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SEXUALITY

Human Biology versus Rabbinic Decree

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Questions to Ask

Torah, our master narrative, recognizes two sexes, male and female, as the fundamental biology of humankind. It further acknowledges sexual desire as a basic component of biology. Several questions arise: Is human sexuality good or bad? Does it lead to desirable behavior that promotes family and community or to dangerous behavior that is detrimental to both individuals and society? If sexuality is a matter of innate biology, to what extent is it possible, desirable, or obligatory to limit human sexuality? What does Torah have to say about human sexuality?

In the world of the Rabbis, we can further ask: can textual interpretation considered to be *Torah Sheb'al Peh* (Oral Torah) manipulate and redefine biology? And what is at stake in answering that question? The Rabbis attempt to constrain human sexuality lest it get out of control and lead to egregious violations of halachah (Jewish law), yet there are subtle hints conveyed in narrative passages that they recognize limitations in their attempt to legislate human nature; I suspect these hints are encoded in narrative by the final redactors. Within the confines of Jewish ethical norms, however, sexuality is celebrated.