

Press Kit
Sex. Jewish Positions

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JÜDISCHES MUSEUM BERLIN

Press information
16 May 2024

Opening of the exhibition *Sex: Jewish Positions* at the JMB



Susan Kaplow, Wrestling with Leviticus, 2012, Exhibition print, Courtesy of the artist. No reproduction without express permission from Susan Kaplow

On 17 May 2024, the exhibition *Sex: Jewish Positions* will open at the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB). Through objects drawn from two thousand years of history, the show presents Jewish debates about sexuality and questions that have been discussed within Judaism for many centuries. What is the role of sexuality in Jewish life and thinking? What positions are found in traditional texts and modern writings, what attitudes to LGBTQ+ people? How do the lives of Orthodox Jewish women and men differ from those of their liberal counterparts when it comes to sex? The JMB's exhibition invites visitors to explore these questions – and more.

Hetty Berg, Director of the JMB, explains: “Sexuality is a universal theme – and we illuminate the crucial significance of sexuality in Judaism. We want to offer a diversity of possible reference points: for different generations and independently of individual life experiences and backgrounds.” But visitors to the exhibition will not find a unified picture of sexuality in Judaism, warns Hetty Berg: “The

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exhibition reveals the multiplicity of Jewish attitudes to sexuality. Through this approach, the JMB challenges widespread clichés about Jewish life context.”

Judaism rarely speaks with a single voice on any issue, and opinions on sexuality are no exception. Talmudic scholars and contemporary artists, medieval philosophers and modern sex therapists, mystical thinkers and TikTok influencers – all champion different views of sexuality, and all have their voices heard in this exhibition.

The exhibition’s curator, Miriam Goldmann, sets out the spectrum of themes: “Marriage and procreation play a central role, as does sexual desire and the possibility – from a present-day perspective – of controlling it. The exhibits question social norms, indicate sexual taboos, and suggest what sexuality can mean for each individual’s identity. We also illustrate the eroticism that is inherent to spirituality, using examples from ritual, art, and literature. The exhibition opens up a panorama of different Jewish attitudes and shows how present-day Jewish positions on sexuality relate to traditional debates.”

Exhibits from the JMB’s own collection and loans from public and private collections in Europe, Israel, and North America bring to life the heterogeneity of these standpoints. Visitors will see sculptures, rabbinic writings, films, photographs, TikTok videos, ritual objects, and poems. The artists exhibited include Judy Chicago, R. B. Kitaj, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Lee Lozano, Boris Lurie, Stéphane Mandelbaum, Benyamin Reich, and Yona Wallach.

Exhibition dates: 17 May–6 October 2024

Location: Jewish Museum Berlin, Old Building, Level 1

Admission: € 10 / reduced € 4

The exhibition is presented in cooperation with the Jewish Museum Amsterdam. A catalog is published by Hirmer Verlag in a German and an English version.

For the latest information on the exhibition, visit:

[Sex: Jewish Positions | Jewish Museum Berlin \(jmberlin.de\)](https://www.jmberlin.de)

Press images are available for download with full acknowledgment at:

[Press images for the exhibition Sex: Jewish Positions | Jewish Museum Berlin \(jmberlin.de\)](https://www.jmberlin.de)

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Factsheet

Exhibition *Sex: Jewish Positions*

Exhibition dates	17 May to 6 October 2024
Opening hours	Daily from 10 am to 6 pm
Location	Jewish Museum Berlin, Old Building, Level 1
Admission	10 €, reduced 4 €, children and young people under the age of 18 free of charge. Timeslot reservation required: https://tickets.jmberlin.de/en/tickets/
Website	https://www.jmberlin.de/en/sex
Social media	Instagram: www.instagram.com/juedischesmuseumberlin Facebook: www.facebook.com/jmberlin X (formerly Twitter): www.twitter.com/jmberlin Hashtag: #JewishPositions #JMBerlin
Exhibition space	800 m ²
Exhibition team	Miriam Goldmann (curator) Sarah von Holt, Lea Simon, Toni Wagner (research trainees and assistants)
Exhibition management	Deniz Roth
Exhibition design (concept, architecture, graphics)	Space4, Stuttgart
Promotion campaign design	e o t . essays on typography
Number of exhibition chapters	5 Prologue Procreation and Pleasure Desire and Control Sexuality and Power Eroticism and the Divine

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Total number of objects on display	approx. 140 Sculptures, paintings, photographs, films, Judaica, graphic art, audiovisual media, historical documents, poetry
Number of artists exhibited	approx. 50
Commissioned work	<p><i>Tumtum</i> Gil Yefman Berlin 2024 Installation commissioned by the JMB, made possible by the FRIENDS OF THE JMB</p> <p><i>Illustrated Episodes from the Babylonian Talmud</i> Noa Snir Berlin 2024 Digital illustrations commissioned by the JMB, made possible by the FRIENDS OF THE JMB</p>
Contemporary art (selection)	<p>Photographs: Susan Kaplow – <i>Wrestling with Leviticus</i>, 2012 Mierle Laderman Ukeles – <i>Mikva Dreams: Hudson River</i>, 1978 Elinor Carucci – <i>Signs of Time</i>, 2017</p> <p>Paintings: Joan Semmel – <i>Hold</i>, 1972 Anita Steckel – <i>NY Skyline on Canvas #5</i>, ca. 1970–1972 R. B. Kitaj – <i>Los Angeles No. 24 (Nose to Nose)</i>, 2003</p> <p>Drawings: Roe Rosen – <i>The Stained Portfolio</i>, 1927–1928 Merav Kamel/Halil Balabin – <i>Maalal</i>, 2016 Roey Victoria Heifetz – <i>First Time Naked</i>, 2021</p> <p>Sculptures: Gabriella Boros – <i>The Scourge</i>, 2023 Judy Chicago – <i>In My Mother's House</i>, 1962–1964 Jacques Lipchitz – <i>Le Cantique des cantiques</i>, 1946 Hannah Wilke – <i>Chewing Gum Sculpture</i>, ca. 1975</p> <p>Video: Hagit Molgan – <i>Five plus Seven</i>, 2001</p>
Lenders and donors	approx. 45: private individuals and institutions
Cooperation	An exhibition jointly conceived by the Jewish Museum Berlin and the Jewish Cultural Quarter, Amsterdam

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Publication	<p>The exhibition catalog is published in an English and a German edition by Hirmer Verlag, Munich. 224 pages, approx. 90 illustrations, 35 €. Available in the JMB Shop and bookstores.</p>
Online feature on the exhibition	<p>In the online feature <i>Let's Talk About Sex</i>, artists from the exhibition have their say in a series of interviews, while a specially compiled series of book and film tips and a playlist provide a multifaceted insight into sex in the context of Judaism. Available at: https://www.jmberlin.de/en/sex</p>
With funding from	<p>The exhibition was financially supported by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media.</p> <p>The work <i>Tumtum</i> by Gil Yefman and the acquisition of the series <i>Illustrated Episodes from the Babylonian Talmud</i> by Noa Snir were made possible by the FRIENDS OF THE JMB.</p>
Media partner	Wall

Press Images for the Exhibition *Sex. Jewish Positions*

Runtime: 17 May to 6 Oktober 2024

Current press photos and views of the exhibition can be downloaded at:
<https://www.jmberlin.de/presse>

Pictures can be used without requesting permission for current reporting only; we request you send a sample copy.

Objektansichten

Bild



Caption

Lesser Ury, Adam und Eva mit
ihrem Erstgeborenen, 1896, Oil
on canvas, 86,4 x 124,1 x 2,1 cm

Credits

Jewish Museum Berlin,
photo: Jens Ziehe



R.B. Kitaj, Nose to Nose (Los
Angeles Series #24), 2003, oil
on canvas, 121,9 x 121,9 cm

R.B. Kitaj Estate, courtesy
Piano Nobile, London

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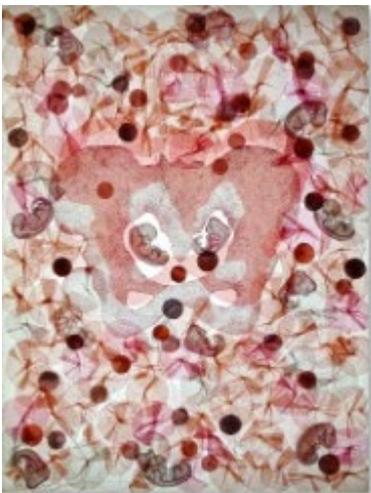
Dorothea Moerman, Holy,
2023, Linoprint, 22,86 x 30,48
cm

Courtesy of the artist



Yitzchak Woolf, A Jewish
Wedding, 2008, Exhibition
print, 80 × 86 cm

Courtesy of the artist



Andi LaVine Arnovitz, Be
Fruitful and Multiply, 2019,
Papier, Wasserfarben, Textil,
103 x 77,5 x 7 cm

Courtesy of the artist, photo:
Issac Fisch

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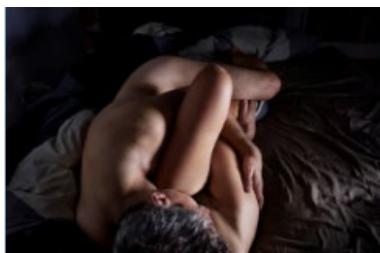
Fertility Figurine, Syria, Bronze Age, Terracotta, 12.8 cm; National Maritime Museum, Haifa

MAA3908
National Maritime Museum,
Haifa



Benjamin Reich, Untitled (from series Divine connection) 2005, Fotografie, 110 x 110 cm

Courtesy of the artist
© Benjamin Reich, Berlin
HighRes auf Anfrage



Elinor Carucci, "Eran and I" (Midlife Series), 2016, Exhibition print, 57 x 85.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist, Edwynn Houk Gallery



Susan Kaplow, Wrestling with Leviticus, 2012, Exhibition print, 61 x 86cm

Courtesy of the artist.
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Miriam Anzovin,
#DafReactions, Videos, 2021 –
2022,
[https://www.youtube.com/@Mi
riamAnzovin](https://www.youtube.com/@MiriamAnzovin)

Courtesy of the artist

Exhibition texts

PROCREATION AND PLEASURE

“Be fruitful and multiply!” This biblical commandment guides the sex lives of many practicing Jews to this day. But is sex no more than a religious obligation? Where does pleasure fit in? Jewish sages debated these questions in antiquity, and their discussions—including both conservative and progressive voices—were preserved in the pages of halacha, or Jewish law.

Whether sex is about procreation or desire, halacha defines the details of what is and is not allowed. Traditionally, sex is supposed to happen within a marriage and between a man and a woman. Yet rules are broken and the reality is complex. Many different positions—religious and secular, heterosexual and queer—exist side by side.

DESIRE AND CONTROL

Orthodox Judaism asserts strict control over men’s and women’s desires. Despite the freedoms rabbis may grant, sex is permitted only between heterosexual couples and only at specific times. Traditional conceptions of women’s bodies underlie the halachic laws of family purity, which are followed more strictly in Orthodoxy than in Conservative or Reform Judaism.

Nevertheless, sexual desire defies control. Rules are continually circumvented, and rabbis have never stopped discussing and adapting them. In particular, feminist, queer, and nonbinary Jews demonstrate that sexual liberation can be compatible with a religious lifestyle.

SEXUALITY AND POWER

Sex always takes place “in society”: our desires and fantasies are shaped by social forces. But which forms of sexual expression are legitimized and which are considered taboo? This is a question of power, over which authorities such as religion or the state have exerted influence and control.

Jewish scholars and scientists such as Sigmund Freud and Magnus Hirschfeld radically changed how we think about sexuality. Their research supported emancipation from cultural norms, religious dictates, and government regulations—and not only for Jews. Their legacy also paved the way for sexual empowerment and new forms of identity in our own time.

EROTICISM AND THE DIVINE

Does sexuality only gratify personal lust or does it also have a spiritual side? Judaism has long debated how eroticism and the divine connect.

The rabbis of antiquity all agreed that celibacy is forbidden. Even the most diligent Torah scholar has a duty to serve God with both spirit and body. Sex is seen as a divine gift and a religious act, especially on Shabbat. Medieval Kabbalah developed an erotic theology, imbuing sexuality with divine, cosmic significance.

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Biblical prophets often portrayed the relationship between God and Israel as a love affair. Liturgy and rituals use erotic language and sensory rites to express devotion to God. The line between divinity and eroticism is often blurred.

COUPLES

Jewish tradition permits sex only within the framework of a heterosexual marriage. From a religious viewpoint, marriage sanctifies sex, transforming the physical act into a spiritual experience. Yet for practicing Jews, the halachic rules bring real challenges. The wedding marks a dramatic turning point in their relationship to sexuality. This is the moment when sexual intimacy goes from being strictly forbidden to a religious duty.

Feminism and the LGBTQ+ liberation movement have reshaped both marriage and attitudes towards “sacred sex.” Modern interpretations of halacha and new forms of Jewish sexuality paint a nuanced picture.

CHILDREN

Reproduction is a core value in Judaism. The first chapter of the biblical book of Genesis urges Adam and Eve to populate the world with their descendants. This divine commandment turns a biological drive into a religious mandate.

The desire to have children is partly guided by concern for the continuity of Judaism, especially after the decimation of the Shoah. Strictly orthodox communities expect married couples to have large families as early as possible. Rabbis endorse the techniques of modern reproductive medicine under Halachic justifications.

Medical advancements have dramatically changed the relationship between sex and reproduction during the past century. Some aspiring parents, including from LGBTQ+ communities, now use medical technologies to conceive. Importantly, contraceptive methods have also improved sexual freedom.

LUST

Is sex merely a means to bring children into the world, or does pleasure itself hold value? The rabbis of antiquity who laid the foundations of Halacha debated what was allowable in the bedroom. They agreed on two points: sex must always be consensual, and a husband is obligated to satisfy his wife. On almost everything else, opinions diverge to this day.

For example, some rabbis celebrate sexual pleasure as an expression of God's will, while others interpret desire as a sacrilegious weakness. For some, sexual preferences are a private matter. Others reject sexual gratification as an end in itself.

SEPARATION

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The rabbis of antiquity prohibited sex during and immediately after a woman's menstrual period: that is, for nearly half of the month. Only after the wife has ritually purified herself by bathing in a mikvah does the couple resume their sexual relations. These stipulations constitute the laws of family purity.

For Orthodox Jews, these rules are binding. Some couples find them helpful for maintaining passion over the years. Others feel that their desires are obstructed by them. It is no surprise that female artists have often explored these male-imposed laws in their works.

TEMPTATION

Orthodox Judaism expects men to keep their sexual desires under control. But it warns against the evil inclination—yetzer ha-ra in Hebrew— which tempts a person to break rules and succumb to lust. Only marital sex can direct the yetzer ha-ra toward its holy purpose. Orthodox communities reject masturbation and non-procreative sex as “wasting seed.”

But what should a person do about raging hormones and wandering thoughts? Prayers and rituals are enlisted in the struggle to control desire. Dress codes place the primary burden of responsibility on women, to protect men from temptation.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Jewish law and tradition are viewed by some as authentic and unchanging. But Judaism is always evolving and adapting. Historical sources often reveal surprises and challenge our assumptions about sexual norms in the past. New voices, including perspectives once considered unacceptable, continue to expand the canon.

Today, feminist and queer Jews are reinterpreting traditional texts and challenging the status quo. In spaces of openness, religion can coexist with sexual freedom, paving the way for new futures and new pasts.

Feminist art, mostly by secular Jewish artists, critiques the traditional role for women as having completely ignored the experience of the female body. Increasingly, Orthodox artists have also been voicing demands for equal participation in religious communities.

TABOO

Although sexuality connects all humanity, it is fraught with deep-seated taboos. Every society dictates what is permissible and what is not.

The biblical book of Leviticus lists prohibitions for ancient Israel, including adultery, incest, and sex between men. Nevertheless, the Bible also demonstrates strikingly ambiguous attitudes. Many biblical heroes are celebrated despite having violated these prohibitions—including Lot and his daughters, David and Bathsheba and Ruth and Boaz. Dynasties and kingdoms arise following the sins of incest, adultery, and sex with a non-Jew.

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Contemporary attitudes toward monogamy, homosexuality, and sex work demonstrate that taboos can be revised. After all, what is considered acceptable or not depends on cultural and social norms. But whatever is forbidden holds a special allure—in fantasy and reality alike.

SEXOLOGY

A new medical discipline emerged around the year 1900: sexology. Notably, many of the field's reformist doctors and medical researchers were Jewish. They championed the rights of homosexuals and campaigned to fight the spread of sexually transmitted infections, to protect mothers, and to educate the public about birth control methods. As a result of discriminatory obstacles to their academic careers, it was often Jewish doctors who ventured into these new disciplines, including sexology and psychoanalysis.

Beginning with Magnus Hirschfeld and Sigmund Freud, Jewish sexologists and sex therapists remain a cultural phenomenon to this day. Ruth Westheimer and Esther Perel have each gained international fame by helping the public make sense of sex.

IDENTITIES

Sex is not just something people “do”; it is also a defining aspect of a person's individual and social identity. Political movements such as Zionism and feminism have explored the relationship between Judaism and sexuality and set out to change power dynamics. Particularly in response to antisemitic prejudices, Jews have cultivated collective identities partly through sexuality. Popular film, comedy, and performance art have satirized and redefined the antisemitic stereotype of the lustful Jew.

Jewish artists offer diverse depictions of sexual and gender identities, pointing at new avenues for individual self-expression.

HOLY SEX

Jewish religious texts recommend having sex on Shabbat, the holiest day of the week. This timing is considered auspicious: on that day, all physical pleasures lead to sacred, lofty heights.

In the Middle Ages, disciples of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, elevated marriage to a spiritual level and invested sexuality with a divine dimension. The sexual union of man and woman became not merely a physical act, but a way of connecting with God. According to the mystics, the coming together of masculine and feminine had the capacity to renew the divine order.

DEVOTION

God and Israel are intimately connected in Jewish tradition, like lovers. God either shuns or embraces his people, depending on whether they find favor in his eyes. Some schools of mysticism expand on this idea, viewing God and his Torah as objects of desire.

On a literal or figurative level, religious actions are expressions of devotion to God and can resemble romantic love. Rituals may be spiritual acts, but they are performed and enacted with the body. Rites

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such as dressing the Torah scroll in lush fabrics or wrapping one's arms in leather tefillin straps appeal to the senses and carry erotic undertones.

SONG OF SONGS

The Song of Songs is as unique as it is influential. This collection of erotic love poems—as opposed to religious or legal teachings— describes sexual desire unabashedly and celebrates it for its own sake. Yet it is a canonical book of the Hebrew Bible and is read each year in synagogue on Passover.

Rabbis have often dismissed the obvious eroticism in the Song of Songs, interpreting it as an allegory for the relationship between humanity and God. Whether allegorical or purely erotic, this ancient love poetry has inspired scholars and artists for centuries.

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Hetty Berg

Director of the Jewish Museum Berlin

Hetty Berg became the Director of the Jewish Museum Berlin on 1 April 2020. Originally from the Netherlands, she has held various positions at the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam.

She began her work there as a curator in 1989. In the span of her 30-year career, she created over 30 original temporary exhibitions, and oversaw the creation and implementation of five permanent exhibitions. Since 2002 she worked as the manager and chief curator of the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam, which expanded in 2012 into the city's Jewish Cultural Quarter. Along with the Jewish Historical Museum, it includes a children's museum, the Portuguese Synagogue, the National Holocaust Museum, and the Hollandsche Schouwburg memorial site.

Hetty Berg was born in 1961 in The Hague. After studying dance for four years in London and Amsterdam, she studied theater studies in Amsterdam. While pursuing her career, she received a master's degree in management for non-profit organizations in Utrecht. Berg is proficient in six languages and is a member of several scholarly councils and committees; for example, since 2016, she has been a member of the Dutch National Committee for the Code of Ethics for Museums, and from 2007 to 2013, she was a member of the board of the Association of European Jewish Museums.

Her work and research focuses on cultural history, including Jewish performance, Jews in the Netherlands and museum studies. She has published numerous books and scholarly essays on these subjects; most recently in 2017 as coeditor of *Site of Deportation, Site of Memory: The Amsterdam Hollandsche Schouwburg and the Holocaust*, in 2020 as editor of *Waterlooplein: De buurt binnenstebuiten*, and 2021 as coeditor of *Reappraising the History of the Jews in the Netherlands*.

In addition, she has organized many international symposia and scholarly conferences, for example, together with the American historian Georg Mosse (1918–1999), with the Israeli demographer and statistician Sergio Della Pergola, with the American Rabbi David Ellenson, as well as with the American author and educator Susannah Heschel.

Hetty Berg has been a member of the Liberal Jewish Community in Amsterdam for over 40 years. Together with her partner, the French photographer Frédéric Brenner, she travels regularly to Israel.

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Miriam Goldmann

Exhibition Curator, Jewish Museum Berlin

Miriam Goldmann has been an exhibition curator at the Jewish Museum Berlin since 1999. She curated the exhibitions *A Is for Jewish: Journeys through Now in 22 Letters* (2018), *Cherchez la femme* (2017), *The Whole Truth... Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Jews* (2013), *Kosher & Co.: On Food and Religion* (2009), and *Typical! Clichés about Jews and Others* (2008). She was also part of the curatorial team for the JMB's new core exhibition, which opened in 2020. Miriam studied Jewish Studies in Freiburg, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the Free University Berlin.