1. Hidden Light: Intimate Relations by Sunlight and Candle Light

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[הרבנית שרה סגל-כץ](https://gluya.org/contributers/rabbanit_sarah_segal-katz/)

**There is a fog of uncertainty around the issue of marital relations during daylight or with any lighting at all. In truth, there is quite a wide range of positions on the matter: halakhic rulings and ḥasidic customs that vary from stringency to leniency. In this article, we will discuss various aspects of the topic, the reasons presented, and the options available to couples facing questions in their marital life.**

*Grant us the merit to desire and rejoice in connection, and to cling to one another with a pure and complete heart, without physical, emotional, or spiritual barriers.*

*From: “Prayer Before Union," by Ora Zach*

A common assumption among many couples is that marital intimacy takes place at night. However, research data in the field of sexuality indicate that reaching moments of intimacy at the end of the day, when tired, encounters barriers such as: a mismatch in the desire of both partners, quick fatigue, missing the potential to reach satisfying sexual peaks due to lack of sharpness at the end of the day, a tendency to avoid dealing with difficulties and challenges, and more.

Some would say that it is precisely the night and darkness that provide them with a romantic and intimate feeling, making it the right time for the couple to be together. However, in light of the data on barriers that may block intimacy in the dark hours, it is important to recognize that even during daylight hours, there is an opportunity to achieve a beneficial connection between the couple. Missing out on this opportunity forfeits significant depth and peaks for the couple.

However, even couples who are deeply committed to the prohibition against marital relations during daylight and the general guidance derived from Ramban’s interpretation of “You shall be holy” often find themselves, over the years, as their family grows and evening fatigue increases, reconsidering the options available to them. Sometimes a morning liaison might be the only opportunity for a couple to draw close to each other in love and desire, rather than fatigued, viewing the encounter as just another task to complete.

Any suggestion or insight that arises on the topic, even regarding the time management of busy parents, often bumps up against concern among religious couples. They assume it is absolutely forbidden to engage in marital relations during the day and not in darkness, based on what is written in Tractate Niddah: “Rav Huna said: The people of Israel are holy and do not engage in marital relations during the day.”

That unequivocal prohibition against marital relations in the light may seem at first to be intimidating and very strict. However, as always, the halakhic deliberation encompasses a broader range than just absolute statements of “forbidden” or “permitted.” Here we will elaborate on the discussion of intimacy in light, touching upon the guiding values within it, and explore the range of actions and choices available to couples within the ethical and halakhic considerations that set boundaries for this issue.

Photo: Jude Beck

**"You shall be holy."**

Many couples first hear about an ambivalent attitude toward marital relations not in darkness during bride or groom counseling sessions. However, although this is the first time it is explicitly stated in practice, most graduates of a religious education encounter the spirit of these words in the Ramban’s commentary on the well-known verse in Leviticus, “You shall be holy”:

*The Torah warned against forbidden relationships and prohibited foods, yet it permitted a man to have relations with his wife and to eat meat and drink wine. Thus, a person driven by desire might indulge excessively with his wife or multiple wives, or become a glutton for wine and meat, or speak freely in all sorts of vulgarities not explicitly forbidden by the Torah. Such a person would be a “scoundrel within the boundary set by the Torah.” Therefore, after detailing the prohibitions, the Torah commands in a general sense that we should abstain from excesses, limiting intimacy as the sages said (Berakhot 22) that Torah scholars should not be constantly having relations with their wives like roosters, and should only engage in intimacy as necessary to fulfill the* mitzvah*.*

Ramban on Leviticus 19:1

One can understand his words as a denunciation of excessive enjoyment of physical pleasures, including maintaining distance and setting boundaries even in areas not explicitly forbidden, in order to act appropriately and respectfully even in what is not prohibited. Sometimes that general directive has a more profound and pervasive impact on perception than the specific halakhic injunction. This is because the *mitzvah* has boundaries, so discourse about it is stated in terms of “fulfilling one’s obligation” (or it terms of “prohibition”), so the discussion ends when an obligation is declared to have been fulfilled. However, a conversation about values has no fixed measure and no established endpoint.

Additionally, we must understand Ramban’s statement in its context: the term *‘arayot* that he uses refers to sexual relations that are not permissible according to *halakhah*. Thus, he does not intend this for the married couple, during the times permitted to them, and in privacy away from the eyes of others. Therefore, his intention is not to demand distancing from the pleasure found in marital life. Rather, he seeks to find a balance between that pleasure and how things work in the real world.

Photo: Dylan Ferreira

**“Love your fellow as yourself.”**

Let us first address the root of the halachic discussion, the first appearance of this prohibition:

*Rav Ḥisda said: It is forbidden for a person to engage in marital relations during the day, as it is stated (Leviticus 19:18): “Love your fellow [person] as yourself.” — What does this mean? Abaye said: Perhaps he will see something unseemly in her and she will become distasteful to him. Rav Huna said: The people of Israel are holy and do not engage in marital relations during the day.*

Bavli Niddah 17a

The Gemara begins by exploring the possible reasons for this prohibition, aiming to derive from them the foundational principles for marital life in general. Rav Ḥisda’s perspective and Abaye’s explanation emphasize love for one’s spouse and concern for preserving her dignity during intimate relations. The discussion positions the man as the subject of the prohibition, yet its core revolves around the feelings and dignity of the woman and her needs during the relationship. The phrasing is based on human love, derived from the admonition “Love your fellow as yourself,” implying an even greater sensitivity between spouses than between any two “fellow persons.” From this we derive suggestions on how to act in a way that expresses mutual love and respect and avoids any possibility of disrespect.

Abaye’s reasoning might lead contemporary readers to a mistaken impression of sexuality or a woman’s body as something repulsive. However, this misses the context in which the statement was made. Firstly, in the time of the Sages, the relative values placed on concealment and display were different from what they are today. Concealing one’s body was considered behavior that conveyed much more respect and appreciation than revealing. By comparison, note the use of distinctly clean and discreet language in the past, quite different from our own contemporary use of language. Similarly, in their attitude toward women, they sought to protect them from judgmental male perspectives.

Another indication of this is that *there is no prohibition against a man and a woman seeing each other without clothes*. In other words, there is no prohibition on the couple being naked together at any other time, even during moments of closeness, hugging, and kissing before intimacy. Therefore, there is necessarily no concern about the nudity itself, but rather a prohibition on the manner of looking that could evoke a sense of disgrace. Furthermore, we learn from “and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24) that nudity holds a significant and important role in the relationship between spouses— a point that different parts of the religious community understanding with varied nuances.

The discussion, therefore, shifts us from defining an absolute prohibition to exploring questions about a woman’s dignity, what is appropriate or inappropriate during intimate relations, and how a partner should treat her during the encounter, with sensitivity toward varying perceptions of sight. The guiding principle emerging from this discussion is that even in matters that a man and a woman, as partners, wish to do in moments of mutual passion, and even with great desire and closeness, one must not cast off all restraint, but instead one should always act with a measure of caution.

One of the major proponents of the prohibition of marital relations in darkness in precise terms is Rambam, and, in accord with him, the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*:

*It is forbidden to engage in marital relations by the light of a lamp/candle, even if one blocks it with a garment. Similarly, it is forbidden to engage in marital relations during the day unless it is in a darkened room.*Rema: *But if one makes a partition ten handbreadths high in front of the lamp/candle [it is permitted]. [This is so] even though the light is visible through the partition, such as when it is interrupted by a sheet.*

*Shulḥan ‘Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 240:1

It is important to remember the background and context of these statements. Maimonides’ general perspective, influenced by Aristotelian thought, viewed the senses and physical encounters as matters that should be restrained for the sake of health and serving God. Such experiences are carried out under the guise of a well-defined purpose and a hesitancy regarding the senses and regarding intending the marital encounter for the sake of pleasure in itself. This stems from Maimonides’ scientific perspective, which viewed the body’s resources, particularly semen, as the source of a person’s vitality. Therefore, according to this perspective, when a person engages in sexual activity, they harm their health and deplete their resources, even if they do so with moderate frequency and certainly so with high frequency. Maimonides’ medical perspective aligns with the position expressed in the Talmudic tractates of Nedarim and Gittin, which link the manner of marital relations to its impact on the participants and the resulting offspring. This conceptual line that connects the beginning of an action to its end is also found in other mystical writings.

Photo: Vera Gorbunova

**What is a Lamp, What is a Tallit, and What is a Home?**

The continuation of the discussion in the Gemara notes that despite the unequivocal tone of the prohibition of marital relations during the day, if the room is dark, it is permitted. In the case where the man is a Torah scholar, even if the room is not dark, he is permitted to engage in marital relations while covering both of them with his tallit.

Adding these variables to the discussion clarifies that the core of the prohibition lies in the type of gaze it involves. Therefore, the level of lighting and the exact time of day allow for a relatively wide range of possibilities. In the spirit of the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*, some halachic authorities rule that there is no prohibition against marital relations during the day, as long as the shutters are closed and the room is completely darkened. The Rema, on the other hand, disagrees with the Yosef Karo in the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh* and permits marital relations even if there is a soft light in the room, such as a partition separating the lit candle or lamp from the couple. He also permits relations during the day if the couple is covered. It is important to note that the Rema, unlike the Rambam, strongly emphasized in his rulings on marital relations the principle: “Whatever a man wishes to do with his wife, he may do.” In other words, anything that the couple desires, with mutual consent to do together, in their privacy and at times when they are permitted to each other, is considered as being in the realm of “sanctify yourself with what is permitted to you.”

In the sub-discussion regarding intimacy during the day, additional reasons for the prohibition arise: the concern for brazenness and lack of modesty, which is contrasted with the praise given to couples who testify that they were intimate after midnight, in such a way that no outsider could hear or be exposed to the act.

The issue of modesty and the degree of visibility, which are determined by the level of shading and covering, shifts the focus to the absent elemente in the discussion—the home. Our homes and the homes in which the Sages or later halakhic authorities lived are not the same homes. Today, younger and older couples do not live as part of an extended family household. They live in their own homes, within which the vast majority have a separate bedroom with a door, lock, and bolt. We are not accustomed to sleeping together in a single room with all our relatives, adults and children alike. The concerns about intimacy during the day and in the light, when we might be inappropriately exposed to neighbors or other household members, are so rare as to be negligible in our reality, where we enjoy the luxury of privacy.

Photo: Ridham Parikh

Bottom of Form

**Monbaz House**

In our reality, and not just ours, couples sometimes reach their intimate setting too late in the evening, when they are tired and exhausted, but they are able to make time for each other after they have sent the children off to their respective programs. On this topic, there is a fairly broad consensus that if a man and woman are unable (even from an emotional readiness standpoint) to be intimate at night, they are permitted to be intimate during the day. In the discussion about the boundaries of lighting, there is a wide range, as mentioned, but the constraints of daily life and dependence on nights are not sufficient reasons to forgo the *mitzvah*.

For example, although being intimate on Friday night is praiseworthy, if this is not possible for the couple it is preferable for them to be intimate during the day so that it becomes part of the Shabbat delights, rather than waiting until Saturday night to be intimate.

A healthy balance within one’s life and reality can already be seen within the Talmudic discussion itself. At the end of the Talmudic discussion, the sages praise the house of Monbaz (a royal family from Adiabene that converted to Judaism) for a surprising reason: because they engaged in marital relations during the day. The Meiri commented on this in a remarkable formulation:

*Even though a person is generally prohibited from engaging in marital relations except at night, if one finds that due to their natural disposition they are overcome by sleep at night and cannot be willing, or if she, due to her natural disposition, is overcome by sleep at night and is not agreeable, it is permissible for them to engage in marital relations during the day discreetly, in the manner we have mentioned, so that their intimacy occurs willingly and affectionately, and not in a manner of coercion or frenzy.*

Meiri on Bavli Niddah 17a

*Halakha* places the utmost importance on the connection between spouses, not just as a technical or dry union, but one that is filled with desire, longing, and love. In other words, although there is an ideal template for action, there is also an understanding of the individual, whether he is a king or just an ordinary person. Therefore, when the dilemma facing the couple is whether to engage in intimacy out of fatigue and lack of enthusiasm, merely due to the prohibition, or to postpone intimacy to daylight hours, the decision is clear—love takes precedence over the guideline of avoiding intimacy during the day.

Furthermore, it is important to note that throughout the discussion, a gap emerges between the level of piety that goes beyond the letter of the law, aspiring to view the relationship between spouses as bearing Kabbalistic and symbolic meanings, and the reality of most couples’ relationships. When we encounter such gaps, we must remind ourselves that there is a certain degree of arrogance in the automatic assumption that anything labeled as a “pious act” is meant for us. The fundamental aspiration should be to maintain a life of goodness, desire, and love between spouses. If we are fortunate enough to reach the level of piety, how blessed we are to have achieved it. But first, we must also care for the love of the common people.

Photo: Justine Camacho

**To Reveal and to Conceal**

Since there is quite a wide range when it comes to putting these principles into practice, let us return to the discussion of values.

The society we live in all but sanctifies specific ideal body images, consciously or unconsciously educating us to adopt a very particular perception of sexuality. When a couple retreats into their private realm, they should strive to keep the outside gaze at bay and turn their focus inward. What do the couple want for themselves? How does each one perceive and express their needs? What is their sense of dignity, and do they recognize the dignity of the person standing before them?

Studies show that today, couples are engaging in fewer intimate relations, and the frequency of sexual encounters is significantly decreasing. There are many different reasons why this is so, related to the technological environment we live in, which constantly demands our attention, inundates us with sexual imagery in our cultural surroundings, and even leads to exhaustion from our contemporary way of life, which is often busy, overwhelming, and stressful. Therefore, in the gap between the ideal desire and the reality of the situation, we should ask ourselves whether we are striving for a level of piety that is truly necessary. And so, is limiting the possibility of having an intimate encounter to nighttime necessarily what will provide each of the couple with what they need in their shared life? It is also important to remember that the answers to these questions may change during different stages of life.

It is important to note that the primary focus of the halakhic discussion is to guide us in showing respect and love in our marital relationships, hoping to achieve the sentiment of Song of Songs 7:7, “How fair are you, how, O love, with all its rapture!”