

ON VIRGINITY: SEXUALITY, GENDER, AND IDENTITY IN
MEDIEVAL ASHKENAZI JEWISH CULTURE
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Abstract

This paper presents a subchapter from the forthcoming monograph: *On Virginitly: Sexuality, Gender, and Identity in Medieval Ashkenazi Jewish Culture*, which examines the poetics and politics that shaped the concept of virginity in Jewish tradition against the socio-cultural and historical background of Western European culture in the High Middle Ages (12th-15th centuries). It broaches a virtually unexplored topic, offering the first detailed and comprehensive survey of virginity in Judaism, exposing its function as a determining factor of women's identity, personal and social status, and as an essential religious category in medieval Jewish discourse. The excerpt presented here is taken from the beginning of the third section of the book, which will present the construction of virginity and its loss in the halachic discourse on *Be'ilat Mišvah* (i.e., ritual defloration of the virgin bride). The rise of new medieval genres created a new literary unit, which I refer to as “tractate *Be'ilat Mišvah*.” I claim that in this tractate a bride's virginity serves as the central axis of the ritual procedure, with her defloration the ultimate goal of the entire process. I focus on the formulation of two fixed components of this ritual: the regulation of the physical act by means of the ritual injunction that the man “engages in the first act intercourse and then separates from her” (*bo'el u-foresh*) and the blessing recited by the groom after the act of intercourse— “blessing of virginity” (*birkat betulim*)—which concludes the ritual sequence.