



Interview

Rabbi Shmuley Boteach



Rabbi Shmuley Boteach is host of "Dear Shmuley," a nationally syndicated daily radio show on the Talk America Radio network. He is one of the country's most sought-after guests on radio and television talk show circuits and has appeared on nearly every American talk and news program. He has authored fourteen books, including the international best-sellers *Kosher Sex and Dating Secrets of the Ten Commandments*, and most recently *Kosher Adultery*.

Shmuley served as Rabbi for eleven years in Oxford (1988-1999), founding the Oxford University L'Chaim Society, an organization of Oxford students that became the second-largest student organization in Oxford's history. He publicly deliberated with Mikhail Gorbachev, Shimon Peres, Benjamin Netanyahu, Elie Wiesel, Michael Jackson, Boy George, Simon Wiesenthal, and Prof. Stephen Hawking, and engaged in debates against such formidable opponents as Prof. Richard Dawkins, Deepak Chopra, the Rules Girls, and Larry Flynt.

In 1999, Rabbi Shmuley was the first-ever non-Christian to win the most prestigious London Times Preacher of the Year Competition. Rabbi Shmuley lives in New Jersey with his Australian wife Debbie and their seven young children.

S *Shabbat Shalom**: What is sexuality? How would you define this term that is so often used in our culture nowadays?

Shmuley Boteach: First of all, I don't claim to be an expert in anything. I am just trying to figure out things I learned in life. Okay, if you mean what I see as the purpose of sexuality, I think that it has never been summarized better than in the Bible in Genesis chapter 2: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cling to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." So the purpose of sexuality is that two strangers come together to be bone of one bone and flesh of one flesh. Clearly those who see the purpose of sexuality as having primarily a procreating function are misguided. The proof is that the human female is the only mammal on the planet that enjoys sex even when pregnant, clearly showing that there is a pleasurable side and a procreative side. Women don't go into heat. They are sexually active all year round, unlike females in the animal world. The disproportion of the large size of the human male sexual appendage facilitates face-

to-face sexual relations, thereby demonstrating an intimacy component that is unknown in the animal world where almost all population have sex back-to-front. Human females are the only organisms on the planet that have breasts throughout their lives, meaning

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they have attractive features on the front of their body that draw a man to their face, whereas in the animal world it's the rump that is attractive. And there are many other reasons.

Shabbat Shalom: Are you then saying that the purpose of sex is procreation and pleasure?

Boteach: No, the purpose of sex is two strangers together to be bone of one bone and flesh of one flesh. Sex is the motion that brings forth the emotion. Of course, there is a pleasurable dimension that is supposed to unite two souls together in

joy, celebration, and delight.

Shabbat Shalom: What then would be your definition of sexuality? What is sexuality?

Boteach: It is the capacity for human beings to be intimate with one another, the capacity to shed all public inhibition and unclasp themselves, not just literally but especially metaphorically, the capacity of human beings to expose their soft underbellies to each other and to unite in intimacy, with emotional pleasure and joy. That is what sexuality is to me: the capacity to feel completely alive, unlike any other human experience, the capacity to have our blood boil, our emotions tingle, and cling to the rafters of the ceiling and fly to the moon and back. Sexuality is the capacity to feel alive. I move away from the strictly evolutionary-biological reductionist definition where sexuality is merely a form of procreation. It's something far more than that. Because if that is all that sexuality is, we would need nothing more than a process of insemination as it takes place in the animal world. However, the fact that in addition to the things I mentioned before there is courtship, romance, lifelong partnership—all unknown in the animal—proves that there is a higher purpose of human sexuality.

Shabbat Shalom: Is your definition then shaped by your Jewish understanding of sexuality? At least you started your definition by referring to the Hebrew Bible. What is, in your view, the specific Jewish perspective on sexuality? And what is particular to it in comparison to other perspectives?

Boteach: I think Judaism celebrates and hallows, sanctifies and consecrates sexuality unlike the other religious traditions that are fearful of sexuality—they feel it's a fire that burns out of control, that

makes people go into directions they do not want, it's anti-cerebral, anti-intellectual, it's too carnal, too physical. Judaism believes that the body is holier than the soul. Evidence of that is the fact that we are allowed to desecrate the

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Sabbath in order to save the body. And there are many other prohibitions in order to maintain our health. It's the body that is truly holy. It's God's physical world where the greatness of God crystallizes, as opposed to the spiritual world where there is no presentation of any concretization or manifestation of real godliness. The belief that the physical can be holier than the spiritual facilitated the Jewish approach that sexuality is actually not just something to be tolerated, not just something to produce children, but actually something that is holy. That is why for many Jews love is associated with sexuality because it is supposed to nurture and to protect that holiness. I think that would be the main difference. In virtually every religious tradition we see an attempt to delegitimize sexuality, often to demonize it. In Catholicism the holiest people cannot marry at all—they are so-to-speak asexual. In Hinduism sexuality has only a procreative function. Interestingly, even for evolutionary biologists sexuality is actually only a kind of canard that the body plays on us in order to propagate the species. It has no intrinsic purpose. It is only there as a means to an end. It's there to produce offspring. All of this is a delegitimization of sexuality, which is why I

think that sexuality is so abused in our days. We don't see it as something holy. We see it as almost a hormonal build-up. In fact, most people do not even really engage in a sexual relation, they engage in sexual ventilation. They rid themselves of an urge that builds up.

Shabbat Shalom: Does that mean since sexuality is an intentionally created part by God that it has to be viewed holistically and that it functions not only on the physical level but also on the spiritual level?

Boteach: Correct.

Shabbat Shalom: How important then is sexuality to Jewish life and thinking? How important was sexuality to Hebrew thinking in the Hebrew Bible?

Boteach: For scientists, sexuality is only important for the propagation of the species but it's not important to the individual. We believe the opposite: sexuality is much more important to the individual. You can inseminate anyone, big deal. We are talking about creating relationships. The very first thing that God labels as bad in the Bible is "It is not good for man to be alone." The only way we can ever assuage that loneliness is not just to be around with the people in the Yankee stadium, not just to be part of a community or even have friendships. It's specifically the intimate side. It's a part of us which connects to people specifically in a sexual arena that is so powerful that it really has the capacity to make us feel like we are one in the morning after as close as we felt the night before. That is something that conversation and communication can never attain. So sex is very important. When the sexual life of husband and wife is functionally terminated, then we witness the functional termination of the marriage, and they

revert to mere friendship. The relationship is gone from the intense to the casual. That's why people are never satiated with friendship. They always want an intimate relationship, because they still feel lonely among their friends. But in a healthy marriage, where the emotional, physical, psychological needs are catered to, loneliness is addressed and assuaged. So why do I say that the sexual is more important than the emotional or psychological? The reason why the sexual is so much more important is that it can actually lead to the emotional and psychological. When people feel desirable to their spouse, when they have a healthy sex life, they feel alive. What happens is that the sexual nurtures and brings back to health the other dimensions of the human personality. But when you don't feel alive, when your marriage is reduced to the great thrill of the week that is going to a movie together, then all of the life forces are externalized. You need external components in order to nurture the relationship.

Shabbat Shalom: This reminds, of course, of the thoughts you have shared in your bestseller *Kosher Sex*. And now you have elaborated on one aspect in more detail in your new book *Kosher Adultery* [see the "Recent Books" section]. By these two books you have brought your understanding of sexuality not only to a Jewish community but indeed to a much larger public audience. So what specifically would you like today's Jews and the larger community to learn about the Jewish perspective on sexuality as you outlined it?

Boteach: Well, we are a generation that seems to be confounded by human sexuality. That's why it is so apparitional. On the one hand, sex is reduced to pornography, which is shallow and also boring,

because pornography is not erotic. On the other hand . . . let's just look at the different permutations of human sexuality. The press treats it in a pornographic way and uses it to sell merchandise. It's a marketing tool. Scientists, as I said earlier, see it only as having a procreating function, but not an intrinsic function. Marriages seem to be dying sexually, with the average American couple having sex once a week according to a survey in February 2001 by American Demographics. For singles, it's a goal to be reached—a guy takes out a girl and abuses her; so there is an agenda. Are any of those things healthy? Of course not. And the primary function of sexuality, cementing husband and wife together, is not happening. Just look at the sixty-percent divorce rate in the United States. So the main thing people can learn from the Jewish perspective on sexuality is primarily—as I have encapsulated in my book *Kosher Sex*, and even in *Kosher Adultery*—that sex has the unique capacity to end the conundrum of

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a marriage, that is, how do you become lovers and best friends at the same time when one cancels the other out. It's a catch twenty-two. To have a passionate love life is about novelty, surprise, curiosity. But to have friendship is the exact opposite. Friendship is based on routine; it's about trust, sharing, going through the same motions with the same person, to build comradery and companionship. How do fire and water coexist? How do friendship and loverhood coexist? Sex is that unique bridge. Sex is a passionate motion that

brings forth intimate emotions. Once we have a much deeper understanding of sexuality and restore it to its proper role and relationship, we can get the best out of our relation. On the one hand, we want to feel alive. On the other hand, we want to feel understood. We want to feel exhilarated, but we also want to feel never alone.

Shabbat Shalom: Do you think if a person is religious, or even a Jew, there will not only be a different perception of sexuality but also a different quality of the experience of sexuality?

Boteach: First of all, all studies show that religious people in general, not just Jewish, have a better sex life than secular people. And that makes sense. Because they are less experienced before marriage, which means that they are less judgmental of their spouse's bodies. The fact that they are naive about sex makes it more erotic and titillating. So they do not feel sexually burned out the way a lot of couples do. You ask me specifically whether I think that religious people have a better perspective of sex?

Shabbat Shalom: Yes.

Boteach: Oh—the answer is yes. Religious people see it as the soul of the relationship, as an integral part, the defining characteristic of their intimacy, whereas in the secular society sex is being seen as a way of having fun. Real intimacy is communication, real intimacy is a romantic dinner. That is why we no longer even say "making love"; we use the phrase "having sex." Clearly, we do not longer see sex as making love; it's having sex.

Shabbat Shalom: Do you see sexuality related conceptually to religion?

Boteach: Certainly. Kabbalistically, it is. The Kabbalah strongly employs sexual metaphors to speak about the unity of God and His

world. Sexuality among humanity is seen as a devolution of what we call in the Kabbalah “the higher celestial unions.” Also, sex in the Bible has only one word. The only word for sex in Hebrew is “knowledge,” e.g. “and Adam came to know his wife Eve.” Clearly biblical religion regards sex as the highest form of knowledge. It’s where a man and a woman shed all their pretension, all their inhibition, and all their projection, and they just are. Instead of doing, they function in the mode of being. So, yes, there is definitely an integral link between religion and sexuality, because religion as in Judaism perceives the sacred nature of human sexuality.

Shabbat Shalom: “Knowledge,” respectively “to know,” is a key term when the Hebrew Bible talks about sexuality. Another key term seems to be *zera*, “seed.” Why is the seed so important in Jewish tradition?

Boteach: As I said, Judaism does not see the principal purpose of human sexuality as procreation. Of course, there can be no doubt about it that it is a procreative act. But its procreative function is not the primary focus. The unique human capacity to create life is the one in which we are most closely associated to God. When the Bible speaks about the seed, its holy character, its holy aspect, and how it can be abused, it’s clear that the seed is a part of us that is demonstratively godly.

Shabbat Shalom: If God has given sex as a part of our creation as human beings, is it then possible that through sexuality we can attain knowledge about God?

Boteach: According to the Kabbalah the answer is yes. But I am very hesitant about answering that question in the affirmative. How many cults have degenerated

into some sort of sexual orgastic religious experience, which is really just an excuse to have sex and to behave in an immoral fashion and give it a religious sugar-coating. On the contrary, sex in a sacred and holy way is an act of love when a

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man and a woman enjoy the pleasures of human sexuality and are totally focused on each other. Then, we believe, there is a sacred component of sex. Yes, there is a Jewish tradition that regards sex as an analogy of the kind of joy and pleasure of a man or woman truly understanding God and uniting with God. However, not to repeat myself, that understanding can be

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dangerously distorted and employed as an excuse to engage in immoral cultic sexual deviances that are practiced today by many sexual cults.

Shabbat Shalom: I am specifically interested in the spiritual quality about sexuality. Are there any lessons we can learn about God through His gift of sexuality?

Boteach: Sexual intercourse is one of the great metaphors of the Kabbalah. Even in the Bible, the Song of Solomon is a long erotic love poem about the erotic love of a man and a woman that is set to be a metaphor for the love of God in Israel. So clearly yes, the intensity of sexual desire can be transposed

so that we can understand how the soul can answer God and God’s relationship to the Jewish people—He is set to be the Husband, the Jews are set to be the wife. So sexual imagery is fundamental to an understanding of God in the Jewish mythical experience and in the Song of Solomon.

Shabbat Shalom: In your two books which we mentioned before, you address particularly the sexual relationship between spouses. How should a couple educate their children on sexuality in our permissive society? How should they teach them to create a healthy understanding of sexuality?

Boteach: Well, from the earliest age you don’t teach them. You shelter them from it. I am not an advocate of sex education for preteens. I think that is awful. The more you talk about it the more you fuel their curiosity about sex. As with our children—my oldest daughter is thirteen—we shield them from all things sexual, as should be done with children. Because that’s what they are: they are children. We all seem to believe that kids cease being children at age eight or nine, which is just a modern aberration. We do not allow children to be children. Beginning at fifteen or sixteen, as they are exposed to these things, it is very difficult to shelter kids these days. I would give them this perspective, that the purpose of human sexuality could be the fundamental adhesive which connects you to the person that you love and allows you to know them in the most intimate, deepest, and most profound way possible. And therefore its potency should never be diluted. And that it is something uniquely—not just a gift—it’s a uniquely potent device to get to know someone beyond their public and artificial layers, to really—

viewing the human being as an onion—to really peel away the layers to get to know the essence. It's only in the sexual act that we can have such a kind of knowledge. Therefore when we make sex something artificial and part of our layers we rob ourselves of the capacity to know people intimately and we end up being alone in our relationships.

And that's what I would say is the governing characteristic of modern human relationship—not just confusion, shall I marry, shall I not marry, shall I stay in a relationship, shall I get out?—I say that the final characteristic of most relationships is loneliness. People are still lonely when they are married, they are still lonely when they are dating. Because it's still solely external, artificial, superficial. Sex is about cutting through all those layers. Yet, when we make sex itself an act of the body rather than an act of the soul, it cannot achieve its principal function.

Shabbat Shalom: Earlier you explained that sex is the unique capacity to bind two persons in a friendship combined with lovership. Then, what about the single person, the individual, who is not married, who has no intimate friend to whom he or she can direct his or her sexual attention, but who of course is also a sexual person? What advice would you give here?

Boteach: Well, the advice is that sex is not a luxury, it is a necessity. It's not something you can live without. It is amazing. Again, scientists see sex as a necessity of the species but not as a necessity of the individual. I couldn't disagree more. Sex is a far greater need than food, clothing, and shelter. We know that people are prepared to forego and squander food, clothing, and shelter for sex. And again

this is all part of the delegitimization of human sexuality. If we recognized it as a need then singlehood would no longer be endorsed the way it is today. You know, people are asking all the time why Judaism is opposed to masturbation and things like that. I say the thing about masturbation is that we lessen our dependency on the opposite sex. We are not supposed

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to lessen our dependency, we are supposed to increase it. I want men to need their wives. I want wives to need their husbands. I want them not just to love them, to like them. I want them to need them. In fact, studies show that men who masturbate in their marriages have more arguments with their wives. That makes sense. Because if you had a

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big argument with your wife you want to be sexual. And by the way, very often people even become more sexual after arguments. People heat up. Then you have a choice. To say it rather simply, you can apologize and say "I was a jerk, I'm sorry" or you can go to the shower.

So, marriage is a necessity, not a luxury. Does the fact that we can divorce so easily mean that we can live without each other? I don't believe we can.

Shabbat Shalom: Marriage, a necessity?

Boteach: It's like food. We all

eat. Even if the food is not perfect and the restaurants are not perfect, we need to eat. So we do. But when it comes to love, we feel we can live without it. So we love only when it is appropriate, when we find perfection. Now if food was the same way, if we only ate when we found perfection, we would starve. So if we only love if we find perfection, we end up lonely. And our hearts end up dying.

Shabbat Shalom: Maybe here is also something we can learn for our relationship with God. Sexuality makes us dependent upon another person. Sex and marriage are a necessity. So we could learn that we are dependent upon other people as we are dependent upon Him too. Could that be a lesson?

Boteach: Definitely. We even express that. In one of the most famous Jewish poems which is recited every Friday night when the Sabbath comes we say "I yearn for you with an unrequited lust." Yes, a relationship with God is not a luxury, it's a necessity. Absolutely.

Shabbat Shalom: Well, the Song of Songs is recited every Friday night by Sephardic Jews. Why is it in relation with the Sabbath that this text is recited?

Boteach: Because Sabbath is the Sabbath bride. Yes, Sabbath is a unique day of communion with God. We don't work. We enjoy our intimate relation with God. That's why according to Jewish law the Sabbath is even a time for husband and wife to make love.

Shabbat Shalom: So, sexuality and Sabbath are intimately connected.

Boteach: Correct.

Shabbat Shalom: An interesting question that many people ask is: Are we going to have sex in the world-to-come? What is your response?

Boteach: I wrote a book about the world-to-come. It really is disputed. According to Nachmanides the answer is Yes, since the world-to-come is here on a perfected earth. According to Maimonides it's the world of souls, so the answer is No.

Shabbat Shalom: Could it be that some people are afraid that their most intimate relationship on earth will not be in the world to come? How is it going to be substituted?

Boteach: According to Maimonides there will be a spiritual union, because we will all be disembodied spirits. Jewish tradition says that husband and wife are two halves of a single soul anyway. So there will not be the bodily unity, only the spiritual unity. According to Nachmanides where the physical unity is higher and holier than the spiritual unity, the physical unity will of course continue.

Shabbat Shalom: Sexuality without love is possible, though not desirable. Is love possible without sexuality?

Boteach: Love in its highest way . . . of course not. You won't have that deep knowledge. For Judaism love is knowledge, love is to know someone intimately. And without the physical component, no, you cannot know the same way.

Shabbat Shalom: What spiritual, religious, or theological lessons did you learn from your study of sexuality that help you to understand life, even life with God, in a much better sense?

Boteach: Well, I think the primary lesson I deduced is the need for passion in all areas of life. Life must be that passionate. In other words, the one distinguishing characteristic about sex in comparison to all other things is that sex is passionate. And in fact, when it is not passionate it is barely sexual. You

can't even function sexually if you are not excited about something, if there is not that degree of lust. I think we can transpose that lesson to every other area of life. Just to live is mere existence, it's being a plant, even an inanimate object. But to feel, to experience, and to pulsate, that's the way to engage life. In other words, all of life should have an erotic quality. In the same way, sex is the ultimate way of curiosity. What's this person like in bed? What's it like to be with him or her in the most intimate setting? We have to approach life in the same way. We should have the same

- *Sexuality is the capacity to feel alive.*
- *Sexuality is actually something that is holy.*
- *Sex is the ultimate way of curiosity.*
- *Sex is a passionate motion that brings forth intimate emotions.*

level of erotic curiosity about every area of life. For instance, the pursuit of knowledge. It was Allan Bloom who said in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987] that one of the reasons students today are so poor in knowledge, as compared to what students were able to do fifty, sixty years ago—then they would speak four or five languages and devour books—the reason is that students experience sex at such an early age. They get their erotic need out of their system so that they are not as curious. That was a controversial statement, but Bloom was one of America's most respected academics. And I happen to agree with him.

Shabbat Shalom: So you learned life is actually exciting and life should be passionate in every area.

Boteach: Life—in the same way as human beings have layers—and you reach their essence specifically

through the physical. All of existence has layers, and we should always try to go to the deepest possible layer.

Shabbat Shalom: Thank you so much, Rabbi Shmuley, for taking time to reflect on our questions. A final one: If you would have the possibility to ask God one question about sexuality, what would your question be?

Boteach: I would ask God why sex is also associated with pain. Why the flip side of love is pain. Why specifically when something is outside your grasp you want it, and why when it is immediately

available, you don't want it anymore. I would ask Him that. That is what my new book *Kosher Adultery* is all about: creating erotic obstacles to increase desire.

Shabbat Shalom: Does that mean sexuality needs to go along with pain?

Boteach: Sure, it goes along with pain. That's why marriages need all kinds of tricks. Even Judaism says you need twelve days of separation in order to attain interest and desire. Lust is about pain. You only lust for something that you want, and not having it is the source of that pain. And the moment you get the pleasure of having it you lose interest in it. So, look at that conundrum.

*This interview was conducted by Martin Pröbstle.