

The Observant Life: The Wisdom of Conservative Judaism for Contemporary Jews by Martin Cohen and Michael Katz Quotes

There are some Lubavitch Jews who cling to the idea that the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (who died in 1994) was the messiah sent to redeem Israel. They do not advocate that he was divine, however, nor do their prayers that he intercede on their behalf constitute anything approaching worship of him as a divine figure. When Messianic Jews embrace Jesus as part of the trinity, on the other hand, they are in effect elevating the man they consider to be the messiah to the level of divinity, a belief so absolutely incompatible with traditional Jewish belief that it firmly places those who hold it outside the House of Israel. As is the case with respect to all Jews who abandon Judaism, however, the gates of repentance remain forever open.¹

Explicitness of the terms of hire is an essential aspect of all contract negotiations. This precision is dictated by a passage in the Mishnah found at M Bava M'tzi-a 7:1, where the text teaches that a person who hires workers and then later demands that they arrive earlier or stay later than is customary in that locale cannot force them to comply with this new requirement in violation of local custom. The Shulḥan Arukh extends this statement further and adds that even if employers increase the employees' wages, they still cannot demand this additional work because it was not stipulated at the time of hiring (SA Ḥoshen Mishpat 331:1). Extrapolating from the Shulḥan Arukh, then, an employer cannot, at a later date, demand more than is written into the original negotiated contract; one must therefore be very careful to delineate the precise demands of the job during negotiations. For moderns, this list of details to be negotiated in advance could reasonably be expanded to include such items as the amount of vacation time, sick leave, and overtime pay being offered. In turn, the employee must also take care to ensure that a precise specification of duties occurs in negotiations.²

Any honest reporting of Jewish tradition on sexuality must affirm marriage as the ideal setting for intercourse. The exclusive fidelity of marriage permits couples to understand sex as an expression of the kind of most intimate love, care, and joy that characterize marriage at its finest. Furthermore, understanding marriage as the exclusive licit venue for sexual relations also highlights the role of sexuality in the performance of one of the most sacred of all mitzvot:

¹ 139 (Kindle Ed)

² 719-720

the commandment to create new life and carry the human community forward into the next generation. In most cases, especially among young people, unmarried couples are unprepared to face that possible outcome of their behavior. Since it is ethically dubious to risk consequences one cannot handle, and since no form of birth control is perfect, people unprepared for parenthood ideally should refrain from sexual intercourse.³

No halakhah forbids female masturbation. Some talmudic commentators did ban it, on the grounds that the prohibition on destroying “seed” also applies to women, whom they assumed emit some procreative substance in sexual climax, just like men. Conservative halakhah should not base itself on the errors of medieval medicine. Even if one wished to re-affirm the prohibition against male masturbation on the grounds of destroying semen, as Orthodox authorities do, this would have no relevance for women’s auto-eroticism or orgasm outside of intercourse.⁴

“You shall neither insult the deaf nor place a stumbling block before the blind” (Leviticus 19:14)... Even though the law codes seem to ignore the obvious in discussing this passage, the Talmud reminds us that the basic meaning of a verse is never legitimately ignored (BT Shabbat 63a). Indeed, the metaphorical interpretations of this verse are reasonable only because the fundamental laws requiring removing barriers from people’s paths and treating others with compassion are already taught elsewhere. Their reiteration in connection to this passage in Leviticus regarding people with disabilities should, therefore, remind us of the specific obligation we all have to treat people with disabilities as we would others, and to be concerned for the removal of both physical and metaphorical barriers from their paths. Whether or not mandated by law (in the United States, for example, the federal government specifically exempts religious institutions from having to comply with the section of the Americans with Disabilities Act that mandates that public buildings be accessible to people with disabilities), Jewish congregations should feel obligated, both legally and morally, to go beyond the requirements of civil law. We should work toward removing all physical barriers that prevent people from entering our buildings and sanctuaries, or from using our classrooms, restrooms, social halls, or mikva·ot, or from ascending to the bimah. We should seek ways as well to allow blind or deaf people to participate fully in synagogue activities. Listening devices for people with hearing impairment should be provided as a matter of course, as should interpretation in American Sign Language for people who are deaf; large-print books should be provided for those with visual impairment, and Braille volumes for blind

³ 840-841

⁴ 846-847

people. Nor should we wait to be asked to provide such services or aids. Indeed, making people who may have disabilities feel truly welcome requires making such services available even before they are needed.⁵

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⁵ 1080-1081