



October 2010

## Jews Have the Best Sex: The Hollywood Adventures of a Peculiar Medieval Jewish Text on Sexuality

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### Recommended Citation

Marienberg, Evyatar (2010) "Jews Have the Best Sex: The Hollywood Adventures of a Peculiar Medieval Jewish Text on Sexuality," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol14/iss2/8>

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## Jews Have the Best Sex: The Hollywood Adventures of a Peculiar Medieval Jewish Text on Sexuality

### Abstract

According to quite a few books and films produced in the last few decades in Europe and North America, sex is widely celebrated in Jewish sources. In “authentic Judaism,” kosher sex between husband and wife is a sacred endeavor and a key to heavenly bliss both on earth and beyond. This representation of Jewish attitudes about sex is highly problematic and is often based on only one medieval Jewish source commonly known as *The Holy Letter*. This paper discusses the use of this text in two Hollywood films: *Yentl* (1983), and *A Stranger Among Us* (1992).

Since the fourteenth century, a Hebrew kabbalistic text on marital sexuality, known as *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* (may be translated as *The Holy Letter* or *The Epistle on/of Holiness*), or *Hibur ha-Adam ve-Ishto* (*The Union of Man and His Wife*), has been evoked in various works. Often, it was attributed to Moses ben Nahman,<sup>1</sup> known in traditional circles as Ramban and in more scholarly ones as Nahmanides. This paper explores how this medieval text has been used in two films from the last two decades of the 20th century.

### *The Holy Letter*

Nahmanides, one of the greatest Jewish minds of the thirteenth century, was a man of many talents. His works encompass Jewish law, Biblical and Talmudic exegesis, ethics, and more.<sup>2</sup> As it is often the case with renowned authors, his fame caused some works that he did not actually compose to be also attributed to him. This has been the case for centuries with *Iggeret ha-Kodesh*. Although some doubts about Nahmanides' authorship of *The Holy Letter* were raised centuries ago, it was Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), in many ways the father of the academic study of Kabbalah, who was the first modern scholar to seriously tackle this issue.<sup>3</sup> Today, following Scholem's and other scholars' conclusions, the *Iggeret* is generally believed to have been composed at the time and place where Nahmanides lived, Catalonia of the thirteenth century, but certainly not by him. Certain kabbalistic concepts found in the letter, particularly vocabulary, the fact it is not hinted at in

Nahmanides' biblical exegesis, as well as a lack of such an attribution in the earliest mentions of the work, all point to this conclusion.

It is clear that the false attribution to Nahmanides did the work in fact a great service; without it, one might imagine, the text could very well have remained an obscure work with little influence, or even disappeared.<sup>4</sup> It seems there was another reason, probably related to the first, that *The Holy Letter* became so widely known. It was a common practice to include it, frequently in its entirety, in many other works as a “ready-made” piece on sexual relations. Thus, editors or writers of prayer books, works on issues of purity, or even manuals for Shabbat practices who wanted to include something on the complex issue of sexual relations in their books often quoted this letter. It was an easy, kosher, and very practical solution. Therefore, for centuries, the text was easily available, even to those who were not scholars. The English-speaking Jewish world became aware of this unique text starting in 1976, when Seymour J. Cohen, a Conservative rabbi in Chicago, published an impressive critical edition of the work, accompanied by an English translation.<sup>5</sup> It is imaginable that in the atmosphere of the 1970s, showing that rabbinic Judaism has its own Kama sutra was not an inappropriate feat in Cohen's eyes.

This unique “letter” contains an introduction and five “paths” or chapters. The first “path” explores what is referred to as “The Nature of the Union.” This

chapter is not an easy one, and it is fair to say that it is the most “kabbalistic” section of the whole work. It is this chapter that highlights the holiness of the sexual act that is properly done. First, it fiercely attacks a relatively famous statement from one of the most prominent Jewish authors of all times, Maimonides (1135-1204), who said, “The sense of touch is a shame to us.”<sup>6</sup> The author of the *Iggeret* insists that sexual relations practiced in the appropriate manner are holy and clean. If done for the sake of heaven, “there is nothing holier and cleaner” than such relations. It is possible that this direct attack on Maimonides was at least in part what led some to claim that the work is by Nahmanides. Not only are their Hebrew acronyms very similar (Rambam and Ramban), but they are perceived by many, not necessarily justly, to be opponents. It is also possible that because of this statement, the title “Letter on/of Holiness” was given to the entire work.

The second and third chapters or “paths” deal with the right time for the union and the appropriate foods to consume prior to it. Sexual relations should not be performed excessively, the reader is told, and the right time for those who study Torah is Friday evening, in the second half of the night, not immediately after eating a moderate amount of permissible food.

The fourth path explains that one should have the right intention about performing this unique activity. Several scholars have justly claimed that this long and complex chapter parallels Christian literature. One doubts whether most

readers of this work could understand the symbolic and cryptic language in this section. Still, the bottom line is clear and simple, even for lay readers: one must not have unclean thoughts during the union. The reader (a man, obviously) should make sure his wife is happy, as this will ensure that she also has right and holy thoughts. If they both think about “the Justs and the Pures,” the child born of these relations will acquire the good qualities of these holy people.<sup>7</sup>

These first five sections (the introduction and the four “paths”) provide information about the preparation for the coital act, not about the act itself. Only the last section, the fifth path, “On the Quality of the Union,”<sup>8</sup> can be truly considered to be a practical guide for the intercourse itself. It is not surprising then that it is only this last chapter that is used in the two films explored in this article.

### *Yentl*

Seymour J. Cohen seems to be the person who took the first step in bringing *The Holy Letter* out of the limited circle of Hebrew readers to a much larger public. The next step in its popularization occurred a few years later when *The Holy Letter* went to Hollywood. The text’s cinematic debut was in the 1983 Hollywood film *Yentl*.<sup>9</sup> The film, it is well known, was based on the 1962 novel *Yentl the Yehiva Boy* by the Nobel Prize laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer,<sup>10</sup> who, together with Leah Napolin, later (1975) made into a play.<sup>11</sup> In Singer’s texts there is no mention of

the *Iggeret*, but in the film, directed by Barbra Streisand (who also co-wrote the script and played the main role), the text is alluded to. One can imagine that Streisand, who was already planning to make Singer's story into a film only a few years after its appearance,<sup>12</sup> or Jack Rosenthal, the British playwright who worked with her on the script, learned about the *Iggeretin* the late 1970's or early 1980's through Cohen's translation.

This widely acclaimed movie portrays the fictitious story of Yentl (Streisand), a young Jewish woman in Poland at the beginning of the twentieth century, who decides to dress like a man in order to be able to study in a talmudic institute, a Yeshiva<sup>13</sup> Yentl, now called Anshel, chooses a specific Yeshiva after meeting a charismatic student named Avigdor (Mandy Patinkin). Very quickly, the two become friends and study mates. Later, when the betrothal of Avigdor to Hadass (Amy Irving), a charming young woman from the town, falls apart after the suicide of Avigdor's brother is revealed, Anshel becomes the new candidate for marriage to Hadass. The story thus becomes even more complex, raising the possibility of the marriage of two women, one of whom is not aware of the other's true sex.

Shortly after the middle of the movie, during Anshel and Hadass' wedding, Avigdor, who is also unaware of Anshel's big secret, brings him a small book. After saying, "I have a wedding present for you, for both of you. Nahmanides' *The Holy*

*Letter*. He wrote it over five hundred years ago,” Avigdor begins to read from it.

Very quickly it becomes clear that he knows it by heart:

Converse with her to put her mind at ease. Speak words which arouse her to love, desire and passion. Words of reverence, for God. Never force her; her mood must be as yours. Win her with graciousness and seductiveness; be patient, until her passion is aroused; begin with love, and when her mood is ready, let her desire be satisfied first; her delight is what matters.<sup>14</sup>

Hadass is not present in this scene: she is with the wedding guests in the adjacent room. When Avigdor says, “for both of you,” he actually speaks only to Anshel. Clearly, the scene hints that the *Iggeret* is a text for men, although women might very well benefit if men would meticulously follow its instructions.

Nahmanides is evoked as the author of the text. This fact is most probably due to the title Cohen gave to his translation: *The Holy Letter: A Study in Medieval Jewish Sexual Morality ascribed to Nahmanides*.<sup>15</sup> The sentences from *The Holy Letter* (in Cohen’s translation) that seem to be the basis of Avigdor’s words are the followings:

You must begin by speaking to her in a manner that will draw her heart to you, calm her spirits, and make her happy... Speak to her so that your words will provoke desire, love, will, and passion, as well as words leading to reverence for God.... A man should never force himself upon his wife... Rather act so that you will warm her heart by speaking to her charming and seductive words... Do not hurry to arouse her until she is receptive. Be calm, and as you enter the path of love and will, let her insemination come first...<sup>16</sup>



The cinematic rendering of the text in *Yentl* seems to be more or less reliable. One can note that the medieval medical concept of women's "insemination," to which we will return later, was replaced by what seems to be a hint of female orgasm: "let her desire be satisfied." Another interesting addition should be noted as well: Avigdor's concluding sentence, "Her delight is what matters," a very charged statement that can surely be interpreted in many ways, is not in the medieval text.

The efforts made by Streisand and her collaborators to present Jewish sexuality in a positive way in *Yentl* are most obvious when one compares the movie to the play written by Singer and Napolin. In the play, *Avigdor*, the parents of Hadass, and other community members explain to Anshel and Hadass, the newlyweds, that pain and sometimes even the use of force are a legitimate part of the sexual act. This is how Avigdor explains to Anshel what will happen on the wedding night:

Anshel, tomorrow night, get ready to taste Paradise! Be firm! Even if she weeps and begs you not to, you must take her and have your pleasure.<sup>17</sup>

The following day, during the wedding itself, Hadass' parents and other members of the community instruct both Anshel and Hadass on the matter.<sup>18</sup> From her mother and other women, Hadass hears this:

[Hadass' mother:] My daughter, be strong! Eve was created out of Adam's rib and made to do his bidding. Everything your husband asks you to do, do

it gladly... [Other women:] Even if it hurts, do it gladly! Give yourself to him... Try to please him... Accept him with love...

Anshel, at the same time, gets this information from the men:

[Hadass' father:] Since you're a scholar I don't have to tell you about the commandment to be fruitful and multiply! [Hadass' father and other men:] First approach her with words of endearment... It's the Law! Kissing and caressing is not always a frivolity... as long as it's with your own wife!

Streisand was, understandably, not happy with some of these notions.<sup>19</sup> She thus replaced them with the text from *The Holy Letter*, much more marketable to modern viewers (and she perhaps found an allusion to in the instructions the cantor gives Anshel: "First approach her with words of endearment").

Although we should credit Streisand-Rosenthal for being the first to give *The Holy Letter* wide exposure, its place in the movie is, after all, minor. Quoted in the midst of a noisy wedding, and being only one of countless rabbinic quotations mentioned in the film, the text is probably hardly noticed by the average viewer. Luckily for it, this medieval work was given another chance on the silver screen.

### *A Stranger Among Us*

In 1992, *A Stranger Among Us*, a film directed by Sidney Lumet, was released. For many, it seemed as an attempt to repeat the earlier success of *Witness* from 1985. *Witness*, directed by Peter Weir, won two Oscars, and thus was clearly a good example to follow. The similarities are indeed obvious. *Witness* starred

Harrison Ford playing John, a policeman living undercover in an austere Amish community, gradually falling in love with his Amish host, Rachel, played by Kelly McGillis. *A Stranger Among Us* starred Melanie Griffith playing Emily, “a tough, super-modern blond policewoman” living undercover in a home of a Hassidic rebbe in “the seemingly archaic Jewish world of Williamsburg”.<sup>20</sup> Her real task was to investigate a murder that had occurred in Manhattan’s diamond district, largely controlled by Hasidim, but this did not prevent her from falling in love with Ariel, the rebbe’s brilliant adopted son (Erich Thal).<sup>21</sup> The script for *A Stranger Among Us* was written by Robert J. Avrech, a Los Angeles screenwriter who describes himself on his Web site as “an observant Jew, a religious Zionist, a conservative Republican, and a member of the NRA.”<sup>22</sup>

One of the pivotal scenes in the movie happens during a chilly night, in what seems to be an inner courtyard of the rebbe’s house. Emily, after hearing some noises, comes out, wearing a nightgown (and a gun), only to discover that Ariel is sitting in the courtyard. As Emily is already awake, Ariel, in a very gentlemanly way, takes off his coat and covers her to protect her from the cold. Then, in an inner pocket of his coat, Emily finds a small book:

Emily: “What’s this?”

Ariel: “Uh, that’s the Kabbalah. I like to keep it close to my heart.” [Ariel shows her how to hold the book, they giggle]

Emily: “Will you read something? [she picks a page] This!”

Ariel: [looking into the text] “Uh, uh, I don’t think...”

Emily: “What?”

Ariel: “You can’t learn out of context. You need a lifetime of study.”

Emily: “Well, I don’t have a lifetime. Let’s do the Evelyn Wood version. You know Evelyn Wood? [it seems he does not] Just read.”

Ariel: [reads] “Therefore engage her in conversation that puts her heart and mind at ease. Speak words which arouse her to passion, union, love, desire and...”

Emily: “And what?”

Ariel: [after a long pause] “...Eroticism.”

Emily: [laughing] “You little devil!” Ariel: “No, you don’t understand.”

Emily: “Wait, now. So you don’t do it through a sheet?”<sup>23</sup>

Ariel: “Wh... what are you talking about?”

Emily: “Never mind. Read... more.”

Ariel: [reading] “Hurry not to arouse passion until her mood is ready; Begin to love her; Let her—”

Emily: “What? What?”

Ariel: [holds his head in embarrassment, continues to read] “Let her vaginal secreting take place first.”

Emily: [giggling] “Very mystical.”

Ariel: “It’s... The Rabbis have a deeper intent here, which is that man and woman should be a holy union.”

Emily: “Okey dokey.”

Ariel: “The Kabbalah is filled with erotic imagery. Most of it is theoretical.”

Emily: [laughing] “Vaginal secreting... it’s very theoretical.”

A few seconds later, Emily and Ariel engage in a heated debate about his upcoming wedding to a French Hasidic woman he has never met. Emily finds it very disturbing. She asks him, “But what about love?” His answer about reunion of souls intrigues her, but she is not fully convinced. Then she asks, “But what about sex?” This question startles Ariel, who probably thought he had already won the debate:

Ariel: “Sex?”

Emily: “Yeah.

Ariel: “Emily, I just read to you from the Kabbalah. Sex is sacred, it is a Mitzvah, one of the positive commandments. Well I have a hot flash for you: sex is nice!”

Emily: “Sex is nice? How would you know? I mean outside of your little Jewish Kamasutra?”<sup>24</sup>

According to Avrech, many people consider the scene in the courtyard to be a fabulous one.<sup>25</sup> Avrech is very pleased with it as well. In his words,<sup>26</sup> “if in the world to come I will be judged by one scene I made, I hope it will be this one.” Why is this scene so intriguing? The answer is complex. We have an erotically charged scene with a perfectly dressed, smart Hasidic man and a relatively covered non-Jewish and very charming policewoman, and they talk, in the middle of the night, about sex. With such a start, things can hardly become boring, and, indeed,

they are not. Griffith discovers that very observant Jews are no different from other people in their desire to know more about sex.

As problematic and barely believable as it is,<sup>27</sup> the scene evokes, in a superficial yet concise manner, many interesting topics:

A mention of Jewish guides of sexuality in general and kabbalistic ones,<sup>28</sup> in particular;

The fact that books with such content are considered a part of Jewish traditional literature;

Myths<sup>29</sup> about Jewish sexual practices;

The presumed respect for women 's needs in Jewish sexual practices;

The notion that marital relations are considered good and holy in Judaism.

As readers of this paper can imagine, the text read by Ariel comes from *The Holy Letter*. Apparently, its inclusion was not influenced by its use in *Yentl*: Avrech claimed he never watched Streisand's movie.<sup>30</sup> It is worthwhile to note that the seemingly erroneous connection of the work to Nahamnides is not present in the scene; in fact, even the name of the work is not given.

Ariel's words are not taken verbatim though from the *Iggeret*. It seems that the sentences Avrech used to create the actor's speech are those in bold in the following text:<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, when engaging in the sex act, you must begin by speaking to her in a manner that will draw her heart to you, calm her spirits, and make her happy. Thus your minds will be bound upon one another as one, and your intention will unite with hers. Speak to her so that your words will provoke desire, love, will, and passion, as well as words leading to reverence for God, piety, and modesty. Tell her how pious and modest women are blessed with, honorable, and worthy sons, worthy of the highest crown, masters of the *Torah*, and having the fear of God and the ability to teach... A husband should speak with his wife with the appropriate words, some of love, some of erotic passion, some words of fear of Heaven... To conclude, when you check yourself and find you are ready for sexual union, see that your wife's intentions combine with yours. And when you cleave to her do not hurry to arouse, so that her spirit calms.<sup>32</sup> Enter her<sup>33</sup> with love and will, let her<sup>34</sup> insemination come first, so that her seed be the substance and your seed like the design, as in the verse where it is said, 'When a woman has an emission, she gives birth to a male child.'<sup>35</sup>, <sup>36</sup>

Avrech's reformulating of several ideas from *The Holy Letter* into a few short paragraphs is fair. His decision to combine a few sentences into one, thus adding the word "eroticism"<sup>37</sup> to Ariel's first sentence, is unquestionably legitimate. Interestingly, Ariel pauses before pronouncing it, reflecting the unique weight of such a term. His mention of "vaginal secreting" is understandable as well. Avrech's other option would have probably been to first have Ariel lecture Emily on medieval medical ideas about conception, explaining to her that according to the widespread Galenic system, women also had "semen," a secretion that was deemed necessary for conception,<sup>38</sup> and that many Jewish authors and physicians shared this opinion. But such an explanation would have probably bored many film viewers. From a cinematic perspective, even if not from an educational one, it seems that Avrech chose a better solution.

It is important to note that in addition to the aforementioned decisions, Avrech also “de-Judaized” the text, secularized it, removed medieval medical notions from it, and made it more politically correct. He did so by removing any hint of the recommended verbal exchanges between husband and wife regarding God, the Torah, and what seems to be the ultimate *raison d’être* of these practices: to produce worthy and kosher male children.

### **Conclusion**

Jewish scholars of the nascent academic study of Judaism in the nineteenth century tried to show the rationality of their religion and its compatibility with contemporary culture. They proclaimed that Jewish culture is not an antiquated, outdated way of life, as was often claimed by their Christian counterparts, but one that is in some ways even more “modern” than Christianity.<sup>39</sup> The two films mentioned here, and many other recent written works on Jewish sexuality, are part of a similar trend. They all claim that sex is widely celebrated in Jewish sources. At times, their authors or screenwriters, explicitly or implicitly, juxtapose their understanding of what Judaism says about sexuality with their own generally negative perceptions of Christian attitudes on the matter. The fact that such a trend exists today is probably related to the general culture, one in which proclamations that sex is not something to “celebrate” will be seen as strange at best or as fundamentalist at worst.<sup>40</sup> In such a cultural environment, one can understand why



declarations that Jewish culture is pro-sex seem to these authors to be of a great service to both the world and Judaism. Their efforts are therefore not surprising. What is surprising is the fact that so many writers base their representation of Jewish sexuality on a single ancient Jewish text, *Iggeret ha-Kodesh*.

One might ask whether, leaving aside the occasional incorrect information, the overall presentation of sexuality in Judaism in the two works explored in this paper is not basically and objectively true. Is it not true that Judaism's attitude towards sexuality is indeed very positive, as one hears so often? The answer is, obviously, not a simple one. Jewish literature certainly includes some very positive statements about heterosexual, marital sexuality (and only about it), but the Jewish tradition includes many negative statements about it as well. The fact that both works explored here use (apparently, independently) *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* as a centerpiece for their arguments is not a coincidence. Being arguably the most remarkable traditional positive Jewish discussion of marital sexuality, their decision to include it is thoroughly correct and appropriate. Nevertheless, a direct or indirect claim that this unique text is representative of Jewish notions on the subject is not.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1194-1270.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Joseph Kaplan, Tovia Preschel, Israel Moses Ta-Shma, Efraim Gottlieb, and Haviva Pedaya, "Nahmanides," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 2nd Ed., Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik eds., vol. 14 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 739-748.

<sup>3</sup> In an article published in 1945 (Gershom Scholem, "Did Nahmanides Compose the Holy Letter?" (Hebrew), *Kiryat Sefer* 21 (1944-1945): 179-186), Scholem suggested that the work was composed by the *Castilian kabbalist Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla* (1248-after 1305. See on him in Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 409-411). In another place, the suggested author was Joseph of Hamdan (*idem.*, 66). In 1963, an editor of Nahmanides' texts, Charles Chavel, suggested, without mentioning Scholem's classic article, that the *Iggeret* might be the work of the earlier kabbalist Azriel of Gerona (c. 1160-c. 1238). See Chaim Dov Chavel, *The Writings of Our Master Moshe ben Nahman* (Hebrew), vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1963), 315-320 [the two volumes Chavel published later in English, under the title *Ramban: Writings and Discourses* (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1978), do not include the *Iggeret*]. In a Hebrew translation, published in 1977, of one of his major books, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, Scholem briefly said that he no longer holds the opinion that Gikatilla is the author of the work. Unfortunately, he did not explain what brought him to this conclusion, nor if he has thoughts regarding another possible author. In the original German edition, as well as in an English translation, both published in the 1960's, Scholem still held that attribution (in German: *Gershom Gerhard Scholem, Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1960), 204 n. 72, "In dem später dem Moses Nachmanides zugeschriebenen 'Iggereth ha-Kodesch des Josef Gikatilla (um 1300)"; in English: *Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 155 n. 1: "In Joseph Gikatilla's 'Iggereth ha-Kodesh (c. 1300), later attributed to Moses Nahmanides"; in Hebrew: *Gershom Scholem, Pirkey Yesod be-havant ha-Kabbalah u-Semaliah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1977), 149 n. 72: "... I do not hold anymore the opinion that R. Joseph Gikatilla composed this work.") See also Shraga Abramson, "The Holy Letter Attributed to Nahmanides" (Hebrew), *Sinai* 90:5-6 (1982): 332-353, and Yaakov S. Spiegel, "Do We Have a New Segment of the 'Holy Letter' Attributed to Nahmanides?" (Hebrew), *Kiryat Sefer* 51 (1975-1976): 488-491. For a truly excellent summary of the debate (up to 1976) see Seymour J. Cohen's introduction to his critical edition of the text in Seymour J. Cohen, *The Holy Letter: A Study in Medieval Jewish Sexual Morality* ascribed to Nahmanides (New York: Ktav, 1976), 7-27.

<sup>4</sup> A similar case is that of the greatest medieval kabbalistic work, the *Zohar*, which was—and is, in traditional communities—attributed to a rabbi of the Talmudic era when in fact it was composed by an obscure kabbalist, Moses de Leon (c. 1250-1305).

<sup>5</sup> See the reference in the previous note. Cohen's translation was not the first translation of the *Iggeret* to a European language. Chavel mentions it was translated in the past to Latin and German. See Chaim Dov Chavel, *The Writings of Our Master Moshe ben Nahman* (Hebrew), vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1963), 320. A short time before Cohen's edition came out, an English translation of some paragraphs of the work was published in Norman Lamm, *The Good Society: Jewish Ethics in Action* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 102-108.

<sup>6</sup> *Guide for the Perplexed*, II:36. For Maimonides' views on sexuality, see the excellent article "Maimonides on Sex and Marriage" by Michael S. Berger in Michael J. Brody & Michael Ausubel (eds.), *Marriage, Sex, and Family In Judaism* (Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 149-191.

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<sup>7</sup> For information about the theme of the impact of what the parents (in particular the mother) see or think about during the early stages of conception and gestation (a common concern that anthropologists call "Maternal Impression"), see, for example, my discussion, in Evyatar Marienberg, *Niddah: Lorsque les juifs conceptualisent la m"enstruation* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003), 245-284.

<sup>8</sup> "הדרך החמישי - באיכות החבור". In printed editions, this is generally chapter VI because the introduction is counted as the first chapter.

<sup>9</sup> See also Byron L. Sherwin, *Kabbalah: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 123.

<sup>10</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902-1991), *Yentl The Yeshiva Boy*, trans. Marion Magid and Elizabeth Pollet (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962).

<sup>11</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer and Leah Napolin, *Yentl: A Play* (New York: Samuel French, 1977). The play was performed for the first time in 1975.

<sup>12</sup> Streisand optioned the film rights to *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy* in late 1968. See "Yentl—15 Years." Retrieved January 4, 2009. <http://www.bjsmusic.com/Yentl15/chronology.html>.

<sup>13</sup> On issues such as homoeroticism, cross-dressing, and gender in *Yentl*, see Allison Fernley and Paula Maloof, "Yentl," *Film Quarterly* 38:3 (1985): 38-46; Marjorie B. Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 77-84; Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 37-39. Bashevis Singer did not like the film, especially its ending, and wrote a rather harsh criticism of it: Isaac Bashevis Singer, "I. B. Singer Talks to I. B. Singer about the Movie 'Yentl'," *New York Times*, January 29, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> In the VHS version, this scene occurs around minute 75.

<sup>15</sup> In his introduction, Cohen seems to accept though the suggestions of previous scholars that this attribution is, at the very least, problematic

<sup>16</sup> Cohen, 140-144.

<sup>17</sup> Play, p. 62. Avigdor might not necessarily be the best instructor on the matter. See Avigdor's earlier description on pp. 52-53 of his first night with his wife Pesha, during which he tried, unsuccessfully, to arouse her using erotic quotes from Song of Songs.

<sup>18</sup> Play, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> These differences are unquestionably related to the generally dark and even, at times, cruel representation of Jewish life and Yentl/Anshel's personality in particular by Singer versus the much nicer depiction by Streisand. In the movie, the general feeling is that Yentl/Anshel is an innocent victim of circumstances. Referring to Haddas, Anshel sings, "She's an innocent maiden,

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but then so am I!" Yentl/Anshel is not an evil person as one might infer from Singer's original story and play.

<sup>20</sup> Sylvia Barack Fishman, "I of the Beholder: Jews and Gender in Film and Popular Culture," *The Hadassah Research Institute on Jewish Women Working Paper Series 1* (1998): 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> In a smart play with a Yiddish-like pronunciation, some critics referred to the film as "Vitness."

<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.seraphicpress.com>. Avrech very kindly answered many of my questions regarding this scene in a phone call we had on May 7, 2008. The director, Sidney Lumet (born 1924), whose parents were both involved in the Yiddish theatre scene, is known to describe himself as "culturally Jewish."

<sup>23</sup> This is a reference to a sentence told to Emily earlier [min. 38] by a secular (and vulgar) Jewish colleague, Levine, regarding the Hassidim: "Hey, you know what I heard about how they do it? They do it through a sheet!"—[another male colleague]: "A sheet? Come-on"—[Levine]: "Yeah, they are so uptight about sex they make a hole in a sheet, and shtup away." At that point, Emily's reaction was "I'll get back to you on that one."

<sup>24</sup> This long exchange begins around the 68th minute in the DVD version of the film.

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication, May 2008. Interestingly enough, most critics of the film I have found were interested in the general plot of the film and did not speak about this scene. Rita Kempley though, from *The Washington Post*, referred to it directly: "A future rebbe himself, [Ariel] knows that their love can never be. Things get a little iffy when one night at the rebbe's she responds to a prowler in her robe and the son reads to her from the cabala a passage on vaginal lubrication. Yes, really." See Rita Kempley. "Stranger': One Unkosher Cop." *The Washington Post*. July 17, 1992. Retrieved January 4, 2009). [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/astrangeramonguspg13kempley\\_a0a2c8.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/astrangeramonguspg13kempley_a0a2c8.htm).

<sup>26</sup> Personal communication, May 2008.

<sup>27</sup> In some moments, for example, the two protagonists sit extremely close to one another. It is even possible they happen to casually touch one another for split seconds. Such behavior is something that, certainly in a relatively public space, a hassid in good standing would unquestionably avoid. It is also not clear if Ariel is supposedly reading from a Hebrew version and translating it on the fly or, surprisingly for a smart Hassid, from an English translation. In the second case, Griffith's not knowing how to hold the book is even more surprising. Avrech told me that obviously, in his mind, Ariel reads from a Hebrew text. Nevertheless, the actual gestures of the actors in the film were done according to the director's instructions, not his .

<sup>28</sup> Obviously, Ariel's declaration that this book is "the Kabbalah" is problematic, considering the evident fact that Kabbalah is a genre, a body of literature and knowledge not contained in any single book.

<sup>29</sup> By speaking of "myths," I do not claim they are false. I plan to explore, in a later study, the notion that observant Jews use a perforated sheet while having marital relations.

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<sup>30</sup> Personal communication, January 2009.

<sup>31</sup> The translation is that of Seymour J. Cohen in his previously mentioned English edition, chapter 6, with a few changes. According to an edition published in *Efraim Ariel Buchwald* (Bnei Brak: n.p., 1990) as an annex to his edition of another related medieval work, *Sefer Baalei ha-Nefesh* (with which I plan to deal in an upcoming book), the words in brackets are absent from the version that Buchwald considers to be the best available. Nevertheless, as they appear in other versions, as well as in many popular editions and in Cohen's translation, Avrech had a perfect right to use them.

<sup>32</sup> Cohen: "she is receptive."

<sup>33</sup> Cohen: "And as you enter the path of love and will." It is possible that the meaning is less graphic and thus that it should be translated as "when you exchange/discuss/communicate with her" (similar to another Hebrew expression "להיכנס בדברים", which although literally means "to enter in words," should be translated as "to talk," to "exchange words.")

<sup>34</sup> Or: "so that."

<sup>35</sup> Leviticus 12:2. This reading, even if it is most certainly not the original intention of the Biblical text, is possible.

<sup>36</sup> "ולפיכך יש לך להכניסה תחלה בדברים שמושכין את לבה ומיישבין דעתה ומשמחין אותה, כדי שתקשר דעתה " בדעתך וכוונתה בכוונתך. תאמר לה דברים קצתם מכניסין אותה בדברי חשק ואהבה ורצון, וקצתם מושכין אותה ליראת שמים וחסידות וצניעות. ומספר עמה בדברי נשים חסידות וצניעות, היאך יצאו מהם בנים הגונים וכשרים, ראויים לכתר עליון, בעלי תורה ויראה והוראה [ ...ויכניס אותה בדברים אלו, מהם אהבים ומהם עגבים, ומהם יראת שמים ...]. [סוף דבר, כשתהיה בודק בעצמך ותראה שאתה ראוי לשמש, עשה שתהיה דעת אשתך מוסכמת לדעתך. וכשאתה מתחבר עמה אל תמהר לעורר בה התאוה, כדי שתתישב דעתה], ותכנס עמה בדרך אהבה ורצון, בענין שתזריע היא תחלה, כדי [ שיהיה הזרע שלה כחומר והזרע שלך כצורה, כענין שנאמר אשה כי תזריע וילדה זכר ]."

<sup>37</sup> In the Hebrew "דברי (עגבים)", in Cohen's translation "erotic passion."

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>39</sup> See Jonathan M. Hess, *Germans, Jews and the Claims of Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> See an interesting recent debate on similar issues at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/sep/21/weneednewsexualrevolutio> (last accessed February 13, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> One could have easily brought many examples to show other, less positive traditional Jewish statements about sexuality, but two that are more or less contemporaneous with the *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* and come from two of the most important Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages, should suffice to show the complexity of the matter. The first one is from Maimonides (1135-1204), in his *Guide for the Perplexed* III:8: "This is chiefly the case with the sense of touch, which is a disgrace to us as Aristotle said, and which is the cause of our desire for eating, drinking, and

coitus. Intelligent persons must, as much as possible, reduce these wants, guard against them, feel grieved when satisfying them... Man must have control over all these desires, reduce them as much as possible, and only retain of them as much as is indispensable" (Friedlander's translation from the Judeo-Arabic, with some modifications). Another important author, a generation later, is Nahmanides (1194-c. 1270), to whom the *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* was erroneously attributed. This paragraph is from his unquestionably authentic commentary on Leviticus 18:6: "You should know that coitus is a rejected and despised matter according to the Torah, unless if it is for the survival of the specie. And coitus that does not lead to procreation is forbidden" ("ודע כי המשגל דבר מרוחק (" ונמאס בתורה זולתי לקיום המין, ואשר לא יולד ממנו הוא אסור