

Orthodox women offer franker advice on sex

By Elise Kigner
Advocate Staff

Topics like sexual dysfunction and how to give and receive pleasure may not be typical subject matter for a kallah (bride) class, but Dr. Bat Sheva Marcus believes they should be.

Marcus, clinical director of the Medical Center for Female Sexuality in New York, was among the instructors at the conference "Demystifying Sex and Teaching Halakha," held last month at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York.

The attendees were kallah teachers, who meet with brides in the months leading up to marriage. The goal was to show how their instruction can go beyond the do's and don'ts of the Jewish laws surrounding physical intimacy.

"I would like there to be more focus on female orgasm, a lot more direct use of language, a lot more understanding of varied ways to have sex and a lot more understanding about difficulties of intercourse," said Marcus, who is also vice president of program and education at the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance.

JOFA co-sponsored the four-day conference with Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School and Yeshivat Maharat, both in New York. Among the instructors were doctors, sex therapists, Torah teachers and rabbis, including Sara Hurwitz, the first Orthodox rabba and dean of Yeshivat Maharat.

Among the participants was Rabbanit Sharon Weiss-Greenberg, who in 2009 became the first female Orthodox Jewish chaplain at Harvard University. Weiss-Greenberg and her husband, Rabbi Ben Greenberg, codirect the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus at Harvard Hillel.

She said she talks to brides not only about the laws of ritual purity, but also about physical intimacy, wedding planning and the practical aspects of running a household. At Harvard, she said she has counseled eight kallot. As a result of the workshop, she would now like to ask the women to bring along their fiancés for some of the sessions. By watching a couple interact, she said, she could anticipate potential tensions and encourage them to share responsibility for relationship issues.

"I think a lot of people feel like this is the woman's job," said Weiss-Greenberg, 28. "It is important for [the couple] to feel like this is their marriage, this is their future."

She said brides have a lot of misconceptions, such as that Orthodox couples can only have sex in the dark and must use a sheet with a hole in it.

For women who have been shomer negiah – meaning they have not had physical contact with members of the opposite sex (other than close family) – the wedding night can be challenging.

"I think it is a huge transition, either from being shomer negiah, or pretending to be shomer negiah, it is for a lot of people traumatic," Weiss-Greenberg said. "People just feel really anxious and nervous, and people don't talk about it and know enough."

Miriam Segura-Harrison, a first-year medical student at Boston University, said the conference helped her learn how to talk to her kallah students

'People just feel really anxious and nervous, and people don't talk about it and know enough.'

Rabbanit Sharon Weiss-Greenberg

about sex. The first step, Segura-Harrison said, is being more comfortable talking about it herself.

"Everyone's experience in sex is totally different. My goal is to make the students feel totally comfortable and be completely non-judgmental," said Segura-Harrison, who has

taught about 20 kallot in her living room in the three years since she married.

She encourages couples to talk to each other about sex and any feelings of apprehension, even when it's difficult.

"I think there is a culture of silence," she said. "I think people don't want to talk about it. They feel they may not be modest by talking about it."

Segura-Harrison, 27, said the lectures she found most helpful at the conference didn't concern halacha; rather they were about such issues as when to refer students to doctors for advice on sexual dysfunction.

Marcus told of a conference

participant who works at a mikvah, the ritual bath where women immerse themselves at the end of niddah (the period when they cannot have sexual relations because of menstruation).

The mikvah worker recalled a woman telling her: "I am going into the mikvah to dunk into this holy water, and I am going home to do something so different."

"I want this whole paradigm to shift," Marcus said. "Great, fabulous sex is just as holy."

To sign up for a local kallah class, email: Sharon Weiss-Greenberg at sharonweiss@gmail.com or Miriam Segura-Harrison at mbs613@gmail.com

Mom is showing signs of confusion. In helping her choose long-term care, so are you.



When the signs of vulnerability show themselves, it can be difficult and confusing. Realizing your loved one may need long-term care is equally emotional. That's why your choice deserves careful thought.

We'd like to help turn your confusion — about where to go and what to ask — into understanding. Our goal? To offer guidance and support. To help you think about your loved one's needs in advance, to understand your options and to feel more confident in your decisions.

Long-term care choices can be confusing. You'll be more confident if you have a plan. For a copy of our Long-Term Care Planning Guide, visit www.guidetolongtermcare.org, or call 1-877-822-4722.



Hebrew
Rehabilitation Center
Hebrew SeniorLife



Affiliated with
Harvard Medical School