

GUR HASIDIM AND SEXUAL SEPARATION

By [Tamar Rotem](#) Haaretz 10 02 2012

In a recent study, scholar Nava Wasserman offers a window into the philosophy behind the strict sexual separation practiced by Gur Hasidim. For them, sexuality is the antithesis of sanctity, and must be resisted at all costs.

One day in 1976, a student entered our classroom at Beit Yaakov Seminar in Tel Aviv, weeping passionately. She informed us that the revered Gerer rebbe - the so-called Beis Yisroel - Rabbi Israel Alter, had died. Classes at the seminar, which was affiliated with the Gur Hasidic sect, were suspended immediately, and all of us, including girls from the Lithuanian community (those ultra-Orthodox Jews historically opposed to Hasidism) to which I belonged, bawled our eyes out.

The Beis Yisroel, who ruled Gur Hasidism from 1948 to 1976, was a dominant leader who revolutionized that sect, which in those days won admiration in the ultra-Orthodox world - even though, or perhaps because, it had always been steeped in secrecy when it came to relations between men and women. Over time it emerged that the unusual Gur customs in this realm are tied to the concept of kedusha (sanctity), from which stems the unique attitude to sexuality and conjugal relations within the sect. (Much of our understanding of the topic is the result of the research of Dr. Benjamin Brown of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem over the last few years).

A new study that focuses on the private and public lifestyle of Gur Hasidim lifts the veil further on sanctity in the sect. "Sanctity is the ideology of the art of drawing apart," says Dr. Nava Wasserman, whose study of private and public life among Gur Hasidism was the subject of her doctoral dissertation (which she wrote under the guidance of Prof. Kimmy Caplan, at Bar-Ilan University).

According to Wasserman, "This view dictates the strict separation between the sexes in this Hasidic sect, and primarily the practices of prishut [separation] that guide the relationship between spouses in this society, which is unparalleled in other ultra-Orthodox groups. Hasidism is doing more than is demanded by Jewish law. If in the Western world sexuality is a constant presence, it is precisely against this that Gur Hasidim fight. They don't want to get anywhere near the atmosphere and tension of sexuality, even if matters do not reach the level of prohibition. This is the fulfillment of Hasidism: Separation beyond that which Jewish law requires."

Response to Zionism

More than 20 years ago, Prof. Menachem Friedman, one of the most important scholars of ultra-Orthodox life, claimed that the Ashkenazi Haredi community is built around a "society of learners," and demonstrated how this was intended to be a fitting response to Zionism. Starting in the 1950s, studying Torah came to be seen as an alternative to the secular sense of having "a calling" in life. Teenage boys began to be sent to small yeshivas at age 15, something that was not commonly done before at that age, and that would be followed by study at a larger yeshiva. Another important development was the alliance struck between the leader of the Lithuanians, the Chazon Ish (Rabbi Avrohom Yeshaya Karelitz), and Rabbi Zeev Wolf, who sought to educate the girls who would agree to take upon themselves the burden of working for a living. Thus came about the learners' society.

Whereas Friedman does not distinguish between Lithuanian society and the Hasidim, Wasserman demonstrates that the case of the Gur is unique. "Gur Hasidim did adopt the practice of studying the Torah for many years, but they have an alternate ethos, that of sanctity as an organizing principle and the axis around which life revolves - exactly like the ethos of Torah learning in Lithuanian society. This is a society that has taken upon itself with utter devotion the principle of reducing sexuality, as a way to challenge general society," she says.

In her study, which receives its first public exposure here, an honest attempt was made to analyze and understand in depth a culture based on strict gender separation.

"Quite often, separation of men and women is interpreted as something that is intended against women," Wasserman explains. "Modesty demands which are made of women are also frequently interpreted as acts of oppression by men, but the Gur case proves that the demands for modest attire made of men are even stricter."

Her study is a rare achievement, in that sanctity is an oral tradition, and among Gur Hasidim, it is passed on only via private instruction. She describes the sanctity society through the eyes of women and men who are for the most part from the hard core of the sect. And therein also lies its disadvantage: Wasserman, who is a social worker, acknowledges that she does not address the implications of the strict approach to sexuality for all the "circles" of Gur Hasidim, nor does she deal with the personal price that these Hasidim may pay for their way of life.

The concept of sanctity, or "drawing apart," comes into play in four circles: between the Hasid and himself; between the Hasid and other men; between the Hasid and women; and - the great novelty - between the Hasid and his wife.

"The Gur innovation is that the notion of separation also exists for the men in relation to the women they marry. This is in addition to the limitations of halakha (Jewish religious law) that the other groups adhere to," Wasserman says.

Gur Hasids drew the inspiration for separation from the heritage of Kotzk, a small Hasidic sect that existed in the early 19th century - the path of which Gur saw itself as continuing.

"The Kotzk Rebbe essentially claimed that love for the Lord and love for a woman do not go together. There is a rivalry between spirituality and sexuality, so sexuality has to be abolished," notes Wasserman, explaining the rationale.

"At first it was a matter for a select few. A significant turning point occurred in 1948, when Rabbi Alter, the Beis Yisroel, assumed the position of admor of Gur, and brought all the issues of sanctity to the fore again and made it a requirement for everyone. The move unified Gur Hasidim: From a collection of groups with varied affinity for Hasidism, which included refugees from the Holocaust, it became a homogenous group. To belong to it you had to meet obligatory requirements.

"The Beis Yisroel appointed commandants, Polish for 'commanders,' whose job was to instruct, and to spread information about the issue of sanctity. The change was introduced through the boys' school system. Instruction on what is permitted and proscribed does not take place in public lectures, because such matters are not discussed in public. And that is the inherent paradox in the system: On the one hand, they stay away from talking about conjugal matters, and on the other hand they need to be discussed. Therefore the conversation is a personal one between the young man or Hasid and his counselor, in language that is highly indirect, but at the same time also highly specific."

A young man's preparation for having a relationship with a woman is very limited. Only on his wedding day, about two hours before the marriage ceremony, does the counselor reveal to the groom what he must do on his wedding night. The girls receive more extensive counseling.

"There are grooms who throw up or faint when they hear these things," Wasserman notes. "But the sect is willing to pay this price, to receive the benefit of sanctity."

'Distant closeness'

Gur Hasidim acquire their level of separation by guarding their eyes - and their thoughts. "The intention is to uproot from consciousness the images that might lead to arousal," Wasserman says. Therefore, when a Gur Hasid walks down the street, he will direct his gaze downward. On a bus, he might remove his glasses, because "they are taught diversionary practices - how to guide awareness to another place. That way they slowly acquire tools for repressing their sexuality."

An entire set of restrictions pertains to ties with friends. Gur men do not embrace and do not kiss; a young man is forbidden to sit on his friend's bed; a young man is forbidden to conduct a conversation unless he is wearing his overcoat. In general, Gur Hasidim must walk around in their overcoats at all times. The strictest instruction is given regarding immersion in the mikveh, or ritual bath, in the most modest manner. "There is a clash of values here," Wasserman says. "You need to safeguard sanctity, on the one hand, and on the other, the immersion involves nudity."

For this reason, children under the age of 13 do not perform the ritual immersion. The young men who do immerse do so quickly and get dressed without dawdling. Young Hasids are instructed to look away so as not to see a naked body.

Separation between the sexes in Gur is so complete that "the young men do not attend weddings, because the event could create a certain connotation that it is undesirable to create in their consciousness. And also to reduce the opportunity of meeting women," Wasserman says. In some Gur families, boys of a certain age will stop speaking to their female cousins, and at meals for the extended family, women and men eat at separate tables. A young man who is considered even more devoted will speak only to women from his nuclear family, and not with his sisters-in-law. They will not say hello and goodbye to women, so as not to have contact.

The relationship between a man and his wife in the Gur sect is definitely unique. Wasserman terms it "distant closeness": "The couple's relationship takes shape in light of the ethos that sexuality is minimized in marital life. Whereas modern society talks about cooperation between man and woman, unity, friendship and love, Gur Hasidism comes along and tells its members to keep their distance. But distance is not alienation. A couple can be caring and warm, even if they maintain their distance. The Hasid will not call his wife by name. When there are children, this becomes easier: She will be called 'Mother' ordinarily. To address her, he will knock on the table. Or hum. In any event, he will not walk with her on the street. This means that they will never do the shopping or go on a trip together."

One example of the emotional restraint demanded of couples was given in a preparatory course for Gur brides: "A woman told me that after the wedding she heard a lecture about how to treat your husband, and how to create a pleasant atmosphere in the home. They said there that everything depends on the woman and her manner of speaking. And when the husband comes from the kollel [yeshiva for married men], you have to welcome him with a nice [greeting like] 'Sholom Aleikhem' - out of warmth and friendliness.

"The girl took the instruction at face value, and that very day when she heard her husband approach, opened the door to him and said, 'Shalom, how are you?' She had barely got the sentence out when the door was slammed in her face and her husband disappeared. The wife was stunned, close to tears, didn't know what to do. She went back inside and began thinking what had been wrong in her conduct. When the husband [returned and] entered the house, he said to her: 'Tsu gut, is nisht gut' - too good is not good."

Necessary evil

The distance stems from the basic mind-set that sexuality and conjugal relations are a necessary evil, Wasserman says. Conjugal relations exist only because Jewish law demands this - and because you have to bring children into the world. But those relations are marginal and are kept to a minimum.

"The Lithuanians and the Hasidim have very different concepts of family," she explains. "Lithuanian society exists within the boundaries of Jewish law, but the basic mindset is, 'Sanctify yourself through those things that are permitted to you' - in fact, devote yourself to conjugal relations, [during the two weeks out of the month] when they are permitted, as something that will benefit your spiritual life. The Gur interpretation is the opposite: 'Remove yourself from those things that are permitted to you.'"

Thus, the husband and wife from Gur will always behave as if the woman is in niddah (the days during and after a woman's period when she is considered impure). He will never take something from his wife's hand; she will place it on the table for him to pick up. There will certainly not be any contact between them that expresses warmth. There are also orders regarding frequency of conjugal relations.

The supervision and strict enforcement reach a climax during the first year of marriage. The avrech (married yeshiva student) spends the day at the kollel. The entry into married life is gradual, with the object of solidifying it in an asexual manner. Wasserman makes it clear that for Hasidim, marriage is about wholehearted devotion to a supreme cause.

"When my goals are spiritual, I must do everything to reduce my natural desires," she explains. "Gur Hasidism contend that it is possible to control sexual urges. To a large extent, in their eyes, Western society blew sexuality out of its natural and necessary proportions." Sanctity, therefore, is a source of collective pride within Gur.

At the same, however, Wasserman says, "People were willing to talk about difficulties. There's a feeling that they are prepared: there is talk about the fact that the relationship is slowly forged. One of the counselors told the brides: 'Imagine that you might cry a lot in the beginning, but in the end it will work out.'"

Toward the age of 40, which Hasidism deems the age at which a man acquires greater control of his urges, some of these directives melt away. Among some couples, they will feel free to act the way they like. Even before this, there is a range of behaviors regarding which there is choice.

"I think that Gur society is an impressive model of success," Wasserman says. However, she adds that, "no society succeeds in realizing its ideal all the way through, and there are also people who do not get along with the norms in it."

And just as Hasidism and maintaining the Hasidic lifestyle that goes with it is seen mainly as the "work" of men only, so too the issue of maintaining sanctity in Hasidism is a demand addressed to the men.

Wasserman: "The men have spiritual-Hasidic goals, whereas the women's Hasidism is intended to help that of the men to be executed. That is their role as women. Women identify with the idea and instill it in their children from an early age."

According to her, Gur life has also given rise to women's empowerment. "There is something in the lifestyle that makes them highly independent. Gur women have lots of opportunities for self-expression," she says. "This is because men do not fill any function in the feminine sphere." For example, it is rare for there to be male teachers or principals at Gur schools for girls.

Wasserman spent several years teaching educational psychology to female instructors at a Gur seminar in Bnei Brak. Her impression was that the women are not in the least embittered.

"Happiness or a [personal] connection in marriage does not depend on a model of marriage or on the question of whether people walk together in the street or not. There are many couples that know how to create a sensitive and considerate connection and they are the happy couples, as in any society," she says. "There is great security in these marriages, in which the spouses feel that someone 'has their back' - that someone cares for them, and that they are realizing their purpose. Love is something that is culturally dependent. It doesn't have to be expressed by gazing into each other's eyes. There isn't one way to express love."

FOR MEMBERS OF ISRAEL'S ULTRA-ORTHODOX GUR SECT, SEX IS A SIN

By Tamar Rotem Haaretz 12 02 2012

Y., a Gur Hasid, fainted during his pre-wedding counseling session. R. left the sect because she could not stand its alienation of women. A. was sexually harassed as a youth by a religious supervisor. On breaking taboos - and silence.

When R. was a girl, she came into the possession of the books in the "Anne of Green Gables" series, which her parents did not allow her to read. One Yom Kippur, when her family was at synagogue, she slipped away from the women's section. In her parents' room she shed a tear when the protagonists, Anne Shirley and Gilbert Blythe, kissed for the first time. When she became engaged a year later, she expected that some of her innocent, romantic fantasies would come true in her own marriage.

On her wedding night, her brand-new husband called her into the living room, where a large picture of the Admor of Gur - the rabbinic leader of that Hasidic sect - hung on the wall. He told her she had to imagine the rebbe's face when she observed the mitzvah of ishut (conjugal relations), so that she would have "righteous" children.

As she tells this story, R., who is now 30 years old, shakes her short-cropped head as if in disbelief. A few years ago, already the mother of two children, she divorced her husband and left the Gur Hasidic sect.

R. was outraged by the research, whose findings were described last week in Haaretz, about the concept of kedusha (sanctity) among Gur Hasidism, which revealed the ethos of prishut (separation) and its strict practices aimed at restraining sexuality. According to her, the depiction of these sacred strictures as merely a supreme value, to which the Hasidim are prepared to devote themselves totally, is imprecise, to put it mildly.

Gur is a large Hasidic sect, numbering tens of thousands of members. Most of them follow the "official line" they are taught in their schools and yeshivas. However, quite a considerable number observe the strictures only during the first years of their marriage, and thereafter see them as guidelines that can be relaxed in the privacy of their own homes.

R. and her girlfriends who were raised in hard-core Gur families - some of whom left Hasidism by the skin of their teeth - speak of the heavy psychological price paid by women living in a world where kedusha constitutes an ongoing, restrictive way of life, imposed with severe emotional coldness. They describe a society in which the men, who until their wedding night hardly ever have looked directly at a woman, keep their distance and alienate themselves from their wives as well.

The women's descriptions were embellished by male former Gur Hasidim who spoke about the implications of being educated toward a life of prishut. Out of the desire to maintain their relationships with family members who are still part of the Gur community, most of the speakers preferred not to identify themselves by name.

According to Dr. Benjamin Brown, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, criticism of the regulations laid down by the late Rabbi Israel Alter (also known as the Beis Yisroel), who led Gur from 1948 to 1977, goes back as far as the 1960s. Among the critics was Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky (1899-1985), known as the Steipler. Kanievsky was the brother-in-law of the world-renowned rabbinical authority Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (the "Hazon Ish," who lived 1878-1953) and the father of Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, one of the leading rabbinical authorities in Bnei Brak today.

The Steipler wrote that one should not necessarily act according to the sect's strict regulations, which he said mainly cause suffering to women. To this day his views are studied in instruction sessions for bridegrooms in the Lithuanian (non-Hasidic) ultra-Orthodox community, who are encouraged not to refrain from sexual relations. Among other things, the Steipler wrote: "It is known that a woman's main hope in her world is to have a husband who loves her ... but heaven forbid that he observe the measure of prishut, whereby he hurts his wife."

The commandants

R. was considered a good and pious student at the seminary for young women where she studied. Her family, which had a lofty status within Gur, arranged a match with a groom who did not deviate one iota from the doctrine of kedusha.

"My family," R. recalls, "were good people with good values, but my husband was the product of his education. In Gur sex is a sin. He was convinced that if he loved one woman, this would be a slippery slope and he would become a pervert. The men are severely warned about this."

At the only encounter she had with him before the engagement, R. did not like her designated groom, she says, "But I thought that if the Rebbe of Gur says it's suitable, then it's suitable. The Rebbe is not God's messenger on earth: He is God."

At the wedding, she recalls, "When we were in yihud [where the couple is left alone immediately after the wedding ceremony], he kept making sure that the fabric of my dress wouldn't touch him. My feeling was that he found me disgusting."

Nevertheless, R. says she wanted to love the man who was intended for her: "I kept trying to connect with him, even during the time I was fighting the rules [of kedusha]. I tried to explain to him that this [sort of life] was irrational. But that didn't help."

In Gur Hasidism, there is a network of men called commandants, who counsel the young grooms regarding marital relations. If there is one thing L., a friend of R.'s, could not stand in her marriage, she notes, it was the commandant's intervention in her intimate life.

L.: "Early on in my marriage, it sometimes happened that at 1:30 A.M. on the night of my immersion [in the mikveh, or ritual bath, to render her pure for marital relations], he would phone to consult. The commandant told my husband to set a clock for 3 A.M. because only until dawn is it possible to observe the mitzvah. We fell asleep and suddenly the alarm clock rang. It was pitch dark - because in marital relations you cover even the light of the clock. I didn't wake up. The whole evening I had cleansed myself in order to be immersed in the purification pool at the mikveh. I had worked that day. I was tired. And nevertheless he performed the mitzvah. If that isn't rape, what is it? That's how we started out life. Already the next day, you are ritually impure."

D., a former Gur member who also fled the sect with her two children, describes entire nights when she sat in the bathroom and wept because her husband treated her cruelly. "While I would cry, he would be fast asleep in his bed, a meter and a half from me, clutching his tzitzit, with an angelic smile on his face," she relates.

D.'s husband, who actually came from a more open family and thus presumably wasn't committed to kedusha, used the regulations as a weapon against her. Sara Einfeld, a former Gur Hasid, says: "Men are liable to use this to control their wives and avoid treating them well, in the guise of spiritual 'elevation.'"

Yiddishkeit

Y., a Gur Hasid, sent me the following message: "It is important to me that our outcry reach the sane world," he wrote.

We met under the cover of darkness in a secular neighborhood in Jerusalem. A fellow in his late 20s, Y. appears to be a full-fledged Gur Hasid, but inwardly he has stopped believing and he abhors the sect's rules.

"When I was nine or 10 years old," he recalls, "the mashgiah [supervisor] at the heder called the children in for personal talks. That's how I understood for the first time that there are things about the body that are forbidden. In the conversations with the counselors the feeling is that they are walking on eggshells. On the one hand they are warning you [about sex] and on the other hand trying to withhold information that there is such a thing as sex. There is a code name for this: Yiddishkeit [Jewishness, a Jewish way of life]."

"When I was 15 the mashgiah interrogated me, asking: 'What happens with you at night in bed?' He became all serious when I told him - completely naively. 'These are absolute prohibitions,' he reprimanded me. I was very upset and kept thinking how I could do penitence. This is the main frame of mind in Gur, beating your breast for the terrible sin of sexuality."

Y. learned to walk along side streets quickly, and with his eyes cast down: "We didn't know what we were missing out on. I wasn't even thinking about women then. I didn't see my body. At the mikveh we'd compete to see who could go in and get out the fastest. There was one boy who managed to take his dip and get dressed, all in nine minutes."

Presumably a young man who has grown up completely separated from any female figure will feel strange when he is brought before a woman on the eve of his engagement. Indeed, says Y.: "The meeting was one big stutter," he relates. "I felt I was riding in a train and there was an engine pulling me. I did not have an independent opinion, I was so accustomed to my parents deciding for me."

Y. did not see his intended at all during the next two months. "You are not allowed to think about her, about the wedding, at all. I would not have recognized her in the street had I seen her. It's a disaster that there is no guidance for bridegrooms before the wedding. When the counselor told me, two hours before the ceremony, about a woman's period and intimate relations - I was in shock. After all, my whole life they had taught us that this was something forbidden."

Like many grooms, Y. fainted during the conversation with the counselor. There are others who throw up. "I saw black circles in front of my eyes and all of a sudden I found myself on the sofa," he recalls.

But the greatest crisis of all came when Y. realized he could not establish a relationship with his wife: "I was not supposed to know anything about love, but I remember myself praying to God to bring me a match that would grant me love and a real relationship."

Y.'s wife did not want to budge from the strictures of the sect, he adds: "She believes that if she opens up to my love, she will damage her 'paradise.'"

Nor did Y.'s counselor leave him alone. "I got a phone call. They had told him I had walked in the street with my wife" - which is against Gur regulations. "After that I got it. I would wait for my wife at the bus stop to help her with the stroller and the children. In Gur it is forbidden to help a woman."

A., also a young man in his twenties, has had doubts about being a Gur Hasid, but has decided to remain in the sect. He says he keeps making efforts to lessen the feeling of alienation he feels from his wife, and she - whom he defines as "one of the strong ones" (in terms of faith) - has made some concessions. Today this enables him to live within the community, and yet he still does not forgive it for meddling in his life when he was an adolescent.

"The institution of the commandants is a disgusting mechanism in my opinion," he says. "When I was about 14 years old, a mashgiah interrogated me about some strange thoughts that I was having. I was an innocent lamb. He succeeded in exposing my innermost self, he drew out the marrow of my bones. I am damaged to this day because they did not respect my intimacy. I think this is sexual abuse in every respect. They gave me to understand that hell awaited me if I didn't confess."

A. believes that the institution of the commandants serves as a refuge for Hasidim, who satisfy their own lustful urges by means of voyeurism and conversations about the sexuality of married couples and young boys.

"They are obsessively concerned with this," he says. "There are also wonderful people, counselors who help in matters of fertility, for example, but they are few."

According to A., the commandants have total independence, and in the absence of a written code of kedusha, also encourage extremism.

A. himself was released from some of the constraints of kedusha thanks to his financial independence. According to him, "Gur Hasidism applies force mainly upon the young learners, who are 'nourished' around the community table. The moment the Hasid starts working, like me, he is not dependent on them."

By force of pride

In R.'s former environment, she says, they continue to this day to live by the rules of kedusha. "The girls in my class, my aunts, my sisters-in-law, my sisters - all of them are living that way."

At one time she went along with them: "I wasn't educated to be critical. I lived in a sheltered world. I thought people only do good. That it's necessary to admire the admor. I didn't wake up until my marriage. Then I realized that a woman in Gur is a vessel in the service of the man. I envied men for going to learn when I had to clean and cook. I was strangled by the kedusha rules, and in the end it was a matter of life and death for me - and I preferred to leave."

R. adds, "Most of the women are submissive because they don't know anything about rabbinical law or Gemara. In the Gemara there are stories that are full of sexuality, but [the authorities] only teach the line about Rabbi Eliezer, who had intercourse with his wife as though possessed. The women can't fight it because they don't know that both things exist."

"Women hold themselves together thanks to the pride instilled in them for being part of a select unit. Look at the others, they are told - look at the secular, look at the Lithuanians: They are like cats. We are angels, ascetics. And if the women want something different, they are ashamed. You are not supposed to want your husband to stay home and not travel to the Rebbe [in Jerusalem] every three weeks. After all, you are driving him to sin, and causing him to stray from the path of Hasidism - and you definitely don't want him to hug you."

R. agrees that it is possible for relations of mutual respect and caring to develop even in the most pious Gur families. But that is not enough, she notes: "There is emotional alienation. There are no demonstrations of affection, the whole matter is taboo. It reminds me of marriages in royal dynasties in Europe intended for the perpetuation of the kingdom."

S., a Gur Hasid of 30 who has left religion, recently attended his sister's wedding. "I saw how she was dragged to the wedding canopy with an opaque cloth covering her face," he relates. "I thought about how she was feeling, thinking that soon someone would be touching her in an automatic and insensitive way, and I wept. I think this is traumatic, but I know that her culture and her locked-up world prevent her from feeling what they are doing to her."