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## **The Story of the Seven Gates**

### **Visible bodies, invisible bodies and lost souls**

Daniel van Mourik

It is Monday morning, the first day of our Summer University week in which we will talk about new ideas on the body and on sexuality in Judaism and about their implications for Judaism and Christianity.

We all have a body so we are supposed to know what it is and what it means to have one, but when we talk or read about it, it seems as if we came from different planets. Even within monotheistic religions that have as a ruler the One and Only God, we find contradictory ideas stemming from different interpretations of His words. The body can be seen as a vessel of good and evil, or as a Temple; it can be seen as a prison, or as a guesthouse of the soul; as a source of esthetic and sensual delight, or as a despicable bag of flesh; as something that needs to be punished and starved, to neglect and hide, or as something to admire, to adorn and to take care of. It can be seen as a wild animal that needs to be tamed, or it can be perceived as a passive erotic object. Our bodies can be thought of as the essence of our individuality or, on the contrary, not at all our most essential part. They can be viewed as material things that we may manipulate, dissect and control, or as spiritual gateways.

To confound our discussions further, these ideas are never adhered to by all people sharing one framework of religious or ideological thought. Moreover, in their elaborations and practical consequences these views on the body are usually handled differently when applied to the bodies of women or those of men, the bodies of people from different ethnic groups, religions, cultures or nationalities, or people with sexual preferences varying from the

heterosexual one.

I should like to take you on a short trip through the inner city of Amsterdam. For what could be a better way of talking about the body than inviting you for an imaginary walk? When one is walking, one has to use one's legs, one's eyes, one's touch and smell, one's mind and heart, in order to move through the streets and to absorb everything that one experiences.

There is one more reason for my choosing the city, in our case Amsterdam, as a metaphor. It is not a new thought to consider the city and its inhabitants as a kind of body. Therefore, a stroll through the city might teach us something about the subject of this conference: the body in Judaism in particular, and the body in Western culture in general.

Let me, first of all, introduce your guide to you. She is a woman in her forties, born a romancatholic, but already from an early age a disbeliever. Her feminism and her homosexual lifestyle made her critical of antibody, antiwoman and homophobic tendencies in western Christian culture and made her look for better ideas elsewhere. After marrying a female husband and housewife of Jewish descent, she became strongly 'angejiddelt'.

I, as your guide this morning, will give you my subjective views on the city of Amsterdam, while carrying my backpack containing a hodgepodge of influences of which the Jewish tradition and culture, at least here in The Netherlands, has alas become the least visible one for most nonJewish people.

One of the signs of a renewed visibility has been the recent appearance of a book by young, Dutch Jews titled: *Macho's and Princesses, Eros and the Jews*.

Talking about the body is also talking about sexuality, and as W.C. Fields has said: 'Some things are better than sex, some are worse, but there is nothing exactly like it.' So I will briefly talk about this book, before we make our promised tour.

I am, indeed, extremely happy that the book *Macho's and Princesses* solves a couple of what are, for outsiders, Jewish mysteries, so that I shall not be obliged to go into intimate details of my mixed marriage. My husband and wife has, you see maybe very Jewishly threatened to

divorce me if I would make too personal a statement. But, as I said, everything you always wanted to know about Jews and sexuality but didn't dare to ask, has been answered in the book I just mentioned.

Read the story of standup comedian Raoul Heertje, who reveals in a letter to non-Jews the most hidden secrets of Jewish sexuality, the Jewish nipple, Jewish breasts, the Jewish penis and Jewish semen. In other stories you find the ultimate truths about Jewish men: they are either clumsy and frustrated or sexually uncommonly potent. And about Jewish women: they are totally asexual Jewish princesses, or they are damned good in bed.

In fact, all my prejudices got confirmed and also those I have towards the goyim, the nonJews, especially goyish women, the 'shiksese': they are either frustrated bitches, or wild sexual animals.

After this brief detour, let us, according to good Jewish oral tradition, start our city trip with a preliminary stop at one of the rare kosher restaurants on the outskirts of Amsterdam, next to the far end of the Vondelpark. On the wall of this restaurant there is a mural. It shows all kinds of historical events and locations in Israel. Among them, we see a fragment of the Kotel, the Western Temple Wall or, in Christian language, the 'Wailing Wall'. On this painting, quite contrary to reality, we don't see any people praying at the Wall. Also, the division of the Wall, two third for men, one third for women, remains invisible.

I still remember a conflict at the Wall that happened a couple of years ago and that hasn't been solved yet. One day, the women at the Kotel began to pray loudly. The men, at the other side of the fence, immediately started yelling hysterically and threw chairs at the women. Kol isha, a woman's voice, is considered by male ultraorthodox Jews to lead to yetzer hara, the evil inclination. Women's voices are said to seduce men and to distract them from their sacred obligations such as prayer. They therefore may not be heard during prayer, they must be forbidden.

But let us dwell no longer in this cosy restaurant where Hebrew religious music is heard in the background, but hit the road and dedicate ourselves to our walk. Or, like my husband would say: and now tacheles.

### **The First Gate: The Gate of the Garden of Eden**

The first gate through which we enter the city is the gate that gives entrance to the Vondelpark. It is a beautiful day, one of the first days of spring after a cold and severe winter. Older people, huddled in their coats, sunbathe themselves on the benches. Audacious youngsters undress their bodies as much as possible and stretch themselves out on the damp grass. Others make music, do TaiChi, perform acrobatics, play soccer, or are taken out by their dogs. On the paved roads skaters enjoy the movement of their bodies. One can hear the laughter of children in the playground. Lovers of all sexes, colours and preferences, touch and kiss each other.

I try to picture the park as it was seventy years, or even only thirty years ago. Then there was also joy and laughter and all the pleasures of being outside, but there was much less physical expression except by the children. In those times, grownups behaved and dressed in a way that was more a manifestation of decency and shame, of hiding their bodies, than of joyfully showing and using them. Thus the body has, at least as seen from the outside, been liberated from its former strait

jacket. However, from time to time one can still see reminders of the past walking by in the Vondelpark: a group of Chassidim in their dark seventeenthcentury clothes; Islamic women in their djelleba's and with headcovering.

Now, what has happened in our western culture that has brought about these changes? Have we really returned to the Garden of Eden? Have we indeed found back our childlike innocence and thus the unhemmed enjoyment of our bodies? Have we finally cast off our western, Christian tradition of denial and contempt of the body? But what about those Chassidim? Don't Jews have a more positive attitude towards the body? Isn't that what Judaic tradition tells us? And if that is true, why then have books been written like Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* or Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*? What is or was so revolutionary about the blowjob of a kosher liver on Roth's hero, or about a zipless fuck, as described by the other

American Jewish author, Erica Jong?

But let's first continue our walk.

### **The Second Gate: The Gate of Consumer's Delight**

At the other end of the Vondelpark we enter, through the second gate, a part of the city that consists of sidewalkcafé's, bars, disco's, coffeeshops that sell soft drugs, numerous restaurants and an abundance of shops and department stores.

The people in this part of the city amuse themselves with drinking, blowing, eating, dancing and most of all shopping. Day after day they carry, with unflagging zeal, their bulging plastic shopping bags home, in order to stuff their contents into their already cramped houses and refrigerators, or hang them around their bodies. This must be for them a perpetual feast of oral joy and bodyadornment.

In this part of the city we also find the paradise of anal joy. Here is the territory of male homosexuals: streets lined with bars of all kinds, with saunabaths, leatherbars and darkrooms. A paradise of weird outfits, mutual masturbation and bodily contacts that seem to defy Aids.

No, we are not entering one of those leatherbars or the Roxy, a decadent disco where you get a straight look into hell, although I know that you are very curious. This will be a decent daytrip and we will now climb the stairs of the distinguished and expensive departmentstore Metz where, in the tearoom at the top, we can have, for free, a view of the city behind the third gate.

### **The Third Gate: The Gate of the Rational Mind**

One has to be outside the body of the city or a little bit above it, in order to discern its protruding limbs: its banks and officebuildings, its universities, hospitals and sportstadium, its prisons and, on taking a closer look, its churches.

The steeples of the churches that once dominated the city skyline have by now been surpassed by more secular buildings. All these worldly buildings have one thing in common that stands in sharp contrast to the churches: they have sacrificed the soul in favour of the body. They

put the main emphasis on the physical parts of the body, like in hospitals, or on physical achievements, like in sportpalaces, or they favour the rational mind and the material brain, like in universities, industries and businesses. The churches, on the other hand, always had a tendency to sacrifice the body symbolized by the crucified body of Jesus (the most succesful icon of the last two thousand years) in favour of the soul.

On entering the secular buildings, one notices at once that they are very much alive, crowded with people who work there, who are clients or patients, public or visitors. But whenever one should want to enter a church now, it is usually closed, or it has been transformed into a cultural center, a gallery or a disco. If the latter has not happened yet, one sees in the churches at the best a handful of mostly elderly people who are saying their prayers.

I wonder whether the sacrifice of the soul was a necessary step in the liberation of the body and whether there are any gates in the city that can show us a more sophisticated approach to it. But let's first descend from our tearoom and enter the fourth gate.

### **The Fourth Gate: The Gate of the Red Lights**

It is only a tiny step from the world of huge stores and broad streets to the oldest part of the city, with its narrow streets, its dark, smelling alleys, its old, crooked houses with their cosy red lights, and their inviting women of all ages under forty, of all skin colours and from different countries. Here men of all skin colours mix intimately with the bodies of women of all skin colours. If there is one part of the city where the ideal of a multiracial and multicultural society has been realized, then it is here. For almost all tourists and for many inhabitants this is the most romantic spot in town. It is the number one site to visit.

I know it is hard to admit, but the gate through which we entered this section of the town could as well be called 'The Gate of Slavery', or 'The Gate to the Garbage Dump'. That is, because everything you see here is false. The mixing of races has nothing in common with real respect for people from other countries and cultures. The women kept here are mostly the drugged slaves of men who have lured them into the trap of a 'nice job' in a rich western country.

The sexual intercourse practiced behind the red lights is not a lustful meeting of two

bodies, but mostly paid 'garbage can sex', a mechanical dumping of semen into a vessel called woman. The seemingly cosy rooms are a facade to hide the innumerable sad stories of exploitation, violence and misogyny. If there is one part of the city where the bodies of women are at the same time visible and invisible, then it is here.

Is this the ultimate outcome of a Christian culture that not only denied and loathed the body, but above all despised women's bodies? Of a culture that, for centuries, has been dividing women into virgins, whores and housewives? On the other hand, all cultures even Jewish culture with its life and bodyaffirming values have known and still have prostitution.

As a guide, I feel I am on the wrong track now. It is not essential whether there are or are not prostitutes in any given culture. The relevant question, the one that Freud already asked, is: 'Was will das Weib?' What does a woman want?

Freud asked his famous question more as a rhetorical phrase, a confirmation of women's mysteriousness, than as a question directed to women themselves. It wasn't Freud's intention to really get an answer.

Well, maybe some women want to be prostitutes, and others want to be virgins or housewives, but there ought to be more opportunities for women than either spending your life in a monastery or in a brothel or in a patriarchal household.

It is a fact that most existing cultures today are still patriarchal. The identity of women in these cultures is being defined in relation to men. Women in general do not own their own bodies. This disembodied state is connected with their voicelessness. As long as they do not talk, do not give words to their own experiences, they not only remain mysterious but they are also a mystery to themselves.

Since the late sixties women all over the world have begun to give voice to their own ideals, feelings and experiences. They especially try to describe their attitude towards their own female bodies. The redefinition is in progress of a body that has always been colonized by patriarchal cultures and which, moreover, was only concerned with its heterosexual use. Now as soon as women raise their voices they become dangerous, because they are attacking the old male order. That is what happened at the Kotel in Jerusalem. The fear of the men is not the fear

of yetzer hara, of sexual temptation, but a fear that goes much deeper. It is the ageold fear of autonomous women who start to express, in their own voices, their own ideas about themselves. It is the fear of the final collapse of the patriarchal social order in which men are dependent on the position they ascribe to women. In this respect, female liberation is one of the most revolutionary movements of this century.

These thoughts and remarks run through my mind as I stand in a part of the city that once housed many monasteries and churches. You all know, of course, that Amsterdam has for centuries been a city of merchants and ministers. Religion and trade have always been perfect partners as long as they lived apart together.

Well, at least in former times the soul was not completely lost. But all that remains here now, is trade and trade only: trade in women, trade in sex, trade in drugs. It surely is a romantic part of the city that we have just visited. But it surely is also time for a little something to chase away the sadness and the anger that it evokes.

Maybe I took you on the wrong tour. Maybe I should have gone with you to the movies, to the theater, to a café for standup comedians, to the zoo, to some famous shuls or to an interesting church or museum: to all those nice places in the city that are like jewels on a body. But my task was to show you the body itself. So let us continue to the heart of the city, the fifth gate.

### **The Fifth Gate: The Destroyed Gate**

There is no gate. We just enter this part of the city. Here, in the very center there are many new buildings, new streets, a modern operahouse and the new cityhall. Something has happened here, this part of town looks uprooted, as if a bombardment had blown away all the older buildings and everything else there ever was.

As you may know, it was not a bombardment, it was citypolicy by the city magistrates, shortly after the Second World War. After the destruction of almost all Jews of Amsterdam, after the coldblooded murder of six million European Jews, the annihilation of their bodies and their culture, local authorities, like a surgeon, cut away that part of the city that once was the heart of

Jewish life.

The Hebrew word for heart is lev or levav. It refers not only to the physical heart but also to the inner life, both emotional and intellectual. Whenever the word lev (or levav) is used in Tenach, the Hebrew Bible, no sharp distinction is made between mind (or soul) and body. In Judaism there is always a bodyawareness that is closely connected to a positive attitude towards conscious life on earth. People are God's coworkers on this earth, meant to complete the creation, to contribute to tikkun olam. That task makes their physical existence essential and something to honour.

In Christianity, asceticism and bodydenial will surely bring you into heaven. But in Judaism one cannot enter heaven if one didn't enjoy the good things of life. It is difficult to understand that the One and Only God made two heavens, or perhaps more, but it must be a part of the divine plan.

There is a scar in this city, there where the Jewish heart has been destroyed. The mere handful of Jews who returned to Amsterdam after the times of the Shoah, and their offspring, are constantly aware of it, whereas fifty years after our liberation from the Germans most inhabitants don't even feel the itching of the scar.

There are still some reminders of a living past here, like the old synagogues that are now used as the Jewish Historical Museum. One unusually large, Sephardic synagogue is still in use a few times a year, but by an extremely small community. Most presentday Jews don't live here anymore. They have moved to the very outskirts of Amsterdam and to the nearby town of Amstelveen.

I do not want to imply that this destroyed neighbourhood was a romantic place before the war. It certainly was not a kind of shtetl with fiddlers on the roof, with Tevye the Dairyman telling funny stories and everywhere the smell of chickensoup. The Jewish quarter was a place of poverty, of bad health and very poor housing. But the physical destruction of its inhabitants, the annihilation of its culture and the final tearing down of its neighbourhood has made this part of the city into a place of shame and neglect, a monument of not taking care. Its empty lots are a

reminder of all the collaborators who handed over the bodies, hearts and souls of their Jewish fellowcitizens to the antisemitic occupiers. By doing so they have sold their own hearts and souls to a perverse ideology.

It is right on this spot that Mokum, as Amsterdam is called in Yiddish parlance, has died and with it her neshomme, her heart and soul.

Let us sit down for a moment in the café of the Jewish Historical Museum and order some kosher cheesecake and coffee. After our brief tour, I will make a few more remarks and give you here my personal final conclusions.

In the beginning there was the park, the joy and laughter behind the 'Gate of the Garden of Eden' and at the end the silence of the empty space and its 'Destroyed Gate'. In between we have seen the 'Gate of Consumer's Delight', the 'Gate of the Rational Mind' and the 'Gate of the Red Lights'.

Well, surely this is not a city, like Jerusalem, that got its blueprint from a heavenly counterpart. However, even Amsterdam has its own intangible city. Above the city there is emerging:

### **The Sixth Gate: The Gate of the Digital City of Amsterdam**

Here people are communicating in a disembodied way, by electronic means. In this case exactly the opposite from Jerusalem the 'heavenly city' has as its origin the physical one below.

A city of the future, one that constantly oscillates between two extremes, is coming into being. Its roots are in the hedonistic, materialistic and exploitative use of the body and its crown is the disembodied world of bits and bytes.

One has to look very carefully to find an undercurrent in this city of a critical appreciation of the body and of a more spiritually informed bodily awareness. One can find bits and pieces of it in the so-called 'alternative' cultures of feminists, gay people, artists and newcomers in this land. One can also find it among progressive, liberal Jewish thinkers who try to integrate modern ideas

with the Judaic tradition. The Jewish tradition, besides being one of the roots of Christianity, is important as an antidote to western values that are tainted by the Christian mentality of bodydenial and misogyny.

In certain periods of history Judaism used to be more womenfriendly than other religions; body and soul used to be both positively perceived, as intertwined aspects of the whole human being. On the other hand, several of its ideas notably on the subjects of sexuality and gender are by now outdated, they also have become obsolete.

It is here that Phillip Roth and Erica Jong come into the picture. Their books were a violent attack on existing values. They were an effort to liberate sexuality out of the confinement of marriage, a system of discriminatory regulations and of patriarchal definitions.

But there is more to the job than smashing a brick wall. The Western body is in bad shape. It has crucified itself to a very limited definition of the body. Something essential is missing. There is a hole in it through which the heart and soul have disappeared, as symbolized in this city by the physical destruction of Amsterdam Jewry and its quarter.

By digging out the 'Destroyed Gate' and what lay behind it, we can finally enter:

### **The Seventh Gate, the Golden Gate**

The body is itself the 'Golden Gate', because it is the memoryhouse of all the good and bad experiences we ever had and at the same time the treasurehouse of knowledge, understanding and wisdom. Through it we can shape our lives in this and in the future world. It is up to us to make use of all its possibilities, both the physical and the spiritual, in undivided cooperation and concord.

Let us try to enter through this Gate.

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