

# **SEXUAL INTERCOURSE, MARRIAGE, AND HOUSEHOLD LIFE FROM A HEBREW PERSPECTIVE**

*A Complete Torah-Based Household Study  
Parts One Through Three: Foundations, Hebrew Definitions, and Marriage*

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*For Adults — Mature Covenant Content*  
*All authority rests in the Tanakh — the Torah and the Prophets.*

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# PART ONE: FOUNDATIONS

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## 1. Introduction — Why This Study Exists and Who It Is For

This study was written because the confusion is real, the pain is real, and most people who follow **Yahweh** have never been given honest answers from the Hebrew text.

Every person reading this has been formed, to some degree, by a society that inherited its understanding of sex and marriage from Rome and from the Catholic Church — not from the Torah of **Yahweh**. That formation runs deep. It shaped how your parents talked to you about sex, or more likely how they did not. It shaped what your pastor or teacher declared to be sin. It shaped what you felt the first time you considered that a man might lawfully have more than one wife. It shaped the guilt, the anger, the confusion, and the pain that these subjects produce in households where Torah-observant people are trying to work through what **Yahweh** actually said versus what their culture told them He said.

This study is written for both the husband and the wife. It is written for the household as a whole. It does not soften what the Torah says, and it does not add prohibitions the Torah did not place. Both errors have caused enormous damage: the softening produces license, and the additions produce bondage. Neither is acceptable when the standard is the covenant text itself.

A note on the secular material included in this study: research from medicine, sociology, psychology, and human biology is included where it confirms, contextualizes, or illuminates what the Torah establishes. This is not a concession to secular authority. **Yahweh** created the human body. Medical research that describes how that body actually functions is simply documentation of what **Yahweh** built. Where secular science and Torah align, they are presented together. Where they conflict, the Torah is the final word. The secular material serves the Torah's argument — never the reverse.

Every Tanakh citation in this study uses **Yahweh** (יהוה) for the Tetragrammaton and **Elohim** (אֱלֹהִים) for the generic divine title. The substitutions 'LORD' and 'God' carry centuries of Christian translation overlay that moves the reader away from the Hebrew covenant text. We will not use them here.

## 2. The Torah as the Sole Authority — Why We Leave Christianity, Judaism, and Islam at the Door

Before this study can say anything useful about sex and marriage, it must establish the standard from which everything is measured. That standard is not the New Testament. It is not Talmud. It is not the Quran. It is not the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides, or the rulings of any rabbinical council held after **Yahweh** gave the Torah to **Mosheh**.

The standard is the written Torah — the five books of **Mosheh** as **Yahweh** gave them — plus the Prophets (Nevi'im) and the Writings (Ketuvim) of the Tanakh, interpreted through the primary Hebrew lexicons: Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB), the Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT), the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT), and Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon. Where the words of the text are examined in their original Hebrew meaning, the conclusions are binding. Where a tradition — however venerable — contradicts the plain meaning of the Hebrew text, that tradition yields.

This is not anti-Jewish. It is the position of the Torah itself. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 4:2** states: 'You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it.' **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 12:32** repeats: 'Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it.' Every human religious institution — without exception — has added to and subtracted from **Yahweh's** covenant instruction on the subjects of sex and marriage. Understanding what was added and by whom is essential to understanding what we have been taught versus what **Yahweh** actually said.

### What Christianity Added

Christianity's sexual ethic was shaped primarily by three forces: Greco-Roman monogamy (which became Roman law and then became Christian practice), the theology of Paul's letters read through a Greek philosophical lens, and the rulings of the Catholic Church's councils beginning in the 4th century CE. The Council of Trent (1563) declared polygamy anathema and threatened excommunication for any who practiced or defended it. The Church's authority derived from the Roman Empire that had already criminalized polygamy for its Jewish citizens by 285 CE under Diocletian and Maximian. Christianity did not invent monogamy-only marriage — it inherited Rome's version and gave it theological justification after the fact.

The result was that Christian doctrine redefined adultery to include any sex outside a single monogamous marriage — directly contradicting the Torah's precise Hebrew definition of **na'aph**, which concerns a married woman having sex with a man who is not her husband. A married man taking a second wife or a concubine is not **na'aph** under Torah. It is **na'aph** under Christian doctrine derived from Roman law. These are not the same thing.

### What Rabbinic Judaism Added

Rabbinic Judaism's position on polygamy evolved under pressure from the nations that ruled over Yisra'el. After the 212 CE Antonine Constitution made all Jews Roman citizens, Roman law forbidding polygamy to citizens had to be accommodated. A synod convened by Rabbenu Gershom ben Yehuda around 1000 CE formally banned polygamy among Ashkenazi Jews. This ruling was not derived from the Torah — it was derived from centuries of Roman and Christian cultural dominance over Jewish life in Europe. The Mishnah's own discussion of the **onah** obligation (the husband's conjugal duty to his wife) specifically addresses the case of a man with multiple wives, confirming that the Torah regulation never prohibited polygyny.

Where the Talmud and Mishnah expand on Torah law in ways that protect wives, provide for their needs, and establish minimum standards of care, those discussions are referenced in this study as valuable commentary. Where rabbinical rulings go beyond the Torah text and impose restrictions the text does not support, this study marks the boundary clearly.

### The Standard We Will Hold

You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, so that you may keep the commandments of **Yahweh** your **Elohim** which I command you. —**Devarim (Deuteronomy) 4:2**

The Torah as written. The Hebrew words as defined by the primary lexicons. The two-or-three-witnesses standard of **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 19:15** applied to every claim. That is the standard of this study.

## 3. The One Flesh Covenant — Basar, Davak, Azav

**Beresheet (Genesis) 2:24** is the foundational verse for all of human sexuality. Everything else in this study — marriage, polygyny, concubinage, what is permitted in the marriage bed, what is prohibited — flows from or is measured against the covenant design established in this single verse. It must be read in Hebrew, not in English translation.

על-כן יעזב איש את-אביו ואת-אמו ודבק באשתו והיו לבשר אחד —Beresheet (Genesis) 2:24

*Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his woman, and they shall become one flesh.* —Beresheet (Genesis) 2:24 — literal translation from Hebrew

Three Hebrew verbs govern this verse: **azav** (leave), **davak** (cleave), and **hayah** (become). Three Hebrew nouns carry the covenant weight: av (father), em (mother), **ishah** (woman/wife), and **basar** (flesh). Each word is precise. None is accidental.

### Azav — H5800 — The Leaving

The Hebrew verb **azav** (עָזַב) means to leave, forsake, abandon — specifically in the context of releasing obligation to a prior authority. BDB documents **azav**'s primary meaning as 'to leave, forsake' with the sense of formally departing from a claim or obligation. When a man **azav** his father and mother, he is not merely changing his address. He is departing the authority structure of his father's household — the **beit av** — and establishing a new one. This departure is covenantally prior to the union: a man cannot properly establish a new household while remaining under the authority of the old one. The leaving must precede the cleaving.

This has profound practical implications. A man who cleaves to his woman while still functionally under the authority of his parents — financially dependent on them, governed by their preferences regarding his marriage — has not properly **azav**'d. The Torah's design requires the man to establish his own covenant household. This is why the command is given to the man, not the woman: it is the man who founds the new **beit av**. The woman joins a household already being established.

### Davak — H1692 — The Cleaving

The Hebrew verb **davak** (דָּבַק) is one of the most intense attachment words in the entire Tanakh. BDB defines it as: to cling, cleave, keep close, stick to. It describes permanent, inseparable adhesion. It is the same word used in **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 10:20** — 'You shall fear **Yahweh** your **Elohim**; you shall serve Him and **davak** to Him' — and in **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 11:22** — 'to love **Yahweh** your **Elohim**, to walk in all His ways and **davak** to Him.' The cleaving a man does to his woman is the same category of bond as Yisra'el's covenant bond to **Yahweh**. This is not metaphor. This is **Yahweh**'s own choice of vocabulary.

The word **davak** appears in **Rut (Ruth)h 1:14**, where **Rut (Ruth)h** 'cleaved' to **Naomi** — refusing to leave her even after **Orpah** departed. It appears in **Beresheet (Genesis) 34:3**, where **Shechem**'s soul 'cleaved' to **Dinah** after he lay with her. The word describes a bond that does not let go. When **Yahweh** designed the one-flesh covenant, He chose this word deliberately: the man's union with his woman is to be a bond that does not release, that holds as tightly as Yisra'el is commanded to hold to **Yahweh** Himself.

### Basar — H1320 — The One Flesh

The Hebrew word **basar** (בָּשָׂר) is the most anatomically specific word in the verse and the one most consistently softened by English translations. BDB's primary definition: flesh (from its freshness); by extension, body, person. But BDB also explicitly documents **basar**'s euphemistic meaning: 'the pudenda of a man — male organ of generation.' This is not a later interpretation

or a medieval commentary. It is BDB's own documented definition drawn from the usage pattern of the word across the Tanakh.

When **Beresheet (Genesis) 2:24** says the man and woman become one *basar* — one flesh — it is describing the physical joining of the male organ with the female body. This is what *echad basar* means. The Talmud (Ketubot 48a) confirms this understanding: the rabbinical discussion of *onah* (marital conjugal duties) is based on this verse, and the sages understood one flesh as specifically describing sexual penetration. **Ramban's** commentary on **Shemot (Exodus) 21:9** uses the language of 'flesh to flesh contact' in discussing the *basar* union.

The verse continues immediately in **Beresheet (Genesis) 2:25**: 'And the man and his wife were both naked (*arummim*) and were not ashamed.' The Hebrew *arummim* (אֲרֻמִּים) describes total physical nakedness — the full exposure of *basar* in its most intimate sense. There was no shame because there was no transgression. They were covenant man and covenant woman, joined under **Yahweh's** own design, in the act **Yahweh** had specifically designed for them.

### What Echad Basar Specifically Defines and Excludes

The one-flesh covenant, as defined by *basar* in BDB, HALOT, and the usage throughout the Tanakh, is anatomically specific. This precision has direct consequences for the subjects covered throughout this study:

- A man and a woman become *echad basar* through vaginal intercourse — the penetration of the female body by the male organ. This is what **Beresheet (Genesis) 2:24** describes. The one-flesh union is the joining of male and female anatomy as **Yahweh** designed them for both procreation and covenant intimacy.
- Two men cannot become one flesh in this sense. **Vayikra (Leviticus) 18:22** prohibits a man from 'lying with a man as he lies with a woman' — because the act defined by *echad basar* is anatomically specific to male-female union. Two men are anatomically incapable of the one-flesh covenant **Yahweh** designed.
- Anal intercourse — whether between two men or between a man and a woman — is not the one-flesh covenant and is addressed separately in this study under **Vayikra (Leviticus) 18:22's** prohibition. The anatomy of **Beresheet (Genesis) 2** itself establishes this: *basar* is the male organ joined to the female body in the manner **Yahweh** designed.
- Two women cannot become *echad basar* by definition. The Torah's silence on female-female sexual activity reflects this anatomical reality: what two women can do together does not constitute the one-flesh covenant penetration that defines sexual intercourse in Hebrew. This has specific implications for the household, which are covered in Part Five.

### The Dual Purpose of the One Flesh Covenant

**Yahweh's** first recorded command to human beings involves the *basar* union: 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth' (**Beresheet (Genesis) 1:28**). The one-flesh covenant serves two purposes simultaneously — and both are essential to understanding the full picture of sexuality in Torah.

The first purpose is procreation: the continuation of the human species and the covenant community. When **Yahweh** designed male and female anatomy to fit together in the way they do, He was designing a biological system for producing offspring. **Beresheet (Genesis) 1:28** makes this explicit as a command, not merely an option. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 25:5-10** (levirate marriage) shows how seriously **Yahweh** takes the continuation of family lines — even

requiring a brother to raise up offspring for a dead brother rather than allow his household to be erased from Yisra'el.

The second purpose is covenant bonding — the emotional and spiritual adhesion that the act of physical union produces. The hormone oxytocin — documented by modern neuroscience as the primary bonding chemical released during sexual intercourse — is **Yahweh's** biological design for covenant attachment between husband and wife. The Talmud (Kiddushin) recognizes this through the concept of *yediat isha* — 'knowing a woman' — using the Hebrew word **yada** (to know) for sexual union, expressing that the sexual act is a form of the deepest intimate knowledge between two people. Modern society has attempted to sever these two purposes through contraception and abortion — keeping the pleasure while refusing the covenant consequence. The Torah's design holds them together.

## 4. The Beit Av — The Patriarchal Household as Yahweh's Covenant Structure

The Hebrew phrase **beit av** (בֵּית אָב) — the father's house — is the structural container within which every subject in this study must be understood. It appears 140 times in the Tanakh, first in **Beresheet (Genesis) 12:1** where **Yahweh** commands **Avraham**: 'Get out of your country, and from your kindred, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.' From that first appearance through the entire governance structure of the covenant community in the wilderness, the **beit av** is **Yahweh's** designed unit of covenant life.

The 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia's article on Patriarchal Family and Authority defines the **beit av** as 'a body of persons who form one household under one head and one domestic government, including parents, children, sons and daughters-in-law, and dependents.' HALOT documents the term as the standard household unit of ancient Yisra'el. The **rosh beit av** — the head of the father's house — governed his wife or wives, concubines, children, servants, and any others living under his roof and under his authority.

The **beit av** was not merely a residential arrangement. It was a covenant unit with religious, legal, economic, and social dimensions. The father of the house maintained the family altar before the Temple era, offered sacrifice, conducted the Passover household observance, and was accountable to **Yahweh** for the covenant faithfulness of everyone within his gates. His authority was stewardship before **Yahweh** — not tyranny over those beneath him.

### The Three Levels of Covenant Community

The Torah organizes the covenant community in three nested levels, all built on the **beit av**:

- **Mishpachah** (מִשְׁפָּחָה) — the clan: multiple households descended from a common ancestor. **Mishpachah** appears over 300 times in the Tanakh and is the primary unit of tribal identity.
- **Beit av** (בֵּית אָב) — the household: the nuclear and extended family under one patriarchal head. This is the foundational covenant unit. Multiple **beit avot** form a **mishpachah**.
- The individual — but never as an autonomous self. In the Hebrew covenant worldview, the individual finds his or her identity as a member of a **beit av**, within a **mishpachah**, within a shevet (tribe), within the nation of Yisra'el. The Western concept of radical individual autonomy — 'my body, my choice,' 'my relationship, my rules' — is foreign to the covenant structure of the Torah.

## What the Patriarch's Authority Covers

The **rosh beit av** — the head of the father's house — held authority in several specific domains established by the Torah:

- Marriage arrangements: The father could arrange marriages for his sons and daughters (**Beresheet (Genesis) 24**) and give or withhold his daughter from a man who had defiled her (**Shemot (Exodus) 22:17**).
- Bride price (**mohar**): The father received and negotiated the **mohar** paid by the man seeking his daughter.
- Household religious observance: The father conducted the Passover household service (**Shemot (Exodus) 12:3-4**), maintained the household altar before the Temple era, and was responsible for teaching the Torah to his children (**Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:7**).
- Household judicial authority: The patriarch could act judicially on matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and household discipline within the framework Torah establishes.
- Covenant accountability: When **Yahweh** judged Yisra'el at Baal-Peor (Bamidbar (Numbers) 25), He held the roshei am — the patriarchal heads — accountable for the national sin. The father answers to **Yahweh** for his household.

## The Three Non-Negotiable Obligations: Sheer, Kesut, Onah

The Torah establishes three specific obligations a man has to every woman in his household — wife or concubine — in **Shemot (Exodus) 21:10**:

*If he takes another wife for himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. —Shemot (Exodus) 21:10*

These three words — **sheer** (שָׂאֲרָה), **kesut** (כְּסוּתָהּ), and **onah** (עֲנֻתָהּ) — establish the floor of a husband's covenant obligations. No woman in his household may be deprived of these three things, regardless of how many women he has.

- **Sheer** — food and sustenance: The husband provides for the material needs of every woman in his household. A man who takes a second wife while failing to feed his first has violated the covenant.
- **Kesut** — clothing and covering: The husband provides for the protection, covering, and dignity of every woman in his household.
- **Onah** — marital rights: The husband provides for the sexual needs of every woman in his household. This is the most discussed of the three in rabbinic literature and is examined in full detail in Section 18.

Critically, **Shemot (Exodus) 21:11** establishes the consequence of failure: 'If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.' The covenant authority of the patriarch comes with corresponding covenant obligation. The man who exercises headship without fulfilling **sheer**, **kesut**, and **onah** has not exercised headship — he has exercised exploitation, and the Torah addresses it directly.

## 5. The Sexual Revolution in Context — How Society Arrived at Its Current Confusion

Before this study moves into the Torah's specific laws, it is important to understand the historical and cultural trajectory that produced the world we live in now — a world where homosexual

marriage is legal, polygyny is illegal, and the average person has no framework for evaluating sexual ethics other than whatever their culture and media tells them this week.

The process did not begin in the 1960s, though that decade accelerated it dramatically. It began centuries earlier with the same forces that shaped Christian marriage doctrine: the Roman Empire's imposition of monogamy, the Catholic Church's conversion of Roman custom into divine law, and the slow replacement of Torah covenant ethics with Greek philosophical categories that treated the body as suspect and sexuality as something to be controlled rather than covenanted.

### **The First Sexual Revolution: 1870–1910**

Historians distinguish between the first and second sexual revolutions. The first (roughly 1870–1910) saw the collapse of Victorian moral consensus in Western societies. Victorian morality had itself been a relatively recent cultural construction — an attempt by industrial bourgeois culture to create respectability norms around sexuality in the context of urbanization and mass media. When photography, early film, and print advertising began making sexual imagery publicly available for the first time at mass scale, the Victorian framework began cracking under its own internal contradictions.

### **Pin-Up Culture, World War II, and Public Sexualization**

World War II produced one of the most significant accelerants of public sexual desensitization in American history: the pin-up phenomenon. Men serving in combat carried images of sexualized women on their planes, tanks, and in their barracks. The cultural message was clear: the sexualization of women's bodies was normal masculine behavior, a morale resource rather than an ethical question. Betty Grable's iconic poster — displayed in the lockers of millions of American soldiers — was a turning point in the normalization of treating female sexuality as a public commodity.

Hollywood simultaneously institutionalized the sexual objectification of women through film, creating an entire industry built on selling sexual imagery to a mass audience. By the time the second sexual revolution arrived in the 1960s, the infrastructure for public sexual desensitization had been under construction for four decades.

### **The Second Sexual Revolution: 1960s–Present**

The second sexual revolution (1960s–1970s) completed what the first began. The development of the birth control pill (1960) removed the biological consequence of non-procreative sex. The legalization of abortion (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973) removed the social consequence. The feminist movement, which correctly identified the double standard by which female sexuality had been policed while male sexual behavior went unchallenged, made sexual liberation a political cause. By 1971, more than 75% of Americans considered premarital sex acceptable — a threefold increase from the 1950s.

What followed was precisely what **Yahweh's** design predicts when the covenant structure of sex is abandoned: an explosion of sexually transmitted diseases, a divorce epidemic, massive numbers of fatherless children, and — paradoxically — a documented decline in reported sexual satisfaction, particularly among women. The sexual revolution promised liberation and delivered confusion, disease, and broken households.

### **Where We Are Now**

Today's society has arrived at a position that would have been unrecognizable even 50 years ago: homosexual marriage is legally recognized in most Western countries, transgender identity is legally protected in many jurisdictions, and the push continues to normalize every form of

sexual expression regardless of biological or covenant reality. Meanwhile, polygyny — a practice explicitly regulated (not prohibited) by the Torah — remains a crime in every U.S. state, punishable by imprisonment.

This is the world this study addresses. A world where what **Yahweh** actually regulated in His covenant text is illegal, and what His covenant text specifically prohibits has been normalized as a civil right. Understanding how we arrived here is not peripheral to understanding the Torah's sexual ethics. It is essential context for why this study needs to exist at all.

## PART TWO: DEFINITIONS FROM THE HEBREW TEXT

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### 6. Sexual Intercourse — What It Is and What It Is Not

The Torah uses several specific Hebrew words for sexual intercourse, and the precision of those words is the beginning of the entire legal framework. Modern English flattens all of these into the single word 'sex,' erasing distinctions the Torah treats as legally significant. This section establishes the primary Hebrew vocabulary of the sexual act.

#### Shakav — H7901 — The Primary Word for Sexual Intercourse

The Hebrew verb **shakav** (שָׁכַב) is the primary term the Torah uses for sexual intercourse. BDB defines it as: 'to lie down (for rest, sexual connection, decease or any other purpose).' The word appears 213 times in the Tanakh in various forms, with its sexual meaning clearly established by context throughout. Strong's documents it as describing 'sexual connection' among its range of meanings.

The sexual use of **shakav** is explicit throughout the Tanakh: **Beresheet (Genesis) 19:32-35** (Lot's daughters lying with their father), **Beresheet (Genesis) 30:15-16** (Rachel purchasing nights with Ya'akov using mandrakes), **Beresheet (Genesis) 34:2** (Shechem lying with Dinah), **Vayikra (Leviticus) 18:22** ('Do not lie [**shakav**] with a man as you lie with a woman'), Shemuel Bet 11:4 (David lying with Bathsheva). In every case, the context confirms that **shakav**, when used with a person as its object, describes actual sexual penetration.

The derivative nouns are equally precise: **shekavah** (שִׁכְבָּה, H7902) means 'a lying down, the sexual act, copulation, seed/semen' — BDB documents it as covering both the act of lying down for sexual purposes and the emission of semen. Shekobeth (שִׁכְבֹּת, H7903) means 'a sexual lying with' — NASB translates it simply as 'intercourse.' These derivative nouns remove any ambiguity about what **shakav** means in its sexual application.

#### Yada — H3045 — To Know

The Hebrew verb **yada** (יָדָע) means to know — and in the Torah it is used as a second way to describe sexual intercourse, specifically in the context of covenant intimacy. **Beresheet (Genesis) 4:1** — 'Adam knew (**yada**) his wife Chavah and she conceived' — is the Torah's first description of marital sexual intercourse, using **yada** rather than **shakav**. The deliberate choice of **yada** over **shakav** in this verse reveals something significant: the act of sexual union between husband and wife is in the category of the deepest possible knowledge — not merely physical contact but intimate knowing of another person in totality.

**Yada** is also used in **Beresheet (Genesis) 19:5** and 19:8 regarding the men of Sodom who demanded to 'know' the visitors (the malachim/messengers) and Lot offering his daughters to 'know' instead. The identical word is used for the shameful homosexual gang rape attempt and for the legitimate offer of Lot's daughters, making clear that **yada** in both cases means actual sexual intercourse — and marking the difference between covenanted and covenant-violating uses of the same act.

#### Bo El — H935 — To Come Into / To Enter

The phrase **bo el** (בּוֹא אֵל) — literally 'to come into' or 'to enter' — is a common euphemism for sexual intercourse throughout the Tanakh, particularly in legal contexts. **Beresheet (Genesis) 6:4** (the sons of Elohim 'came into' the daughters of men), **Beresheet (Genesis) 16:2** (Sarai telling Avram to 'come into' Hagar), **Beresheet (Genesis) 29:23** (Lavan bringing Leah to

**Ya'akov** so he 'went in to her'), **Beresheet (Genesis) 38:2** (Yehudah 'going in to' his wife). The phrase describes the act of sexual penetration from the male's perspective — the entry of the man into the woman.

### What Sexual Intercourse Is Not — The Boundaries the Torah Sets

Having established what the Torah's vocabulary identifies as sexual intercourse, the boundaries become clear:

- Sexual intercourse in Torah is specifically vaginal penetration — the entry of the penis into the vagina. This is what **basar** in **Beresheet (Genesis) 2:24**, **shakav** in **Vayikra (Leviticus) 18**, and **bo el** throughout the narrative texts describe. Anal penetration is a separate act addressed under the prohibitions of **Vayikra (Leviticus) 18:22**.
- Oral sexual stimulation — while not described in the Torah's narrative texts — is addressed in rabbinic law as permitted between husband and wife within the framework of the one-flesh covenant, provided semen is not emitted outside the vagina. Mishneh Torah (Issurei Biah 21:9) states explicitly: 'He may have intercourse with her naturally or unnaturally.' The Talmud's tractate Nedarim 20b uses the analogy of kosher meat: if it is permitted, it may be prepared and eaten in any manner the husband desires.
- Masturbation to emission (hashhatat zera — wasting of seed) is addressed separately and is generally prohibited in rabbinic tradition based on the account of Er and Onan in **Beresheet (Genesis) 38**. The Torah's concern is with emission of seed outside of the covenanted context of procreation and marital union.

The full details of what is and is not permitted within the covenant marriage bed are covered in Part Four of this study.

## 7. Adultery — Na'aph: The Precise Torah Definition and Its Limits

No subject in this study has been more distorted by centuries of Christian overlay than the definition of adultery. The English word 'adultery' now functions as a broad moral condemnation for any sexual activity outside of a monogamous marriage. The Hebrew word **na'aph** (נָאֵף) is far more precise — and far more specific — than that.

### Na'aph — H5003 — The Hebrew Definition

BDB defines **na'aph** as: 'to commit adultery — usually of male and female; but the accusative is always a wife of another.' The critical phrase is 'wife of another.' **Na'aph** in the Torah is specifically sexual intercourse between a man (married or unmarried) and a woman who is married to someone else. The marital status of the man is irrelevant under Torah. What triggers **na'aph** is the married status of the woman.

This is confirmed by multiple primary sources. The Encyclopedia Judaica (Jeffrey H. Tigay, 2007) defines adultery as: '*Voluntary sexual intercourse between a married woman, or one engaged by payment of the brideprice, and a man other than her husband.*' Michael Coogan, professor of Old Testament at Harvard Divinity School, states: 'In the Hebrew Bible there is no prohibition of premarital or extramarital sex for men, except for adultery, i.e. having sex with the wife of another man.'

The Wikipedia article on Forbidden Relationships in Judaism cites Jeffrey H. Tigay in the Jewish Study Bible (2014) stating the same position. The Talmud (Kiddushin 2a) confirms that a man's sexual history is legally irrelevant in Hebrew marriage law — there is no concept of male

virginity as a legal requirement, and there is no prohibition on a man having sexual relations with an unmarried woman outside of her covenant status.

### What Na'aph Protects

The Torah's adultery prohibition protects three specific covenant realities:

- The husband's exclusive claim on his wife's sexual loyalty. When **Yahweh** prohibited adultery in the Seventh Commandment (**Shemot (Exodus) 20:14, Devarim (Deuteronomy) 5:18**), He was protecting the covenant bond a husband has with his wife. Her sexual exclusivity to him is the covenant being protected.
- The integrity of the husband's bloodline. **Vayikra (Leviticus) 20:10** and the broader discussion of adultery in the Torah consistently returns to the issue of paternity: the adulterous wife may become pregnant by a man who is not her husband, introducing another man's genetic line into the husband's household under the pretense of being his own child. This was understood in the ancient Near East as a form of genetic fraud — erasing the husband's lineage and substituting another's.
- The covenant structure of the *beit av*. A wife who commits adultery has breached the foundational covenant of the household. The Torah prescribes death for both the woman and the man in **Vayikra (Leviticus) 20:10** — not as cruelty but as recognition that the covenant breach is so fundamental it dissolves the legitimacy of the household structure itself.

### What Na'aph Does NOT Cover

Understanding what *na'aph* does not cover is as important as understanding what it does:

- A married man who takes a second wife has not committed *na'aph*. The second wife is not another man's wife. There is no covenant breach of the type *na'aph* describes.
- A married man who takes a concubine (pilegish) has not committed *na'aph*. The concubine, by definition, is not married to another man.
- A married man who has sexual intercourse with an unmarried woman who is not betrothed has not committed *na'aph*. This may involve other considerations (see Section 8 on *zanah*), but it is not the adultery that the Seventh Commandment prohibits.
- A man who has sexual intercourse with a widow (who is not under levirate obligation) has not committed *na'aph*, as she is no longer bound to her deceased husband.

These are not comfortable conclusions for those formed in the Christian tradition. But they are the conclusions of the Hebrew text, confirmed by every major Hebrew lexicon and confirmed explicitly by the Encyclopedia Judaica — the premier reference work of Jewish scholarship — and by Professor Michael Coogan of Harvard Divinity School.

### The Punishment for Na'aph

**Vayikra (Leviticus) 20:10** states: 'If there is a man who commits adultery with another man's wife, one who commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.' Both the man and the woman are subject to capital punishment — but only when the capital judicial process is followed precisely. Two witnesses of good character must testify. The defendant must have been warned immediately before the act. A death sentence could only be issued when the Sanhedrin sat in its chamber within the Temple complex. As this study notes and as the Talmud confirms, no such judicial process can operate today.

Malachi 2:14-16 addresses the husband who divorces his covenant wife of his youth to pursue another woman — covering himself with violence against the one he should protect. The

covenant of marriage is not merely contractual but covenantal, and **Yahweh** is the witness to it (Malachi 2:14).

## 8. Fornication — Zannah: The Full Range

If *na'aph* is a precision instrument, *zannah* (זָנָה) is a wide net. The Hebrew word *zannah* covers a much broader category than adultery — encompassing harlotry, promiscuity, prostitution, and the sexual behavior of unmarried women that falls outside covenant boundaries. It also carries a major figurative dimension: spiritual fornication, the unfaithfulness of Yisra'el to **Yahweh**, which the prophets describe using the *zannah* vocabulary more than any other.

### Zannah — H2181 — The Lexical Range

BDB defines *zannah* as: 'to commit fornication, be a harlot — a primitive root (highly-fed and therefore wanton); to commit adultery (usually of the female, and less often of simple fornication, rarely of involuntary ravishment); figuratively, to commit idolatry.' *Zannah* appears 83 times in the Tanakh in various forms. The KJV translates it as: harlot (36 times), go a-whoring (19 times), whoredom (15 times), whore (11 times), fornication (3 times).

The word's usage patterns reveal its scope: it covers an unmarried woman who is sexually promiscuous (**Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:21**), a professional prostitute (**Yehoshua (Joshua) 2:1** — Rahav), a married woman who is unfaithful to her husband (**Hoshea (Hosea) 3:3**), a widow in a desperate economic situation (**Beresheet (Genesis) 38:15** — Tamar), and even the nation of Yisra'el's covenant betrayal of **Yahweh** through idolatry (**Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah) 3:1-3**; **Yechezkel (Ezekiel) 16**; Hoshea (Hosea) 1-4).

### The Critical Distinction Between Zannah and Na'aph

The two words describe different violations with different subjects and different consequences:

**Na'aph** (adultery): The prohibited party is specifically a **married woman**. Any man who has sex with her commits *na'aph*. Her own marital status triggers the prohibition. Capital offense.

**Zannah** (fornication): The prohibited conduct covers **illicit sexual behavior in general** — with primary application to women who have sex outside of any covenant framework. The consequences vary by context: death for a betrothed woman (**Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:23-24**), payment of bride price for seduction of a virgin (**Shemot (Exodus) 22:16-17**), shame and punishment for the promiscuous daughter (**Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:21**).

An unmarried man who has sex with an unmarried woman he has not paid *mohar* for is addressed in **Shemot (Exodus) 22:16-17** — he must pay the bride price and marry her if the father permits. This is not treated as a capital offense. It is treated as a financial and covenant obligation. The man has taken what was not offered to him under covenant terms, and he must make it right.

### Zannah in Its Spiritual Dimension

The prophets use *zannah* more as a spiritual category than a sexual one. Hoshea (Hosea)'s entire prophetic ministry is built on the *zannah* metaphor: **Yahweh** commands Hoshea (Hosea) to marry 'a wife of harlotry' (eshet zenunim — **Hoshea (Hosea) 1:2**) to embody Yisra'el's relationship with **Yahweh**. The nation has gone a-whoring after foreign gods. It has shifted its covenant allegiance — which is the root meaning of *zannah* — away from **Yahweh** to idols.

**Yechezkel (Ezekiel) 16** is one of the most extended and explicit uses of *zannah* in the entire Tanakh: a lengthy, graphic allegory in which **Yahweh** describes Yerushalayim as a woman who

was rescued from abandonment as an infant, grown to beauty under **Yahweh's** care, and then used that beauty to commit **zanah** with every nation around her. The allegory is deliberately explicit — the language of the chapter is graphic, because **Yahweh** intends for Yisra'el to feel the full weight of the betrayal. The covenant between **Yahweh** and Yisra'el is described in the same terms as the covenant between husband and wife — because it is the same category of bond.

This dual usage reveals something profound about how the Torah understands sexuality. Physical covenant faithfulness and spiritual covenant faithfulness are not parallel — they are the same thing expressed at different levels. The one-flesh covenant between husband and wife is the physical image of the covenant between **Yahweh** and His people. **Zanah** violates both images simultaneously.

### What Zanah Means for the Subjects of This Study

- A man who takes a second wife or concubine has not committed **zanah**. His sexual activity is within covenant boundaries — he has not 'shifted his allegiance' away from the covenant.
- A man who has sex with a prostitute is engaging in **zanah** in a broad sense — participating in a system the Torah views with concern even when it does not make it a capital offense for the man. **Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah) 5:7** uses harlotry as an image of the deepest degradation. Mishle (Proverbs) 5-7 contains extended warnings to the son about the adulterous woman and the harlot.
- An unmarried woman who is sexually promiscuous — entertaining multiple partners without covenant framework — is committing **zanah**. The consequences depend on her status: virgin, betrothed, previously married.
- A wife or concubine who has sex with any man other than her husband commits **na'aph** — not merely **zanah**. The covenant of the household has been broken at the highest level.

## 9. Premarital Sex — What Torah Says and What It Does Not Say

The phrase 'premarital sex' is a modern English construct. The Torah does not use it. What the Torah addresses is something more precise: sexual intercourse with a specific person in a specific covenant context. Understanding what the Torah actually addresses — rather than what the phrase 'premarital sex' implies — clarifies a great deal of confusion.

### The Case of the Seduced Virgin — Shemot (Exodus) 22:16-17

*If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed, and lies with her, he shall pay a bride price for her to be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride price for virgins. —Shemot (Exodus) 22:16-17*

This is the Torah's primary direct address of unmarried sexual intercourse outside of betrothal or marriage. Several things are immediately clear from the text:

- The act is not described as a capital offense. Neither the man nor the woman is put to death.
- The financial and covenant remedy is marriage: the man must pay the **mohar** (bride price) and take her as his wife.

- The father retains authority: he can refuse the marriage while still requiring payment of the **mohar**. The daughter's future is not destroyed by the act — her father can still arrange another marriage for her — but the man who took her must compensate her household for the loss of her bridal status.
- The woman's consent is not addressed in the penalty structure here — this passage covers seduction (pathah, persuasion) rather than force. Forced intercourse with a betrothed or married woman is addressed separately with different consequences.

This passage tells us that sexual intercourse between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman who is not betrothed is not treated as a capital crime in Torah. It is treated as a covenant breach that must be repaired financially and relationally. The breach is real — it has altered the woman's covenant status and her value in the marriage market of the day — and the man who caused the breach is held responsible for it. But it is not put in the same category as **na'aph** (adultery), which is a capital offense.

### The Betrothed Virgin — Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:23-24

The situation changes dramatically if the woman is betrothed (arusah — formally promised and contracted to another man but not yet living with him). Betrothal in Torah carries the full covenant weight of marriage regarding the woman's sexual exclusivity:

*If there is a girl who is a virgin betrothed to a husband, and a man finds her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and stone them to death — the girl because she did not cry out in the city, and the man because he has violated his neighbor's wife. —Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:23-24*

Note the language: 'he has violated his neighbor's wife.' The betrothed woman is legally equivalent to a wife in terms of the prohibition. Sexual intercourse with a betrothed woman is **na'aph** — adultery — not merely **zanah**.

### The Torah's Position on Premarital Sex — Summary

Pulling these passages together, the Torah's actual position on what we call premarital sex is more nuanced than either Christian 'all sex outside marriage is sin' or modern secular 'anything consensual is acceptable':

- Sex with a betrothed woman is adultery (**na'aph**) — capital offense, same as sex with a married woman.
- Sex with an unmarried, non-betrothed virgin is a covenant breach requiring financial remedy and the offer of marriage. It is not capital. It is not **na'aph**.
- Sex with an unmarried woman who is not a virgin — a widow, a woman who has been with other men previously — is addressed more loosely. A man who has sex with such a woman has a different set of obligations than one who seduces a virgin.
- Sex with a prostitute is permitted under Torah in the sense that it is not prohibited by a specific commandment for the unmarried man, though the prophets and wisdom literature consistently warn against it as destructive.

The consistent thread is not virginity as a universal requirement for sexual activity, but covenant integrity: is the woman bound to another man? If she is, the act is adultery. If she is not, the consequences depend on her status as virgin, widow, or otherwise.

## 10. Virgins — Betulah and Almah — The Hebrew Distinction

The Hebrew language has two primary words that English translations both render as 'virgin,' and confusing them has produced some of the most famous theological disputes in the history of the Bible. Understanding them precisely matters not only for theology but for the practical subjects of this study: who may be taken as a wife, what standards apply, and what covenant obligations arise.

### **Betulah — H1330 — The True Virgin**

**Betulah** (בְּתוּלָה) is the precise Hebrew word for a woman who has not had sexual intercourse. BDB defines it as 'virgin, a woman who has not known a man.' The plural form **betulim** (בְּתוּלִים) specifically means 'signs of virginity' — the physical evidence of an intact hymen. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:13-21** uses **betulim** in the legal case of a husband who accuses his newly married wife of not being a virgin: the evidence of her virginity (**betulim**) is presented to the elders. The word is anatomically specific.

The legal cases involving **betulah** in the Torah are correspondingly specific: **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:28-29** addresses a man who 'seizes' a **betulah** who is not betrothed — the specific **mohar** of fifty shekels of silver is set, and he must marry her and may never divorce her. The premium attached to marrying a **betulah** reflects the covenant value of intact virginity: the man is receiving a woman whose covenant status is unambiguously uncompromised.

### **Almah — H5959 — The Young Woman of Marriageable Age**

**Almah** (עַלְמָה) is a different word. BDB defines it as 'a young woman of marriageable age, one ripe for marriage.' The root **almah** derives from a verb meaning 'to be full of vigor, to have reached puberty.' The word does not carry a specific anatomical meaning related to intact virginity. It describes a woman who has reached sexual maturity and is of the age to be given in marriage.

Scholars confirm that **almah** can refer to a virgin but does not necessarily do so. H.G.M. Williamson notes widespread agreement that **almah** may refer to a virgin but not necessarily. Marvin Alan Sweeney states that scholars agree it refers to a woman of childbearing age without implying virginity. The word appears nine times in the Tanakh, and while most of its appearances involve women who appear to be virgins by context, the word itself does not carry the specific anatomical meaning that **betulah** carries.

### **Practical Implications for Marriage**

The Torah does not require a man to take a virgin as his wife or concubine. The specific legal protections and financial obligations apply when a **betulah** (a verified virgin) is involved. When a man marries a widow, a divorced woman, or a woman who has previously been with another man, the **betulah** premium does not apply — but the marriage is fully valid and fully covenanted.

- King **David** married **Avigail** after the death of **Naval** (Shemuel Alef 25:39-42). Neither was a virgin. The marriage is legitimate and recorded without moral qualification.
- Hoshea (Hosea) was commanded by **Yahweh** to marry **Gomer**, a woman of harlotry (**Hoshea (Hosea) 1:2**). **Yahweh** used this marriage as a prophetic statement about His relationship with Yisra'el.
- The Torah's levirate marriage law requires a widow to marry her dead husband's brother — she is not a virgin, and that is irrelevant to the covenant validity of the union.

A man who wants a virgin as a wife or concubine has every right to seek one. But the Torah does not require it, and no sin attaches to marrying a woman who has been with another man before, provided she is not currently bound to another man by covenant.



## PART THREE: MARRIAGE IN TORAH

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### 11. The Covenant of Marriage — How a Man Takes a Wife Under Torah

Marriage in Torah is not a ceremony. It is not a license issued by the state. It is a covenant — a binding agreement between a man and a woman (and their households) in the presence of **Yahweh**, sealed by the sexual act of consummation and governed by the covenant obligations of *sheer*, *kesut*, and *onah*.

The Torah does not prescribe a single fixed marriage ceremony. What it describes are components of the covenant process that were understood and practiced in the ancient Israelite community. Understanding these components is important because it establishes what actually constitutes a marriage under Torah — and therefore what does not.

#### The Mohar — The Bride Price

The *mohar* (מֹהָר) is the bride price paid by the man to the father of the woman. It is documented in **Beresheet (Genesis) 34:12** (**Shechem** offering whatever *mohar* was required for **Dinah**), **Shemot (Exodus) 22:17** (the standard *mohar* for a seduced virgin), and implied throughout the betrothal process. The *mohar* represents the man's formal declaration of intent to take the woman into his household and his compensation to her father's *beit av* for the loss of his daughter.

The *mohar* is not the purchase of a slave. It is the acquisition of a covenant partner. The word used for a man taking a wife — *lakach* (לָקַח, to take, to receive) — is the same word used throughout the Tanakh for receiving something of value. The woman taken as a wife becomes a covenant member of the husband's household with full rights and protections.

#### Erusin — Betrothal

*Erusin* (אֵרוּסִין) — betrothal — is the formal declaration and agreement between the households that the woman is covenantally committed to the man. In ancient Yisra'el, betrothal carried the full legal weight of marriage regarding the woman's sexual exclusivity, even though she had not yet moved into the husband's household. This is why **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:23-24** treats sex with a betrothed woman as adultery, and why Miryam's situation in the New Testament (betrothed to Yosef before the birth of Yeshua) would have been subject to divorce proceedings under Torah.

#### Nissu'in — The Marriage Itself

*Nissu'in* (נִישׁוּאִין) — from the root *nasa*, to carry — is the completion of the marriage: the man 'carries' or 'takes up' his wife into his household. This is the point at which the woman moves from her father's *beit av* to her husband's. The consummation of the marriage — the physical union, the one-flesh covenant — seals the marriage as fully completed.

#### The Ketubbah — The Marriage Contract

The *ketubbah* (כְּתוּבָה) is the marriage document — the written covenant contract specifying the husband's obligations to his wife: the *mohar* payment she is owed if he divorces her, provisions for her sustenance and care, and the formal statement of his covenant commitment. The *ketubbah* is the written legal expression of the covenant obligations that **Shemot (Exodus) 21:10** establishes.

In the context of multiple wives and concubines, the **ketubbah** is critical: it specifies each woman's individual protections and financial claims within the household. The concubine (pilegish) typically did not receive a formal **ketubbah**, which is one of the key distinctions between a wife and a concubine under Jewish legal tradition. However, the concubine's protections under **Shemot (Exodus) 21:10-11** are operative regardless of a written document.

### Consummation — The One Flesh Seal

The marriage covenant is sealed by consummation — the first act of sexual union, the **echad basar** of **Beresheet (Genesis) 2:24**. This is not merely symbolic. In the Torah's framework, the physical union is the covenant act. **Ya'akov's** inadvertent marriage to **Leah** was sealed by consummation before he discovered the deception (**Beresheet (Genesis) 29:23-25**). The union was valid. The question was then whether the intended union with **Rachel** would also be honored — which it was, through an additional seven years of service.

This is why the **betulim** (signs of virginity) in **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:13-21** carry legal weight: they are the physical evidence that the consummation covenant was entered by both parties as represented. A husband who falsely accuses his wife of not being a virgin at the time of marriage must pay a fine of one hundred shekels of silver to her father and may never divorce her (**Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:19**). A wife whose virginity is legitimately disproved is stoned (**Devarim (Deuteronomy) 22:21**) — because she entered a covenant while concealing that she had already given her body to another.

## 12. Monogamy — Its Real Origins

Monogamy as the only legitimate form of marriage is not a Torah commandment. It is a historical development shaped by three external forces: Babylonian captivity, Roman law, and the Catholic Church. Understanding this history is not academic — it is pastoral. It explains why Torah-observant people in the 21st century feel guilty about something the Torah explicitly permits, and why they have been taught something as **Yahweh's** law that is actually Babylon's law imposed on Yisra'el.

### Before the Exile — The Hebrew Practice

The patriarchal period and the period of the Judges are filled with multiple-wife and concubinage arrangements that the Torah records without moral condemnation: **Avraham** had **Sarai** as his wife and **Hagar** as his concubine. **Ya'akov** had **Leah** and **Rachel** as wives and **Bilhah** and **Zilpah** as concubines — twelve sons were born across the four women, and these sons became the twelve tribes of Yisra'el. **Gideon** had many wives and at least one concubine. Elkanah (Shemuel's father) had two wives, Chanah and Peninnah. King **David** had multiple wives and ten concubines. King Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines — though the Torah records that his foreign wives led his heart away from **Yahweh** (Melachim (Kings) Alef (1 Kings) 11), the condemnation is about the foreign gods, not the number of wives.

The Torah regulates multiple-wife households in **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 21:15-17**, addressing the rights of the firstborn son when the father has two wives — one loved and one unloved: 'If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, then it shall be on the day he wills what he has to his sons, he cannot make the son of the loved the firstborn before the son of the unloved.' The Torah does not say the man should not have two wives. It regulates the inheritance rights of children in a multiple-wife household. This is not a prohibition — it is a protection.

### **The Babylonian Captivity — The First Major Imposition**

The Babylonians were largely monogamous in their general practice, though their royalty practiced polygamy. When Yisra'el was taken into Babylonian captivity beginning in 597 BCE, the Hebrew people were forced to live under Babylonian law or face expulsion or death. Over the 70 years of captivity, Babylonian cultural norms — including monogamous marriage customs — became embedded in the Hebrew community's practice. The Jewish Virtual Library documents that 'study shows that ancient Middle East societies, though not strictly monogamous, were practically monogamous on a commoners' level, especially after the Babylonian captivity.'

### **Roman Occupation — The Second Major Imposition**

After the Babylonian captivity came Persian rule, then Greek (Hellenistic) rule, and finally Roman occupation. Roman law (Lex Julia) prohibited polygamy for Roman citizens. When the Antonine Constitution of 212 CE made all Jews Roman citizens, Roman marriage law applied to them as citizens. A special legal accommodation had to be made for Jewish polygamous families that already existed — but new polygamous marriages were effectively discouraged by civil law.

Roman law's prohibition of polygamy was not based on Torah. It was based on the Roman concept of legal equality between citizens and the Roman household structure (the paterfamilias system, which was also patriarchal but monogamous). The Roman paterfamilias governed his household with absolute authority — but he had only one legal wife.

### **The Catholic Church — The Final Imposition**

The Catholic Church inherited Roman monogamy and gave it divine sanction. Saint Augustine argued in the 4th century that polygamy had been 'tolerated' by the Creator for the patriarchs because of the need for fertility, but that it was no longer valid now that the world was sufficiently populated. The Council of Trent (1563) declared: 'If anyone saith that it is lawful for Christians to have several wives at the same time, and that this is not prohibited by any divine law; let him be anathema.'

Anathema meant formal excommunication — being cut off from the Church and, by implication, from salvation. Catholic scholars and theologians who defended polygamy from the Torah text were imprisoned, beaten, fined, and exiled. The Lutheran pastor Johann Lyser was imprisoned, beaten, and exiled from Italy for his defense of plural marriage. Friedrich Willenberg was fined one hundred thousand gold pieces and escaped with his life only through flight. The systematic suppression of Torah-consistent teaching on this subject was enforced through violence, fines, and excommunication.

The result of these three converging forces — Babylon, Rome, and the Catholic Church — was the universal Western legal and cultural consensus that monogamy is the only valid form of marriage. That consensus is now encoded in the laws of every Western nation. But it is not the Torah's position. The Torah regulates and protects multiple-wife households. It never prohibits them.

### **The Synod of Gershom — Rabbinical Judaism's Addition**

Around 1000 CE, Rabbenu Gershom ben Yehuda convened a synod that formally banned polygamy among Ashkenazi Jews. This ruling was accepted as binding by European Jewry. It was not a Torah-based ruling — it was explicitly an accommodation to European Christian society and its Roman-derived marriage laws. Sephardic Jews in parts of the Middle East continued to practice polygyny for centuries longer, as they were not under the same European cultural pressure.

The Synod of Gershom is a rabbinical decree, not a Torah command. It has no more authority over the covenant household than the rulings of the Council of Trent — both are human institutions responding to their cultural contexts, not revelation from **Yahweh**.

### 13. Polygyny — Yahweh's Actual Law, the Patriarchs Who Practiced It, the Regulations That Govern It

Polygyny — the practice of one man having multiple wives simultaneously — is explicitly regulated in the Torah. It is never prohibited. The distinction between regulation and prohibition is critical: the Torah's dietary laws regulate what may and may not be eaten. The Torah's sexual laws regulate what may and may not be done. Regulation acknowledges the legitimacy of the practice while establishing boundaries. Prohibition forbids the practice entirely. The Torah regulates polygyny and prohibits adultery. These are different categories.

#### Torah Passages That Explicitly Address Polygyny

- **Shemot (Exodus) 21:10** — the primary regulatory passage: 'If he takes another wife for himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights.' The Torah's 'if' here is permissive, not hypothetical. It is establishing the rule for a situation it treats as legitimate and expected.
- **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 21:15-17** — the inheritance rule: 'If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both have borne him sons...' Again, 'if a man has two wives' is not a hypothetical edge case. It is a regular enough situation that the Torah establishes a specific legal provision for it.
- **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 17:17** — the restriction on the king: 'He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away.' This is a specific restriction on the king — not on ordinary men. And even for the king, the restriction is not on having multiple wives per se but on multiplying them excessively (the root *ravah* means 'to multiply greatly'). The concern is the same that *Melachim (Kings) Alef (1 Kings) 11* records about Solomon: foreign wives who led the king's heart to foreign gods.
- **Vayikra (Leviticus) 18:18** — the sororal restriction: 'You shall not marry a woman in addition to her sister, to be a rival, while she is alive.' This passage prohibits taking a wife's sister as a competing co-wife during the wife's lifetime. It does not prohibit multiple wives — it prohibits a specific combination that **Yahweh** identified as productive of rivalry and pain. The very existence of this specific restriction confirms that multiple wives were expected; the Torah is limiting one particular problematic configuration, not the practice overall.

#### The Patriarchs and Multiple Wives — The Record

The covenant patriarchs whose lives are the foundational narrative of the Torah's household structure all practiced polygyny or concubinage. This is not incidental. **Yahweh** established His covenant with these men, gave them His name, promised them the land, chose them as the progenitors of the covenant nation — all while they maintained multiple-wife and concubinage households.

- **Avraham**: Wife **Sarai/Sarah**; concubine **Hagar** (given by **Sarah** herself, **Beresheet (Genesis) 16:3**); wife **Keturah** after **Sarah's** death (**Beresheet (Genesis) 25:1**, listed as concubine in *Divrei HaYamim (Chronicles) Alef 1:32* — a dual status reflecting her position).

- **Ya'akov:** Wives **Leah** and **Rachel**; concubines **Bilhah** (**Rachel's** handmaid) and **Zilpah** (**Leah's** handmaid). Twelve sons born across the four women became the twelve tribes of Yisra'el. **Yahweh** did not rebuke **Ya'akov** for his household structure. He renamed him Yisra'el and established His covenant with him through it.
- **Moshe:** The Torah records **Moshe** had a Midianite wife **Tzipporah** (**Shemot (Exodus) 2:21**) and a Cushite woman (**Bamidbar (Numbers) 12:1**) — **Miriam** and **Aharon** opposed **Moshe** for the Cushite woman, but **Yahweh** defended **Moshe** and struck **Miriam** with tzara'at for her opposition.
- **Gideon** (Shofetim 8:30): '**Gideon** had seventy sons who were his own offspring, for he had many wives.' The text records this without moral qualification.
- King **David:** The prophet **Natan**, rebuking **David** for Bathsheva and the killing of **Uriah**, delivers **Yahweh's** word: 'I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your care... and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these' (Shemuel Bet 12:8). **Yahweh** states explicitly that He gave **David** his wives — plural — and would have given him more. The sin of **David** was not polygyny. It was murder and adultery (*na'aph* — Bathsheva was **Uriah's** wife).

### The Regulations Governing Multiple Wives

The Torah's regulatory framework for multiple-wife households establishes the following:

- Equal provision: Every wife receives *sheer* (food), *kesut* (clothing), and *onah* (marital rights) without diminishment. No wife may be deprived of any of the three because the husband has taken another wife.
- Equal inheritance for sons: The firstborn son receives the double portion regardless of which wife he was born to, and regardless of the father's preferences (**Devarim (Deuteronomy) 21:15-17**). The firstborn of the unloved wife cannot be displaced by the son of the loved wife.
- The specific prohibition against taking a wife's sister as a co-wife during the wife's lifetime (**Vayikra (Leviticus) 18:18**). This specific prohibition assumes and confirms the general permission for multiple wives from other women.
- The king's restriction on multiplying wives excessively (**Devarim (Deuteronomy) 17:17**) — applicable specifically to the king and motivated by the risk of foreign entanglement, not by any general principle against plural marriage.

## 14. The Husband's Obligations — Sheer, Kesut, Onah in Full Detail

**Shemot (Exodus) 21:10** establishes the three non-negotiable obligations of every husband to every woman in his household. These are not suggestions. They are covenant obligations with legal force. The Talmud (Ketubot 47b) documents the rabbinic derivation of these obligations from the Torah text, and the Shulchan Aruch codifies their enforcement through the beit din (rabbinic court). If a husband refuses to provide any of the three, the court may compel him to divorce his wife and pay her full *ketubbah*.

### Sheer — H7607 — Food and Sustenance

The word *sheer* (שָׂרָה) in this context means food and sustenance — the husband's obligation to provide for the material needs of every woman in his household. The Talmud (Ketubot 47b) derives this from the verse: 'She'era' — this is sustenance, as it says, 'Who also eat the flesh

[she'er] of my people' (Michah 3:3). The connection of **sheer** to **basar** (flesh) in this derivation is notable: the husband is responsible for providing the flesh/food that sustains his household.

The **sheer** obligation is not conditional on the wife bearing children, on her sexual compliance, or on the husband's satisfaction with her. It is unconditional. A husband who withholds food as a means of control or punishment has violated the covenant.

### **Kesut — H3682 — Clothing and Covering**

**Kesut** (כֶּסוּת) means clothing and covering. In its narrowest sense it means that the husband provides the wife's clothing. But in its broader covenant sense, it encompasses the idea of protection and dignity — the husband 'covers' his wife in the same way that **Yahweh** is described in **Yechezkel (Ezekiel) 16:8** as covering Yisra'el with His garment. A husband who provides **kesut** is providing not just clothes but the dignity and protection of being under his household's covenant care.

**Ramban's** commentary on **Shemot (Exodus) 21:9** interprets **kesut** in the context of the marital bed: the bed and bedding used by the couple during intimacy. This extends **kesut** to include the physical environment of the marital relationship — not merely clothing in the abstract.

### **Onah — H5772 — Marital Rights and Conjugal Obligations**

The **onah** obligation is the most discussed of the three in the Talmud and the most directly relevant to the subject of this study. BDB defines **onah** as: 'cohabitation.' The Talmud's tractate Ketubot devotes extensive discussion to it. The foundational principle, stated clearly by the Jewish Theological Seminary: 'The wife's right to intimacy does not lapse after a husband has fulfilled the commandment of fathering at least one son and one daughter... A husband is forbidden to deny his wife sex for more than two weeks according to the school of Shammai or for only one week according to the school of Hillel.'

The Mishnah (Ketubot 5:6) establishes minimum frequency schedules based on the husband's occupation:

- Men of independence (not employed in demanding labor): daily.
- Laborers (manual workers): twice per week.
- Donkey-drivers (traveling merchants, short journeys): once per week.
- Camel-drivers (long-distance traders): once in thirty days.
- Sailors (extended voyages): once in six months.

These are minimum floors — not ideal targets. Rabbi Yaakov Emden: 'One should ease his wife's mind and make her happy, prepare her and nurture her with words that make her happy so that she feels passionate towards him.' The Talmud (Pesachim 49b) is scathing about a man who approaches his wife crudely: 'an ignoramus attacks and penetrates his wife shamelessly — just as a lion attacks and devours while it is still alive, so an ignoramus has intercourse with his wife to satisfy his own urges without regard for her pleasure.'

Critically, the **onah** obligation applies even when procreation is impossible: the Talmud (and **Rambam**, Mishneh Torah Hilkhoh Ishut) confirm that **onah** applies even to a woman who is infertile, elderly, pregnant, or nursing. The obligation is to her sexual needs and emotional fulfillment — not merely to procreation. Professor Nahum Sarna notes that this makes the Torah 'the only instance in the laws of the ancient Near East that stipulates a wife is legally entitled to sexual gratification.'

A husband who refuses to fulfill the **onah** obligation without valid excuse can be compelled by the beit din (court) to divorce his wife and pay her full **ketubbah**. This is one of the most striking

examples of the Torah's protection of the wife's right to sexual fulfillment — a right that no Christian tradition has ever matched in its explicit legal force.

### Onah and Multiple Wives

The **onah** obligation in a multiple-wife household means that each wife is owed her individual **onah** separately. The husband with two wives cannot provide one wife's **onah** on behalf of the other's. Each woman is entitled to the minimum frequency appropriate to the husband's occupation. This is a substantial obligation that the man who considers multiple wives must honestly assess against his capacity to fulfill it.

The Zohar (Jewish mystical text, 13th century) states: 'A man who wishes to be intimate with his wife must ask her permission and speak to her in a way that makes her happy.' This applies to each wife individually. The husband who is intimate with one wife while another is being neglected has violated the covenant with the neglected wife.

## 15. The Wife's Obligations and Rights Within the Covenant Household

The Torah's covenant structure is not one-directional. While the husband bears the primary obligations of **sheer**, **kesut**, and **onah**, the wife also has obligations — and the Torah and its commentators address these with the same directness they apply to the husband's duties.

### The Wife's Sexual Obligation — The Moredet

A woman who refuses her husband's conjugal approaches without valid reason is termed a **moredet** (מֵרֵדֶת) in the Talmud — a rebellious wife. The legal consequences are significant: her **ketubbah** payment is reduced by the week in some opinions (Ketubot 63a-64a), and she may ultimately be divorced with cause and without her full financial protection. The Talmud is clear that while the **onah** obligation runs to the husband in terms of active duty, the wife has a corresponding covenant obligation of sexual availability to her husband.

This must be understood in full context: it does not mean a husband has the right to force sexual intercourse on his wife. The Talmud (Eruvin 100b) states explicitly: 'A man is forbidden to compel his wife to have marital relations.' Rabbi Joshua ben Levi adds: 'Whoever compels his wife to have marital relations will have unworthy children.' The obligation is willingness and availability — not submission to force.

### The Wife's Right to Refuse

A wife may legitimately decline sexual approaches for valid reasons: genuine physical illness, emotional distress that she communicates honestly to her husband, exhaustion, or other circumstances she presents in good faith. What she may not do is refuse indefinitely and systematically as a means of controlling or punishing her husband, or out of simple indifference to the covenant she entered.

This balance is expressed in the Talmud (Nedarim 15b): neither husband nor wife can make a vow prohibiting the other from their conjugal rights, because both have obligations to the other in this area. The Gemara uses slightly different language for each — the husband is 'obligated' (mishtabed) to provide **onah**; the wife's sexual rights are 'owned by' the husband in the sense that he has a legitimate covenantal claim to her sexual availability — but both have binding obligations to the other.

### The Wife's Covenant Obligations in the Household

Beyond the sexual dimension, the Torah and its covenant framework establish a number of the wife's household obligations:

- **Tzniut** (modesty): The wife is expected to maintain modesty in her dress and behavior that reflects the covenant dignity of the household. Mishle (Proverbs) 31 — the Eshet Chayil — describes a woman whose dignity comes from the covenant strength of her character, not from the display of her body.
- Household management: The Eshet Chayil of Mishle 31 is explicitly described as managing the household's economic and domestic affairs with skill and diligence. This is not a passive or merely domestic role — she buys fields, plants vineyards, conducts trade, and teaches wisdom.
- Covenant faithfulness: The wife's absolute sexual faithfulness to her husband is the covenant at the heart of the marriage. The covenant is not conditional on the husband's behavior toward her — though a husband who violates his obligations to her may trigger her legal rights to separation.
- Care for the household: The wife is the agentic center of the household's daily life. The Torah's household vision is not one where the woman is passive and silent — the prophets address women directly, the Tanakh records women who led, judged, prophesied, and built — but the covenant household structure places the husband in authority over the household and the wife in the position of the capable, active, honored partner who makes the household function.

### **A Word to Wives: What the Torah Is Actually Asking of You**

The Torah is not asking you to disappear into your husband's preferences and suppress your own. The Torah's household vision is one where a capable, active woman manages a flourishing household under the covering of a husband who feeds, clothes, and sexually fulfills her. Your needs are not an afterthought in this system — they are literally the legal minimum by which your husband is bound before **Yahweh**.

What the Torah is asking is covenant faithfulness: sexual exclusivity to your husband, willing engagement with his legitimate sexual needs, and active participation in the household you have entered together. When those conditions are met on both sides, the Torah's household structure produces stability, children, generational covenant continuity, and the kind of love that is not a feeling but a decision renewed daily in acts of provision, covering, and intimate union.

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### **End of Parts One Through Three**

*Parts Four through Ten continue in subsequent documents.*

### **Miqdash Bethel — The Sanctuary of the House of Yahweh**

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