“You Know Yourself, You’re Not Gonna Do That”: How Modern Orthodox Teens Learn About and Navigate Norms of Sexual Contact

Senior Thesis

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Chapter One - Introduction

As a senior at my pluralistic Jewish high school, neither I nor my friends knew much sex or sexuality. While we were offered multiple lessons on stress, mental health and illegal substances, the only sexual education I could remember from my four years at the school was a single one-hour session in which the entire tenth grade class was given a “tour” of different forms of contraception. While this was undoubtedly important, the session ended with blown up condoms on the floor and diaphragms left untouched in the corner.

According to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), sexual education is defined as:

A lifelong process that begins at birth... Sex education should address the biological, sociocultural, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of sexuality within the cognitive learning domain (information), the affective learning domain (feelings, values, and attitudes), and the behavioral learning domain (communication, decision-making, and other skills). ("Issues | SIECUS," 2018)

While SIECUS identifies sex education as a “lifelong process,” I will focus specifically on sexual education within high schools. Unfortunately, my high school’s curriculum is not alone in neglecting to meet SIECUS’s criteria for sexual education. I cannot count the number of times I have heard a graduate of a Jewish day school bemoan either the harmful messages they received about sex and sexuality while in high school, or the lack of sexual education altogether. Limited or minimal sexual education is not just a problem in Jewish high schools, though. More broadly, schools across the United States struggle to adequately prepare their students for healthy relationships and safe sexual behaviors. The teaching of sexual education in schools has historically been a contentious issue across the world, and especially in the United States. Public schools today are still part of an ongoing national debate about how and when to teach sexual
education, and many remain under the influence of federally-funded abstinence-only programming (Greslé-Favier, 2010).

The regulation of sexual education in the US has traditionally been left up to states, who in turn often give freedom to each school district to determine how and when to teach sexual education, if they decide to teach it at all. Despite this lack of direct regulation, the federal government plays a large role in funding sex education, which then influences what is taught in schools. As a result of campaigns led by the Christian Right created in response to the increased sexual activity of the 1960s and 1970s, federal legislation provides funding for abstinence-only sexual education in public schools. Between 2000 and 2009, Abstinence Only Until Marriage (AOUM) education received approximately $200 million a year in federal and state funding (Calterone Williams, 2011). While President Obama cut much of this funding, the Trump Administration has again begun to increase the budget for AOUM education, rebranded as “sexual risk avoidance education” (Boyer, 2018).

Although 24 states and Washington DC currently mandate sexual education in public schools, as of 2014 fewer than 50% of high schools teach all “essential components of sex education” as recommended by the CDC (“State of Sex Education in USA | Health Education in Schools,” 2018). These critical sexual education topics include healthy relationships and communication; the efficacy, importance and correct use of condoms; factors that influence sexual risk behavior and how to avoid risky behavior; HIV, STDs and pregnancy, among others (CDC, 2014). Moreover, according to the Guttmacher Institute, the numbers of high school students receiving a formal sexual education is declining; between the CDC’s 2006-2010 National Survey on Family Growth and the 2011-2013 Survey, the number of teens who received formal education about birth control, HIV/AIDS and STDs decreased, while the number
who reported only being taught how to say no to sex and not about birth control has increased (“State of Sex Education in USA | Health Education in Schools,” 2018).

This is the general picture of sex education in America: federal funding for AOUM combined with a trend towards fewer students and more limited scope. While federal funding and governmental regulation of sexual education does not directly apply to private schools, many of the abstinence-only messages as well as the general lack of formal sexual education can be found in Modern Orthodox Jewish schools as well. Although limited scholarship exists on if and how sex education is taught in religious Jewish schools, a number of articles written by alumni of Orthodox schools point to the dearth of comprehensive sexual education (Epstein, 2012; Krule, 2016). Moreover, a recent survey of North American Modern Orthodox Jews found that only 22% of parents agreed that their children’s Orthodox Day School does a good job of teaching sexual education (Trencher, 2017). Notably, within the last few years, some of these schools have made efforts to improve their sexual education, and some Jewish sexual educators have in fact put out their own curricula specifically geared toward Modern Orthodox schools (Ingall, 2015; Pollak, 2015). Still, whether due to religious values, lack of time or the absence of educators willing and able to teach sexual education, many of my peers who attended Modern Orthodox high schools came to college with limited knowledge of contraception, STDs and HIV/AIDS and consent, among other important topics. Motivated by the widespread lack of knowledge about sexuality I have observed among alumni of Modern Orthodox schools and a desire to learn more about how Jewish values are incorporated into sexual education curricula, I chose to focus my senior thesis on how students at Modern Orthodox high schools experience sexual education on a broader scale.
Currently, the scholarship that does exist on sexual education in Modern Orthodox high schools tends to focus on alumni of the schools. These articles tend to be thought pieces or blog posts that speak to individual experiences with sexual education and the ways in which sexual education did or did not accurately reflect the behaviors of students, both during high school and after graduation. For example, Sara Meirowitz, a rabbi and educator, writes a chapter in *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*, that draws attention to Jews in their twenties and thirties who observe the majority of Jewish laws, but still choose to have premarital sex (Meirowitz, 2009). Similarly, in an article in *Vice*, Jackson Krule interviews a number of alumni of Modern Orthodox schools about what their sexual education was like and how they learned about sex (Krule, 2016). When research is conducted inside Modern Orthodox schools, it usually includes some participant observation, and sometimes interviews are conducted with teachers at these schools. However, to the best of my knowledge, there are no studies that have involved talking to students at Modern Orthodox schools themselves while they are actually in high school. Therefore, this project focuses on a gap in systematic, empirical research by interviewing and surveying current high school students in two Modern Orthodox schools located in two different cities.

My research seeks to answer three questions. First, how does the content of sexual education at these Modern Orthodox high schools compare to the way sexual education is taught in public schools? Second, how do Modern Orthodox teenagers think about issues of sex and sexuality? In other words, what are their values when it comes to sexual activity, sexuality and relationships? Finally, how do the messages students receive about sex and sexuality from both their religious and secular educations align with their own beliefs and values? This project will not only delve into the complexities of Jewish attitudes towards sexuality, but will look at the
intersection between secular culture and religious values in relation to issues of sex, gender and sexuality.

This thesis will aim to show that at these two, relatively progressive Modern Orthodox schools, the content of sexual education does not actually differ that much from other abstinence-first curricula used in secular schools. However, what makes sexual education unique in Modern Orthodox schools is the attention paid by both students and teachers to the importance of Jewish values and Jewish laws when talking about sex and intimacy. This study will argue on the basis of the empirical data gathered from students that two apparently discordant phenomena seem to both be true: (a) some tension does exist between Jewish sexual ethics and high school students’ values with regard to contact, including sexual contact, with members of the opposite sex, and (b) when it comes to premarital sex, students’ behaviors largely reflect the schools’ Jewish values and religiously motivated messages. The latter phenomenon may be due in part to the schools’ attention to the Jewish approach to sexual intimacy during sex education, but it is also clear that the values are largely motivated by students’ families, friends and the social norms of the Modern Orthodox world.

As a Modern Orthodox college student with an academic interest in health policy and gender studies and a passion for reproductive and sexual health, I am drawn to the topic of sexual education for both personal and professional reasons. While I did not attend a Modern Orthodox high school myself, I come to this project with a background in Modern Orthodoxy and a commitment to the importance of religious education. I also approach this research through a health policy and gender studies academic lens and a curiosity about how current trends in sexual education policy do or do not compare to those present in religious schools. Finally, as a future healthcare professional, I see sexual education as a way to empower individuals to take control
of their own health. For me, this research represents a combination of my interests in health, gender studies and Judaism. I hope that through this research I can draw attention to the ways in which sexual education can be used to inspire Jewish high school students to make informed and thoughtful decisions about their bodies and relationships.
Sexual Education in Modern Orthodox High Schools: A Literature Review

The Modern Orthodox Approach to Sexual Education

Limited literature exists on the topic of sexual education in Jewish settings. Therefore, this review will explore what scholarship exists on the Modern Orthodox approach to sexual education, both within the context of Jewish high schools and more generally in Modern Orthodox spaces. I will explore how biblical and rabbinic texts on sexual ethics influence the modern-day teaching of sexual education, including how these texts can be used as both a motivation for and a barrier to comprehensive sexual education. I will also use the relevant literature to better understand the ways in which educators use a *halakhic* lens to teach sexual education. Finally, I will consider two types of discourse that I have identified in the relevant literature—the discourse of danger and the missing discourse of desire—and compare them to similar trends within secular sexual education.

This review will refer primarily to issues of sexuality and sex. While there is no universal definition of sexuality, the World Health Organization uses the following working definition:

> Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors (“WHO | Defining sexual health,” 2018).

I will also use the word “sex” to mean sexual activity. Like sexuality, there is no universal definition for sex, and in fact there is an even larger disagreement about what counts as sexual activity. For the sake of this project, I will define sex as anal and vaginal intercourse.
How Can Traditional Jewish Sources Inform Sex Ed?

Halakhic Support for the Teaching of Sexual Education

This thesis is not the place to present a prescriptive argument from biblical or rabbinic sources about how to teach about sex and sexuality, but it may be helpful to briefly consider some relevant sources as background. Starting from the biblical period, knowledge about one’s body is talked about and encouraged. After the infamous story of Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, the Hebrew Bible says: “Then, their [Adam and Eve’s] eyes were opened, and they realized that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (Genesis 3:7). From almost the very beginning of the foundational text of Judaism, the idea of knowledge and self-awareness of the body is connected to that of nakedness. After Eve eats the forbidden fruit, humanity is no longer innocent and unaware, but rather it is expected that we have a general understanding of ourselves as sexual beings.

The centrality of knowledge in sexual relationships is further underscored by the use of the word “to know” (la-da’at) throughout the Hebrew Bible to mean sexual intercourse. As Yocheved Debow, a scholar of sexual education and author of a sexual education curriculum used in Modern Orthodox high schools, writes about la-da’at:

This term reflects the idea that sexual relationships should emerge from a relationship in which the partners really know each other in the most profound sense of the word, on the level of the soul. Knowing of this sort usually stems from a willingness to completely reveal one’s shortcomings and weaknesses, as well as one’s aspirations and strengths. This kind of knowledge of the other can exist only in a relationship built on love and trust. Thus the Jewish view of sexuality requires that sexual relations stem from a relationship that is built on a deep level of commitment and connection, involving the heart and the mind as well as the body. It is important for us to familiarize our children with this idea, which is so different from modern, Western values that it may be difficult to comprehend. (Debow, 2012, p. 23)

In this way, Debow argues that the Hebrew Bible provides a basis for encouraging relationships that require hard work and commitment, something that is not always inherent human behavior.
or intuitive for teenagers. For this reason, writes Debow, educating Jewish youth about sexuality is important not only because Jewish sexual values often contradict those expressed on TV, but also because the sexual ethic promoted by Jewish texts requires knowledge of oneself and one’s partner in a way that sometimes necessitates instruction. This raises the question, though, of how one can expect people to develop the type of knowing relationship described above without comprehensive sexual education that teaches students about their own sexuality and bodies.

Moreover, the Hebrew Bible can also be read as requiring that one prioritize one’s own health: “Watch over yourself and take special care of your soul… And you should take great care of your souls” (Deuteronomy 4:9, 15). In other words, it is “part of an individual’s relationship with Hashem [i.e., God] to care for their bodies and take care of themselves physically and emotionally” (Debow, 2012, p. 138). Inherent in Judaism is the commandment to take care of oneself, and one way of doing this is by knowing how the body works and various risk factors that may stand in the way of maintaining one’s physical and emotional health. It is possible to conclude, then, that sexual education can go hand in hand with this commandment, especially given the evidence that the more factual information one has about his or her body, and especially about his or her sexuality, the more likely one is to make healthy decisions (Fine & McClelland, 2006, p. 312).

The rabbis of the 12th and 13th centuries deal more directly with the topic of sexual education. The prominent 12th century commentator Maimonides includes Hilkhot Issurei Biah (“The Laws of Forbidden Intercourse”) in the fifth book, Sefer Kedusha (“The Book of Holiness”), of his comprehensive code of Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah. He writes,

We do not relate the hidden matters concerning forbidden sexual conduct to three students. [The rationale is that] one will be absorbed in questioning the teacher, the other two will be debating the matter back and forth and will not be free to listen. Since a person’s mind is aroused by sexual matters, if a doubt arises concerning something he
heard, he may [in error] rule leniently. Therefore, we teach only to two. In this manner, the one listening will focus his attention and recall what he will hear from the teacher. 

(Hilkhot Issurei Bi’ah 22:17)

This passage is one of the only times that sexual education is explicitly dealt with in rabbinic texts. While one could argue that, according to the above text, sexual education should not be taught in groups, it’s also possible to extrapolate from this text that the Maimonides does advocate for teaching students about sex in some capacity. In fact, learning about sexuality is so important that having someone in the room that might provide a distraction is forbidden so as to ensure that the students are able to focus on the lessons being learned. Given the prioritization of health that consistently permeates traditional Jewish literature—and without making prescriptive claims—it seems reasonable that advocates for the teaching of sexual education might find support in the Bible and in rabbinic literature alike.

**Barriers to Teaching Sexual Education in Religious Schools**

At the same time, other sources from within the Jewish tradition emphasize the value of *tzniut* (modesty) in the context of speaking about sexuality. For example, one teaching in b. Ketubot emphasizes modesty of speech regarding sex in the context of a wedding:

Rabbi Hanan son of Rav states: Everyone knows why a bride is entering under the wedding canopy, but anyone who defiles his mouth and lets an inappropriate saying emerge from his mouth, even had his decree for seventy years of good life been stamped and sealed, it will turn around and become a decree for bad [life]. (Ketubot 8b)

Jennie Rosenfeld, co-founder of the *Tzelem* project, which aims to provide sexual education to the Modern Orthodox Jewish community, interprets this passage as follows: “The message which very clearly emerges from the Talmudic passage is that sexuality—even legitimate sexuality—is not the business of any third party” (Rosenfeld, 2008, p. 325). In other words, discussing sexuality, especially when it relates to someone specific, is not allowed. If part of
acting modestly is avoiding indecent speech, and the Talmud labels discourse surrounding sex and sexuality as “inappropriate,” it follows that teaching sexual education is not necessarily appropriate in spaces committed to following traditional Jewish law.

Moreover, more recently a concern has developed among Jewish educators that teaching students about sex encourages premarital sexual activity (Gorsetman and Sztokman, 2013), a concern that echoes a parallel concern in secular education:

Those who resist sex education or SBHCs [School-based health clinics] often present their views as based on rationality and a concern for protecting the young. For such opponents, sex education raises questions of promoting promiscuity and immorality, and of undermining family values. (Fine, 1988, p. 30)

In other words, teaching sexual education is dangerous because it introduces students to issues of sex and sexuality they may have never thought about, and therefore stimulates their sexual desire.

Multiple scholars and social scientists have disproved this argument, in fact showing that exposing students to comprehensive and factual sexual education early on actually delays sexual activity (Fine and McClelland, 2006). Despite this research, the idea that sexuality is a slippery slope and allowing people access to even a little information will promote illicit sexual encounters is still very much present in the schools. Writes Elana Sztokman of a conversation she had with one rabbi who teaches in a Modern Orthodox school,

Sex education is a ‘no no.’ The best way to curb immoral behavior is to do whatever possible to remove it from the mind. The more it is in the mind of people the more it will be explored, played with, indulged in and violated… Sex education does much more harm than good. (2013, p. 184-185)

Here, the rabbi speaks to the argument that the more information students have, the more likely they are to engage in “immoral behavior.” The solution, then, is to limit the information students are given so that students forget about sexuality and desire altogether. Despite the lack of
empirical evidence for the argument that talking about sex encourages sex, when taken alongside halakhic sources that prohibit or discourage talking about sex at all, some may conclude that Modern Orthodox schools should not teach sexual education.

How and When is Sexual Education Taught in Modern Orthodox Schools?

Given that there are traditional Jewish texts that form a basis for both supporting and opposing the teaching of sexual education, it’s important to ask how Jewish educators deal with this ambiguity. Moreover, when schools choose to teach sexual education, do they do so within a halakhic framework? If so, how do teachers navigate the tension between religious and secular values surrounding sexuality?

Modern Orthodox schools follow a dual curriculum, in which both secular studies and Judaic studies are taught. Students learn both English and Hebrew, and engage in the serious study of biblical and rabbinic texts alongside their history and math courses. These schools take pride in ensuring that Jewish values guide student life and behavior both in and out of the classroom (Krakowski, 2017). Sexual education is no exception: when schools do have some form of sexuality seminar or address sexual ethics, it is often done through a religious lens in one of two ways. Either issues of sex and sexuality come up within the context of a biblical or rabbinic literature class, which may then warrant a longer discussion of sexual ethics, or sexual education is taught during a separate class explicitly devoted to a topic relevant to Jewish sexual ethics, such as seminars on holiness or taharat hamishpaha (“family purity,” i.e., the laws surrounding menstruation) (Gorsetman & Sztokman, 2013, p. 175). Although there is no explicit biblical prohibition regarding premarital sex in Jewish law, later rabbinic authorities forbid premarital sex, mainly out of a concern for preserving the sanctity of both marriage and
intercourse (Dorff, 2003). By offering holiness and marital purity courses rather than sexual education courses, Modern Orthodox schools enable the conversation surrounding sexual activity to occur solely within the religiously sanctioned framework of marriage, allowing educators to indirectly address issues of sexuality without ever mentioning premarital sex. Importantly, these classes are often inherently gendered; for example, in some schools, certain classes, such as those on marriage and family, are offered to girls but no equivalent exists for boys (Hartman & Samet, 2007, p. 76).

The Focus on the Future

By using a halakhic approach to indirectly teach students about sex and sexuality, faculty at modern Orthodox schools can comfortably speak about these issues as only relevant to the students’ future. In this way, teachers avoid directly speaking about sex and instead opt to indirectly promote heterosexual, monogamous marriage as the ideal. Hartman and Samet write, “Surveying the sexual education landscape within these schools, we found a curriculum that is not really a curriculum; bodies that are not present bodies but future bodies, not adolescent bodies but adult bodies projected into an idyllic, rabbinically sanctioned marital future” (2007, p. 90). Students at this unnamed, religious Israeli school are not taught about how to act in the present, but instead are only viewed as future wives, husbands, mothers and fathers. In using the framework of marriage, educators are able to teach students about sex within a halakhically permissible context.

This approach, although taught through a halakhic lens, is not always positively received by students. While the teenagers at these schools want to learn how to control their sexual desire right now, they are being taught that their sexual feelings are invalid until marriage. Writes
Sztokman of one lesson she observed during a “holiness” class in a religious school, “For Orit [the educator], sex education means telling the girls to get married and have babies; for Reut [a student], the subject is my life, right now, at the age of fourteen, and my relationship with my boyfriend” (2013, p. 180). Add Hartman and Samet, “Several of our informants, in their desire to help their students think about and cope with present curiosity and dilemmas, skillfully avoided classroom discussion of overtly non-religiously sanctioned subjects, substituting present concerns with religiously sanctioned future sexuality-related topics” (2007, p. 81). According to Hartman and Samet, speaking about sex as only a future concern allows the educators to teach within halakha while still addressing issues of sex and sexuality. Whether this approach to teaching sexuality is used by teachers because they themselves believe in the immorality of speaking about sex in the present or as a strategy to evade the school’s opposition to addressing any present concerns about sexuality, the message that students should withhold any sexual desire until they are married undoubtedly creates tension for students between Jewish law and their own desire.

*Halakhic Restrictions in Contemporary Jewish Sexual Education*

Another way in which educators use *halakha* to frame conversations surrounding sexual activity is by centering the conversation around halakhic restrictions. Research suggests that Modern Orthodox schools tend to focus on teaching students the halakhic restrictions regarding sex and sexuality, rather than promoting overarching Jewish values such as health and respect. In her doctoral dissertation on the “modern sexual ethic,” Jennie Rosenfeld quotes the following verse from Psalms 34:15: “Turn away from evil and do good; seek out peace and pursue it.” Rosenfeld proceeds to comment that “in placing a tremendous emphasis on the sexual restrictions which are part of *halakha*, the Modern Orthodox community tends to overvalue the
first half of the verse; the fight to avoid evil is conducted with more vehemence than the effort to actively do good deeds” (2008, p. 19). This tendency to focus on halakhic restrictions is perhaps most evident in discussions surrounding homosexuality. Devra Lehmann presents one discussion that occurred within a Tanakh class about homosexuality. After speaking with a few teachers about the topic, she writes:

Other Jewish studies teachers spoke about the need to subjugate to Torah guidelines not only behavior, but also opinion. As one teacher told me about his students, “I think they have a hard time navigating between when they’re allowed to—it’s a bad expression, but when they’re allowed to think and when they’re not allowed to think. And ultimately, in halakha, bottom, bottom, bottom-line, we say, ‘You just do.” (2011, p. 138)

In other words, students at this specific Modern Orthodox school are not taught about how to form their own opinions, but rather instructed about how to behave according to traditional Jewish texts. Instead of stressing the ways in which the Torah teaches everyone to take care of their bodies and souls, teachers instead focus on educating students about the necessity of controlling desire and submitting oneself to Jewish law.

The pressure to focus on restriction rather than fulfillment of desire is further reinforced by the testimony of a prominent Israeli rabbi tasked with teaching sexual education to teenagers:

We do not educate towards a life of love, to fulfill their romantic selves; as their rabbis and educators all we do is talk to them about the dangers and what is forbidden. We are not willing to discuss with them what is allowed, we do not enable them to meet between the two worlds, they feel and are looking for a truth out there and we are constantly blindfolding them (Sherlow, 2003, p. 299 as quoted in Hartman & Samet, 2007, p. 72).

Although the educators may want to teach students about positive aspects of sexuality in addition to the plethora of restrictions, in this case the school itself seems to discourage or even prohibit open dialogue.
According to scholars such as Judith Plaskow and Sara Meirowitz, this overemphasis on restrictions on sexual activity has created a sense of shame and isolation for members of the Modern Orthodox community. Plaskow writes,

As things stand now, however, many Jews who try to integrate their Judaism into their daily experience don’t even make the attempt when it comes to sexuality. This means that they are left without meaningful guidance from tradition in a significant area. It also means that at least some of the large numbers of synagogue members who find themselves or their children living at odds with traditional norms feel ashamed, and/or angry, and/or isolated. They experience themselves as abandoned by institutions that ought to serve as sources of sustenance. (2000, p. 24)

Plaskow describes a phenomenon in which sexual behavior has become so restricted within Orthodoxy that it discourages members of the community from even trying to adhere to the laws and values. This sentiment is echoed by Meirowitz, who explains:

But despite these years of Jewish education that we’ve all had, there’s something very unusual in traditional Jewish communities where everyone is otherwise observant: they do not worry about these prohibitions. In communities where everyone keeps Shabbat and Kashrut, the Jewish dietary laws, twenty- and thirty-somethings sleep at their partners’ houses, consummate relationships, and move in together… People who would never think about eating vegetarian food at nonkosher restaurants have no problem breaking some of the strictest blood taboos in the Torah. What is it about laws of sexual behavior that make them seem more difficult, more outdated, than laws about carrying in public space on Shabbat or daily davening? (2009, p. 174)

Given the relative absence of literature on the topic of Jewish sexual ethics in relationship to contemporary education, it’s notable that both these women point to a sense of isolation and shame that arises from the Orthodox approach to sexual ethics. While Rosenfeld, Plaskow and Meirowitz focus their scholarship on adults rather than on high school students, the discourse, or lack thereof, surrounding sexuality within the Orthodox community certainly applies to schools as well.
Understanding Sexual Education Through Recurring Discourse: From Modern Orthodox to Public Schools

The Discourse of Danger

Given the focus on preventing any type of sexual encounter until marriage, it is unsurprising that schools often emphasize the risks, both physical and psychological, associated with sexual relationships to encourage students to stay abstinent. Hartman and Samet explain:

Several of our informants described focusing classroom discourse on the risks of premature intimacy to their future marriages—the idea not only that (1) there is nothing real or profound to be gained by such intimacy, but conversely that there is all of (2) the unique joy of lifetime purity and exclusivity to be squandered. This discourse is intended to intimate students into adherence to religious law and instill the values of delayed gratification and restraint (2007, p. 82).

At the school at which Hartman and Samet conducted research, students are being taught exclusively about risk, namely the psychological and emotional risk of ruining a future marriage, without much information about positive relationships, inside or outside of marriage. Abstinence from sexual encounters of any kind is framed as an issue of psychological safety in an attempt to discourage students from acting upon desire so as to preserve the sanctity of marriage.

While Hartman and Samet conducted their study in Israel, Sztokman’s research in the United States describes the same pattern: “From her position as all-knowing of both medicine and God, Orit gave girls the impression that disobedience and abnormality lead to death in the form of AIDS” (2013, p. 180). Unlike the teachers in Hartman and Samet’s research, who focused more on the emotional and spiritual risk of premarital sex, Orit uses the risk of physical harm to dissuade students from engaging in sexual activity. The exploitation of the very real but often avoidable risk of AIDS and the focus on abstinence rather than condoms in the face of this danger is not, however, unique to Modern Orthodox schools. In fact, using the discourse of danger to dismiss any positive aspects of sex and to scare students into abstinence fits neatly within a larger historical pattern. Writes Greslé-Favier:
The fear of disease has been central in the past decades in erasing the notion of pleasure from sex education, in an attempt to make sexuality less desirable for ‘youth’s own sake.’ Many abstinence-only programmes even derived from this the same scare tactic of displaying gruesome pictures of STD symptoms in order to scare students out of having premarital sex. However, the message sent by conservatives and the G.W. Bush administration, in particular, in the past decade, was that disease was not the only negative consequence of teenage sexual activity. Documents from the Bush White House pictured a vision of abstinence as the expected norm for youth and of the ‘promiscuous’ teen as a threat to the social, economic and moral fabric of the nation. (Greslé-Favier, 2010, p. 416)

While using biblical texts as justification for not teaching sexual education or for avoiding certain subjects may be unique to religious communities, using the discourse of danger to discourage sexual behavior exists within a larger historical and cultural context; throughout the United States multiple generations of sexual educators in both private and public, religious and secular schools have turned to scare tactics as the preferred means for teaching about sex.

In fact, any abstinence programming in the United States that receives federal funding must adhere to 8 principles listed in section 510(b) of Title V of the Social Security Act, including that the program teaches “abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems” and that “sexual activity outside marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects” (U.S. DHHS, 2003: 14). According to the critics of this approach, however, teaching this information “does not lodge sexuality education in a foundation of information and support for a healthy adult sexuality. Instead, it lodges sexuality education in fear and shame, firmly burying discussions of desire and pleasure” (Fine & McLelland, 2006, p. 306).

Discouraging premarital sex by scaring students with the consequences of sexual activity can be seen as one way in which Jewish sexual educators have navigated the tension between religious values and secular culture. Like their counterparts at public schools, faculty in Modern
Orthodox high schools may attempt to intimidate students so they will not engage in sexual activity. Unlike at public schools though, sexual educators at Jewish schools may be motivated to use the discourse of danger not because of a generic sense of the immorality of sexual activity but, more specifically and concretely, as a way to encourage compliance with halakha.

*Shomer Negiah and Premarital Sex: The Missing Discourse of Desire*

The aforementioned idea that talking about sex is a slippery slope that leads to sexual encounters is echoed in the discourse surrounding *shomer negiah* (the prohibition against touching members of the opposite sex to whom one is not related) within traditional halakhic texts, as well as in contemporary sexual education classes. This literature suggests that encouraging students to be *shomer negiah* is treated as a way to discourage premarital sex; innocent touching may or could lead to sexual intercourse, and therefore all touching is prohibited. For example, *Shemot Rabbah*, a collection of early interpretations on the book of Exodus, includes the following teaching:

> And says God: “Do not say, ‘Although I may be forbidden to be intimate with a certain woman, I can pursue her without sinning [i.e. sleeping with her], I can hug her without sinning, I can kiss her without sinning.’ For just like someone who takes the Nazarite vow prohibiting himself from drinking wine, he cannot even have fresh or dried grapes, grape mixtures, or anything else from grapes, similarly any woman who is not your wife—you cannot even touch!” (Shemot Rabbah 16:2)

According to this explanation, sexual desire is a very real part of human life and something that must be restricted. Therefore, a man is forbidden from touching a woman to whom he is not related because of the assumption that any form of touch may lead to illicit relationships. While this texts appears to speak directly to men, as do most other traditional Jewish texts, this prohibition is usually understood to refer to women as well. Notably, while the first half of the text envisions a situation in which one is already subject to desire for a particular person, the
second half—the practical lesson—extends the teaching to all (“any woman who is not your wife”), regardless of whether one feels a particular desire.

The Rambam also draws a relationship between shomer negiah, abstinence and desire.

In *Issurei Bi’ah*, Chapter 22 he writes:

Whoever shares physical intimacy with one of the *arayot* [forbidden relationships] without actually becoming involved in sexual relations or embraces and kisses [one of them] out of desire and derives pleasure from the physical contact should be lashed according to Scriptural Law. [This is derived from Leviticus 18:30, which] states: “To refrain from performing any of these abominable practices,” and [18:6 which] states: “Do not draw close to reveal nakedness.” Implied is that we are forbidden to draw close to acts that lead to revealing nakedness. A person who engages in any of the abovementioned practices is considered likely to engage in forbidden sexual relations.

It is forbidden for a person to make motions with his hands or feet or wink with his eyes to one of the *arayot*, to share mirth with her or to act frivolously with her. It is even forbidden to smell her perfume or gaze at her beauty. A person who performs any of these actions intentionally should be given stripes for rebellious conduct. A person who looks at even a small finger of a woman with the intent of deriving pleasure is considered as if he looked at her genitalia. It is even forbidden to hear the voice of a woman forbidden as an *ervah* [forbidden relationship] or to look at her hair. (*Issurei Bi’ah* 21:1-2)

While this specific case involves protecting oneself against biblically and rabbinically defined illicit relationships (*arayot*), it follows the same trajectory as *Shemot Rabbah*: touching, or even coming near a member of the opposite sex to whom one is prohibited is understood as increasing the risk that one will engage in inappropriate relations. Therefore, it is forbidden to essentially come into contact with these women. In other words, better safe than sorry.

The idea that being *shomer negiah* ensures, or at least increases the likelihood of, abstinence is not just present in rabbinic texts, but in contemporary religious classrooms. Writes Sztokman:

*Negiya* is a code word for complete abstinence—not just abstinence from sex, but from all physical contact between boys and girls. The assumptions of *negiya* are that everyone is heterosexual, and that all touching between sexes is sexual in nature. There is no such thing as casual touching; no such thing as platonic relationships; no such thing as
interactions between the sexes that are not sexually charged. Education for negiya is effectively education for complete separation of the sexes, and for the absence of all relationship between the sexes before marriage. In many cases, these messages are transmitted in coeducational settings. (2013, p. 183)

Like the classical Jewish texts before her, Sztokman points to an inherent connection in religious education between shomer negiah, abstinence and an inability to separate desire from touch; if all interactions between sexes are understood to be sexually charged, then restricting contact should also limit sexual urges. Educating for shomer negiah, then, is in effect a way for educators to ignore or avoid the issue of sexual activity; if students are all adhering to the principles of shomer negiah, there is no need to talk about healthy relationships and intimate encounters in the present. Instead, teachers and rabbis are free to focus on teaching about sexual restrictions within the confines of marriage and couched in halakhically permissible language.

Given the seeming significance of desire and an assumption that everyone, rabbis and students alike, are unable to control their sexual urges, it is noticeable that desire itself is very often left out of the conversation. This so-called “missing discourse of desire” is originally named by Michelle Fine in the title of her article, “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire” (1988). Fine describes four types of discourses that exist within sexual education in U.S. public schools, the fourth of which is the “discourse of desire.” Fine writes:

If introduced at all, [desire] is an interruption of the ongoing conversation (Snitow, Stansell, & Thompson, 1983). The naming of desire, pleasure, or sexual entitlement, particularly for females, barely exists in the formal agenda of public schooling in sexuality. When spoken, it is tagged with reminders of “consequences” -- emotional, physical, moral, reproductive, and/or financial (Freudenberg, 1987). (Fine, 1988, p. 33)

According to Fine, the role desire plays in sexual relationships is largely silenced within sexual education classes. She also argues that this conversation is inherently gendered because when
desire is acknowledged, it is used to paint women as the object, or even the victim, of male sexual aggression (Fine, 1988).

As we have seen, the assumption that men desire and women are the objects of desire is present in the Jewish tradition as well. And while Fine’s research was conducted in U.S. public schools, Sztokman’s research in Jewish schools appears to show the same pattern. Sztokman writes of one sex ed class that she observed,

Here, sex is not named; there is no female desire; women are objects of men’s unbound lust and vehicles for the purpose of motherhood; and girls are also taught to fear themselves and their bodies. The purpose of this class seems to be to restrict girls’ sexual activity rather than to teach girls about their own bodies. To meet that end, Orit alternatively constructs the woman as loved by God, and the female body as forbidden, lacking its own desire, god-determinedly different, and responsible for male morality. (2013, p. 179)

Like Fine, Sztokman draws a link between the lack of talk about desire and the objectification of female bodies.

The idea of falling victim to desire is further emphasized by Lehmann, who quotes one rabbi as telling his students during a conversation about homosexuality: “No matter what you say… we have a compassion for a person who falls—is a victim of such a—of such a desire. Yes, compassion. But not understanding that he can do it” (2001, p. 132). Homosexuality, then, like all other illicit sexual behaviors, is seen as a problem of desire. Like in Sztokman’s account, when desire is mentioned explicitly, it is in the context of the male’s inability to control it. Moreover, this burden of controlling male desire is often placed on women.

When framed through a halakhic lens, sexual education appears to aim to regulate desire. Often, as in Sztokman’s testimony, this is done by encouraging the practice of shomer negiah without actually mentioning desire as a valid human emotion. While religious and secular
schools both fail to validate, and in some cases even name desire, what separates Modern Orthodox schools is the use of halakha to justify or motivate this approach.

Conclusion

While there is limited literature on sexual education within Jewish religious contexts, of which only a subset focus on Modern Orthodox contexts in the US, the literature that does exist suggests the following conclusions. Teaching within a culture that simultaneously treats sex within marriage as sacred and encouraged, but forbids any sexual contact outside of it, educators at Modern Orthodox schools have had to find ways to make both of these messages clear to students. Through using the language of halakhic restrictions and the framework of marriage to talk about sexuality as only a future concern for students, teachers have found ways to navigate this ambiguity and still teach according to traditional Jewish law. Moreover, by using the discourse of danger and largely ignoring the discourse of desire, educators have attempted to teach students the emotional, physical and religious risks of premarital sexual activity. What differentiates sexual education in Modern Orthodox schools from that of public schools is not necessarily the messages students receive, but the way in which halakha is used to frame conversations surrounding sex and sexuality. When I turn to the voices of the students in this study, therefore, I will focus on how students at Modern Orthodox high schools view halakha as informing the messages they receive about sex and sexuality, and how these students negotiate religious values within the context of a larger secular culture.
Methodology

The process of selecting the schools for this study involved looking for Jewish high schools that explicitly define themselves as Modern Orthodox. According to Chaim Waxman, there are two types of Modern Orthodox. There are those who are “philosophically or ideologically modern,” meaning they are “meticulously observant of halakha (Jewish law) but are, nevertheless, philosophically modern.” As Waxman explains, “Within this context, being modern means, at minimum, having a positive perspective on general education and knowledge; viewing oneself, from a religious perspective, as being part of, and having responsibility for, both the larger Jewish community as well as society in general; and being positively disposed to Israel and religious Zionism.” On the other hand, there are the behaviorally Modern Orthodox, who are not “meticulously observant.” While committed to Jewish tradition, members who fit into this group “feel free to pick and choose in their observance of rituals” (Waxman, 1993). In both cases, those who identify as Modern Orthodox view themselves as both committed to and observant of Jewish tradition and laws, while also existing within a larger secular culture.

While the actual definition of Modern Orthodox may vary, both the schools I studied include in their mission statement a dedication to Torah (in context, this means the entire corpus of classical Jewish texts, including not only the Hebrew Bible but also the Babylonian Talmud and other rabbinic literature) and Jewish values alongside secular learning. On the survey, I was careful to let students self-identify with a denomination. While the majority of students identified themselves as Modern Orthodox, because the question was open-ended and just asked them to write their religious affiliation, many students simply wrote “Jewish.” Due to the vague phrasing of this question, I am unable to conclude that all students in the study identified as Modern
Orthodox. For the most part, though, students indicated in the surveys and interviews that they followed *halakha* and were observant of most Jewish laws and values.

**Methods**

In this study, I employed two main research methods. A survey was done to gain a general understanding of each school’s curriculum and to gauge students’ beliefs. The interviews that complemented the survey aimed to learn more about students’ individual experience with sexual education at their schools and to probe their beliefs. Following Driscoll, the survey was important in order “to find small amounts of information from a wider selection of people in the hopes of making a general claim” (Driscoll, 2011, p.163). The survey consisted of 22 questions, including four demographic questions (gender, grade, age and religious affiliation). The remainder of questions were mostly multiple choice, with a few open-ended questions towards the end, a format also recommended by Driscoll (2011, p. 167). The survey served to provide quantitative data describing student experiences. The survey questions were developed using existing sexual education questionnaires, and were then refined with the input of several faculty members at Brandeis University with experience in survey design and/or the study of religion.

Shulamit Reinharz writes, “Survey research typically excludes, and interview research typically includes, opportunities for clarification and discussion” (1992, p 18). Therefore, I also conducted semi-structured interviews in order to allow students space to expand on their survey responses (if they participated in the survey) and to elaborate on details of their own lived experiences. Having both the survey and interview components also allowed me to reach a larger number of students.
Interviewing has long been a key research method for feminist scholars, who have historically used interviews for social reform purposes (Reinharz, 1992, p. 12). A feminist approach to interviewing, utilized in this study, “reframes the way research is designed because it places the lives, words and stories of participants (generally women) at the foreground of the research” (Trier-Bieniek, 2012, p. 632). Reinharz adds that feminist researchers often find interviewing appealing because it “offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women” (1992, p. 19).

While I interviewed both men and women in my study, in a religion that has not always centered the voices of women, the interviews provide an important setting for young women to comment on their own beliefs and experiences. When interviewing, I tried to utilize the aforementioned approaches by focusing on the students’ experiences and tailoring the interview questions to students’ responses.

Protocol

I mainly reached out to schools at which I either already had a contact or knew someone who had a contact. While six schools originally expressed interest, due to a variety of reasons only two schools allowed me to come conduct research. The two schools are both located on the East Coast, either in or near major cities with large Jewish populations.

Before beginning my research, I submitted a protocol to the Brandeis University Committee for Protection of Human Subjects’ Institutional Review Board (IRB) to gain approval. The study was given full committee review, and approved in early October.
I initially contacted schools via email, and then had multiple follow up phone conversations with administrators, teachers and rabbis at the schools. The schools were sent all of the study materials to review before they agreed to participate in the research. I asked that only eleventh and twelfth graders participate, as those students had already undergone some sexual education in school and overall had more experience with the school. Each school selected certain classes that would participate in the survey. The schools then sent an email to all parents and guardians of students in those classes, informing them of the research and asking them to fill out an online consent form to allow their child to participate in the survey and/or interview. The consent form was created using Qualtrics, and followed an opt-in format.

Using grant money from the Brandeis University Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies program and the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, I traveled to both schools to conduct the survey in person. This was especially important for establishing rapport with students should they choose to engage in a follow-up interview, as Trier-Bieniek explains that “when combining semi-structured interviews with previous communication… individuals are more likely to eschew shyness and offer extremely perceptive points of view on social life, demonstrating what Denzin (2001) views as the opportunity for interviews to reflect the performance of the self and society” (2012, p. 631). Physically going to the school also allowed me to see the students’ learning environment as well as to maintain a higher level of confidentiality by ensuring the survey responses were always in my possession. While at the school, I was also able to speak informally with various faculty members about the sexual education curriculum, which provided me with important background knowledge and context before I talked with students.

At each school, the survey was conducted during a singular class period. At the first school, only eleventh graders participated, while at the second school both eleventh and twelfth
graders were asked to participate. Students who had parental consent to participate in the survey were emailed by school faculty prior to the survey and asked to attend a special session with me instead of their usual class. Students also had to sign their own assent form before participating. Thirty-two students participated in the survey overall, with nineteen participants from the first school and thirteen from the second school. Of these thirty-two participants, 26 were in eleventh grade and 6 were in twelfth grade. Nineteen identify as male, twelve identify as female, and one participant selected “prefer not to say.” The mean age of participants was 16.5, not including six students who did not indicate their age. All survey respondents were Jewish (for a complete breakdown of the demographics of survey respondents, see Appendix A). A combination of Qualtrics and SPSS was used to analyze the survey results, and basic descriptive statistics were used to determine the frequency of responses as well as any correlation with gender and school.

Following the completion of the survey, students were asked to sign up to participate in an interview on their own time. Seven students signed up to be interviewed. I also asked the teachers to reach out to other students who might be interested in speaking to me, which lead to two additional students signing up for interviews who had not completed the survey. Overall, I conducted nine interviews, four from the first school and five from the second school. Of these, four interviewees were male (all from school B) and five were female (one from school B, four from school A). Since I could not stay at the schools for an extended period of time, interviews were conducted over the telephone or using Zoom video conferencing software. Students were allowed to decide whether they preferred a phone or Zoom interview, which ensured students could choose the method of communication most comfortable for them. Additionally, this choice was influenced by feminist interviewing methodology, since as Trier-Bieniek suggests, “by structuring the conversation to meet the needs of each individual participant, there is the
potential to empower the participant” (2012, p. 632). Moreover, while there are differing opinions on the efficacy of telephone interviews, Trier-Bieniek argues that telephone interviews may actually yield better results, especially when the interview is about sensitive material: “interviews done over the phone yield the potential for more honest discussions because of the anonymity involved, as well as an increasing security with virtual conversation” (2012, p. 642).

While it is impossible to know which communication technology encouraged students to be more open, my own assessment is that the participants in this study gave incredibly thoughtful and honest responses to my questions.

Before students were allowed to interview, parents were asked to indicate whether they consented to let their child be interviewed and audio recorded. Students who had parental consent were then asked to assent to the interview and audio recording themselves. Three students either asked not to be recorded or had parents that opted out of audio recording, and so, upon permission from the interviewees, I took extensive notes instead. Before beginning the interview, I reminded students that they did not have to answer questions if they did not feel comfortable and that the interview could be stopped at any point. None of the students asked to skip questions or to stop the interview. On average, interviews lasted between 25 and 35 minutes. Students were given a $7 gift card to either Dunkin’ Donuts or Starbucks, depending on their preference, to thank them for their time. I transcribed the six recorded interviews, and all interviews were coded using the ATLAS.ti software. Students’ names were never collected on the survey, and they were completely de-identified from their interview responses. Throughout the entire process, I have taken the utmost care to protect the participants’ identities.
Limitations

The main limitation of this study is the sample size, as only two schools allowed me to conduct research with them, and between those two schools only 32 students had both parental consent to participate and showed up to the survey. Given the small sample size, the data cannot be taken as representing the population at each school, much less the entire population of Modern Orthodox young adults. Likewise, these two schools may not be representative of the entire set of Modern Orthodox high schools in the US. The schools that participated were ones that had some type of curriculum already in place, and were comfortable enough with their sexual education program that they allowed me to analyze student responses. However, many Modern Orthodox schools do not have a curriculum at all, and some only address topics related to sex and sexuality in Judaic studies classes. Perhaps not surprisingly, the two schools I used for my research have a reputation as being on the more progressive side of Modern Orthodox high schools, in terms of Jewish practice, gender roles, openness to non-Jewish ideas and values, and pedagogy. In that way, again, they cannot be said to represent all Modern Orthodox schools. In some cases, where there is general agreement among all students on both the survey and interview, I will suggest that this represents a larger trend at their specific schools. Overall, though, because of the small sample size and the fact that these two schools do not necessarily represent the majority of Modern Orthodox day schools, this thesis will present isolated accounts of student experiences in both of these schools. The conclusions that I draw will inevitably be illustrative and suggestive, rather than firm and generalizable.
Overview of Chapters

Chapter two will give an overview of when sexual education is taught and how it is taught in these Modern Orthodox schools. The chapter will discuss a variety of different topics that the schools either do or do not cover, and draw parallels between sexual education at Modern Orthodox schools and the content of sexual education at public schools. Chapter three will delve into the messages and values that Modern Orthodox schools are teaching their students, as well as how and in what contexts those messages are conveyed. Finally, chapter four will explore these Modern Orthodox teenagers’ actual values, beliefs and behaviors. It will discuss the ways in which students’ behaviors do or do not align with the messages the school sends, as well as how students navigate the tension between religious values and secular culture.
Chapter Two – The Structure of Sexual Education:
An Overview of the Curricula at Two Modern Orthodox High Schools

In a blog post on the Jewish Women’s Archive website, Sarah Epstein reflected on her experiences with formal sexual education: “In the years that I attended Modern Orthodox day schools, I received close to zero sex education.” She recalled that, aside from a “one period class in the sixth grade dedicated to menstruation” and a week during her senior “devoted to learning the laws of Neidah [sic],” that is, the Jewish laws regarding menstruation and sexual intimacy, she “remained in the dark about reproduction and sexual health” (Epstein, 2012). The picture—one of an almost total absence of sexual education—fits a stereotype of religious education that has been routine in the past. In many schools today, including the two studied for this project, the picture is more nuanced, with schools devoting more curricular attention to sexual education. This chapter will therefore examine the ways in which sexual education curricula at the Modern Orthodox schools in this study compare to public school sexual education. In general, both schools teach a fairly comprehensive curriculum that mirrors topics covered in public schools. However, Modern Orthodox schools also add a Jewish component to the sexual education curriculum that differentiates the messages and values students learn regarding sex and sexuality. Following this examination of the curriculum, the next chapter will address the messages that the school attempts to convey, both in formal sexual education classes and informally.

How is formal sexual education structured?

According to their own accounts, for most students at Modern Orthodox high schools, formal sexual education starts some time in middle school, where they learn about puberty and
health. Generally, though, most of the structured sexual education takes place during high school. The two high schools that participated in this research had different models of sexual education. At School A, the majority of sexual education occurs during tenth grade. The curriculum is split into two units that are offered for one semester each: one focuses on health, while the other, called “Beit Midrash” (literally “house of study,” but in this context suggesting an environment for the study of classical Jewish texts rather than a standard secular studies course), provides lessons on Jewish life and values. Students are split up into smaller sections and segregated by gender, and various staff members are tasked with teaching sex education, ranging from rabbis and secular studies teachers to grade deans. Sexual education is considered a full-credit course and meets twice a week for roughly 40 minutes for the duration of the year. The school also invites occasional speakers to talk to certain grades about specific topics.

School B provides formal sexual education about once a year throughout high school. Unlike School A, sexual education at School B is not a full credit course. Rather, the school offers a series of seminars that range from a few hours to half a day, and tend to cover a different topic every year. Respondents mainly remembered covering consent and STIs. The seminars are split up by gender, with each section taught by a physician of the same gender as the group. Aside from these sessions, School B also invites independent speakers to come into the school to talk about various topics, including consent and domestic violence. Like School A, School B will sometimes hold seminars taught by a rabbi or Jewish educator that focus specifically on Jewish life and values as they relate to sexual education.

The background of the teachers is thus the first important distinction to be drawn between these Jewish day schools and the broader landscape of public schools in America. At both of these Jewish schools, sexual educators can be teachers, religious leaders, administrators or
outside speakers (See Appendix A). In comparison, in the vast majority of high schools (78.3%), health is taught by a health education teacher or specialist, and in 59.5 percent of high schools the subject is taught by a physical education teacher, indicating that in many schools, both health educators and gym teachers are responsible for teaching sex education (CDC, 2014).

Moreover, while there is limited data on whether most sexual education in public schools is designated as a full-credit class or is taught during another course, such as biology or gym, the Guttmacher Institute estimates that in 2014, high schools that required instruction on pregnancy prevention spent an average of 4.2 hours on the topic per year, while in middle school the average time per year decreased to 2.7 hours (2017). Another study found that schools spend an average of 6.3 hours of instruction on “human sexuality,” and less than 4 hours on STDs and HIV prevention (CDC, 2014). This is contrasted with the National Health Education Standards (NHES), which recommend that students in high school receive 80 hours of sexual education per year (Demissie et al, 2015, p. 2). Taken together, this suggests that the amount of time spent on sexual education in School B and in an average public school are not so different from each other, and they are both spending significantly less time on sexual education than recommended. On the other hand, School A appears to spend more time on sexual education than most other schools, dedicating up to two hours per week to the topic. While the course only lasts one year, during tenth grade students at School A receive close to the amount of instruction recommended by the NHES guidelines.

What topics does formal sexual education cover?

In interviews and on the survey, I asked specifically whether students had learned about 11 topics related to sex or sexuality in school: sexual intercourse/abstinence, body image,
consent, contraception, gender roles, sexual preference (and specifically homosexuality), healthy relationships, reproductive anatomy (both male and female), sexual abuse and sexually transmitted diseases. Of these topics, the most commonly discussed were STDs, healthy relationships and consent. The least commonly discussed was gender roles, which will not be considered in this chapter.

Many of the topics about which I asked on the survey can be compared to the Centers for Disease Control’s guidelines for critical sexual education topics. The CDC recommends that sexual education cover the following sixteen topics: creating and sustaining healthy relationships; the influence of family, peers, media, technology and other factors on sexual risk behaviors; benefits of being sexually abstinent; efficacy of condoms; importance of using condoms consistently and correctly; importance of using both a condom and other forms of contraception for STD and pregnancy prevention; how to obtain condoms; how to correctly use a condom; communication and negotiation skills; goal-setting and decision-making; transmission of HIV and STDs; health consequences of HIV, STDs and pregnancy; influencing and supporting others to reduce sexual risk behaviors; importance of limiting the number of sexual partners; how to access valid and reliable information, products and services related to HIV, STDs, and pregnancy, and finally preventive care necessary to maintain reproductive and sexual health (CDC, 2014). Whether these topics are actually covered in public schools, though, varies significantly by school and by district.

**Reproductive Biology**

Out of the 32 students surveyed across both schools, 28 indicated that they studied female reproductive anatomy and 27 said they learned about male reproductive anatomy. Given these
high numbers, it is likely that the students that did not indicate they learned about reproductive biology either did but do not remember, were absent on the day reproductive biology was taught, or else had different teachers who covered different topics. A slightly higher percentage of men indicated that they learned about female reproductive anatomy (84.2%) as compared to women who indicated they had learned about male reproductive anatomy (75%). Of the students that indicated that they did not learn about reproductive biology, three students reported that they neither learned about male nor female anatomy, while one student indicated that he learned about male anatomy but not female anatomy. Although the majority of students learned about both male and female anatomy, interview respondents indicate that most of what they learned about reproductive anatomy was from ninth grade biology, rather than from a formal sexual education class. It is possible then, that the three students who indicated that they did not learn about reproductive anatomy were in different biology classes. Additionally, if teachers addressed reproductive anatomy in sexual education, it was during the secular education unit. Reproductive anatomy was not mentioned in any of the seminars or courses on Jewish values or Jewish sexual ethics.

Healthy Relationships

Healthy relationships is one of the most common topics addressed in sexual education, both from the religious and the secular side. Of the 32 students surveyed, 31 indicated that healthy relationships came up at some point during sex ed. One student from School B recalls that the high school spent an entire day on healthy relationships, which was considered a lot since the school only spent a few days a year on sexual education. The student explained that she learned about different signs of unhealthy relationships and about how and where to get help,
although beyond that she did not specify exactly what the school taught. At School A, the topic of healthy relationships appeared in the tenth grade sexual education curriculum. According to one student, her sex ed class covered the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, both with regard to friendships and romantic relationships. Another student added that the discussion of healthy relationships often included information about consent.

Of all the topics covered in formal sexual education, many students identified healthy relationships as one of the most relevant to their lives. Students were able to relate to and use the information on relationships from sex education, regardless of whether they were engaged in physical romantic relationships at the time. According to one student: “[Healthy relationships] applied a little more [to my life], because if you’re not having sex, that applies in general.” When asked in what ways sexual education had been relevant to his life, another student responded that learning about relationships was relevant to him when he had a girlfriend. In other words, learning about healthy relationships is both helpful and applicable to students’ present lives and does not depend on whether or not they are engaging in sexual relationships.

Studies show that sex education programs that emphasize relationships not only “pave the way for healthy intimacy,” but can “prevent or counter gender stereotyping or bias” (Tatter, 2018). A study by the Columbia University’s Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation (SHIFT), in which Barnard and Columbia students were interviewed and surveyed about their sexual education prior to college and sexual encounters during college, suggests that, “If students become more well-practiced in thinking about caring for one another, they’ll be less likely to commit — and be less vulnerable to — sexual violence, according to this new approach to sex ed. And they’ll be better prepared to engage in and support one another in relationships, romantic and otherwise, going forward” (Columbia School of Public Health, 2018). Learning about
healthy relationships, then, is not just important for kids who are currently having sex. Sharon Lamb, who pilot ed the “Sexual Ethics and Caring Curriculum” at University of Massachusetts Boston argues, “If a young person is not in a healthy relationship, they can’t negotiate sex in a meaningful way. Even if they’re not having sex yet, they’re grappling with the idea of what a healthy relationship is” (Tatter, 2018). Despite this research emphasizing the importance of discussing healthy relationships and the fact that healthy relationships is the very first topic listed on the CDC’s guidelines on what to teach in sexual education, a recent study showed that only eight states have laws requiring their sex education programs to mention healthy relationships (Brown and Shapiro, 2018). This is not to say that schools outside of these states are not teaching about healthy relationships, but it is significant that this is not a required component of sex education. Given the lack of emphasis on healthy relationships in other sexual education courses, it is especially notable that both Modern Orthodox schools prioritize healthy relationships in their sex education curricula.

**Sexually Transmitted Diseases**

In addition to healthy relationships, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS are the other most commonly discussed topics in sexual education. Again, 31 out of 32 students indicated that STDs and/or HIV/AIDS were covered in sexual education. Given the fact that only one student did not remember learning about the topic, it is possible this student was either absent when this topic was discussed, or simply checked the wrong box on the survey.

According to respondents, the majority of discussions about diseases occurred during the secular component of sex education. School A addressed STDs and HIV/AIDS during the health components of the tenth grade curriculum. School B brought in a non-religious speaker for the
tenth graders, who spent a memorable day educating students about all different types of STDs and how to protect against contracting them. For both schools, ensuring that students were knowledgeable about preventing the spread of STDs appeared to be a priority. On the students’ end, the messages were clear: only condoms can prevent STDs and from a health perspective, if you’re going to have sex, protection is crucial.

While most public school students also report learning about STDs (90%) and HIV/AIDS (86%) in school, these numbers are declining; between 2006-2010 and 2011-2013, there were significant decreases in students learning about different types of sexually transmitted diseases and STD prevention (CDC, 2012). Moreover, 76 percent of public high schools teach that abstinence is the most effective method of avoiding STDs, while only 61 percent teach about contraceptive efficacy (Guttmacher Institute, 2017). However, learning about STDs in high school is especially important given that teens and young adults have the highest rates of STDs of any age group, and nearly 21 percent of all new HIV diagnoses are for people between 13 and 24 years old (CDC, 2018). Many experts view sex education as a crucial intervention for reducing the high rates of STDs in the United States, and schools that list one of their program objectives as preventing STDs and HIV show significantly larger reductions in rates of disease (Kirby, et al, 2007, p. 210).

Although most students acknowledged the importance of learning about STDs and still remembered what they had learned, very few students actually saw the information as pertinent to their everyday lives. Because none of the students interviewed were sexually active, the idea of STDs remained abstract and irrelevant to their romantic relationships. As one student put it, “The entire time on STIs and STDs, that didn’t apply to me at all because that’s only for people that’s having protected or unprotected… like, diseases that could happen because of sex, and…
that’s not happening so that doesn’t pertain to me.” Another student added that he learned a lot about STDs and STIs in health, but that is not information that he needs to use.

Regardless of whether the information about sexually transmitted diseases is useful to students in the present, it is clear that both Modern Orthodox schools in the survey prioritize educating students about the topic. Furthermore, it is notable that during the health component of sex education, these schools teach that condoms, rather than complete abstinence, is the best method of avoiding STDs. This is especially surprising given that condoms are forbidden by Jewish law, and most students in these schools are not sexually active. It is possible, then, that the emphasis on condoms comes from an outside health educator or physician brought in to teach health from a more medical, and less religious, perspective, and does not necessarily reflect the schools’ values. Regardless of the reasoning behind why these two schools differ from many public schools in their discussions of STD prevention, the fact that the schools emphasize STD prevention is important because teaching about the topic during sexual education is the most effective ways of reducing rates of STDs and HIV.

Contraception

Of the survey respondents, 28 of 32 indicated that they had learned about contraception in school. Of these 28 students, a higher percentage of girls reported learning about contraception than boys; 11 of 12 girls indicated their sex ed class covered contraception, while 16 of 19 boys said the same. The high response rate indicates that contraception was taught in both schools. However, given that some students responded that they were not taught about contraception, it is possible that students either forgot that they learned about the topic, or contraception was
mentioned only briefly and students were absent from those discussions. It is also plausible that students were split into different sections, and some sections did not cover contraception.

Unlike the other topics discussed thus far, contraception came up in both the Jewish values and the health components of sexual education. From the secular side, as previously mentioned, students learned about the importance of condoms in preventing sexually transmitted diseases. Students did not give specifics about what they discussed in sexual education, but multiple interviewees from both schools mentioned that they were taught that contraception is “an option.” Additionally, a few respondents mentioned condoms, but it is unclear how much the students, and especially the male students, learned about female contraception.

Although contraception may not have been discussed as thoroughly as other topics in the secular part of sexual education, many students admitted that they were surprised that their school talked about contraception at all. One twelfth grade girl reported, “I wouldn’t have expected my teacher to, like, tell us that condoms are a method of birth control, especially because that is something that, like, isn’t according to halakha.” Just talking about condoms as an option contradicted what students learned about the Jewish perspective on contraception.

Students also learned about contraception, and mainly condoms, in the Jewish values component of sexual education and in Jewish Studies classes. In these settings, though, the teachers taught that from a Modern Orthodox perspective, condoms are forbidden. In fact, many students reported learning that if they chose to use contraception, they should stay away from condoms. As one student put it, “The Torah says you can’t wear condoms ‘cause you can’t waste sperm, and you have to take that very seriously, so if you’re using a contraceptive you should use something that doesn’t do that [waste sperm].” Similarly, another student reported that in addition to learning about contraception from a health perspective, “They also talk about halakha
and why we shouldn’t be [using contraception], but also that it’s an option… because there’s obvious reasons for it and the religious opinion is different from the secular world.” Students at these two Modern Orthodox schools receive two very clear, yet often contradictory messages about contraception. From a secular or health perspective, students learn that contraception is a matter of safety, and that condoms are the only way to truly protect oneself against STDs. On the other hand, from a religious perspective, students are told that condoms are forbidden because of the biblical prohibition against spilling seed, and if students are to use contraception, they should stick to female methods of birth control. However, while girls are taught about a fairly wide range of birth control options, such as the pill and IUDs, it is unclear whether boys receive this same instruction in their health class.

Despite the fact that Jewish law prohibits various forms of contraception, these two schools still teach about contraception in the secular component of sex education. However, learning about contraception is not the norm in many other schools. According to research by the Guttmacher Institute, only 55 percent of men and 60 percent of women have received any formal instruction about birth control methods. While the differences in instruction about birth control between men and women in my study may not be significant because of the small sample size, the 5-point difference between men and women across the United States is noteworthy, especially since the number of young men receiving formal education about birth control is also decreasing (Guttmacher Institute, 2017). Given that sexual education that includes comprehensive information about the full range of birth control methods has been shown to decrease rates of teenage sexual activity, teen pregnancy and rates of STDs, the fact that different genders receive different levels of information has definite implications (Ibid, 2017).
Consent

Consent is both one of the most commonly discussed issues in sexual education and one of the most frequent topics to come up unprompted during the interviews. 30 out of 32 students indicated that their school addressed consent, and five interviewees explicitly mentioned consent as a topic they remember discussing in sex education in some capacity. At School B, three out of five interview respondents mentioned a specific, memorable speaker who came in tenth grade to talk to students about consent. According to students at School A, consent was not incorporated into the official sexual education curriculum as much. Instead, students attended two grade-wide meetings about consent, one at the beginning of ninth grade and one in eleventh grade.

Although consent was mainly discussed during the secular or health component of sexual education, the speaker at School B came from an organization that deals specifically with domestic abuse in the Jewish community. The organization, which will remain anonymous to protect the identity of the schools, offers prevention services and education about domestic abuse, as well as legal and clinical support. Their high school program focuses on teaching about different forms of abuse and how to advocate for oneself in unhealthy situations.

As sexual assault and violence become increasingly recognized and publicized both on a national scale and in Jewish communities, it is not uncommon that the conversation surrounding consent, especially in sexual education, occurs within the context of violence prevention (Beres, 2014). However, as Cameron-Lewis and Allen explain, “framing consent within a deficit model (focusing on how men and women are able, or unable, to refuse sex) provides quite different skills and understandings from discussion about how people can, and do, consent to sexual relations… at the very least consent needs to be acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of positive sexual experience” (Cameron-Lewis and Allen, 2013, p. 127). These authors
acknowledge, though, that achieving this is difficult since there is limited research about the meaning of the term consent outside of abusive relationships, and it is instead assumed that there is a universal understanding of what consent is (Ibid, 2013, p. 127).

Because consent is so often taught in the context of sexual violence and abuse, it is difficult to know whether students in both Jewish schools and public schools learn about consent in the context of positive relationships. However, it is clear that, at least in these two Modern Orthodox schools, consent is considered both a critical aspect of sexual education and a part of the larger conversation on violence prevention.

Homosexuality

Within formal sexual education, students were split about whether they discussed homosexuality. 23 out of the 32 students said they discussed homosexuality or sexual preference in school, a low percentage compared to the other topics. Additionally, when homosexuality or sexual preference was included in the sexual education curriculum, the conversation was very brief. In fact, when asked on the survey what they wanted to learn more about, several students indicated that they thought the school should devote more time to LGBT-related topics. Interview respondents only talked about learning about homosexuality after specifically being asked whether they covered the topic, and most students did not remember the specifics of what they learned during sexual education. Taken together, the students’ rare memories of talking about homosexuality and the comparatively low percentage of students who said they actually learned about the topic at school indicates that homosexuality was not part of the formal sexual education curriculum. Rather, LGBT-related topics more commonly came up in informal discussions or in classes. Since students tend to have different discussions depending on which
teacher they have and which courses they take, this explains why nine students have no recollection of speaking about homosexuality at all.

While barely any students were able to describe a time when they learned about LGBT issues in formal sexual education, multiple students indicated that homosexuality came up in classes. One student explained: “[Homosexuality is] definitely a topic that is discussed in other areas of school, but not sex ed… like I’m taking AP psychology and we learn about, like, we’re learning about what’s gender, what’s transgender, what’s transsexual, and like, homosexuality comes up a lot in terms of that, and, like, getting the terms right.” Adds another student, “We’ve talked about, different classes, you know, Gemara mostly, you know sometimes in Humash, just different times we’ll talk about the halakha… like last year we started talking about it because we were talking about, like, you know, the seven Noahide laws.” Within the context of learning about various biblical or rabbinic texts that deal with sexuality, such as the Noahide laws (the seven laws that are traditionally understood in rabbinic Judaism to apply to non-Jews as well as Jews, and which include a prohibition against sexual immorality that may also refer to homosexual acts), it is not uncommon for a rabbi or teacher to address the topic of homosexuality. During gemara or chumash class, teachers sometimes use the opportunity to teach about traditional Judaism’s view on the topic or initiate a class conversation.

When teachers or rabbis teach about homosexuality in Judaic studies classes, there are two messages that students identified. First, the act of homosexual intercourse is forbidden according to the Torah. Second, homosexuality is not a choice and students should respect and open up their community to people who have different sexual orientations. Although students at both schools remember learning about the halakhic prohibition against gay sex, very few students say that any teacher or rabbi had explicitly told the class that being gay was
problematic. Instead, students recall hearing varying messages of acceptance, ranging from “people are born with it… people can’t control it” to “[the school will] support you and you’ll always have them behind you as a community.” For Modern Orthodox schools, homosexuality is a difficult and complicated issue. On the one hand, the schools are built upon adherence to traditional Jewish law, which clearly forbids homosexual acts. On the other hand, these schools also know that whether or not students are openly gay, there are students within the community that identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, and they want to prevent the shaming or alienation of gay teens and ensure that everyone feels welcome in school. While students and teachers are, for the most part, open to having these conversations, they tend to occur in classes, rather than in formal sexual education.

The absence of discussion of LGBT-related topics in health class is fairly consistent with other public schools. Homosexuality still remains an extremely contentious issues, and six states have laws requiring schools to portray homosexuality in a negative light (McNeill, 2013, p. 829). Only 12 states and Washington DC teach “positive” information about LGBTQ issues (Ibid, 2013, p. 832). Even in states where there are no specific policies on teaching about LGBT issues, many health educators still stay away from the topic.

Without specifically mentioning sexuality, though, schools often implicitly promote heteronormativity by exclusively teaching about heterosexual relationships. One of the main ways in which heteronormativity is emphasized is by focusing on marriage as an ideal. Since gay marriage is still illegal in many US states, this reinforces the message that homosexuality has no place in sexual education. Moreover, as McNeill explains, “Abstinence-only curricula anthologize and marginalize all individuals (and families) who do not conform to the marriage mandate… in some cases this is achieved through the articulation of the superiority of
heteronormative nuclear families in curricula and policy” (2013, p. 832). In other words, many abstinence-only curricula teach that sexual activity happens between a man and a woman during marriage, and that sex outside of this context has dangerous physical and psychological consequences (Greslé-Favier, 2010, p. 415). In Modern Orthodox schools, reinforcing heteronormativity often takes the form of teaching taharat hamispacha, which translates to “marital purity,” and refers to the set of Jewish laws specifically intended for married, heterosexual couples. As will be discussed later, taharat hamispacha can be discussed in the formal, Jewish values component of sexual education, as well as in Judaic studies classes. Whether done intentionally or unintentionally, sexual education often reinforces heteronormativity in public and Modern Orthodox schools.

How are Jewish topics incorporated into sexual education?

As demonstrated above, these two Modern Orthodox schools cover a fairly broad and comprehensive range of topics, and may even spend more time teaching sexual education than the average public school. Overall, the sexual education at these two schools appears to teach many of the same messages and content as other, similarly progressive public and independent schools. What differentiates Modern Orthodox day schools from secular high schools, then, is the added Jewish component, i.e., the specific Jewish values and laws students are taught. Modern Orthodox schools are unique in that sexual education is not just about biology and sexual relationships, but incorporates various religious beliefs that are central to Modern Orthodox religious observance.

As previously explained, School A has a course that meets twice a week for one semester of tenth grade called “Beit Midrash,” in which students study sex and sexuality from a Jewish
perspective. School B has various seminars and brings in speakers that specifically present Jewish values and beliefs related to sex and sexuality. Different students identified different points at which Jewish values began to become incorporated into formal sexual education, ranging from late middle school to early high school. At both schools, the Jewish component of sex ed focuses on teaching *halakhot* (Jewish laws) related to sex and sexuality. The actual content, though, varies depending on the teacher: some students study Jewish texts in class while others spend most of the time talking about their opinions and hearing their teacher’s stories.

The two most common examples of topics discussed in the Jewish component of sexual education mentioned in the survey and interviews are *shomer negiah* (“observing touch,” i.e., the prohibitions against touching members of the opposite sex to whom one is not related and not married) and *taharat hamispaha* (“family purity,” i.e., practices related to marital separation during menstruation). These topics are mainly addressed in the Beit Midrash class at School A or the Jewish values seminars in School B. However, like some of the other topics discussed above, the issues of *shomer negiah* and *taharat hamispaha* also come up in other classes or informal conversation with rabbis or teachers.

*Shomer Negiah*

The topic of *shomer negiah* came up in multiple contexts in almost every interview. While the schools’ perspectives on *shomer negiah* and the students’ responses will be discussed later in this thesis, it is worth noting that *shomer negiah* is an important component of the Jewish sexual education classes at both schools. Upon reflecting on their experience with sexual education, one student mentioned: “Jewishly, there was a lot of emphasis on *shomer negiah*” and that the main tangent during class involved talking about *shomer negiah*. Students learned about
both the religious laws regarding *shomer negiah* and why it is important to observe them, i.e., to “be *shomer negiah*.”

Aside from sexual education, the topic of *shomer negiah* also often comes up in other classes, namely *Gemara* or *Humash*, and in conversations with rabbis and teachers outside of classes. Just as in formal sex education, in most of these informal conversations students were also explicitly encouraged to be *shomer negiah*. How and when this message is conveyed will be further discussed in chapter three.

*Taharat Hamishpaha*

The second common topic addressed in the Jewish values component of sexual education is *taharat hamishpaha*. In English, this phrase directly translates to “family purity,” and encompasses rules about sexual intercourse during marriage. During interviews, a few students, mainly girls, named *taharat hamishpacha* as a key component of Jewish sexual education. Some students learned texts directly relevant to marital purity, while others engaged in more of a dialogue about the topic with their sexual education teachers. When asked whether they learned about healthy relationships in Beit Midrash, one student responded: “Not as much, we more learned… about the halakhot of, like, Jewish marriage, and what that means. So we learned about *taharat hamishpaha* a little bit.” Added another student, “We talked about marriage, and *halakhot* that apply when you’re married.” For high school girls, learning about the Jewish laws of marriage is an important component of their Jewish sexual education. Boys, however, rarely mentioned Jewish marriage, and it is unclear whether they discussed *taharat hamisphaha* in their Jewish sexual education classes. This raises the question of whether there actually was a difference in the content of the boys’ and girls’ seminars. Is it possible that male students simply
forgot learning about marital purity, while these conversations stood out more to the girls since most of the laws regard menstruation?

While it is definitely possible that there is no practical difference between the boys’ and girls’ religious values seminars, according to the survey, girls were significantly more likely than boys to report that explicit *halakhic* rulings about sex and sexuality were mentioned in their sexual education classes (11 out of 12 girls, compared to 10 out of 19 boys). This indicates that boys and girls are learning different things during the Jewish component of sexual education. Whether this is because girls learn about *taharat hamispaha* while boys don’t, though, is unclear.

Like *shomer negiah*, learning about *taharat hamispaha* did not occur solely in formal sexual education. The topic was also addressed in Judaic studies classes, and specifically in *Gemara* class, starting from about eighth grade. For example, if students were learning a text related to sex or sexuality in class, this might prompt a larger discussion on the laws of marriage and sexual purity. The topic of *shomer negiah* and the messages students receive about physical touch will be further discussed in chapter three.

While *taharat hamispaha* focuses specifically on Jewish laws surrounding marriage, dedicating units in sexual education to family life is not unique to Modern Orthodox day schools. As McNeill writes, many schools include within their curricula a section on “family life” or “family living.” In fact, in Virginia, state law explicitly frames health education as “family education” (McNeill, 2013, p. 834). In the specific curricula promoted by the Virginia government, as well as in other public schools that include family life as a topic in sexual education, the nuclear family becomes the focus and the goal. Like in *taharat hamishpcha* classes, which reinforce the importance of halakhic marriage in Judaism, public high schools also set aside time to remind students about the significance of aspiring to traditional,
heterosexual marriage. As previously noted, in both public and religious schools this rhetoric reinforces heteronormativity, and often alienates students who either identify with a different sexual orientation or do not want to get married. What differentiates taharat hamishpaha from “family life” courses in secular schools, then, is the motivation for teaching these values, which originate in Jewish texts rather than in government policy.

**Informal Sexual Education: when and where else students learn about sex and sexuality**

As might be expected, the formal sex education classes and seminars are not the only place where students get information about sex and sexuality. Aside from the 90.6 percent of survey respondents who learned about sex from teachers, 84.4 percent indicated that they learned about sex from the internet, 84.4 percent from parents and 81.3 percent from friends. A little over half of students (59.4%) learned about sex from rabbis. Only 15.6 percent said they learned about sexual relationships from experience. When broken down by gender, a higher percentage of girls have learned about sex from both friends and parents (91.7%) compared to boys (73.7% and 78.9%, respectively). On the other hand, 73.6 percent of boys had learned about sex from rabbis, as compared to 41.7 percent of girls.

In comparison, a survey of teen across America revealed that 70 percent of men and 78 percent of women have talked to their parents about sex, birth control or sexually transmitted diseases at least once. The data from these two schools is an agreement with the general trend in that girls are, on the whole, more likely than boys to talk to their parents about sexual health. Data from 2010 indicates that 19 percent of heterosexual youth and 78 percent of queer youth have used the internet to learn about sexual health, although this number has likely increased in the last nine years (Guttmacher Institute, 2017). These data show that this sample of Modern
Orthodox teenagers are more likely to talk to their parents about sex and more likely to learn about sex from the internet than the average American teenager.

Conversations in Judaic Studies Classes

As previously mentioned, one of the most common places in which topics related to sex education came up was in other school courses, namely during Judaic studies, or informal conversations with teachers and rabbis. These discussions tend to occur when students are learning something relevant to sexuality in class. For example, when laws about homosexuality are addressed in the Torah portion that the class is learning, this might prompt a larger discussion about sexuality.

For the most part, students are the ones to initiate the conversation. Students may press a teacher to expand on a topic they are already talking about, ask questions about a different topic that has not been brought up before, or try to gauge a teacher’s perspective on a certain issue. When asked about whether homosexuality was ever talked about in his classes, one student explained, “I mean, *halakhically*, it’ll be students who start the argument, really.” After being asked whether they’ve talked about contraception in his classes, another student respond, “Yeah, yeah, I’m sure we have. We’ve asked questions like—I don’t think, ‘cause these are all usually student prompted, I wouldn’t say it’s brought up by a teacher.” Adds a third student, “I’d say that the rabbis and teachers are very… like it’s clear that they’re open to having these conversations but they don’t push it and if a student takes initiative or, like mentioned it or brings it up, then the rabbis and teachers are totally fine having the conversation, but I’m not sure they would necessarily start them.” In other words, while many teachers are open to having conversations
about homosexuality, contraception, and other often divisive issues in Jewish law, it is often the students who ask these questions and start the conversation.

Depending on the teacher, though, sometimes he or she will actually be the one to start the conversation. The teacher may be motivated by conveying a specific message to the students, or else just wants to open up the floor for students to engage with difficult and sensitive issues. Two students brought up a specific incident that occurred on a school trip, in which students were being overly touchy with members of the opposite sex. The faculty responded by initiating a conversation with the students about shomer negiah and Jewish values. In this situation, the teachers on the trip used this opportunity to educate students about Jewish sexual ethics and values.

In other cases, certain topics will come up in Gemara or Tanakh class, and the teacher then starts a conversation. For example, one student specifically mentioned that her teachers prompted discussions about taharat hamishpaha when it came up in the sugya (passage of Talmud) they were learning. Another student mentioned times when sex would come up in the Talmud, and depending on the rabbi teaching the class and how he handled it, the class could become very uncomfortable. According to the students, when and how teachers and rabbis initiate conversations related to sex and sexuality largely depends on the teachers’ openness and willingness to speak about the topic.

Conversations in Science Classes

While most conversations about sex that occur in classes outside of formal sexual education happen during Judaic studies classes, some students do learn about sex and sexuality in other courses as well. As might be expected, the most common secular studies class in which
students learn about sex is Biology. A quarter of students indicated that they learned about sex or sexuality “often” in Biology and 68.8 percent said they learned about sex or sexuality “a few times” in the class. Only 6.3 percent of respondents (two students) indicated that they had never learned about sex in biology. Additionally, the majority of interview respondents said that the first time they learned about sex in school was in 9th grade Biology class. Two students, both twelfth graders, also mentioned learning about sexuality, and specifically homosexuality, in Psychology.

It is unclear the extent to which reproductive biology and sexuality is discussed in science class in public high schools. However, research suggests that in districts where abstinence only education is mandated, science teachers will occasionally find ways to incorporate sexual health, and healthy relationships and decision making into their own science curricula. Puneet Singh Gill suggests that science teachers not only use their position in the classroom to teach students important and medically accurate information about sex and sexuality that they are not receiving from AOUM education, but the information from science teachers may actually be taken more seriously because of the perceived truth and objectivity of science (2015). Science classes therefore provide a setting in which students can learn about and discuss sex and sexuality that is less regulated by federal and state guidelines. While this may be the case in areas where AOUM education is heavily stressed, there is limited research that points to a widespread phenomenon of science teachers educating about sex in their classrooms. Furthermore, while Gill’s research suggests science teachers in some public high schools are explicitly deciding to teach about healthy relationships and sexual health, at the two Modern Orthodox day schools in this study it is unclear whether teachers intend to educate students about sexuality or simply speak about reproduction when it is relevant to the larger biology unit at hand.
The Internet and Social Media

Although the majority of students indicated that they had learned about sex and sexuality from the internet, few students actually elaborated on the role the internet or social media played in their beliefs about sexual ethics. When students did talk about social media, it was typically when speaking about secular culture. Because many of the students interviewed had no or very few non-religious friends, they tended to get information about other people’s behaviors from the internet: “I think… like, media, just, like, watching TV, or anything like that, I think [sex is] much more of thing… like people know that it happens in the Jewish world compared to the non-Jewish world.” Added another student, “In terms of, like, social media stuff… there’s some stuff that’s just crazy that send total opposite messages [from the school] about just, like, even when we talk about, like, what types of language, or what to wear…” For these two students, social media may not necessarily influence their own behavior, but it does affect what they understand certain norms to be within secular culture.

Some students, though, did indicate that they and their friends had learned about sex from media or the internet. One twelfth grader explained, “I mean, everyone kind of knows what sex is, but I think, like, for a lot of people it’s like, kind of like, the types of things that you see in movies and TV shows.” This student uses television as an example of how students may think they know about sex, but because the information is from the media, it may be inaccurate. While social media and the internet may play a role in influencing students’ understanding of how other people (either non-Jewish or non-religious) engage with their sexuality, for students in Modern Orthodox high schools who are mostly not having intercourse, it is unclear how the information they learn from the internet translates into behaviors.
Friends and Parents

Like with the media, students are clear in the survey that parents and friends do play a role in teaching them about issues of sex and sexuality, however in the interview portion they rarely bring it up. A few students indicated that they have talked to their parents, but no one mentioned any specifics about what they have talked to their parents about. Some students also explained that they learned about what sex was from friends before they had ever had any formal sexual education. One student specifically mentioned learning about sex from friends at pluralistic Jewish day schools, who had more sexual education and “knew a lot more.” This phenomenon of learning about sexual health from peers is definitely not unique to Orthodox Jewish students. According to a 2009 study of 459 adolescents, the most common reported source of information about sexuality was friends (Bleakley, et al, 2009). In other words, Modern Orthodox teenagers are just like other adolescents, who often turn to their more experienced or knowledgeable friends and family for advice and information.

Chapter Conclusion

Like most teenagers, students at these two Modern Orthodox high schools learn about sex and sexuality from a variety of sources and in a variety of contexts. In many ways, the content of the sexual education programs at these two Jewish day schools cover similar, if not more topics than many other public school curricula. In other words, the curricula at these schools should at the very least be considered abstinence-first in that they speak to methods of pregnancy and STD prevention outside of abstinence, and may even be categorized as comprehensive. Unlike other adolescents though, the students in Modern Orthodox high schools have an added aspect of sexual education from a Jewish perspective. Whether it comes in the form of extra sexual
education classes or seminars that teach the subject through a Jewish lens, or conversations in Judaic studies classes or with rabbis outside of class, students at these schools gain a different perspective on sex and sexuality than many other non-religious teenagers. The following chapter of this thesis will therefore focus on the messages students are receiving about sex and sexuality from their Modern Orthodox schools specifically.
Chapter Three – Ideal Messages:
How Schools Teach Students to Behave

In many ways, what students learn in sexual education in Modern Orthodox schools is similar to the content of sexual education in secular schools. In both settings, abstinence is usually stressed, but depending on the school other topics, such as contraception and STDs, are occasionally introduced as well. What really distinguishes sexual education in these two Modern Orthodox schools from public school curricula, then, is the incorporation of Jewish values and laws. More specifically, while both private and religious private schools teach the importance of abstinence until marriage, Modern Orthodox schools are unique in their emphasis on prohibiting all physical touch.

While the primary goal of secular sexual education is to inform Modern Orthodox students about healthy relationships and safe sex, the Jewish values portion of sexual education at both schools often comes with other, more explicit messages about how students are expected to behave. Across the two schools, students identified two messages the schools try to promote. First, in both formal sexual education and informal sexual education, teachers and rabbis teach students about the ideal way to behave: namely, complete abstinence from not just sexual intercourse, but any form of touching, sexual or non-sexual, between members of the opposite sex. Second, although the schools are clear that they believe students should not be engaging in physical relationships, they also understand the diversity of beliefs and behaviors among students. Therefore, the second message that the two Modern Orthodox schools strive to convey is that of safety. While the schools may briefly touch on protecting one’s emotional safety by preventing unwanted sexual encounters, according to the students the majority of this discussion
surrounds physical safety and comfort (i.e. prevention of unintended pregnancy and transmission of diseases). In other words, in the event that students do not adhere to the ideal Jewish standards, the schools stress the importance of staying safe.

**Shomer Negiah**

In both schools, there are two behaviors that are inextricably linked and explicitly encouraged: being *shomer negiah* and abstaining from sexual intercourse until marriage. The term *shomer negiah* literally means observant of touch; however, in practice it is the prohibition against touching members of the opposite sex who are not a member of one’s family. Family is typically understood to include one’s spouse, children, parents, siblings and grandparents (Birnbaum, 2019).

The principle comes from two Bible verses which forbid “uncovering one’s nakedness.” While both verses are directed towards men, women are understood to also be bound by these laws. The first verse reads, “A man shall not draw near to any forbidden relationship” (Leviticus 18:6). The second verse is a negative commandment: “Do not come near a woman during her period of uncleanness to uncover her nakedness” (Leviticus 18:19). This prohibition refers to the period of *niddah*, which is when a woman is menstruating and therefore considered “impure.” According to the Bible, men are forbidden to have intercourse with a woman while she has her period. Only after a woman immerses herself in the ritual bath (*mikveh*) is she considered to be pure and allowed to have sex. However, since women do not typically go to the *mikveh* before they are married, unmarried women are considered to always be in an impure state, and therefore cannot be touched by men (Birnbaum, 2019).
In the biblical context, these laws refer specifically to sexual intercourse, however later rabbis extended this prohibition to any type of physical contact. Specifically, because unmarried women are considered to be in a perpetual state of impurity, the rabbis conclude that they are not only forbidden from having intercourse, but also from any physical contact with a man. According to the 12th century philosopher Maimonides, “whoever touches a woman in niddah with affection or desire, even if the act falls short of intercourse, violates a negative Torah commandment” (Sefer Hamitzvot). In another work, Maimonides writes that implied in the biblical verse about not revealing nakedness is that, “we are forbidden to draw close to acts that lead to revealing nakedness. A person who engages in any of the abovementioned practices is considered likely to engage in forbidden sexual relations” (Issurei Biah 21:1-2). In other words, according to Maimonides, the laws of negiah come directly from the Bible. Later rabbis also echo Maimonides’s logic and explain that the prohibition against physical touch is intended to prevent people from submitting to temptation and having illicit sexual relations, which would violate an even more serious commandment (Manning, 2018).

Other rabbinic authorities, such as the 13th century commentator Nahmanides, hold that the prohibition against touching members of the opposite sex is rabbinic, rather than stated directly in the Bible (Birnbaum, 2019; Abramovitz, 2019). The rabbis also have different opinions on whether the laws of negiah apply only when the contact is romantic or sexual in nature, or if the laws apply to all types of physical touching, including shaking hands and high-fiving (Manning, 2018). Today, the general understanding of shomer negiah, promoted in most Modern Orthodox communities and schools, is that the laws apply to all types of physical contact.
In today’s Modern Orthodox high schools, students are expected to be *shomer negiah*, or at the very least to refrain from touching in school or at school-sponsored events. In fact, *shomer negiah* is treated as not just a Jewish value, but a school value as well, with some students actually being disciplined for disobeying the laws of *negiah*. At the two schools that participated in this research, educators tell students outright that they should follow the laws of *shomer negiah*. Specifically, 74.2 percent of survey respondents indicated that their school encourages students to be *shomer negiah*, while only one out of thirty-two students said *shomer negiah* was never mentioned in school. When broken down by gender, girls were more likely to say that they learned about and were encouraged to follow the laws of *shomer negiah*. 58.3 percent of girls said the laws of *shomer negiah* were explicitly taught at their schools, and 83.3 percent said they were encouraged to follow the laws of *shomer negiah*, compared to 36.8 and 68.4 percent of boys, respectively. While not necessarily statistically significant given the small sample size, these results agree with already existing research that suggests that women are often given the responsibility of upholding the laws of *shomer negiah*, while men are deemed unable to control their sexual desire. In this way, women essentially become accountable for male morality, as it is their job to refrain from touching men themselves and ensure men do not touch them (Gorsetman and Sztokman, 2013, p. 179). Moreover, because the laws of *negiah* are linked to menstrual purity, the topic of *shomer negiah* appears to be discussed more often in Jewish values classes for girls than for boys.

While overall students from both schools learn about *shomer negiah*, the reasoning for following the laws of *negiah* varies somewhat between the two schools. At School A, students are told that being *shomer negiah* is not just a matter of following Jewish law and living a Jewish lifestyle, but also about protecting oneself from being placed in uncomfortable or harmful
positions. One female student mentioned hearing that shomer negiah is both “the ideal way and that’s what Judaism wants and so you should do it” and also that “you never know what the other person is thinking, and like, you’re not in their mindset so you don’t know how someone is gonna take something, and even if you think you know, you never know 100% so like, better to be cautious and avoid that.” Another girl had a similar response, adding, “I guess they tell us that… hm… I mean I guess that they tell us, they don’t really frame it in the way that high-fiving someone can lead to, like, having sex with them, but they say more about, like, everyone, like, kind of respects their own body, and it’s kind of like, you don’t want to be put in a situation, or to be… yeah I guess you don’t want to be in a situation where something could happen, and it’s kind of like a symbol of Judaism that, like, this is what we do.” Both of these students named two types of messages. First, the school tries to teach students about shomer negiah as a Jewish value and an important part of living a religious lifestyle. Second, the school promotes shomer negiah as a way to prevent oneself from being put in difficult situations. While these two girls are fairly vague about the exact content of the second message, they seem to be saying that the school promotes the idea that refraining from physical contact is essentially a safeguard against being taken advantage of sexually in a relationship.

Gorsetman and Sztokman found similar messages in the schools they observed. They write, “The motherhood-centered narrative of female sexuality is compounded by another confusing message for the girls: the woman is an object to be ‘taken’ by men with wild animal natures, who need to be contained and controlled—an idea that is ironically framed as respect and love for women” (2013, p. 179). School A did not explicitly tell these girls that men have uncontrollable desire and being shomer negiah is a way to avoid being “taken by men.” However, both the rhetoric of teaching girls to control their own bodies in order to protect
themselves from male aggression and framing this narrative in terms of respect and love for one’s body is definitely present in both my interviews and Gorsetman and Sztokman’s participant-observation.

While the discussion about the importance of following the laws of negiah is unique to these Modern Orthodox schools, the idea that physical contact can increase the risk of being emotionally or physically harmed is a common rhetoric in religious and secular schools alike. This message most often shows up in the context of preaching abstinence from sexual intercourse. For example, the department of Human and Health Services describes youth sexual activity as “a poor sexual decision,” while abstinence is “the best choice emotionally and physically for all teens” (Gresle-Favier, 2010, p. 417). School A tends to focus on the possible negative outcomes of engaging in any type of physical contact before marriage, as compared to the department of Human and Health Services, which primarily addresses abstinence from premarital vaginal intercourse. Despite this difference, it is still important to recognize that this Modern Orthodox school’s focus on the consequences of sexual activity exists within a larger context of Abstinence-Only and Abstinence-First sexual education in the United States.

Like School A, School B also emphasizes the importance of shomer negiah as a Jewish value. Students are told that following the laws of negiah is the ideal way to behave as young Jewish adults. One student explained that the school definitely discourages physical contact, and teachers often speak about preventing students from overstepping the bounds of negiah. She says, “some teachers in a small class are willing to actually talk and explain how things should be special when you have an actual relationship with your husband.” This high school student’s experience has been that being shomer negiah is not just a Jewish value, but a school value. This student saw herself as fortunate enough to have teachers who are willing to engage in serious
conversations about why being shomer negiah can actually benefit adolescents by making their future relationships more special.

Unlike School A, students at School B frequently discussed the laws of negiah as though they are school rules, much like attendance or dress code, that do not necessarily need to be explained or justified. As one student explained, “whenever there is a shabbaton or event… there’s always, like, picture taking, and they’re always like guys and girls don’t touch, like they make it specific, like there shouldn’t be any PDA, and like they say that kind of stuff, like don’t touch and stuff.” The same student that mentioned talking to teachers about the future benefits of remaining shomer negiah also added that, “it’s the opinion of the school [that] everyone should be shomer at school events.” Added a third student, “Their general idea and rule is that in school, it shouldn’t be happening, people should be shomer negiah… like obviously no one is gonna be, like, making out in the hallways, but they’re even talking about high-fiving and giving someone a hug.” In other words, more so than students at School A, students at School B get the message that being shomer negiah is a school policy and students are therefore expected to behave according to that standard while at school.

What is clear from these students’ interviews is that both schools explicitly encourage their students to be shomer negiah. While the exact content of what students are told differs between the schools, both schools tell students that ideally, they should refrain from physical contact until marriage, and there is very little discussion about the meaning or nuance of the halakha surrounding shomer negiah. Furthermore, although students at School B more often reported being told that being shomer negiah is a school rule, students at both schools understood that touching members of the opposite sex in school is prohibited. This raises the question of whether and how shomer negiah is actually enforced within the schools.
At School B, two students brought up a recent incident, in which students were reprimanded for being overly touchy on a school trip. The students recalled being talked to afterwards by the teachers, who reminded students that touching members of the opposite sex is not allowed in school and during school sponsored activities. One student also specifically mentioned a teacher telling the class that, “he was a little disturbed by the lack of, like he said, the lack of adherence to Jewish values on the trip by the students.” Aside from having a grade-wide discussion with the teachers about Jewish values and adhering to school policies regarding shomer negiah, though, neither of these students mentioned any other consequences. Although students recalled being reprimanded either individually or as a class, no one indicated that there were any repercussions beyond having a conversation with a staff member.

While students at School A rarely reported that the laws of negiah were treated as explicit school rules, they were just as likely as students at School B to mention being called out for touching members of the opposite sex in school. As one girl explains, “I know in certain situations, if they see a boy and girl hugging, they’ll say something, or even if a boy has his arm around a girl they’ll definitely say something.” Like at School B, shomer negiah extends to any type of physical contact, including just high fiving or having one’s arm around someone else. In other words, although not being shomer negiah in school may not have many consequences, students are all aware that they are expected to refrain from all physical contact with members of the opposite gender and may be reprimanded by teachers if they disobey this policy.

Through formal sexual education and Judaic studies classes, in which students are taught about the halakha surrounding shomer negiah, and in informal conversations with teachers who either explicitly or implicitly encourage shomer negiah, students at both Modern Orthodox schools are clearly told that they should be completely shomer negiah. At the very least, students
understand that adhering to the laws of shomer negiah is school policy. However, while students all understand that the school’s goal is for everyone to be shomer negiah, both the school administration and students know that abstaining from all physical contact with members of the opposite sex is not a reality for everyone. Therefore, individual teachers also send alternate messages to students. Often, these messages center around acknowledging that even though students may not be one hundred percent shomer negiah in all circumstances, one can still refrain from certain types of contact. For example, one student reflected,

I think we would learn [about shomer negiah] in more of a discussion way, which was helpful, and in a way that was like okay, maybe you’ll be 100% shomer negiah, or whatever it is, but maybe you won’t. And if you won’t, it’s not an all or nothing per say, like it could be certain things. Like just because you’re, like, giving someone a high-five doesn’t mean, like, oh you’re not shomer you should go, like, hug them and whatever. Like you can take it to different levels and, like, how to balance things out without always having to be one hundred or zero.

According to this respondent, being shomer negiah may be the school’s ideal, but is it not necessarily realistic. Therefore, it is important to talk about boundaries outside of either being completely shomer negiah or consistently engaging in sexual activity. For this eleventh grader, these discussions about the nuance of shomer negiah seemed to make more of an impression than simply being told how to behave in accordance with halakha.

**Sexual Intercourse**

While the messages of shomer negiah and abstaining from sex are different, they are often linked in both religious texts and Jewish education. Gorsetman and Sztokman explain, “Negiya is a code word for complete abstinence—not just abstinence from sex, but from all physical contact between boys and girls… Education for negiya is effectively education for complete separation of the sexes, and for the absence of all relationship between the sexes before
marriage. In many cases, these messages are transmitted in coeducational settings” (Gorsetman and Sztokman, 2013, p. 183). In other words, educating students about the importance of remaining shomer negiah also sends the message that they must be abstinent from sexual activity. The explicit message that students should not engage in premarital sex, on the other hand, does not necessarily imply that students must be shomer negiah as well. Therefore, in this thesis, the messages students get about shomer negiah and sexual activity will be addressed separately.

Like with shomer negiah, the two schools firmly teach students to abstain from sexual intercourse, but also teach the importance of safety if the students decide not to be abstinent. More so than with shomer negiah, the schools emphasize that Judaism allows for one, ideal behavior, and the expectation is that students will follow that path; while the schools acknowledge that many students do not follow the laws of shomer negiah, there is a general assumption of abstinence among both faculty and students. The messages about safety are thus framed in terms of future decisions that students may make when they are in college, or even later, rather than acknowledging that high school students might be having sex.

**What Does Jewish Tradition Have to Say?**

Premarital sex is not directly prohibited by the Bible. Why, then, does Modern Orthodoxy view sex outside of marriage so negatively? First, for the same reason that physical touch is prohibited (i.e. because of a rabbinic interpretation of the biblical prohibition against uncovering an impure women’s nakedness), premarital sex is also forbidden in Jewish law. If the previously cited verse in Leviticus that forbids men from coming near women when they are impure can be interpreted as prohibiting any type of physical contact, all the more so can it be taken to mean
that intercourse with any woman who is not married is prohibited, since unmarried Modern
Orthodox women do not immerse themselves in the ritual bath, and therefore are never pure.

While some rabbis believe this prohibition is biblical, others understand it to be rabbinic (My
Jewish Learning, 2019). This distinction is important because biblical laws are usually
considered to be more serious and have stricter consequences than certain rabbinic laws.

Another possible reason why premarital sex is so widely disapproved of in Modern
Orthodox circles is because of the emphasis in Judaism on the sanctity of marriage and the
holiness of sex. Because the very first commandment in the Bible is to procreate (Genesis 1:28),
sexual intercourse for the purpose of having children is treated with the utmost significance.
Therefore, sex outside of marriage, which is usually not done for the purpose of procreation, is
discouraged. In the context of marriage, though, sex is understood to be positive, important and
holy. In the work The Holy Letter, written in the 12th century and commonly attributed to the
renowned commentator Nachmanides, the author writes:

No one should think that sexual intercourse is ugly and loathsome, God forbid! Proper
sexual intercourse is called ‘knowing’ (Genesis 4:1) for good reason. As it is said, ‘And
Elkanah knew his wife Hannah’ (I Samuel 1:19). The secret reason for this is that when
the drop of semen is drawn in holiness and purity, it comes from the source of wisdom
and understanding which is the brain. Understand, therefore, that unless it involved
matters of great holiness, sexual union would not be called knowing.

Within Judaism, sexual intercourse, when done during marriage for the purpose of procreation, is
one of the most sanctified acts. According to Jewish tradition, though, when one has sex outside
of this context, the action loses much of its meaning and holiness.

Today, Rabbi Elliot Dorff also brings in the consideration of safety when it comes to
premarital sex, especially for teenagers. He is a strong advocate of abstinence for teenagers, but
not necessarily for religious reasons. Rather, he believes, “even more than single adults, though,
teenagers need to refrain from sexual intercourse, for they cannot honestly deal with its
implications—such as the commitments and responsibilities that sexual relationships normally imply for both partners, including, especially the possibility of children and the risk of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases” (2003, p. 119). While Rabbi Dorff acknowledges that there are situations in which adults are engaging in premarital sex, the possible consequences are significant enough that all teenagers should be discouraged from having sex.

The Ideal Message – Premarital Sex

At both schools, what students are told about premarital sex can be categorized into two messages. First, that Jewish law forbids premarital sex. Second, that having sexual intercourse for the purpose of procreation is a mitzvah (a biblical commandment) and therefore the act itself is holy. While the content of what students learn may differ slightly between schools, classes and genders, the take home message is clear: do not have premarital sex. This is reflected in both the survey and interview responses. Among the survey respondents, three quarters of students said they were taught that sex is a mitzvah and therefore should only occur between married couples. Moreover, 26 out of 32 students said they were taught that abstinence before marriage is the ideal, but if you do chose to have sex it should be safe (See Appendix A).

In interviews, students also identified an abstinence focused message. Across both schools, students were clear that their school did not believe students should be having sex. However, unlike in many existing abstinence-only and abstinence-plus curricula in which students are taught about the mental, physical and emotional dangers of intercourse, including future relationship instability, acquiring STDs or becoming pregnant and dropping out of school (Greslé-Favier, 2010), these two Modern Orthodox schools are clear that students should not engage in premarital sex for religious reasons. Students are taught that sexual intercourse is a
mitzvah and is reserved for marriage. While sex is positive and holy when it occurs at the right time and the right place, outside of marriage it loses this significance.

One of the most common ways in which abstinence from premarital sex is emphasized is by teaching students that according to Jewish tradition and values, sexual intercourse should only occur during marriage. Students recalled hearing messages such as “wait until marriage,” and “you shouldn’t be having sex before marriage.” While it is clear to all students that the ideal is to wait until marriage, sex is not necessarily framed as negative. Rather, the schools teach that under the right set of circumstances, sexual intercourse is good and healthy. One student recalls being taught that, “Judaism views sex as positive, but only at the right time, right place, and with the right people.” Adds another respondent, “It’s not viewed as something that is bad, it’s viewed as something that is good once you’re married. It’s healthy once you’re married. Pre-marriage it should not be practiced.” At these two Modern Orthodox schools, students are not necessarily always directly told to be abstinent. Rather, they are told that when they do have sex, it should be during marriage.

Both schools also discourage premarital sex by teaching that sexual intercourse is a mitzvah and therefore is a good, and even holy behavior when intended for the purpose of reproduction. When asked what his school taught about sexual intercourse, another student responded without a second thought: “premarital sex is forbidden… premarital sex is a no, it’s a mitzvah, like d’orayta [from the Bible], it’s a mitzvah to reproduce, obviously, so that’s been taught.” Moreover, two of the students quoted above also remembered being taught that sex “is a holy thing, it’s a spiritual thing” and that, “marriage is, like a holy thing.” The idea that sex is holy, an understanding that comes from the fact that procreation is a mitzvah [biblical commandment] and that Jewish law emphasizes the sanctity of marriage, is present throughout
student responses. Although sexual intercourse is actively discouraged at both schools, the conversation is often framed in terms of the merits of waiting, rather than the consequences of teenage sexual activity. In this way, the emphasis on abstinence is very much motivated by and taught through a Jewish lens.

The Focus on the Future

One approach to framing the act of sexual intercourse that has been documented across religious schools is the focus on the future. In order to either get around talking about sex outside of a halakhic context or to avoid talking about sex at all, many teachers in Modern Orthodox high schools take the approach of treating sex as a future concern for students, rather than one that is relevant to their current lives. At the two high schools surveyed, this approach took two forms. The first way educators focused on the future was by talking about sex solely within the confines of marriage. As previously discussed, students described hearing the message that they should wait to have sex until marriage. Moreover, when sex was discussed in classes outside of sex ed, it was most often in the context of a halakhic discussion on marital purity laws, which only reinforced the schools’ emphasis on sex as reserved for marriage. Since none of the high school students were close to getting married, by definition this meant that the students would not be having sex for at least the next few years. In other words, students were taught that sex was a future concern, not a present concern.

The second approach to teach sex as a future behavior was to teach students to wait as long as possible before engaging in sexual activity. One student explained that the message she got from her teachers is that “sex is post-high school.” A second student echoed this experience, mentioning that when they learned about intercourse in sex ed, it was “just about
having that [information] in the future.” Added another interviewee, “they spread the message very clearly that, like, [sex] is a great thing, but, like, wait, and ideally until you’re married, but if not then as close to then as possible.” While marriage may or may not have been directly mentioned, these two students were taught either explicitly or implicitly that sex should not be a present concern. Instead, the purpose of sexual education was to teach students to be prepared for the future and to spread the message that sex should be pushed off for as long as possible.

While these schools take the approach of encouraging students to push off intercourse for as long as possible, and ideally until marriage, they do not seem to explicitly push marriage. For many other Modern Orthodox schools, though, this is not the case. Write Gorsetman and Sztokman of one lesson they observed during a class on taharat hamishpacha in a different religious day school, “For Orit [the educator], sex education means telling the girls to get married and have babies; for Reut [a student], the subject is my life, right now, at the age of fourteen, and my relationship with my boyfriend” (Sztokman and Gorsetman, 2013, p. 180). None of the respondents in my research mentioned teachers explicitly encouraging them to get married and have kids. However, students at the Modern Orthodox schools in my research still receive some similar messages as Reut, including that sex occurs in the future, and, ideally for the purpose of procreation. What differs between Reut’s experience and the experiences of student’s in this research, though, is that at both of these Modern Orthodox day schools, there is some recognition that not all students will be abstinent after high school and before marriage.

Hartman and Samet, who also researched sexual education in religious, Jewish schools, argue that the purpose of teaching about sex as solely a future concern is not just about educating students about how they should be behaving. Rather, using the rhetoric of marriage or the future allows educators to teach about sex within a religiously sanctified context (Hartman and Samet,
In other words, while the schools teach Jewish sexual ethics assuming that that students will only need this knowledge in the future, the students are still able to learn about the *halakhic* perspective on sex in case they are engaging in sexual relationships right now.

It is unclear whether the schools use the rhetoric of the future in order to avoid the conversation about sex outside of marriage, or because the teachers believed that *halakhically*, it is best to wait as long as possible to engage in intercourse. Although it is clear that both Jewish law and the faculty at these Modern Orthodox high schools maintain that premarital sex is forbidden, one has to wonder whether there is religious basis for waiting to have sex for as long as possible, even if the onset of sexual activity is still before marriage. Or, are teachers pushing students to hold off in the hopes that if they push off sexual intercourse for long enough, they will end up getting married first? This study does not provide an answer to this question, but it may be worth looking into in future analyses of sexual education curricula in Modern Orthodox schools.

**Assumption of Abstinence**

The tendency of Modern Orthodox schools to focus on the future when talking about sexual activity goes hand in hand with the widespread assumption of abstinence among the student body. Research participants from both schools noted that their schools assumed that none of the students were having, or had previously had, sexual intercourse. Not only that, but students suggested that their schools rarely considered that any of the students would have premarital sex at any point in the future, whether in high school or beyond: “I think that the school doesn’t think much about that any students would have sex before marriage, and therefore it’s really just a given. I don’t think they really discuss their view on that since it’s a universal
view.” Adds another student, “Like, our teachers are, like, they know most of us, and they don’t think most of us are going to be having sex until marriage, and so because of that they take a much firmer stance, and they really believe that none of us should be having sex before marriage.” While these two students agree that their schools assume students are abstinent until marriage, they disagree about whether this means that the school does or does not express explicit messages about ideal sexual behavior. In the first student’s experience, the supposed fact that students are not sexually active means that it is not necessary to teach students about the importance of abstinence. On the other hand, the second student explains that it is precisely because students are understood to be abstinent that teachers feel comfortable taking a direct stance on the matter.

The first student quoted above is not the only one to bring up the idea of abstinence as a “universal view” in Judaism. Another student also explained that:

For me, and I would say the overwhelming majority of my school, there is an assumption of the way things happen in Judaism, and whether or not people have different interpretations of that, it’s kind of like, it doesn’t need to be said or forced, because it’s a known assumption, and I would say most people respect that. So I don’t think a message is trying to get across… we’re just trying to be taught information.

The student adds that “[the school is] going along with the assumption that most people in the school will abstain from sex before marriage.” This student brings up a number of important points that echo previous students’ responses. First, she appears to agree that in Judaism, there is one, universal opinion on sex, which is that people should abstain from sexual intercourse until marriage. This opinion is not only promoted by the school’s faculty, but agreed upon by most students as well. Second, this student also suggests that because it is assumed that all students understand that they should refrain from premarital sex, the school rarely explicitly tells student
to be abstinent. Rather, they teach students information that is supposed to be relevant only to the students’ futures.

For all three of these students, the idea that students are not having sex appears to be less of an idealized assumption made by school administration, and more of an actual understanding that reflects who the students are and what they have grown up believing. While this small subset of students seems to believe that their school’s assumption of abstinence is rooted in an accurate understanding of student behavior, whether this assumption is necessarily true for all students at these Modern Orthodox high schools will be discussed further in chapter four. Additionally, while the issues of assault and violence are largely beyond the scope of this thesis, it is also worth noting the possible emotional consequences that the assumption of abstinence can have on students who may be survivors of sexual assault.

The Discourse of Danger

Another common rhetoric that often comes up in both secular and religious sexual education curricula is the discourse of danger. Often, in order to discourage students from engaging in sexual activity, schools will overemphasize the potential risks and consequences of sex. These include both emotional consequences, such as being emotionally abused by a partner, and the physical consequences, including pregnancy and STDs. Perhaps surprisingly, this discourse of danger is largely absent from the Modern Orthodox students’ narratives. While many students reported learning about STDs extensively during sex ed, most say that these sessions were intended to be informational, rather than designed to scare them away from having sex. However, a few students did leave these lessons thinking about the risks inherent in intercourse. When asked about how sex ed has been relevant to his life, one student responded
that, “I’d say definitely that there is, like you know there are risks to thinks, and things can be transmitted orally, and that kind of stuff.” While it is unclear whether this student actually changed his behavior because of these lessons, it appears that his main takeaway from sexual education was about the risks associated with certain sexual actions.

Another student also reflected on how she was taught about premarital sex, saying, “Like obviously they say, like, okay it’s better to wait in terms of being safe, and it’s better to not have sex before you get married—like to not have sex as seventeen year olds ‘cause then you could end up with, like, an STD or a baby or something like that.” Like the student above, this student reported that she was mainly taught that premarital sex is dangerous because of the physical consequences – STDs or pregnancy. While some other students did mention potential social or emotional consequences, such as rumors being spread or the guilt associated with going against Jewish law, these fears appeared to originate from the social norms of Jewish day schools, and will therefore be discussed later on.

From where do students receive these messages?

Thus far, this chapter has grouped together all the messages students report receiving from their teachers, rabbis and administration, without differentiating between where and when students hear them. Therefore, I will briefly discuss the various situations in which students are told either explicitly or implicitly that they should not be having sex until marriage.

First, it’s important to note that while students definitely learn about sex during the secular, or health component, of their sexual education, most students specified that these seminars were usually informational. The school faculty and outside speakers who taught students about health were supposed to, and usually did, provide students with information about
healthy relationships, contraception, and many other topics, without sharing their own opinions and beliefs. Therefore, students did not receive specific messages from these lessons outside of the importance of keeping their bodies safe and healthy.

Given that the secular component was more facts-based and that the messages students received about sex were often framed in terms of religious law and tradition, it is unsurprising that many of these messages came directly from the Jewish values portion of sexual education. One student explains that during Beit Midrash (the Jewish component of sex education), “we learned that, like, you should not have sex. And then afterwards, during health, okay well, if you’re going to…” While not all students had teachers during Beit Midrash or Jewish values seminars that told them explicitly not to have sex, because many of the classes involved learning traditional texts focused on the sanctity of marriage and purity, all students understood that the Jewish perspective clearly prohibits premarital sex.

Finally, students received explicit messages about sexual activity from their teachers, often during Judaic studies classes. While students did not explain exactly how sex came up in their classes, multiple students did mention that they had teachers who were willing to talk about sex or sexuality in class. Usually, these discussions involved the teacher telling students not to have sex. While the messages were often direct, students appreciated having teachers who were willing to have discussions or expand on the reasoning behind prohibiting premarital sexual activity. Explains one student about talking about sex during class,

It was not by many. It was definitely by like, two or three maximum, and, like, we would be talking about something and it would get off topic, or it would be, like… a day [designated for] a serious conversation. [For example] we would talk about how you shouldn’t be having sex before marriage, because marriage is, like, a holy thing, or like, you should only have children… like having children is a real thing and it’s not like you should just do it for fun, like it’s against Torah. But that is one specific case, because I had one really good teacher who would talk about this. I think that’s the only teacher I’ve ever had that has taken time to, like, really discuss it. And I think that was very, very
valuable for the students, and for the kids that don’t have it, I really think it’s not being discussed—kids who don’t have that teacher, I think it’s not being discussed from a halakhic, Judaic, or, like, from a teacher’s perspective.

For this student, the experience of talking about sex during class was both valuable and unique. He implied that for many students, teachers are not necessarily willing to talk about these issues, and therefore they don’t gain the same perspective on why Jewish law prohibits certain sexual activity.

While all the students in the research remember learning about sex in some capacity in health, religious sex ed or classes (either Judaic studies or science class), other students agree with the student quoted above that in general, there are very few discussions about sex and sexuality in school. While students are told that they shouldn’t be having sex or that marriage is sacred, there are few opportunities to actually hear from teachers about the basis for these Jewish laws and traditions. Says one student, “I think that in [my school], and in a Modern Orthodox community in general, sex is thought of as something a lot more sacred, and not taboo, but, like, you don’t speak about it so much.” Adds another student, “Right now [premarital sex] is not talked about at all except to say ‘no, don’t do it.’” According to these three interviewees, the students at Modern Orthodox schools are clear on the school’s and their teachers’ belief that they should be abstinent until marriage. However, what not all students are getting, but wish they were, is a more nuanced discussion about the values and reasoning behind this prohibition.

If you do have sex, be safe: an alternative message about premarital sex

Although schools ideally want their students to not only be abstinent, but to refrain from touching members of the opposite sex, they also recognize the importance of safety. Aside from discouraging premarital sexual activity, students also identified the schools’ message that if
students are choosing to engage in sexual relationships or are put in situations where they engage in sexual relationships, their number one concern should be safety. While this idea was mentioned by students at both schools, School A appeared to preach this message more firmly and consistently than School B. When asked what her school’s perspective on premarital sex was, one student from School A answered: “Probably, that like, first, like, you shouldn’t. And then, if you’re going to, how to be safe.” Though the student starts with abstinence, it is noticeable that she includes the message about safety in the same sentence. In other words, while this student understood that her school’s priority is abstinence, she also understood the school’s commitment to keeping students safe even if they make different decisions. Another student from School A described the message about sex as: “Whenever the time comes, whether it’s now or later, but whatever you’re going through, like whenever it happens, this is what to do, and this is what not to do, and this is how to be safe and whatever.” Again, this student talks in terms of safety, with an understanding that pushing sex off is ideal, but should a student decide to act otherwise, the most important thing is one’s own health.

Other students talked about the school’s emphasis on safety as an attempt to be realistic about what students are actually doing. As one student described:

This year we talked a little in Beit Midrash about sex and drugs and our teacher was very clear that, like… it’s not just gonna be like, no don’t do it, because that’s not realistic and they know that, like, kids aren’t just gonna be like oh they said no and that’s the rule we’re not gonna do any of those things, so even if you’re gonna do something like that before ideally you should, then their goal is to push it off so that, just, even so that you know more about what you’re doing before you’re doing it and you’re more aware of the consequences and the possible outcomes.

Another student stated something similar, reflecting that “I think that people… the people who teach it are very smart and realistic people who know that, like, this is stuff that teenagers are going to be doing, so they don’t teach it to you in like… they don’t preach abstinence, they just
preach safety, and, like health.” For these two students, both from School A, the school hopes, and often assumes that their students are refraining from sexual activity. However, they know that not everyone will be abstinent, especially after they leave high school. Therefore, School A teach students not just to be safe, but how to be safe.

Students at School B, though, were less likely to articulate this message of safety. In fact, according to the survey, 18 out of 19 students at School A said they learned that marriage is the ideal, but if they choose to have sex it should be safe, while only 8 of 13 students at School B indicated the same, a statistically significant difference (see Appendix A). However, though School B may not have been as clear about prioritizing safety, the fact that they do dedicate time to teaching students about STDs, birth control and consent do indicate that at least at some level, the administration believes in the importance of educating about health.

Conclusion

The dichotomy between ideal and realistic messages is evident throughout the interviews and survey responses. While some students, mainly from School B, seem to only be getting the “ideal” message (i.e. don’t have sex), other students are told both that ideally, they shouldn’t be having sex, but realistically, if they do, they need to prioritize their safety. Between schools, and even within schools, though, the messages an individual student receives is largely dependent on their teachers for sexual education and for Judaic studies classes, where most of these issues are discussed. In fact, much of the contradiction between students’ narratives regarding whether or not the schools assume their students are abstinent or recognize that students may be engaging in some sexual activity come down to which faculty member students are talking to while at school. Moreover, while the schools may assume that students are abstinent in high school, some of the
messages deemed more “realistic” by students actually are intended by the schools to not be relevant until the future, and at least until after high school graduation. In other words, the assumption of abstinence and the “realistic” approach may not actually be contradictory. Rather, both schools assume students are currently abstinent, but know that students might make other choices in college, and therefore try to impress upon them the importance of safety for future knowledge.

While abstinence is clearly stressed at these Modern Orthodox schools, the sex education curricula they use are not necessarily abstinence-only. According to the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, which defined abstinence-only curricula in order to provide schools who taught them with federal funding, an abstinence-only curriculum must abide by the following six rules:

A. Has as its exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity;
B. Teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-age children;
C. Teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems;
D. Teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity;
E. Teaches that sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects;
F. Teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society;
G. Teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increase vulnerability to sexual advances; and
H. Teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity. (US Social Security Act, §510(b)(2))

While both Modern Orthodox schools follow some of these guidelines, namely teaching abstinence and mutually faithful monogamous relationships as the expected standard, these two schools do not stress the risks and consequences of premarital intercourse, both psychological and physical, nearly as much as truly abstinence-only curricula do. In many ways, then, the
sexual education at these Modern Orthodox schools can be considered abstinence-first; According to Greslé-Favier, “this means that, in the cases where information on contraception and condoms was provided, abstinence was still promoted as the best choice for teens for their physical – and also emotional – health” (2010, p. 417). Greslé-Favier continues by explaining that there is increasing cultural support in the United States for curricula that, “while not promoting abstinence only, privilege abstinence as the most desirable behavior and thus fail to or avoid underlining the pleasurable dimension of sexuality and the legitimacy young people have in seeking it” (Ibid, p. 414). While abstinence is still encouraged as ideal behavior, the main difference between abstinence-first and abstinence-only curricula is that abstinence-first also teach students about other methods of birth control and pregnancy prevention.

While abstinence only education primarily teaches student to avoid sexual behaviors, it has actually been shown not to have significant effects on preventing sexual activity and teenage pregnancy. On the other hand, when students are taught about various forms of birth control, they are more likely to delay first vaginal intercourse and use some form of contraception during intercourse, and less likely to get pregnant or get an STI (Lindberg and Maddow-Zimet, 2012).

While there are no empirical studies that speak to the efficacy of sexual education in Modern Orthodox day schools, given the research on the role abstinence-first and comprehensive sexual education plays in decreasing teen pregnancy and delaying sexual activity, teaching a wider range of sexual education topics can only have positive effects on teenage relationships.
Chapter Four – Student Beliefs and Behaviors: Negotiating Religious Values and Social Norms

Both schools emphasize the values of shomer negiah and abstinence to their students. They also expect students to be shomer negiah and assume that students are not engaging in premarital sex, at least during high school. However, do the schools’ values and messages accurately reflect the behaviors of students? Are students shomer negiah? And do they abstain from sexual intercourse before marriage? This chapter will explore the behaviors and values of high school students in Modern Orthodox high schools, as well as these students’ perceptions of how their behaviors and values fit into a larger secular education and culture. Both the survey results and interviews showed that while most students are not shomer negiah, most also abstain from sexual intercourse, and view premarital sex as an absolute boundary they will never cross. I will argue that unlike in public schools, where receiving abstinence-only or abstinence-first education does not predict whether students will engage in premarital sex, at these Modern Orthodox schools, education for abstinence accurately reflects students’ choices. I suggest that this is because for Modern Orthodox adolescents, the decision to wait for marriage is not just a physical decision, but a way of life supported by peers, the community and Jewish law.

Shomer Negiah

As was discussed in the previous chapter, both schools explicitly encourage students to be shomer negiah, and may even call students out for not following the laws. While the schools clearly value shomer negiah and want to teach students about the importance of refraining from physical contact with members of the opposite sex, in reality, very few students at these Modern
Orthodox schools actually consider themselves or their friends to be *shomer negiah*. In other words, the schools’ values and teachers’ beliefs do not align with the students’ reality.

Among the 32 students surveyed across both schools, 21 students said less than half of their friends are *shomer negiah*, and ten students said that none of their friends are *shomer negiah*, with one student declining to answer. Students were also asked about their personal beliefs about *shomer negiah*. The most common response, selected by 13 students, was “I do not agree with the laws of *shomer negiah*.” The second most common response, selected by 11 students, was, “I do not believe people should have sexual intercourse before marriage, but other types of contact are okay.” There was one student that selected both answers, meaning that overall, 23 of the 32 students either disagreed with *shomer negiah* altogether, or believed that the majority of physical contact is acceptable before marriage. Of the remaining students, 6 indicated that *shomer negiah* is important and should be observed by all Modern Orthodox Jews, one student said being *shomer negiah* is important to him, but understands it is not the right choice for everyone, and one student said physical contact is alright as long as it happens in private. One student declined to answer (See Appendix A).

When broken down by gender, boys were more likely to say that they think everyone should be *shomer negiah* (six boys compared to no girls), while girls were more likely to indicate that other types of contact other than sex are acceptable (66.7% of girls compared to 15.8% of boys). This is especially notable given that girls were more likely to indicate explicitly learning *halakha* in sex education than boys. However, the number of students who indicated that less than half or none of their friends were *shomer negiah* did not differ significantly by gender. Additionally, relatively equal amounts of girls and boys said they disagreed with the laws of *shomer negiah* (36.8% of boys and 41.7% of girls). It is unclear exactly why these differences
exist between girls and boys, and the interviews did not clarify (See Appendix A). However, this significant disparity between girls’ and boys’ stances on shomer negiah does suggest that among these Modern Orthodox adolescents, boys tend to be more sexually conservative than girls.

Taken together, these responses indicate that most students at these two schools are not shomer negiah. Moreover, some students tend not to practice the laws of shomer negiah because they actually disagree with the concept, rather than because peer pressure, social norms, or desire push them to engage in physical contact. However, students also observe the laws of shomer negiah to varying degrees, and are cognizant of the fact that there are a wide range of sexual behaviors occurring among their peers and within their high school.

The variety of responses to and beliefs regarding shomer negiah came through in the interviews in addition to the surveys. Consistent with the survey results, most of the interviewees were not shomer negiah, and students estimated that roughly 10% of the student body is strictly shomer negiah, meaning that they refrain from all types of physical contact. While some saw value in refraining from certain types of physical contact before marriage, others disagreed with the laws completely. One student explained that he was not shomer negiah, and had long conversations about it because he does not like the idea, “that men are here and women are here and you can’t interact… there are too many restrictions.” Adds a female student, “when you talk about the most basic example of, like, shomer negiah, it’s hard to do because most people don’t really understand why that’s a thing. And going back to what you said about whether the school’s message is in touch with what students actually do… I think most students in school do not consider themselves shomer.” Most of the interviewees across all genders simply dismissed the idea of shomer negiah, indicating that very few, if any, of their friends practiced negiah. These two students, though, actually elaborated on why it may be difficult for students to follow
these laws, explaining that the laws of negiah create boundaries that seem arbitrary and unjustified for high school students. Despite being taught that they were expected to follow these laws, students had a hard time understanding why being shomer negiah mattered.

For other students, it was never really a question for them of whether to follow the laws of shomer negiah. Engaging in physical contact with members of the opposite sex is seen as a social norm, where the majority of students behave in one way. When asked about whether he or is his friend ever felt guilty for being called out for giving a hug or a high five to a girl during school, he answered, “Maybe they feel… not like they’re wrong but maybe people shouldn’t be doing that, but it’s not like now that the teachers are saying that I’m just gonna stop and never do it again, I’m always gonna think about my actions. Cuz it just like happens naturally, and they’re like, oh okay, maybe they shouldn’t be doing it, but they’re not gonna think about it that much.” From this student’s account, it is clear that he, like many other students interviewed, does not view non-sexual forms of contact, such as high-fiving or even hugging, to be problematic. Rather, he seems to regard these actions as an expression of friendship. Perhaps this explains why so many students do not comprehend the reasoning behind being shomer negiah, since it might be difficult to understand how non-sexual contact could lead to more sexual interactions.

For the student quoted above, the laws of negiah are just another set of rules he is supposed to follow in school. It is not morally wrong for him or his friends to give each other high fives, it is just something that might result in consequences if they are caught. Moreover, this student describes physical contact as “natural” and something that most students engage in at the school. While students who choose to be shomer negiah may do so because they feel it is a religious obligation, students who decide it is not important to them do not feel any sense of guilt
or that they are going against religion, since they are behaving in the same way as most of their Modern Orthodox peers.

Another student also describes not being *shomer negiah* as a social norm, saying that, “It’s not about the way we learned it or when we learned it. I think it’s just what we’re more, like, surrounded by and kind of like what we grow up thinking. Like, the majority of us, like, our older siblings or whatever, we don’t see as many people being *shomer negiah*, so it’s just, like, rather than being like I’m the exception that isn’t, it’s more like you’d be the exception if you were, um, not that that’s a bad thing at all, it’s just, like, what we’re used to, so I think that’s why people are more just like, like, oh that’s kind of like the usual.” This student is even more clear about the fact that her decision not to be *shomer negiah* was barely a decision at all, but rather completely a result of the fact that everyone around her was not *shomer negiah*, so she grew up thinking this was the norm. Despite years of being told that they should be *shomer negiah*, and even at points being called out for high-fiving or hugging other students, there is a clear norm across both schools that students do not follow the laws of *negiah*. Moreover, in interviews, there was no significant difference in genders – neither female nor male students identified the laws of *shomer negiah* as especially relevant or important to their lives and choices. Therefore, while girls may be taught about the necessity of being *shomer negiah* more often than boys, and the survey suggests that among a larger sample, boys are more likely to believe in the importance of the laws of *negiah* in Modern Orthodoxy, all interviewees had fairly similar beliefs.

However, when it comes to physical contact beyond high-fiving and hugging, students feel differently about how much contact is okay. A few students alluded to or else directly brought up other types of sexual behaviors and intimacy outside of vaginal intercourse. These students discussed whether kissing someone casually is okay, or whether kissing should only
happen in relationships. According to one student, “I don’t think that most people are [shomer negiah], but I also don’t think that, like, most of my friends, would, like, hook up with someone random at a party. Like, I think that they’re all somewhere in between… I think it’s normal, and I don’t think it’s surprising when anyone does or you hear about anyone who does [hook-up], but it’s not like… it’s not something that happens very flippantly, like I think most of the people who I hear about hooking up are, like, in relationships.” Adds another student, “60% of the student body sees hooking up as okay if you are dating, but those who do random hook-ups are rarely judged.” These two students use the term “hooking-up” to describe sexual behaviors. In the broader, secular culture, hooking-up is sometimes understood to mean casual sex, however this is clearly not what these Modern Orthodox students are talking about. While it appears as though these students are mainly talking about kissing, and perhaps a little more, these students do not define “hook-up” culture.

A third student elaborates that “Everything just like, before sex, like everyone knows that’s going on. And that’s a lot of people, that’s not just like a few people. That’s like multiple people from each grade starting from as young as freshman year. And, like, everyone knows.” Unlike the previous two students, who seem to refer mainly to kissing, this student alludes to other types of contact; when he says “everything… before sex,” he seems to be including oral sex as an accepted behavior among his peers. Like high-fiving and hugging, these students understand everything from kissing to, in some cases, oral sex to be normal and common among their religiously observant peers. Even when they understand that their behaviors are against halakha, they are not troubled by it. However, while hooking up is clearly something that all students know goes on, some maintain that people should only be kissing in relationships, while others see no problem with casual, random hook-ups.
According to these student responses, there seems to be somewhat of a disconnect between what the school is teaching and how the students actually behave; while the school encourages students to refrain from all physical contact and does not really touch upon other types of sexual behaviors, most students are very comfortable with the fact that they are not \textit{shomer negiah}. In other words, when it comes to hugging and kissing, the school’s values do not necessarily align with the students’ values.

\textbf{Premarital Sex}

According to existing literature on sexual education at Jewish day schools, one of the reasons that schools emphasize the laws of \textit{negiah} is because prohibiting physical touch is understood as a way of preventing premarital sex (Gorsetman and Sztokman, 2013, p. 182). This framework assumes that innocent touching can lead to intercourse, so if students do not touch each other, they also will not have premarital sex. When analyzed through the lens that any type of touch is a slippery slope towards more illicit behaviors, it is perhaps easier to see why students at these Modern Orthodox day schools do not understand the relevance or value of being \textit{shomer negiah}. In both the interviews and the surveys, the majority of students were clear that they do not plan to have premarital sex. Therefore, perhaps part of the reason it was difficult for students to imagine being \textit{shomer negiah} is because they also did not see themselves as ever having premarital sex; the slippery slope argument only applies if students are worried that they might accidentally be put in a situation where they are either overcome by sexual desire or forced into a physical relationship, a situation which can supposedly be avoided by being \textit{shomer negiah}. When phrased this way, students’ agency in determining their own boundaries and beliefs is completely undermined. In reality, though, students at these two modern orthodox schools have,
for the most part, set their own boundaries about what types of sexual behaviors they are comfortable with that often differ from what they are told is *halakhically* acceptable.

According to the slippery slope model, students either practice the laws of *negiah* and are completely abstinent, or they do not practice the laws of *negiah*, and are therefore likely to have premarital sex. However, the students at these schools show that, at least in high school, this is not the case. Rather, the vast majority of students are not *shomer negiah*, but also do not plan to have premarital sexual intercourse. According to the survey responses, 13 students said their Modern Orthodox friends would not engage in any type of sexual intimacy before marriage, and 14 students indicated that they themselves would not engage in any type of sexual intimacy before marriage. Another 9 students said they don’t want to have premarital sex but don’t think it’s problematic for other to behave differently, while 11 said their friends thought the same thing (See Appendix A).

Overall, students tended to indicate that their Modern Orthodox peers would engage in a wider array of sexual behaviors before marriage than they would. For example, 15 respondents said they thought their friends thought that oral intercourse is okay, while vaginal intercourse is not, while only 4 indicated that they personally believed that oral sex is okay but vaginal sex is not. This statement aligns with the interview responses above, which indicated that students are aware that many people in their schools are engaging in other types of sexual behaviors, ranging from kissing to oral sex. However, given the vague and perhaps unclear wording of the survey question, which asked “how would you describe the general attitude of your friends towards sex,” general conclusions cannot necessarily be drawn from student responses, as students may have all interpreted the question differently.
However, if there was consistency in how students answered the question, the result that students are more likely to say their friends are comfortable with a wider range of behaviors than they themselves are comfortable with can be explained in one of two ways. First, students were answering the survey question on behalf of all their friends, and some even indicated out loud during the survey that they were not sure which answers to choose because different friends had different beliefs. However, it is worth noting that even though students’ friends held a variety of different opinions, from the interviews it is clear that the majority of these friends are still Modern Orthodox. In other words, students were not answering on behalf of non-Jewish or non-religious peers. Second, in general, students are more likely to overestimate their peer’s sexual behaviors, assuming that their peers are more experienced or engaging in sexual behaviors more often than they actually are, which may also have been at play here (Martens et al, 2006).

For the most part during the interviews, students’ responses echoed the survey responses. All the respondents were clear that very few students at their school, if any, had ever had sex during high school. Most students also confidently answered that neither them nor their friends would ever consider having sex before marriage. Some notable responses included: “I don’t have a single friend that would consider having premarital sex,” “Students in our high school having sex with each other is practically unheard of,” and “A minority, only a couple students ever at [my school] have [had sex], so it’s kind of… people are taken aback by it because it’s not a norm.” From these responses, which are consistent across both schools, it is clear that Modern Orthodox students at these schools are not, for the most part, having sex during high school. However, this begs the question: does the students’ adherence to the halakha regarding abstinence speak to the efficacy of these schools’ sexual education curricula and Jewish values courses, or is a testament to the strength of communal norms in Modern Orthodox communities?
To begin to answer this question, it is necessary to first consider the role Jewish values play in each student’s decision regarding premarital sexual activity. Both the survey results and interview responses indicate that for both the students that do not want to have premarital sex and the minority of students who would consider it, Jewish values and halakha play an important role in the way they think about sex. Many students specifically alluded to the Jewish component of sexual education, which they said helped them develop a better understanding of Jewish values when it comes to sexual intercourse. Explains one student, “I’ve learned more of a respect for it [sex] and I don’t see it as just do it and have fun and whatever. It definitely taught me that there’s something… there’s something greater to having sex than just doing it and being used to it and whatever. You know, that it is something spiritual and it is something special, but I don’t necessarily… I mean I still haven’t decided, but I’m not 100% wait until marriage.” For this student, the halakha and Jewish values he learned in school clearly made an impact on how he thought about sex, but not quite enough to completely convince him against abstinence until marriage. Added another student, “I definitely went into the sex ed curriculum not, like, having any desire to have sex before marriage, but I do think… I think it confirmed a lot of my beliefs, I do think it, especially, the Beit Midrash [Jewish component of sex ed]—this is why the Beit Midrash aspect is important because I think seeing the texts, and seeing where these random halakhas come from that we follow every day is meaningful and helpful to people, especially, it’s helpful to me to see why I do this, um, and to be taught from, like, a Jewish perspective, and not just from, like, this is a rule and follow it.” Like the previous student, this student suggests that learning about the texts surrounding sex has been helpful for her in confirming her own religious beliefs and contextualizing the justification for abstinence until marriage.
Even students who would think about having premarital sex are still influenced by halakha and an understanding of how Modern Orthodox teenagers are expected to behave. Says one student, “I think people should be able to make their own decisions about premarital sex. Yes—you can follow halakha and maybe… whatever the reasons given, maybe it is worthwhile to listen to that, but I think that people should be allowed to have their own free will when it comes to, like, choosing sexual partners, engaging with the opposite gender, opposite sex, before marriage… but I also think that sometimes, it should… that sometimes halakha, when it comes to sexual relationships, is wrong, yeah.” Like his peer quoted above, this student is influenced by halakha and understands the value in waiting. However, he also expresses a degree of discomfort with the one way of doing things that Judaism teachers, and even goes so far as to say that Jewish law may not always be right. While this student is influenced by the ideal values and behaviors taught in sexual education, he does not necessarily agree with them to the same degree as the two students quoted before.

For these three students, halakha seems to play a significant role in how they think about sex – whether they are thinking about having sex or not, they are cognizant of what Jewish law teaches and that if they do have sex, they will be going against Jewish law. Unlike with shomer negiah, where students dismissed the laws as unnatural or not standard practice, the Jewish laws that dictate abstinence from premarital sex before marriage are given much more weight. For example, when asked if and how halakha influences his everyday life decisions, one student responded, “But, like, I guess it does a little bit, because, like, me personally, I wouldn’t have sex, and I know that because halakha has taught me that that’s not allowed. So in every sense, like halakha also says a lot of things about being shomer, but that doesn’t apply to me… so it’s like, that halakha of not having sex applies, but, like, most of the other ones don’t really affect
me.” Like the other students, this students’ decision to abstain from sex before marriage is largely grounded in Jewish law and values, while his decision not to be shomer negiah was just because the halakha “didn’t apply” to him.

Another student echoed this idea, reflecting that, “I’m not necessarily shomer negiah, but I would not have premarital sex. And that is something that, like, maybe it’s kind of like a baseless line, and I sort of just like pulled it out of nowhere, but, like, to me there does… in halakha there does seem to be a difference.” Although these students are from different schools, different grades and identify with different genders, the way they both think about halakha, shomer negiah and premarital sex is strikingly similar. For both, the decision not to be shomer negiah and the decision to abstain from premarital sex were both fairly easy. However, the decision about whether or not to be shomer negiah was considered pretty unimportant, while whether or not one has premarital sex is not only a much bigger decision, but also has larger religious connotations. For these students, not being shomer negiah and not having premarital sex are both widely accepted norms in their schools and larger Modern Orthodox communities. As they explain, though, the key difference between the two decisions is that not having sex is influenced by both social norms and halakha, while not being shomer negiah is more often motivated solely by social norms.

**Why the Difference in Attitudes Between Shomer Negiah and Premarital Sex?**

While there is certainly some diversity among students’ beliefs and values, overall the students in the study were in agreement that they and most of their friends did not feel the need to be shomer negiah, but also could not see themselves having premarital sex. Why, though, are students lenient about physical contact, but firm about not engaging in sexual intercourse? After
multiple respondents talked about this seeming disconnect in values, I began asking students directly if they had explanations. Not being shomer negiah but also not having premarital sex has become such a norm in Modern Orthodox day schools, though, that students struggled to explain why this is the case. While overall students responded similarly to questions about the importance of shomer negiah and abstinence from premarital sex, why and how students thought about these decisions differed significantly between respondents.

One student, an eleventh grade boy, directly named the idea of a slippery slope, explaining that shomer negiah is often understood to lead to premarital sex. However, since this student did not buy that reasoning, it did not make sense to him to be shomer negiah. In his words,

*Shomer negiah*, in a way—*in a way*, I’m not saying that this is true, is like, the stop to what becomes the slippery slope to premarital sex. Again, I don’t believe this, because I am not shomer negiah, like, basically, the majority of the school, and, like most of them are not shomer negiah with a boy or with a girl… and, I… I just don’t think that impacts a lot of people. I think, like, shomer negiah feels such like, oh yeah, everyone does it, everyone doesn’t keep shomer negiah. But, like, premarital sex is like, oh, no one’s gonna have premarital sex. Like that’s the last thing I would do, that’s the worst thing. And I think people just brought up being Jewish don’t really… don’t really see that as a real possibility.

As was brought up earlier, not being shomer negiah is such a social norm in his school that it has pretty much lost all value for students, and is instead something they are told to do because physical touch is a gateway to sex. At the same time, though, having premarital sex is also something that rarely happens, and so abstinence has become a social standard and engaging in premarital sex is considered to be wrong and inappropriate. The understanding that almost everyone at the school views premarital sex as similarly unacceptable according to community values and standards is almost a better protection against engaging in premarital sexual behaviors than being shomer negiah. In other words, for this student, what the school actually teaches in sexual education does not have a huge impact on his decisions. Rather, the fact that his Jewish community and his peers are all abstinent is more influential in discouraging premarital sex.
This student also continues by implicitly bringing up the idea of agency and personal boundaries when it comes to intercourse. He explains, “it’s so natural not to be shomer negiah, because you know yourself, you’re not gonna do that, and obviously you’re a high schooler, you’re with girls all the time, like you wanna not be shomer negiah, you know what I mean? But you know you wouldn’t go to that… so yeah, if you know you’re able to control yourself to not go as far as having premarital sex, then people are like, yeah, obviously I’m not gonna be shomer negiah. I’ll still do things with girls or boys, but I’m not gonna get to the point where it’s like the endgame.” For him, being shomer negiah is only a good option if you cannot trust yourself to control your desire. However, because this student insists that he is able to make his own decisions and control his behaviors, he doesn’t need the added “protection” that being shomer negiah affords. In this way, encouraging students to be shomer negiah essentially denies adolescents the agency to decide what they are comfortable with and where their personal boundaries lie, and instead directs all students to hold by the same universal standard that may or may not reflect the students’ actual values, needs and behaviors.

A second student, an eleventh grade girl, also tries to use social norms to explain the seeming disconnect between attitudes towards shomer negiah and premarital sex. This student, previously quoted in the section on shomer negiah, reflects that,

I think that it’s not even just… not about the way we learned it or when we learned it, I think it’s just what we’re, more like surrounded by and kind of like what we grow up thinking. Like the majority of us, like, our older siblings or whatever, we don’t see as many people being shomer negiah, so it’s just like, like rather than being like I’m the exception that isn’t, it’s more like you’d be the exception if you were, um, not that that’s a bad thing at all, it’s just, like, what we’re used to, so I think that’s why people are more just like, like, oh that’s kind of like the usual, um, whereas I think premarital sex is—also I think the consequences is like, it’s just greater, in other words, premarital sex, like, there’s so many possible outcomes that are just, like, ooh that’s not good, and you’re like, oh, who cares if I give a boy a high-five, like what’s gonna happen.

For her, not being shomer negiah is about adhering to social norms and communally accepted
standards. There are very few consequences that can come from touching a member of the opposite sex, except for maybe being reprimanded by a teacher. However, for her, premarital sex has far more consequences that make it an unappealing option. Like the student quoted above, who explained sex as “the worst thing,” this student also thinks about sex in terms of the negative outcomes. The endless ways that premarital sex can negatively impact her life, ranging from pregnancy to diseases, is enough of a reason to wait until marriage. This way of thinking about sex solely in terms of the risks and consequences is a common rhetoric throughout sexual education curricula. However, despite the overlap between this student’s concerns about sex and those commonly promoted by schools, this student explicitly states that her decisions are not motivated by what she learned in school, but by the ways she sees her family, friends and community acting.

A senior girl similarly answered the question by explaining sex in terms of consequences. She also expands what previous respondents said by talking about sex as less nuanced than other sexual behaviors. She explains,

I mean, I think… from, like, teenage perspective, like, the actual act of sexual intercourse is much more black and white then other things, whereas being shomer negiah, you could high-five someone, but not hug someone. You could hug someone but not kiss someone. There’s a lot more interpretations of what people who consider themselves to be shomer negiah are, and it’s much easier to put yourself in a situation where you’re not shomer negiah than to put yourself in a situation where you’re having premarital sex. Like that’s a much bigger life decision, I think for some people. I think everyone, whether or not your shomer negiah, would agree about that… so, I think people see it as a much bigger deal, and it’s like, losing your virginity is a much bigger deal, and I feel like people also… there are some people maybe, like I wouldn’t do it, but who would consider doing it, and then who are, maybe, scared about ramifications, and like, what if there is that situation where a girl in yeshiva gets pregnant, like that’s a scare, and if you can do other things that feel just as fulfilling, than that’s a safer route to go.

For this twelfth grader, sex is a big deal and it is black and white – either you have premarital sex or you don’t and there is no in between. Additionally, like her peers, she thinks about sex by
addressing the possible risks. She specifically names pregnancy, and implies that this potential result of sex is enough to completely discourage her from having intercourse. For her, though, it does not necessarily seem to be about having a baby in general. Instead, her concerns specifically stem from a fear of getting pregnant in a religious setting, as in her hypothetical situation she intentionally includes the detail that the girl who gets pregnant is in yeshiva. Surprisingly, this does not necessarily seem to result from a fear of shame or guilt, but rather a fear of ostracism from her religious community. The fact that religious setting plays such a key role in deterring this student from premarital sex speaks to the importance of religious norms and communal values in these student’s lives. While this student’s beliefs about premarital sex align with her school’s values, this is not necessarily due to the efficacy of the school’s sexual education curriculum. Rather, the value of abstinence in Modern Orthodoxy is reinforced by the student’s family, friends and religious community, which all encourage her to wait until marriage.

Moreover, like the eleventh grade boy quoted above, this student does feel like she has agency and that engaging in premarital sex is a choice. In fact, given that she describes premarital sex as “black or white,” it seems like for her, not having sex is an even easier decision than not being shomer negiah. On the other hand, choosing to have premarital sex is a difficult and big decision that comes with a plethora of potential risks and consequences. While this student clearly thinks about the specific consequences that a religious student would face, it is unclear whether her decision not to have sex is more motivated by halakha or the fear of shame or social consequences within her Modern Orthodox Jewish community.

Another twelfth grade girl also suggest that premarital sex is different than shomer negiah because it is more of a big deal, especially within religious circles. This student explained premarital sex through a very halakhic framework, speaking about sex as separate and holy:
I think that because sex is such a big part of marriage, and like, literally, part of the Jewish ceremony of becoming married is having sex, it’s become, like, sanctified as… like by a lot of… like people who, like, it’s become sanctified and separate as something else. And I think that also Judaism treats it with a lot of reverence, so, like, even from a not serious, even from a not religious perspective, like, if you have… like when it’s treated very casually, it’s a little bit jarring, so I don’t think, like, people would say, like, yeah I would totally have premarital sex, like, so it’s just like a big deal and, you know, that’s what I think, I don’t know if that makes sense… I guess, like there is, like not a taboo around sex but it’s sort of like “untouchableness” of it, in like Modern Orthodox culture, so, like, I’m sure if that is something from [my school], like, keeping frumkeit [traditional religious observance] in your life, and, like, living your life by halakha, but I do think that there’s like, something about it that people just won’t really consider. Like it seems to exist on a different plane than, like, hooking up or anything like that.

This twelfth grader brings more of a halakhic perspective, explaining that because sex is treated as something so sacred and emphasized as an important part of Jewish marriage, sex is essentially off limits for unmarried religious Jews. Part of this comes from her Modern Orthodox community, which has set aside the prohibition against premarital sex as something that is neither spoken about nor questioned, while part of it comes more directly from the school, which promotes Jewish traditional values and observance, especially when it comes to sexual behaviors. This student’s testimony suggests that the school’s emphasis on Jewish values and observing Jewish law does play a role in discouraging premarital sex. More importantly, though, the commitment to wait until marriage is largely motivated by the fact that the student’s culture and community model the value of abstinence.

What separates Modern Orthodox schools’ sexual education curricula from other schools, then, is that these schools teach values that are part of a larger lifestyle centered around a commitment to Jewish values and laws that is not only encouraged by the school, but by the students’ entire community. This means, though, that it is not necessarily because of the schools’ values-based abstinence education that students choose not to have sex. Rather, this decision results from being raised in an insular Modern Orthodox community that, for the most part,
shares the value of abstinence. Sexual education only serves to reinforce this value and can occasionally confirm students’ already existing beliefs.

The question remains, though, of why students take the prohibition against premarital sex as an absolute, strict boundary that is not supposed to be questioned or crossed, while students are more casual about breaking the laws of negiah. Students understand sex as existing on “a different plane,” and as a “black and white issue” and the “last thing” they would do. Maybe this is because, as some students suggest, sex is treated with such reverence in the Torah. However, these students don’t always follow all other biblical commandments and many admitted that halakha is not something that necessarily influences their everyday life. Sex also has more consequences than other types of physical contact, but none that cannot be prevented. Sex is highly emphasized in the Torah and later Jewish thought, but so are a hundred other laws and values. So why is sex treated differently? Why has premarital sex become such a taboo and contentious issue that is given more attention than many other commandments and values?

The language of “endgame” is particularly striking, as for the student quoted above, there is a sense that relationships “end” in intercourse. It is hard to know how much to read into these students’ expressions and metaphors about sexual activity, however is is clear that there is just something that makes intercourse different than any other sexual act. While why sex is treated differently cannot be definitively answered based on this set of data, future research might analyze more deeply how Modern Orthodox adolescents conceptualize sexual activity.

**Religious Values and Secular Education: Conflict and Coexistence**

In addition to speaking about and grappling with their own religious values regarding sexuality, students also commented on how their religious education fit in with both their secular
sex education as well as secular culture and social norms. For many students, the messages they received from their secular sex ed seemed to conflict with what they were taught in Beit Midrash and religious values seminars. For example, in health class, students are taught about all types of birth control, including that condoms are the only form of birth control that can prevent transmission of STDS/STIs. At that same time, though, students are taught in both the Jewish component of sex education and in Judaic studies classes that condoms are forbidden according to the Torah and should not be used. While one might expect this to create a sense of tension for students, students were split about whether hearing these two messages was confusing. Some students actually found that hearing both messages was important so that they learned both what religion thought and what their less observant peers might be doing. Others, however, felt a sense of tension between the two messages, and wanted the school to do a better job of teaching students how to balance the two.

Many students did not find the different messages confusing or difficult to negotiate. For these students, it is understood that the message they should be following is the one that comes from the religious perspective, and what they learn in health is information only intended for students who are either not observant or chose not to follow halakha. In fact, one student did not realize that she was receiving two conflicting messages until she was asked to verbalize both of them at once: “I think it was, like, clear, I guess, I guess saying it out loud it sounds like it’s really split but I think that for us, it was just like, religiously that’s what the standard is.” After saying it out loud, the student realized that these two messages might seem conflicting. For her, though, it was clear that she should follow the rules and values taught in her religious classes and seminars. This student’s commitment to Jewish values again reflects personal beliefs that are
aligned with the Jewish component of sexual education and motivated by an understanding that this is also how her community expects her to behave.

On the other hand, a different student at the same school did seem confused about how health class and Beit Midrash were connected. As she explained, “In one ear to get the halakhic aspects and then in another ear to get the health perspective on it can be sometimes confusing.” When asked how the school could improve, the student responded that she would like to see them “intertwine” both messages, rather than portraying them separately: “I think it is a lot clearer to teach, like, to teach it more together and maybe have, if they even want, bring one Judaics studies teacher into the class—into the health class a few times to talk about the halakhic aspects.” From earlier in the interview, this student appears to know where she stands on many issues, including, like many other students, not being shomer negiah but also not expecting to have premarital sex. However, she still desires to hear about the health and the religious aspects of sexual education together, even if some parts may not be immediately relevant to her life. From informal conversations with administrators, it seems that better integrating the two components of sex education is something many students have asked for and is a priority for the school in improving their own curriculum.

In general, though, students didn’t seem too conflicted about getting separate messages. Rather, these messages were simply a consequence of the fact that the school wanted to teach both religious values and how to be safe and healthy if students make different choices. In fact, some students valued having the added aspect of health, even if it was contradictory, because they saw the alternative as only having religious education. Even just having the health component at some point during high school signaled to students that the school understood that
not everyone always follows halakha, and that there are other ways students could and are behaving, which is something that the student appreciated. Explains one student:

I think that the way [my school] did it was really good, because you have half the year learning about the Jewish aspect of it, and like halakha, and half the year learning about, like, the biological aspect. Because I do thing that, like, if you [just] learn from the Jewish perspective—like, it’s one thing if you’re like, even if halakha doesn’t say this, here’s what different methods of birth control are, but I think that if you, like, approach everything from a halakhic standpoint, the bottom line is gonna be, like, just wait until you get married and nothing will be a problem. And, like, I don’t think that’s such a good model of doing it. But I do think it’s important to learn the halachot and learn what it means, but maybe not in the same class.

Although this twelfth grader also did not imagine having premarital sex and mostly followed halakha as best she could, she still did not just want to learn about what halakha said. While she valued hearing about the motivation and basis for certain laws she follows, she also recognized that there are aspects of health class, such as birth control and reproductive health, that are relevant to students even if they are not engaging in sexual behaviors before marriage. As a teenager in a Modern Orthodox school and community, but also living in a broader secular culture, it was important for her to hear both messages, even if they did conflict.

Another student echoed this same idea, saying that he also appreciated hearing from different speakers outside of a specifically religious context:

I like how our school… I would say that one thing that I like is that, you know, since it’s a religious school, but they’re not just bringing in rabbis and just teaching the, like, they’re being realistic, they’re not just teaching the halakhic perspective on it. They’re also bringing in… like they know that we’re teenagers and they know we’re living in the secular world, and that things happen, even if it’s not complete intercourse, but they know that there are other things that go on… So I like how they bring in secular people, and not just having rabbis say don’t do it until you’re married.”

This student is even more explicit in his belief that it is important to hear both sides because in reality, students’ decisions are not solely based in halakha; some students do have physical relationships during high school, and it’s important for them to know both about the religious
perspective and about how to be safe and healthy from a secular and scientific perspective. Like the previous student, this student seems to understand that the default in Modern Orthodox schools is to only teach about what Judaism says and ignore any other behaviors that might be going on, so for him even just having a few secular speakers a year was important and appreciated. At the same time, students understand why their schools spend so much time on Jewish sexual ethics, and do want their schools to teach them more about religious values so that they know what Judaism says and why. Currently, many students are left to figure out what types of intimacy they are comfortable with, and therefore are seeking more guidance from the school about how to make decisions beyond deciding whether to follow the laws of negiah and whether to have premarital sex. The majority of students in the study viewed it as the school’s job to teach the religious values and Modern Orthodox standards so that students know how they should behave, and also to teach the secular component so students know how to be safe and healthy, regardless of whether they are in halakhic relationships or not.

**Outside the Modern Orthodox bubble: how do students understand secular culture?**

In addition to hearing two messages from the health and the Jewish values portion of sex education, students also recounted hearing conflicting messages from secular culture and from their Modern Orthodox schools and communities. While most students had spent most of their lives entirely inside the Modern Orthodox world and had no or very few non-religious friends, students were consistently exposed to different messages and sexual ethics on social media and from television. When asked which statements best describe secular culture’s attitudes towards sex, 28 of the 32 respondents checked that as long as safe is safe and consensual, it’s okay regardless of the relationship status of the individual. 17 respondents said that if two peoples are
in a healthy relationship, there is nothing wrong with having sex even if they are not married. None of the students said that secular culture thinks one shouldn’t engage in vaginal intercourse before marriage.

When asked in the interview about what they thought secular culture believed, students brought up a number of ways in which the messages they received from their religious education and backgrounds conflicted with the messages they heard from secular culture. First and foremost, students talked about sex. They mentioned a few tensions between religious and secular values, including that people are more open to talking about sex, sex is more accepted and people have sex younger outside of religious circles. Explains one student, “For example, sex, in our high school, is practically unheard of, but in other high schools it’s a common thing, so that’s just an example, like, students don’t push the boundaries as far, but they are also, they’re not taught by their school as much as, you know, as much as secular schools teach their students, I guess.” This student suggests that not only do secular adolescents have different values and engage in different behaviors than Modern Orthodox teenagers, but that students in public schools actually learn more about sex in school. Some public schools do teach more comprehensive curricula than Modern Orthodox schools, and it is likely that because these students live in the Northeast, often in middle to upper class neighborhoods, and because the content of sex ed is tied to location and class, their local public schools are teaching relatively comprehensive sexual education. However, it is certainly not the case that all public schools educate students about sexual activity in as open, accepting or complete a manner as this twelfth grader might assume. One has to wonder, then, whether students at Modern Orthodox high schools are overestimating and overgeneralizing about what happens in secular schools and communities. Of course attitudes and behaviors differ, but, as I have shown in chapter two, the
secular component of sex education at these two Modern Orthodox day schools is not necessarily so different from many public school sex ed curricula in terms of both content and rhetoric.

In addition to viewing secular culture as more open and accepting than Modern Orthodoxy in terms of sex, students also brought up a few other instances of contention. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most common other topics that came up were *shomer negiah* and contraception. In terms of *shomer negiah*, students were unable to make a real comparison because they could not think of any parallel value or concept in secular culture. One student even mentioned that this made it harder to be *shomer negiah* because people outside of Orthodoxy “don’t really understand why that’s a thing.” Another student adds that “*shomer negiah* is non—practically non-existent… Contraception is viewed as a good thing, right, it’s viewed as an aid. They’re different, they’re certainly different.” For this student, the most common reason contraception is discussed is to discourage the use of condoms, as they are prohibited according to the Bible. However, either from TV or from secular friends, this student has come to the conclusion that outside of Modern Orthodox circles, contraception is viewed positively. While in many circles this is true, it is also the case that the number of schools across the United States teaching about birth control is rapidly declining (Guttmacher, 2018).

Other students are more explicit about the sense of tension between religious and secular values, saying there is “a lot of contradiction” and they send “totally opposite messages.” From these responses, a few things are clear. First, students’ understanding of secular culture mainly comes from the media, and does not necessarily represent the full range of behaviors and feelings among all non-religious teens. Second, students are cognizant that the religious values of their schools, home communities and friends in many ways conflict with how secular culture thinks and acts. For some students, this sense of conflict is directly relevant to their futures, since many
graduates of Modern Orthodox high schools enroll in secular colleges, where their friends and roommates may have different understandings of sexual ethics and behaviors. However, up until this point in high school, there is little indication that students are finding it difficult to balance the messages they get from secular culture with those they get from their religious education, as most students are content having physical relationships that do not include sexual intercourse.

**Conclusion**

Despite years of learning in sexual education and in Judaic studies classes that they should be *shomer negiah*, this study shows that very few students actually follow these laws. However, it was also found that very few students would even consider having premarital sex, instead viewing sex before marriage as a hard boundary that they will never cross. When asked to explain this phenomenon, students struggled to put a finger on why so many of them choose to strictly follow *halakha* when it comes to sex, but to dismiss Jewish values regarding *shomer negiah*. Some students suggested that not being *shomer negiah* is more of a social norm and not really a question, while sex is given so much weight and treated as sacred in Jewish law, which sets it apart from other commandments and laws. Others posited that having sex comes with so many risks that it is not even worth it to engage in premarital sex when there are other ways of fulfilling desire. The common thread across all students’ answers, though, was that both not being *shomer negiah* and abstaining from sex is the norm among teenagers in their Jewish community.

After close analysis, it becomes clear that sex education is effective only when it also aligns with social norms. When the curriculum does not reflect communal behaviors, as in the case of *shomer negiah*, students prioritize norms over the messages from the school. However,
when the Jewish sexual values that the schools teach are consistent with social norms, what results is a student body largely committed to following the schools’ ideal method of behavior. Therefore, it is not sexual education itself that motivates students to make certain decisions about relationships and sexual intimacy, but rather students’ entire Modern Orthodox Jewish community, which includes family, peers and at times, teachers.

Moreover, students discussed the ways in which they either do or do not see their secular studies and religious values classes conflicting, especially when it comes to matters of sex. Some students found it difficult to negotiate separate and contradictory messages about sex, contraception and relationships, and wished the school better integrated health and religious values into one course. Others did not really think the messages conflicted, since it was clear that students were supposed to follow Jewish law, and that what they learned in health was only intended for students who decide not to follow halakha. Overall, though, students were glad that they did get both messages, since they did not believe that just hearing about the religious perspective would be helpful or sufficient, especially for students who did not want to follow halakha as strictly.

Finally, students were asked to compare the messages they received at school to those they heard from secular culture. Since most students did not have non-Jewish or non-religious friends, students tended to compare the messages from their religious background, such as not to have sex or use contraception, to what they heard from social media. It is clear from these responses that students understand secular culture to be more open and accepting of sexual behaviors than Modern Orthodoxy. While this is often true, it is certainly not the case for all public schools and secular adolescents. The overgeneralization, largely influenced by Hollywood, that secular teenagers have more sex, have sex earlier, and live in communities
where sex is much more accepted, likely contributes to an ever greater sense of tension between secular values and religious values for Modern Orthodox students.

Overall, students at Modern Orthodox high schools are aware that their values and behaviors at times conflict with both their schools’ values and ideals and with secular culture. This places Modern Orthodox adolescents in a unique position where they largely follow halakha and lead religious and observant lives, but also reject some other laws, such as the Jewish laws of negiah. However, because students are taught in school to refrain from all physical touch, they do not necessarily learn how to translate their values to things like hook-up culture and physical romantic relationships, which are clearly present in Modern Orthodox communities. Students are then left to figure out on their own where their boundaries are and where they stand in terms of sexual ethics. Although in high school, students may be adequately equipped to deal with relationships if their partner was also brought up with similar knowledge and understandings of Jewish values, it is worth considering what happens when these students leave the “Jewish bubble” and are faced with peers who have not been raised with the same values about what types of behaviors are socially and religiously acceptable.
Conclusion

Based on the existing literature on sexual education in Modern Orthodox high schools, I expected that at the Modern Orthodox schools I studied, there would be a disconnect between what the school teaches and what students want to learn. While some students did express mild frustration with the curricula at their respective schools, for the most part I found a much more complicated and nuanced picture of sexual education at these progressive Modern Orthodox day schools. While there are definitely instances of contention between the sexual education curricula and students’ actions, most notably in the case of the laws of negiah, the combination of secular and religious sex education aligns fairly well with students’ beliefs and behaviors.

Sexual education, though, is never perfect. At the conclusion of the survey, I asked students if there was anything else they wanted to add, or things they wish they had learned more about during sexual education. Multiple students wrote that they wanted to learn more about sex, including “Jewish people having sex,” “halakha surrounding sex,” “varied opinions regarding sexual interactions” and how to be “non-shomer negiah and hang out and possibly have premarital sex, while still living as a devout Orthodox Jew.” Even for students who are not necessarily having premarital sex, they still desire to know more about sexual intercourse within a Jewish context. In school, students are taught that premarital sex is against halakha and that they are not only expected to be abstinent until marriage, but refrain from any type of physical touch, sexual or non-sexual. However, students who fall somewhere in between, and find behaviors such as kissing unproblematic but understand sex to be out of the question, are left to figure out their own boundaries. These students find meaning in keeping halakha and observing tradition, and seek guidance on how they can act upon their sexual desire without compromising their values.
Along these lines, noticeably absent from students’ experience with both the health component and Jewish values component of sexual education is any discussion of pleasure and fulfillment of desire. Students appreciate the fairly comprehensive range of topics the school covers in sexual education, but still remain committed to their Modern Orthodox backgrounds and values. However, the main feedback students had was that they wished there was more time spent on sexual education, a wider range of opinions presented, and more discussion about how to make personal decisions about different forms of intimacy. While students know the science behind reproduction and some Jewish texts about family purity and sexual intercourse, they are lacking an education about the emotional side of relationships.

Michelle Fine, writing on the missing discourse of desire in sexual education curricula, argues, “A genuine discourse of desire would invite adolescents to explore what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experiences, needs, and limits… in a context in which desire is not silenced, but acknowledged and discussed, conversations with adolescent women can… educate through a dialectic of victimization and pleasure” (Fine, 1988, p. 33). According to Fine, silencing desire is not just problematic because it discourages teenagers from finding their own comfort levels and boundaries, but also because it perpetuates the idea that women are simply the objects of desire and not entitled to their own pleasure. Teachers at Modern Orthodox schools are in a complicated position, because they simultaneously aim to teach students that they should not be having intercourse, while also preparing them for safe sexual activity. However, there is still room for desire in these conversations, even if they occur within the framework of marriage. Expanding the conversations about sexual intimacy already happening in some capacity at these schools to include both pleasure and emotional fulfillment
provides the opportunity for the school to address power dynamics in heterosexual relationships and better prepare students to navigate physical relationships without having premarital sex.

Finally, while it is clear that most Modern Orthodox students in this sample are not having sex during high school, it is worth asking what happens after high school. While the biblical and rabbinic laws about physical touch and intercourse were written when individuals got married at younger ages, now most Modern Orthodox teenagers choose to enroll in college rather than marrying at eighteen. It is likely that not all Modern Orthodox adolescents remain abstinent after high school graduation, and many articles have also drawn attention to the difficulty of refraining from premarital sex for individuals who remain unmarried later in life (Meirowitz, 2009; Rosenfeld, 2008). Future research then, might look at the behaviors of Modern Orthodox college students to analyze how sexual practice and ethics change over time.
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### Appendix A: Tables and Figure

#### A.1: Survey Demographics

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Table 1a: Number of respondents for each demographics question.

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Table 1b: Number of students in eleventh and twelfth grade.

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Table 1c: Age of survey participants. The average age among these participants is 16.5 years.

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Table 1d: Gender of survey participants.

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Table 1e: Religious affiliation of survey respondents.

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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1f: Number of male and female students who completed the survey at each school, excluding the one student who indicated they preferred not to select a gender.
A.2: Survey Results.

Figure 2a: Across all academic classes, students discuss sex or sexuality most often during Biology, Tanakh and Talmud, while the topic was rarely discussed in chemistry, physics and Hebrew class.

Figure 2b: Sexual education courses and seminars are most often taught by rabbis, Judaic studies teachers and guest presenters. Students also indicated that a principal occasionally taught a course on sexual education.
Figure 2c: More than three quarters of students felt comfortable during sexual education.

Figure 2d: Students in School A tended to think their school spent the right amount of time on sex education, while students in School B were more likely to say their school should spent more time on sex education.
Selected “Explicit halakhic rules about sex and sexuality were mentioned in sex ed”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Within Gender</td>
<td>47.4%</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Within Gender</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2f: A chi-squared test was performed and it was found that a significantly higher number of girls indicated that explicit halakhic rules about sex and sexuality were mentioned in their sexual education classes than in boys’ sex education classes, $X^2 (1, 31) = 5.128, p < 0.05$. 

Figure 2e: Twenty-eight students indicate Jewish values and ethics were talked about in sexual education and twenty-two say that explicit halakhic rulings were mentioned. The two students who selected “other” wrote that, “We had halakhic sex ed, but we got really off topic and ended up talking about rape in chassidish communities” and that “we first had a seminar that didn’t care about halakha followed by a small class on Jewish philosophy.”
Figure 2g: Twenty-six students were taught that abstinence before marriage is the ideal, but if you choose to have sex it should be safe. Twenty-four students report learning that sex is a mitzvah (biblical commandment) and therefore should only occur between married couples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students were told explicitly that they should be abstinent before marriage</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstinence before marriage was not explicitly taught but it was assumed that students would abstain from sex before marriage</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstinence before marriage is the ideal, however if you choose to have sex it should be safe</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex is a mitzvah and therefore should only occur between married couples</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex is dangerous and can lead to consequences such as STDs, pregnancy and AIDS</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2h: Between the two schools, students from School A were significantly more likely to indicate the they learned that abstinence before marriage is the ideal, but if you choose to have sex it should be safe, compare to students from School B, \( X^2 (1, 32) = 5.584, p < 0.05 \).
Figure 2i: Students personal beliefs about sexual intercourse compared to what students believe their friends think about sexual intercourse. Students believed their friends would engage in a broader range of sexual activity than they personally would.
Figure 2j: Most student either do not agree with *shomer negiah* at all, or believed other types of contact besides sexual intercourse are okay before marriage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected “All Modern Orthodox Jews should adhere to the laws of <em>shomer negiah</em>”</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Within Gender</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Within Gender</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>80.6%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2k: Boys are significantly more likely to indicate that they believe all Modern Orthodox Jews should adhere to the laws of *negiah* than girls, $X^2 (1, 31) = 4.699, p < 0.05$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected, “People shouldn’t have sex before marriage, but other types of contact are okay.”</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Within Gender</td>
<td>84.2%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Within Gender</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>64.5%</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2l: Girls are significantly more likely to believe physical contact is acceptable before marriage as long as people are not having sex, $X^2 (1, 31) = 8.316, p < 0.05$.  

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Appendix B: Consent Forms

Sexual Education in Modern Orthodox High Schools
PARENTAL CONSENT FORM (to be done through Qualtrics) - Survey

Names and Affiliations of Investigators:
Student Investigator:
Ariella Levisohn
Undergraduate Student, Brandeis University

Primary Investigator:
ChaeRan Freeze
Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

Your child is invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Ariella Levisohn, an undergraduate at Brandeis University, under the supervision of Dr. ChaeRan Freeze, Professor of Gender Studies and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University.

Please read this form carefully. We encourage you to ask questions if you want more information about any part of the form or the study.

If you decide to allow your child to participate in this study, you will be asked to electronically sign this form. A copy of the signed form will be given to you to keep for your records – it has important information, including whom to contact if you have questions in the future.

What is this study about?
The goal of this research is to understand how Modern Orthodox Jewish teenagers think about issues of sex and sexuality. Additionally, this study will look at how Modern Orthodox teenagers negotiate the messages regarding sex and sexuality that they get from their religious education in the context of a larger secular culture. I will ask your child to complete a 21 question survey about his or her experience with sexual education in high school. I will also ask any students who are willing to participate in a short interview, during which they will have the opportunity to further explain their answers to the survey and answer a few more questions. The data collected from these surveys and interviews will be used to inform my undergraduate senior thesis in the Brandeis University Women’s and Gender Studies Department. All information shared in this process will be kept completely confidential and protected to the fullest extent possible.

Why have we asked your child to participate?
Your child was selected for this study because he or she is enrolled in the eleventh or twelfth grade at a Modern Orthodox high school.

What will your child be asked to do if he/she participates?
As a participant in this study, your child will be asked to complete a 21 question survey. Your child will also be asked to participate in an interview. Because your child is under the age of 18, the law requires that I first obtain permission from you for your child to participate in this study. If you give consent, I will then give your child a similar assent form, give him/her the opportunity to ask any questions about his/her participation and the study itself, and ensure that he/she understands his/her full rights in this process. If your child also assents to participate in the survey, he/she will be given time to answer the survey questions. I expect the survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. If you or your child do not assent and/or consent to your child’s participation, your child will instead participate in an unrelated activity as determined by the teacher.

Are there any possible risks to your child?
The risks for participating in this project are minimal. However, your child may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. If your child does not wish to answer any of the questions in the survey, he or she is free to skip the question or withdraw from the study at any point.

Additionally, if your child feels as though this process is traumatic in any way, your child will be encouraged to withdraw from the study. If at any point your child feels that he/she needs emotional support, guidance counselors and trained professionals are available to speak with him/her.

Finally, there is always a risk that confidential information will be accidentally disclosed. However, your child’s name will never be recorded on the survey, and we will do everything possible to secure other possible identifiers, such as age and gender.

**Will your child benefit from participating in the study?**
Your child will not benefit directly by participating in the research. However, we hope that the results of the study will provide better insight into student experiences with sexual education in Modern Orthodox high schools.

**Will it cost your child anything to participate in the study?**
The only cost will be your child’s time.

**How will your child’s information be kept private?**
All information collected from the survey will be kept completely confidential. As previously mentioned, your child’s name will not be collected – the only identifiers to be collected are age, grade and gender. All the answers to the surveys will be stored in a locked drawer and destroyed after the minimum of three years after the conclusion of the research project.

**What if your child doesn’t want to participate or changes his/her mind partway through?**
A consent form will be filled out by you and an assent form will be filled out by your child. Should either of you indicate that you do not wish to participate, your child will not participate in the study. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and your child may withdraw from the survey at any point without penalty. Every survey question is optional, and your child is free to skip any question in the survey.

**Who can I contact with questions?**
Should you have any questions about this research or your child’s participation in this research, please contact Ariella Levisohn or ChaeRan Freeze, Ph.D.:

**Student Researcher:**
Ariella Levisohn
(617) 939 7654
alevisohn@brandeis.edu

**Professor/Primary Investigator:**
ChaeRan Freeze
(781) 736 2987
cfreeze@brandeis.edu

If you have questions about you or your child’s rights as a subject in this research, would like to speak with someone other than the researchers about concerns you have about the study, or in the event the researchers cannot be reached, please contact the Brandeis Institutional Review Board at 781-736-8133 or irb@brandeis.edu.

**Parent/Guardian Consent:**
I have read the contents of this consent form, have been encouraged to ask questions, and have received satisfactory answers to my questions. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my child from participating at any time without penalty. I voluntarily agree to allow my child to participate in this study.
By signing below, you voluntarily agree that your child can participate in the survey.

Your Child’s Name: _____________________________________________________________

Your Name (printed): __________________________________________________________

Your Signature: ______________ Date: _____________

Researcher Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________
Names and Affiliations of Investigators:
Student Investigator:
Ariella Levisohn
Undergraduate Student, Brandeis University

Primary Investigator:
ChaeRan Freeze
Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

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What is this study about?
The goal of this research is to understand how Modern Orthodox Jewish teenagers think about issues of sex and sexuality. Additionally, this study will look at how Modern Orthodox teenagers negotiate the messages regarding sex and sexuality that they get from their religious education in the context of a larger secular culture. I will ask your child to complete a 21 question survey about his or her experience with sexual education in high school. I will also ask any students who are willing to participate in a short interview, during which they will have the opportunity to further explain their answers to the survey and answer a few more questions. The data collected from these surveys and interviews will be used to inform my undergraduate senior thesis in the Brandeis University Women’s and Gender Studies Department. All information shared in this process will be kept completely confidential and protected to the fullest extent possible.

Why have we asked your child to participate?
Your child was selected for this study because he or she is enrolled in the eleventh or twelfth grade at a Modern Orthodox high school.

What will your child be asked to do if he/she participates?
Your child will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview should he/she volunteer to participate and provided you give consent and the child gives assent. Because your child is under the age of 18, the law requires that I first obtain permission from you for your child to participate in this study. The interview will be conducted either over the phone or over Zoom, depending on which is more comfortable for your child. Before beginning the interview, I will reaffirm the child’s assent to participate, including for the interview to be recorded. If you do not consent and/or your child does not assent to audio recording, I will take handwritten notes. If you do consent and your child assents to audio recording, I will begin recording and ask a series of questions about your child’s experiences with sexual education at his/her high school. The interview will take about 30 minutes to complete. Your child can ask for the recording to be stopped at any point. Your child is also free to stop the interview. Following the interview, I will turn off the recording. Should your child have any further comments, he or she should feel free to contact me by email or phone using my information listed below. As stated earlier, any information given throughout this process will be kept completely confidential and your child’s name will never be used in connection with the data.
Are there any possible risks to your child?
The risks for participating in this project are minimal. However, your child may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. If your child does not wish to answer any of the questions in the interview, he or she is free to skip the question or withdraw from the study at any point.

Additionally, if your child feels as though this process is traumatic in any way, your child will be encouraged to withdraw from the study. If at any point your child feels that he/she needs emotional support, guidance counselors and trained professionals are available to speak with him/her.

Finally, there is always a risk that confidential information will be accidentally disclosed. However, your child’s name will never be linked to his or her response, and we will do everything possible to secure other possible identifiers, such as age and gender.

Will your child benefit from participating in the study?
Your child will not benefit directly by participating in the research. However, we hope that the results of the study will provide better insight into student experiences with sexual education in Modern Orthodox high schools.

Will it cost your child anything to participate in the study?
The only cost will be your child’s time.

How will your child’s information be kept private?
All information collected from the interviews will be kept completely confidential. As previously mentioned, your child’s name will not be linked to his or her interview and all data will be completely de-identified. If you consent and your child assents to be interviewed and have the interview recorded, the recording will be stored in a password protected Box.com storage account. The audio recording will be destroyed after the minimum of three years after the conclusion of the study. If you or your child do not consent or assent to the audio recording of the interview, I will take handwritten notes, which will be stored in a locked drawer and shredded after the minimum of three years after the completion of the study.

What if your child doesn’t want to participate or changes his/her mind partway through?
A consent form will be filled out by you and an assent form will be filled out by your child. Should either of you indicate that you do not wish to participate, your child will not participate in the study. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and your child may withdraw from the interview at any point without penalty. Your child may also skip any question or ask the interviewer to move on to the next question or topic at any point.

Who can I contact with questions?
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Parent/Guardian Consent:
I have read the contents of this consent form, have been encouraged to ask questions, and have received satisfactory answers to my questions. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my child from participating at any time without penalty. I voluntarily agree to allow my child to participate in this study.

Please check the box corresponding to your answer regarding audio recording.

I do    I do not give the researcher permission to make audio recordings of my child during this study.

By signing below, you voluntarily agree that your child can participate in a phone or Zoom interview.

Your Child’s Name: ______________________________________________________

Your Name (printed): ______________________________________________________

Your Signature: ____________________________ Date: __________

Researcher Signature: ____________________________ Date: __________
Sexual Education in Modern Orthodox High Schools
STUDENT ASSENT FORM - Survey

Names and Affiliations of Investigators:
Student Investigator:
Ariella Levisohn
Undergraduate Student, Brandeis University

Primary Investigator:
ChaeRan Freeze
Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Ariella Levisohn, an undergraduate at Brandeis University, under the supervision of Dr. ChaeRan Freeze, Professor of Gender Studies and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University.

Please read this form carefully. We encourage you to ask questions if you want more information about any part of the form or the study.

If you decide to participate in this study you will be asked to sign this form. A copy of the signed form will be given to you to keep for your records – it has important information, including whom to contact if you have questions in the future.

What is this study about?
The goal of this research is to understand how Modern Orthodox Jewish teenagers think about issues of sex and sexuality. This study will also look at how Modern Orthodox teenagers negotiate the messages regarding sex and sexuality that they get from their religious education in the context of a larger secular culture. I will ask you to complete a 21 question survey about your experiences with sexual education at your school. I will also ask any students who are willing to participate in a short interview, during which you have the opportunity to further explain your answers to the survey and answer a few more questions. The data collected from these surveys and interviews will be used to inform my undergraduate senior thesis in the Brandeis University Women’s and Gender Studies Department. All information shared in this process will be kept completely confidential and protected to the fullest extent possible.

Why have we asked you to participate?
You were selected for this study because you are enrolled in the eleventh or twelfth grade at a Modern Orthodox high school.

What will you be asked to do if you participate?
As a participant in this study, you are asked to complete a 21 question survey. You will also be asked to participate in an interview. Because you are under the age of 18, I will first obtain permission from your parent or guardian for you to participate in this study. If your parent or guardian gives consent, I will then give you this assent form, give you the opportunity to ask any questions about your participation and the study itself, and ensure that you understand your full rights in this process. If you do assent to participate in the survey, you will be given time to answer the survey questions. I expect the survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. If you do not assent to participate, you will instead participate in an unrelated activity as determined by the teacher.

Are there any possible risks to you?
The risks for participating in this project are minimal. However, you may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions in the survey, you are free to skip the question or withdraw from the study at any point.

Additionally, if you feel as though this process is traumatic in any way, please withdraw from the study. If at any point you feel that you need emotional support, guidance counselors and trained professionals are available to speak with you.
Finally, there is always a risk that confidential information will be accidentally disclosed. However, your name will never be linked to your responses, and we will do everything possible to secure other possible identifiers, such as age and gender.

Will you benefit from participating in the study?
You will not benefit directly by participating in the research. However, we hope that the results of the study will provide better insight into student experiences with sexual education in Modern Orthodox high schools.

Will it cost you anything to participate in the study?
The only cost to you will be your time.

How will your information be kept private?
All information collected from the survey and the interviews will be kept completely confidential. As previously mentioned, your name will not be collected on the survey – the only identifiers to be collected are your age, grade and gender. All the answers to the surveys will be stored in a locked drawer and destroyed after the minimum of three years after the conclusion of the research project.

What if you don’t want to participate or change your mind partway through?
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the survey at any point without penalty. Every survey question is optional, and you should feel free to skip any question in the survey.

Who can I contact with questions?
Should you have any questions about this research or your participation in this research, please contact Ariella Levisohn or ChaeRan Freeze, Ph.D.:

Student Researcher:
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(617) 939 7654
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(781) 736 2987
cfreeze@brandeis.edu

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Subject Assent:
I have read the contents of this assent form, have been encouraged to ask questions, and have received satisfactory answers to my questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my participation at any time without penalty. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

By signing below, you voluntarily agree to participate in the survey.

Your Name (printed): __________________________________________________________

Your Signature: ______________________________________ Date: ______________

Researcher Signature: __________________________________ Date: ______________
Sexual Education in Modern Orthodox High Schools
STUDENT ASSENT FORM - Interview

Names and Affiliations of Investigators:
Student Investigator:
Ariella Levisohn
Undergraduate Student, Brandeis University

Primary Investigator:
ChaeRan Freeze
Professor of Women's and Gender Studies and Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Ariella Levisohn, an undergraduate at Brandeis University, under the supervision of Dr. ChaeRan Freeze, Professor of Gender Studies and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University.

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Why have we asked you to participate?
You were selected for this study because you are enrolled in the eleventh or twelfth grade at a Modern Orthodox high school.

What will you be asked to do if you participate?
You will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview, should you feel that you would like to participate. The interview will either be conducted over the phone or over Zoom, depending on what is more comfortable for you. Before the interview, I will ask for your assent for audio recording. If you do not assent to audio recording, I will take handwritten notes. If you do assent to audio recording, I will begin recording and ask a series of questions about your experiences with sexual education at your high schools. The interview will take about 30 minutes to complete. You can ask for the recording to be stopped at any point. You are also free to stop the interview. Following the interview, I will turn off the recording. Should you have any further comments, you should feel free to contact me by email or phone using my information listed below. As stated earlier, any information given throughout this process will be kept completely confidential and your name will never be used in connection with the data.

Are there any possible risks to you?
The risks for participating in this project are minimal. However, you may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions in interview, you are free to skip the question or withdraw from the study at any point.
Additionally, if you feel as though this process is traumatic in any way, please withdraw from the study. If at any point you feel that you need emotional support, guidance counselors and trained professionals are available to speak with you.

Finally, there is always a risk that confidential information will be accidentally disclosed. However, your name will not be linked to your interview, and we will do everything possible to secure other possible identifiers, such as age and gender.

Will you benefit from participating in the study?
You will not benefit directly by participating in the research. However, we hope that the results of the study will provide better insight into student experiences with sexual education in Modern Orthodox high schools.

Will it cost you anything to participate in the study?
The only cost to you will be your time.

How will your information be kept private?
All information collected from the interviews will be kept completely confidential. As previously mentioned, your name will not be collected – the only identifiers to be collected are your age, grade and gender. If you assent to be interviewed and have your interview recorded, the recording will be stored in a password protected Box.com storage account. The audio recording will be destroyed after the minimum of three years after the conclusion of the study. If you do not assent to be interviewed, I will take handwritten notes, which will be stored in a locked drawer and destroyed after the minimum of three years after the conclusion of the study.

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(781) 736 2987  
cfreeze@brandeis.edu

If you have questions about you or your rights as a subject in this research, would like to speak with someone other than the researchers about concerns you have about the study, or in the event the researchers cannot be reached, please contact the Brandeis Institutional Review Board at 781-736-8133 or irb@brandeis.edu.

Subject Assent:
I have read the contents of this assent form, have been encouraged to ask questions, and have received satisfactory answers to my questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my participation at any time without penalty. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
Please check the box corresponding to your answer regarding audio recording.

I do  I do not give the researcher permission to make audio recordings of me during this study.

By signing below, you voluntarily agree to participate in the interview.

Your Name (printed): ____________________________________________________________

Your Signature: ________________________________ Date: ____________

Researcher Signature: ________________________________ Date: ____________
Sexual Education in Modern Orthodox High Schools
STUDENT CONSENT FORM (for students over 18) – Survey

Names and Affiliations of Investigators:
Student Investigator:
Ariella Levisohn
Undergraduate Student, Brandeis University

Primary Investigator:
ChaeRan Freeze
Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Ariella Levisohn, an undergraduate at Brandeis University, under the supervision of Dr. ChaeRan Freeze, Professor of Gender Studies and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University.

Please read this form carefully. We encourage you to ask questions if you want more information about any part of the form or the study.

If you decide to participate in this study you will be asked to sign this form. A copy of the signed form will be given to you to keep for your records – it has important information, including whom to contact if you have questions in the future.

What is this study about?
The goal of this research is to understand how Modern Orthodox Jewish teenagers think about issues of sex and sexuality. Additionally, this study will look at how Modern Orthodox teenagers negotiate the messages regarding sex and sexuality that they get from their religious education in the context of a larger secular culture. I will ask you to complete a 21 question survey about your experiences with sexual education at your school. I will also ask any students who are willing to participate in a short interview in which you have the opportunity to further explain your answers to the survey and answer a few more questions. The data collected from these surveys and interviews will be used to inform my undergraduate senior thesis in the Brandeis University Women’s and Gender Studies Department. All information shared in this process will be kept completely confidential and protected to the fullest extent possible.

Why have we asked you to participate?
You were selected for this study because you are enrolled as a student in the eleventh or twelfth grade at a Modern Orthodox high school.

What will you be asked to do if you participate?
As a participant in this study, you are asked to complete a 21 question survey. You will also be asked to participate in an interview. Before you begin the survey, I will give you this consent form, give you the opportunity to ask any questions about your participation and the study itself, and ensure that you understand your full rights in this process. If you do consent to participate in the survey, you will be given time to answer the survey questions. I expect the survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. If you do not consent to participate, you will instead participate in an unrelated activity.

Are there any possible risks to you?
The risks for participating in this project are minimal. However, you may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions in the survey, you are free to skip the question or withdraw from the study at any point.

Additionally, if you feel as though this process is traumatic in any way, please withdraw from the study. If at any point you feel that you need emotional support, guidance counselors and trained professionals are available to speak with you.
Finally, there is always a risk that confidential information will be accidentally disclosed. However, your names will never be recorded on the survey, and we will do everything possible to secure other possible identifiers, such as age and gender.

Will you benefit from participating in the study?
You will not benefit directly by participating in the research. However, we hope that the results of the study will provide better insight into student experiences with sexual education in Modern Orthodox high schools.

Will it cost you anything to participate in the study?
The only cost to you will be your time.

How will your information be kept private?
All information collected from the survey and the interviews will be kept completely confidential. As previously mentioned, your name will not be collected – the only identifiers to be collected are your age, grade and gender. All the answers to the surveys will be stored in a locked drawer and destroyed after the minimum of three years after the conclusion of the research project.

What if you don’t want to participate or change your mind partway through?
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the survey at any point without penalty. Every survey question is optional, and you should feel free to skip any question in the survey.

Who can I contact with questions?
Should you have any questions about this research or your participation in this research, please contact Ariella Levisohn or ChaeRan Freeze, Ph.D.:

Student Researcher:
Ariella Levisohn
(617) 939 7654
alevisohn@brandeis.edu

Professor/Primary Investigator:
ChaeRan Freeze
(781) 736 2987
cfreeze@brandeis.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a subject in this research, would like to speak with someone other than the researchers about concerns you have about the study, or in the event the researchers cannot be reached, please contact the Brandeis Institutional Review Board at 781-736-8133 or irb@brandeis.edu.

Subject Consent:
I have read the contents of this consent form, have been encouraged to ask questions, and have received satisfactory answers to my questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my participation at any time without penalty. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

By signing below, you voluntarily agree to participate in the survey and certify that you are over 18.

Your Name (printed): __________________________________________________________
Your Signature: __________________________________________ Date: ______________

Researcher Signature: __________________________________ Date: ______________
Sexual Education in Modern Orthodox High Schools
STUDENT CONSENT FORM (for students over 18) - Interview

Names and Affiliations of Investigators:
Student Investigator:
Ariella Levisohn
Undergraduate Student, Brandeis University

Primary Investigator:
ChaeRan Freeze
Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Ariella Levisohn, an undergraduate at Brandeis University, under the supervision of Dr. ChaeRan Freeze, Professor of Gender Studies and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University.

Please read this form carefully. We encourage you to ask questions if you want more information about any part of the form or the study.

If you decide to participate in this study you will be asked to sign this form. A copy of the signed form will be given to you to keep for your records – it has important information, including whom to contact if you have questions in the future.

What is this study about?
The goal of this research is to understand how Modern Orthodox Jewish teenagers think about issues of sex and sexuality. Additionally, this study will look at how Modern Orthodox teenagers negotiate the messages regarding sex and sexuality that they get from their religious education in the context of a larger secular culture. I will ask you to complete a 21 question survey about your experiences with sexual education at your school. I will also ask any students who are willing to participate in a short interview in which you have the opportunity to further explain your answers to the survey and answer a few more questions. The data collected from these surveys and interviews will be used to inform my undergraduate senior thesis in the Brandeis University Women’s and Gender Studies Department. All information shared in this process will be kept completely confidential and protected to the fullest extent possible.

Why have we asked you to participate?
You were selected for this study because you are enrolled as a student in the eleventh or twelfth grade at a Modern Orthodox high school.

What will you be asked to do if you participate?
You will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview, should you feel that you would like to participate. The interview will be done either over the phone or over Zoom, depending on which you prefer. Before the interview, I will ask for your consent for audio recording. If you do not consent to audio recording, I will take handwritten notes. If you do consent to audio recording, I will begin recording and ask a series of questions about your experiences with sexual education at your high school. The interview will take about 30 minutes to complete. You can ask for the recording to be stopped at any point. You are also free to stop the interview. Following the interview, I will turn off the recording. Should you have any further comments, you should feel free to contact me by email or phone using my information listed below. As stated earlier, any information given throughout this process will be kept completely confidential and your name will never be used in connection with the data.

Are there any possible risks to you?
The risks for participating in this project are minimal. However, you may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions in interview, you are free to skip the question or withdraw from the study at any point.
Additionally, if you feel as though this process is traumatic in any way, please withdraw from the study. If at any point you feel that you need emotional support, guidance counselors and trained professionals are available to speak with you.

Finally, there is always a risk that confidential information will be accidentally disclosed. However, your names will never be linked to your answers, and we will do everything possible to secure other possible identifiers, such as age and gender.

**Will you benefit from participating in the study?**
You will not benefit directly by participating in the research. However, we hope that the results of the study will provide better insight into student experiences with sexual education in Modern Orthodox high schools.

**Will it cost you anything to participate in the study?**
The only cost to you will be your time.

**How will your information be kept private?**
All information collected from the interviews will be kept completely confidential. As previously mentioned, your name will not be collected – the only identifiers to be collected are your age, grade and gender. If you consent to be interviewed and have your interview recorded, the recording will be stored in a password protected Box.com storage account. The audio recording will be destroyed after the minimum of three years after the conclusion of the study. If you do not consent to be interviewed, the handwritten notes will be stored in a locked drawer and destroyed after the minimum of three years after the conclusion of the study.

**What if you don’t want to participate or change your mind partway through?**
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the interview at any point without penalty. You may also skip any question or ask the interviewer to move on to the next question or topic at any point.

**Who can I contact with questions?**
Should you have any questions about this research or your participation in this research, please contact Ariella Levisohn or ChaeRan Freeze, Ph.D.:

**Student Researcher:**
Ariella Levisohn  
(617) 939 7654  
alevisohn@brandeis.edu

**Professor/Primary Investigator:**
ChaeRan Freeze  
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**Subject Consent:**
I have read the contents of this consent form, have been encouraged to ask questions, and have received satisfactory answers to my questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my participation at any time without penalty. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
Please check the box corresponding to your answer regarding audio recording.

I do  I do not give the researcher permission to make audio recordings of me during this study.

By signing below, you voluntarily agree to participate in the interview and certify that you are over 18.

Your Name (printed): ____________________________________________________________

Your Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________

Researcher Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________
Appendix C: Survey

Introduction:
The purpose of this survey is to determine:
1) How students in Modern Orthodox high schools learn about issues of sex and sexuality.
2) How students are thinking about issues of sex and sexuality in relationship to halacha (Jewish law).

The survey is completely anonymous and the only identifiers to be collected are age, grade and gender. All questions are optional, and both parents and students must sign a consent and assent form before participating.

1. Grade:
   - 9
   - 10
   - 11
   - 12

2. Age:

3. Gender:
   - Male
   - Female
   - Gender non-conforming
   - Prefer not to say
   - Other

4. Religious Affiliation:

5. From which sources have you learned about sex? Check all that apply.
   - Parents
   - Internet
   - Friends
   - Experience
   - Teachers
   - Rabbis
6. During which classes do you remember having conversations about issues relating to sex or sexuality?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>A few times</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hebrew</td>
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<tr>
<td>English</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanakh (biblical literature)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talmud (rabbinic literature)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/Sexual Education Class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Were there other opportunities outside of these classes to learn about issues of sex and sexuality during school?

If you had any type of sexual education class (including anything from a full-year course to a seminar that met once or twice), please answer questions 8-10. If you did not, please continue to question 11.

8. Who taught your sexual education course?
   - Guidance counselor
   - Rabbi
   - Judaics studies teacher
   - General studies teacher
   - Nurse
   - Guest presenter
   - Other:

9. During sex ed, I generally felt (choose all that apply):
   - Comfortable
   - Uncomfortable
   - Accepted for who I am
   - Judged for who I am

10. Which of the following describes how halacha was incorporated into your sexual education class?
   Choose all that are relevant.
   - Explicit halakhic rules about sex and sexuality were mentioned
   - Jewish values and ethics related to sex and sexuality were talked about
   - Adherence to halacha (shomer negiah, etc) was assumed but not explicitly mentioned
   - Halacha was neither explicitly nor implicitly mentioned
   - Other (please explain):
11. Which topics did your sex ed class (or other classes in which you talked about sex and sexuality) cover:
Abstinence (don’t have sex)
- Body image
- Consent
- Contraception (condoms, birth control)
- Gender roles
- Homosexuality or sexual preference
- Healthy relationships
- Reproductive anatomy (female)
- Reproductive anatomy (male)
- Sexual abuse
- Sexually transmitted diseases or HIV/AIDS

12. Which topics do you wish you would have covered or learned more about in school?

13. Do you think your school should spend more or less time on sex ed?
- More
- Less
- Good how it is

14. Which of the following describes what you were taught about sexual intercourse? Choose all that apply.
- Students were told explicitly that they should be abstinent before marriage
- Abstinence before marriage was not explicitly taught but it was assumed that students would abstain from sex before marriage
- Abstinence before marriage is the ideal, however if you choose to have sex it should be safe
- Sex is a mitzvah and therefore should only occur between married couples
- Sex is dangerous and can lead to consequences such as STDs, pregnancy and AIDS
- Sex was never explicitly mentioned

15. Which of the following describe the messages you have received about the laws of shomer negiah? Choose all that apply.
- The laws of shomer negiah were explicitly taught
- Students were encouraged to follow the laws of shomer negiah
- The laws of shomer negiah were never explicitly taught but it was assumed that students adhered to them
- The laws of shomer negiah were never mentioned
- It was not assumed that students adhered to the laws of shomer negiah
- Students should not touch members of the opposite sex in public, but it is okay in private
- Being shomer negiah is a personal choice and no recommendation was made to students about whether or not to follow the laws

16. How would you describe the general attitude of your friends towards sex?
- One should not engage in any type of sexual intimacy before marriage
- One should not engage in vaginal intercourse before marriage, but oral and/or anal intercourse is okay
- I do not want to have sex until marriage, but I don’t think it’s problematic for other people to behave differently
If two people are in a healthy relationship, there is nothing wrong with having sex even if they are not married.

As long as sex is safe and consensual, it’s okay, regardless of the relationship status of the individual.

17. How would you describe the general attitude of the broader, secular world towards sex?

- One should not engage in any type of sexual intimacy before marriage.
- One should not engage in vaginal intercourse before marriage, but oral intercourse is okay.
- One should not engage in vaginal intercourse before marriage, but anal intercourse is okay.
- I do not want to have sex until marriage, but I don’t think it’s problematic for other people to behave differently.
- If two people are in a healthy relationship, there is nothing wrong with having sex even if they are not married.
- As long as sex is safe and consensual, it’s okay, regardless of the relationship status of the individual.

18. Which of the following best describes what you personally believe about sexual intercourse?

- One should not engage in any type of sexual intimacy before marriage.
- One should not engage in vaginal intercourse before marriage, but oral intercourse is okay.
- One should not engage in vaginal intercourse before marriage, but anal intercourse is okay.
- I do not want to have sex until marriage, but I don’t think it’s problematic for other people to behave differently.
- If two people are in a healthy relationship, there is nothing wrong with having sex even if they are not married.
- As long as sex is safe and consensual, it’s okay, regardless of the relationship status of the individual.

19. Which of the following best describes what you personally believe about shomer negiah:

- I think shomer negiah is important and all Modern Orthodox Jews should adhere to the laws of shomer negiah.
- Being shomer negiah is important to me, but I understand that it’s not the right choice for everyone.
- I think it is important for people to not have sexual intercourse before marriage, but other types of contact are okay.
- I think people should not touch members of the opposite sex in public, but it is okay in private.
- I do not agree with the laws of shomer negiah.

20. How many of your friends do you think are shomer negiah (do not touch any member of the opposite sex)?

- None
- Less than half
- More than half
- Most
- All

21. If you had a question about something related to sex or sexuality, to whom would you go?
Appendix D: Interview Guide

1. When and where did you first learn about reproductive biology in school?
2. Have you ever learned about healthy relationships in school?
   a. Can you describe what you learned?
3. Do you remember when and where you first learned about sexual intercourse in school?
   a. In your own words, how would you describe the messages you have received from your school about sexual intercourse?
   b. How were these messages conveyed? (What was in the lessons? Conversations with teachers, outside classes, etc)
   c. How does this message compare to the message you’ve heard from secular culture (the media, non-religious friends, etc) about sex?
4. Have you ever learned about homosexuality in school?
   a. If so, how would you describe the message you have received from your school about homosexuality?
5. What messages did you receive from your school regarding contraception?
6. What do you wish you had learned in sexual education?
   a. What do you like about the way your school teaches sexual education?
   b. What do you dislike about the way your school teaches sexual education?
7. Do you think it’s important for Jewish values and laws to be incorporated into sexual education?
8. How does halacha (Jewish law) influences your everyday decisions?
   a. More specifically, how does halacha influence how you think about sex and sexuality?
9. How would you describe the social norms surrounding sex in your school?
   a. Are most of your friends shomer negiah?
   b. Can you describe the general attitude towards premarital sex among your friends?
   c. Is that the way you feel too?
10. How would you describe your own beliefs about premarital sex?
    a. Do you feel that your own beliefs are reflected in the sexual education curriculum?
    b. How does halacha inform how you think about sexual intimacy?
11. In what ways (if any) has the content from sexual education classes been relevant to your life?
12. Has your sexual education helped you make informed and healthy decisions?
    a. If yes, please describe in what ways.
    b. If no, why not?
13. Have you ever felt uncomfortable during a lesson related to sexual education?
    a. If you feel comfortable, please describe your experience. What aspects of the lesson made you feel uncomfortable?