Elliot N. Dorff, and Danya Ruttenberg, Eds. *Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices: Sex and Intimacy.*

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The notion that good sex between consenting adults can also be “Jewish sex” permeates the pages of this fascinating volume edited by Elliot Dorff and Danya Ruttenberg. *Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices* introduces the classical and contemporary sources that enable the reader to develop a Jewish sexual ethic that builds on traditional values.

This slim volume is structured similarly to *she’elot ve-teshuvot*, the query and reply case studies used to build the rabbinical *responsa* literature. Each query outlines a variety of possibilities within a given case study; the replies contain a mix of traditional and contemporary list of sources, and include a diversity of voices that provide extensive commentary to the matter at hand. Elliot Dorff, Danya Ruttenberg, and Uzi Weingarten have gathered the traditional sources in each section. Steven Edelman-Blank has compiled the contemporary sources in each section. These include not only contemporary relevant websites, but also a brief synopsis on the book, article or website recommended. The case studies present sexual-ethical questions in four categories: dating ethics, sexual consequences, sex work and pornography, and sexual negotiation.

The first case study, Dating Ethics, considers issues of obligation and sexual exclusivity in relationships. The primary question of this case study asks when, if at all, does one have a duty to inform another about the possibilities of dating someone else (3)? This question is refracted through the variables of heterosexual and/or same sex coupleings, length of time in relationship, and attitudes towards brief versus long-term sexual encounters. Besides giving the reader four pages of traditional and contemporary sources there are four detailed responses by Esther D. Kustanowitz, Uzi Weingarten, S. Bear Bergman, and Scott Perlo.

Esther D. Kustanowitz in “Seeing Each Other and Seeing Ourselves: Jewish Ethical Dating in the Modern Age” utilizes both Jewish texts and personal experience to demonstrate how Jewish values can be
integrated into intimate relationships. Uzi Weingarten in “Doing What is Right and Good” examines the ethical issues of dating through a closer reading of the classical sources. S. Bear Bergman in “Sex, Truth, and Ethical Communication” illustrates what constitutes ethical communication when issues of sexuality arise. Scott Perlo in “Holy Uncertainly: Judaism and Dating” compares and contrasts issues raised when the sexual relationship is between a dating couple versus a married couple. One draws from these responses that good sex is really about good communication and the commitment to be open and honest in one’s relationships.

The second case study, Sexual Consequences, looks at several issues that remain contentious in both traditional and modern contexts: birth control, pregnancy, abortion, sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs), the need for safe sex – and the sexual-ethical question of our time: under what circumstances is one obligated to reveal his or her sexual history to one’s partner. This case study presents eight pages of traditional and contemporary sources to consider presented by Gloria Feldt, Deborah Roffman, and Jeffrey Burack.

Gloria Feldt in “Building a Framework for Sexual Decision-Making” addresses sexual decision-making within a social justice framework in today’s milieu where people, regardless of persuasion, begin having sexual relations in their mid-to-late teenage years (47). Deborah Roffman in “Making Meaning and Finding Morality in a Sexualized World” writes about teaching children, those approaching adolescence and those already in their teens to think about sex as part of the human condition rich with meaning and value (58). Jeffrey Burack in “Protect and Respect” supplies the longest response in the book (12 pages) and details how a framework of Jewish values and Jewish sexual responsibility promote protection and respect for oneself and for the other in a sexual relationship.

The third case study, Sex Work and Pornography, looks at issues relating to the sex trade, an industry that incorporates exotic dancing, escort services, modelling, and pornographic movies; as attitudes have shifted significantly towards public displays of sexuality, attitudes to these types of sex work have undergone a great deal of change. The presenting problem in this case study questions whether or not a minimally educated young woman should work either as a dancer in a strip club or as a drugstore clerk. Her choice to work in the strip club means she could possibly earn “significant money for minimal hours” work (75); in the drugstore she will definitely work for minimal wages and no benefits. In this section there are six pages of sources and four responses, by Elliot Dorff, Hanne Blank, Rachel Durchslag, and Aimee Dinschel, and Martha Ackelsburg.

The first response is Elliot Dorff’s interview with Ron Jeremy, “The Realities and Ethics of Sex Work.” Jeremy re-iterates the idea of making moral choices and challenges the idea that the job choices presented in the case study are valid choices. Hanne Blank in “The Sex of Work, The Work of Sex” addresses the
possibilities and limitations of sex work. Rachel Durchslag, and Aimee Dinschel in “Deconstructing the Commercial Sex trade Industry” examine the commercial sex trade industry and the issues raised for women working in these milieus. Martha Ackelsburg in “Sex Work: Whose Choice?” addresses reasons for engaging in sex work and considers alternate choices.

The fourth case study, Sexual Negotiation, addresses sexual negotiation and the extent to which sexual accommodation is an obligation in Jewish law. Sexual accommodation includes a variety of sexual acts – cuddling, oral sex, anal sex, – and the drama that can accompany these acts: the use of degrading language, erotic role-playing, and cross-dressing. There are six pages of sources followed by three responses, by Gabriel Blau, Ron Levine and Mark Dratch.

Gabriel Blau in “Negotiating Orgasm: Spirituality and the Sexual Experience” asks what it means to engage in intimate relationships and would advocate that these relationships become encounters that integrate Judaism, God, and spirit into the negotiation process (126). I found it a little curious that it is only towards the end of the book that active consideration is given to the place of God in one’s sexual life. Ron Levine focuses on instinctive responses and Biblical knowledge and what is and what is not acceptable. The focus is not only on the ability of a couple to communicate their needs, but their ability to participate in reflective dialogue which consists of acknowledgement and affirmation; acceptance and understanding; and adding information and desire (130). Levine notes that consenting adults can do what they want, but that in a Jewish relationship degrading language is unacceptable, as is a ménage a trois in a monogamous relationship (131). Mark Dratch in “A Bit of Heaven Here on Earth” discusses the “sharedness” of the sexual relationship and the meaning of consent.

Considering that this book is fewer than 150 pages, a great deal of information is found between its covers. The book clearly speaks to the sexual experiences of adults today regardless of their relationships (married/unmarried, heterosexual/same-sex): issues are raised, clarified, and thoughtfully considered. The source materials are extensive and provide the reader with the key to “using [their] Jewish heritage as a source of sexual values (xii). *Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices* should be required reading in Jewish high schools and colleges, so that young Jewish adults are empowered to integrate their sexual behaviours and their Jewish values.