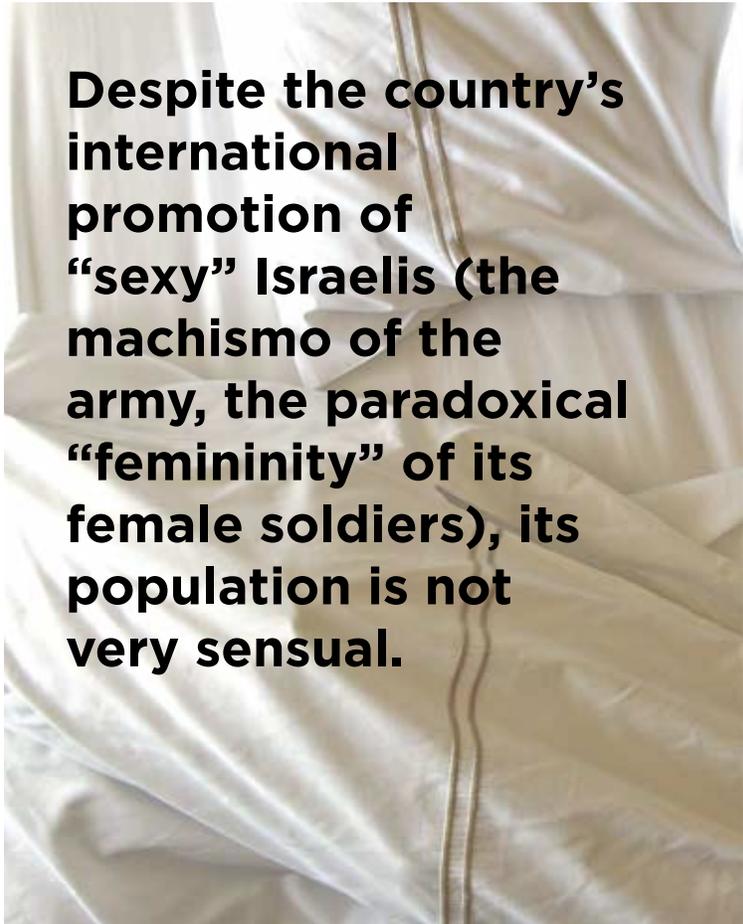
ISRAELIS ARE RETICENT?

So, in this presumably modern, liberal, Jewish democracy, what does the school system teach impressionable young Israeli minds about sexuality? Joanne Zack, FIGS' resident sex educator, started her professional life in Israel in 1969 as director of a family planning and education center (similar, she explains, to Planned Parenthood). As a freelance sexual health consultant for the past decade, she has been teaching others—professionals and parents—how to talk to kids about sex.

"The Ministry of Education has an obligatory program called Relationships (*Kishurei Ha'im*) that covers kindergarteners

through 14-year-olds, and they have regional supervisors who give courses to the school counselors dealing with sex education," Zack says. "In the early grades, the message is simple: 'Respect your own body and that of others'. That's easy for teachers." Beyond the earliest grades, though, implementation of the official sex-ed program is sporadic and superficial, depending primarily on the attitudes of school principals and counselors. It is often limited to a lecture or two, by visiting doctors or other outsiders, on pregnancy and disease prevention. "Sex talk is difficult and values-laden, requiring skills that school staff don't have," Zack continues. "No one talks voluntarily about sex—even when it comes up in the media. The result is that most kids end up getting their information from peers, or from Internet pornography."

"At nine, they think they're already teens," Zack protests. "Just look at all those sexy little Purim costumes on the streets!" She says that many Israeli 14- and 15-year-olds are becoming sexually active, and contrary to popular rumor, Tel Aviv has no monopoly on the phenomenon: A hotline for kids fields about 25 calls a day, from the far corners of the country as well as its central megalopolis, testifying that youngsters here are not prepared to deal with the media's onslaught of sexual messages.



Despite the country's international promotion of "sexy" Israelis (the machismo of the army, the paradoxical "femininity" of its female soldiers), its population is not very sensual.

Like many of their North American peers, they don't understand that looking sexy is not the same as feeling good sexually, and that being sexual does not necessarily mean having intercourse. "From the beautiful people portrayed on-screen and off," Zack says, "they get distorted expectations. They're anxious about their bodies and their sexuality, and their brains are not yet wired to deal with all the repercussions of having sexual relations."

Across the board, twenty-first-century Israeli parents are not doing their job either, she adds. They don't talk openly with their children about sex. "And that," she emphasizes, "holds true across the religious-secular spectrum—though religious kids have even fewer people they can try to talk to."

Where does this reticence come from? While mythic images of Israel's pioneering generations led us to believe that they were indulging in limitless "free love," those ostensibly liberated individuals were actually subject to a "Puritan sex ethic" that prevailed at least till the 1980s, according to Dana Kaplan. And even today, says Joanne Zack, despite the country's very public international promotion of "sexy" Israelis (the clichéd machismo of the army, the paradoxical "femininity" of its female soldiers), its population is in fact not really sensual or open to their own sexuality. Israel's sexy-looking young women, she has observed,

are actually very uptight about sex.

FIGS' Michal Schonbrun, the health educator and trainer dedicated to empowering women through their bodies, goes further. "We're in the Middle East, and in some ways we're very backward and Third World. Israel only pays lip service to sexual health. Because of religious and ethnic barriers and sensitivities, the establishment is not prepared to take it on. Subjects like menstruation and sexuality are taboo." An American-born woman, living in Jerusalem for four decades, noted that not one of her sabra friends ever mentioned her period. Or sex! Schonbrun says, "Women don't talk about their sexual needs; they're not taught what kind of relationships they may have, or may be good for them. Products like vaginal lubricants or sex toys are almost impossible to find in Israel." Furthermore, she says, sexual relations in Israel, like in

most other Western and non-Western cultures, are conducted according to a male standard: "sex" equals male penetration and ejaculation. Women's pleasure is just assumed, or not even part of the equation.

Joanne Zack adds, with some understatement, that Israeli men are "not so in touch with their bodies." Conservative and orgasm-oriented, traditional and inhibited in their behaviors, they are nevertheless the ones who initiate what goes on in bed, where male/female stereotypes still prevail. With the additional burden of traditional Judaism—that having sex is a mitzvah, religiously ordained for *men*, primarily for the sake of procreation—there's inordinate pressure on women, secular as well as religious, to provide it, not necessarily to enjoy it.

CARETAKING IS A POWERFUL ANTI-APHRODISIAC

It comes as little surprise, then, to see an Israeli gynecologist on national TV declaring that Israeli women are "more invested in being mothers than sexual beings." "Sad," says Michal Schonbrun. "Motherhood is heavy-duty here. Women here are prepared to do anything, make any sacrifice, to have kids, but not to demand sexual satisfaction. It shouldn't be either/or."

For women who perceive themselves first and foremost as mothers and nurturers, sexologist Esther Perel, author of the best-selling *Mating in Captivity*, has another, troubling message: Caretaking is a powerful anti-aphrodisiac. Or, in the words of a JDate who'd just ended a long-term relationship: "It was suffocated by too much mothering." Naomi Raz, a FIGS psychotherapist and social worker who deals mainly with couples and their sexual issues, agrees. She sees many "caretaker types" in her practice. Israeli women, she says, are particularly imbued with what one of them called "an attitude of unstoppable giving." Their sense of responsibility for others—and a congruent sense of selflessness—starts early in life, but their appreciation of sex does not.

"Sex is about one's own pleasure, about feeling entitled," Raz emphasizes. "It's an adult playground, where we wouldn't normally go. Orgasm is a process of cutting off from doing, going to a place of being. It's a process of surrender, a changed state of consciousness." Perel refers to it as "a moment when you have an experience of major adventure, of novelty, of surprise, of mystery, of risk. A moment perhaps where you express desires in your body that you usually don't allow yourself to know."

This is hardly the experience generally presented by FIGS' clients—overextended and stressed-out Jerusalemites who, Raz says, have to fight for their sexual time. These women often have to be taught that they *deserve* good sex. Sexual arousal, or lack of it, is an issue for many. "Every woman," Raz points out, "faces arousal problems at some point. The brain is our sexual organ; it gives the signal for arousal. But it takes most women time to get there, and during that time religious [or mothering] messages from the brain can intervene."

So, how do Naomi Raz and her FIGS colleagues help their Israeli clients get over their predisposition, apparently genetic, to be nurturing rather than naughty, to love rather than lust? The



help begins, tellingly, with the group's interdisciplinary approach, research, and willingness to confront difficult questions on a personal as well as professional level.

WHEN THERAPISTS GET PERSONAL

"FIGS represents a microcosm of our culture," Michal Schonbrun answers. "Ironically, it took years until the group coalesced, till we trusted each other and felt safe enough to discuss our own sexuality and how it informs our practices. For the religious members, there are also issues of modesty (*tzni'ut*): How can we talk about our sexual lives without exposing our partners? And, like everyone else, we all suffer from psychic inhibitions. How many people—men or women—can sit around comfortably talking about masturbation?"

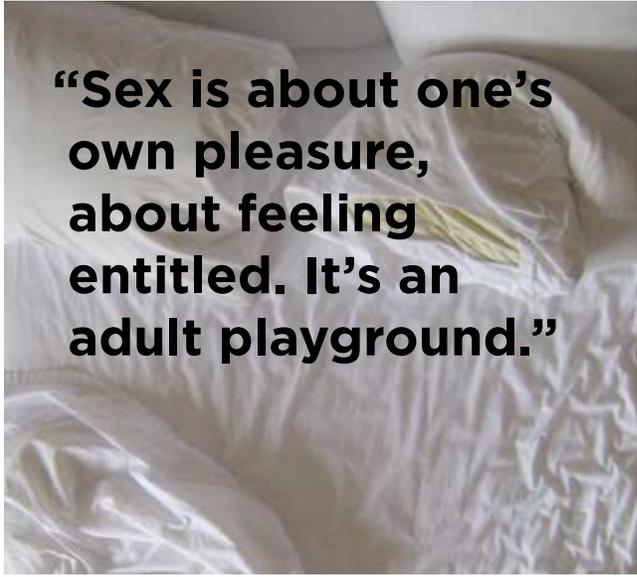
In a radical change during the past year, FIGS members have largely left their cognitive inquiries behind and turned towards the emotional and experiential, for the first time dealing as a group with the personal alongside the political and cultural. "It has been a transformation," Talli Rosenbaum declares. "We are exposed, and we process the issues together. It's a kind of readjustment of our own sexual attitudes."

Naomi Raz elaborates: "We've watched porno films together and done very intimate tantric yoga exercises, discussed our innermost lives and personal experience. It has opened us up, given us more professional tools and confidence." Consequently, when an ultra-Orthodox man stuns his modest wife by bringing her sexy lingerie, or when his desire to watch a pornographic film puts her into shock, FIGS can refer the woman to various members who are prepared to help her with wide-ranging therapies, from pre-orgasmic support groups to pelvic-floor workouts. "Many couples in the *haredi* community," Naomi Raz says, "are immature kids when they marry. They're not into pleasure. Jewish law gives them only two weeks a month for sex. So husbands pressure their wives, who recoil. They become traumatized and try to avoid turning their husbands on. You have to start at ground level with them, help them connect physically and psychologically to themselves and their own sexuality."

At another end of the spectrum she researched S&M last year with her FIGS colleague Dr. Anna Woloski-Wruble, and presented the topic to the group. "I found out that there's a whole community of S&M people who are highly functional, good members of society, and play by strict rules. This changed my preconceptions and expanded my capacity to deal with [other] things like infidelity, gay couples, and transgender clients without blinking."

ASK: "HOW ARE THINGS IN THE BEDROOM?"

Many FIGS members reiterate that the simple act of talking, both within their own meetings and in therapy, can help many women start solving their sexual problems. If, they suggest, Israel's family doctors would just ask "How are things in the bedroom?" a lot of women would be willing to confide in them—but the doctors themselves are not comfortable with the subject. Woloski-



"Sex is about one's own pleasure, about feeling entitled. It's an adult playground."

Wruble, a nurse-midwife and certified sex counselor, teaches at Hadassah-Hebrew University's School of Nursing and coordinates the Faculty of Medicine's first mandatory course in sexuality. There, with the occasional help of her FIGS colleagues, she impresses upon medical students the need and the ways to relate to patients' sexual health. In the meantime, since few Israeli doctors bring up the issue, individuals or couples in distress—at least those who have the courage and the cash—must turn to private therapists. Enter the women of FIGS.

Not infrequently, FIGS therapists are confronted with situations peculiar to their particular setting. In more than one case, Michal Schonbrun recalls, her clients were young ultra-Orthodox women who, half a year or more after their weddings, were still virgins. "Though they'd never had 'sex', their partners had ejaculated, the sperm entered the vagina, and the women got pregnant."

The good news is that, thanks to the two "F" words—feminism and Facebook—Israeli women everywhere are much more aware now that they are entitled not just to want sex, but to enjoy it—and this consciousness is seeping into the previously closed world of the ultra-religious as well.

"The *haredi* world, with its arranged marriages, with intimacy and relationship problems and internalized homophobia, is opening itself up to deal with a lot of trauma," notes Naomi Raz. Many religious and ultra-religious women come to her treatment room in a secular neighborhood, where they feel more anonymous and therefore safer. "I've seen married women who've lived their whole lives without having an orgasm, who hate sex and haven't been able to get any help." One of her cases was a lesbian couple: an ultra-Orthodox woman with six children, one of them studying in the most extreme of *haredi* yeshivas, and her childless partner. The mother was afraid to tell the truth of her being lesbian to her children, frantic that word would get out and ruin their chances of marrying. Her partner was desperate

to have children of her own. For both of them, the struggles were internal as well as external.

FIGS members are quick to affirm that many Israeli rabbis of all stripes are willing to collaborate, to some degree, with professionals in the larger community, and with the organizations dealing with women's sexual health that have sprung up within the religious community. Tahel, Israel's first crisis center for religious women and children, was founded two decades ago; its first international conference, held in Jerusalem in December 2014, attracted 600 people, a third of them men, for three days of training on the topics of violence and abuse. Yahel Institute, established more recently, offers counseling and guidance on marital relations. Its academic program, headed by FIGS' Talli Rosenbaum, trains "marital relations instructors" in the religious sector, including bridal counselors in the Hasidic communities. "Don't call them sexologists or sex therapists," warns Yahel's founder, Michal Pins, "but rather women with guidance abilities serving as a sort of emergency/first aid station on the way to happy sexuality."

Everyone wants happy sexuality, but not everyone—whether religious or secular—agrees on its definition. Michal Schonbrun points out, "When we got The Pill more than 50 years ago, women got sexual freedom—pleasure divorced from reproduction—and were available for sex 24/7. This was a great model for men, but not necessarily for women. Do I want to have sex all the time?"

Well, Schonbrun's 20-something daughter Elisha believes that there are plenty of people who do want to have sex all the time, though exactly what kind of sex they're having remains to be seen. "Just look online," she suggests, "there are groups for sex everywhere. 'Polyamory'—that's where it's at." A Google search for Polyamory in Israel is illuminating: this is apparently the place for what, in the pre-Facebook '60s, was known as open relationships, with permutations of sex and gender now unabashedly thrown into the mix. Polyamory's home page invites newcomers to "a group for people interested in alternatives to monogamy,

serious or casual, emotional or sexual." The only requirement for its meetups is to be interested in learning more.

Nevertheless, a quick survey of Polyamory's members, mostly in their 20's or 30's, reveals that most of the men check off rather staid goals like "Self-Improvement," "Communications Skills," or "Intimacy" rather than the racier suggestions on the group's list, such as "Swingers Polyamorus" (sic), Kinky, or Alternative Lifestyles (read: homosexual or other experiences off Israel's beaten sexual track). These guys are looking for a date, a relationship, or a one-night stand, not necessarily a way-out way of life. As for the women, they're almost demure in their self-descriptions: "Creative," "Independent," and "Foodie" often head their lists; the bolder ones may say that they're "Free-thinkers." Like their male peers, they are usually seeking a date or relationship, with business networking, intimacy and communication sometimes part of the bargain. Hardly the stuff of which Dana Kaplan's doctorate is made.

FIGS' Judy Shotten, the 91-year-old doyenne of Israeli sex therapists, has a clearer vision. The country's first qualified social worker, she became a media hit in her 80s after lecturing on "Sex Among the Aging" at an international conference in Tel Aviv. "I've done it all," she says, and her gleeful laugh hints that she might still be doing it. "Just stay in good health," she advises, "and keep an open mind."

From FIGS' anecdotal evidence, it would seem that most Jewish women of Jerusalem do not enjoy sex any more than their counterparts in other places—and in some cases, significantly less. But the story is far from finished. "In Israel or anywhere else," Talli Rosenbaum concludes, "the more you know about how complex and dynamic female sexuality is, the more you realize how much more there is to know. It's like learning Talmud—you're never done." ■

A freelance writer/editor/translator, Barbara Gingold lives in Jerusalem, where she also designs small urban, eco-friendly gardens.

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