

## ***Hishtadel L'hiyot Ish: Crafting A Contemporary Jewish Ethic of Masculinity***

### **1. Pirkei Avot (Ethics of Our Fathers) 2:5**

הוא הִיהָ אוֹמֵר, אֵין בּוֹר יֵרָא חֲטָא, וְלֹא עִם הָאֲרָץ חֲסִיד, וְלֹא הִבִּישׁן לְמִיד, וְלֹא הִקְפִּדן מִלְּמִיד, וְלֹא כָל הַמְרַבֵּה  
בְּסַחֲרָה מְחִפִּים. וּבְמָקוֹם שֶׁאֵין אָנָשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לִהְיוֹת אִישׁ:

He was accustomed to say: A boor cannot fear sin. An ignorant person cannot be pious. A person prone to being ashamed cannot learn. An impatient person cannot teach. Not all who engage in a lot of business become wise. In a place where there is no man, strive to be a man.

### **2. “The Boys Are Not All Right”**

Michael Ian Black, *The New York Times*, February 21, 2018

Last week, 17 people, most of them teenagers, were shot dead at a Florida school. Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School now joins the ranks of Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, Columbine and too many other sites of American carnage. What do these shootings have in common? Guns, yes. But also, boys. Girls aren't pulling the triggers. It's boys. It's almost always boys.

America's boys are broken. And it's killing us.

The brokenness of the country's boys stands in contrast to its girls, who still face an abundance of obstacles but go into the world increasingly well equipped to take them on.

The past 50 years have redefined what it means to be female in America. Girls today are told that they can do anything, be anyone. They've absorbed the message: They're outperforming boys in school at every level. But it isn't just about performance. To be a girl today is to be the beneficiary of decades of conversation about the complexities of womanhood, its many forms and expressions. Boys, though, have been left behind. No commensurate movement has emerged to help them navigate toward a full expression of their gender. It's no longer enough to “be a man” — we no longer even know what that means.

Too many boys are trapped in the same suffocating, outdated model of masculinity, where manhood is measured in strength, where there is no way to be vulnerable without being emasculated, where manliness is about having power over others. They are trapped, and they don't even have the language to talk about how they feel about being trapped, because the language that exists to discuss the full range of human emotion is still viewed as sensitive and feminine....

Case in point: A few days ago, I posted a brief thread about these thoughts on Twitter, knowing I would receive hateful replies in response. I got dozens of messages impugning my manhood; the

mildest of them called me a “soy boy” (a common insult among the alt-right that links soy intake to estrogen).

And so the man who feels lost but wishes to preserve his fully masculine self has only two choices: withdrawal or rage. We’ve seen what withdrawal and rage have the potential to do. School shootings are only the most public of tragedies. Others, on a smaller scale, take place across the country daily; another commonality among shooters is a history of abuse toward women.

To be clear, most men will never turn violent. Most men will turn out fine. Most will learn to navigate the deep waters of their feelings without ever engaging in any form of destruction. Most will grow up to be kind. But many will not.

We will probably never understand why any one young man decides to end the lives of others. But we can see at least one pattern and that pattern is glaringly obvious. It’s boys.

I believe in boys. I believe in my son. Sometimes, though, I see him, 16 years old, swallowing his frustration, burying his worry, stomping up the stairs without telling us what’s wrong, and I want to show him what it looks like to be vulnerable and open but I can’t. Because I was a boy once, too. There has to be a way to expand what it means to be a man without losing our masculinity. I don’t know how we open ourselves to the rich complexity of our manhood. I think we would benefit from the same conversations girls and women have been having for these past 50 years.

I would like men to use feminism as an inspiration, in the same way that feminists used the civil rights movement as theirs. I’m not advocating a quick fix. There isn’t one. But we have to start the conversation. Boys are broken, and I want to help.

### **3. “A Master’s Degree in ... Masculinity?”**

Jessica Bennett, *The New York Times*, August 8, 2015

Michael Kimmel stood in front of a classroom in bluejeans and a blazer with a pen to a whiteboard. “What does it mean,” the 64-year-old sociology professor asked the group, most of them undergraduates, “to be a good man?”

The students looked puzzled.

“Let’s say it was said at your funeral, ‘He was a good man,’ ” Dr. Kimmel explained. “What does that mean to you?”

“Caring,” a male student in the front said.

“Putting others’ needs before yours,” another young man said.

“Honest,” a third said.

Dr. Kimmel listed each term under the heading Good Man, then turned back to the group. “Now,” he said, “tell me what it means to be a *real man*.”

This time, the students reacted more quickly.

“Take charge; be authoritative,” said James, a sophomore.

“Take risks,” said Amanda, a sociology graduate student.

“It means suppressing any kind of weakness,” another offered.

“I think for me being a real man meant talk like a man,” said a young man who’d grown up in Turkey. “Walk like a man. Never cry.”

Dr. Kimmel had been taking notes. “Now you’re in the wheelhouse,” he said, excitedly. He pointed to the Good Man list on the left side of the board, then to the Real Man list he’d added to the right.

“Look at the disparity. I think American men are confused about what it means to be a man.”

You’ve heard of women’s studies, right? Well, this is men’s studies: the academic pursuit of what it means to be male in today’s world. Dr. Kimmel is the founder and director of the [Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities](#) at Stony Brook University, part of the State University of New York system, which will soon start the first master’s degree program in “masculinities studies.”

#### 4. “Today’s Masculinity Is Stifling”

Sarah Rich, *The Atlantic*, June 11, 2018

To embrace anything feminine, if you’re not biologically female, causes discomfort and confusion, because throughout most of history and in most parts of the world, being a woman has been a disadvantage. Why would a boy, born into all the power of maleness, reach outside his privileged domain? It doesn’t compute.

As much as feminism has worked to rebalance the power and privilege between the sexes, the dominant approach to launching young women into positions that garner greater respect, higher status, and better pay still mostly maintains the association between those gains and masculine qualities. Girls’ empowerment programs teach assertiveness, strength, and courage—and they must to equip young women for a world that still overwhelmingly favors men.

Last year, when the Boys Scouts of America announced that they would begin admitting girls into their dens, young women saw a wall come down around a territory that was now theirs to occupy. Parents across the country had argued that girls should have equal access to the activities and pursuits of boys’ scouting, saying that Girl Scouts is not a good fit for girls who are “more rough and tumble.” But the converse proposition was essentially nonexistent: Not a single article that I could find mentioned the idea that boys might not find Boy Scouts to be a good fit—or, even more unspeakable, that they would want to join the Girl Scouts....

While society is chipping away at giving girls broader access to life’s possibilities, it isn’t presenting boys with a full continuum of how they can be in the world. To carve out a masculine identity requires whittling away everything that falls outside the norms of boyhood. At the earliest ages, it’s

about external signifiers like favorite colors, TV shows, and clothes. But later, the paring knife cuts away intimate friendships, emotional range, and open communication.

There's research connecting this shedding process to the development, in some adolescent boys, of depression, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. In her 2014 documentary *The Mask You Live In*, the filmmaker Jennifer Siebel Newsom features the voices of dozens of teen boys describing their progression from childhoods rich with friendships to teen years defined by posturing and pressure to prove their manhood. Some of the boys, who present tough exteriors, admit to having suicidal thoughts. The film flashes news clips from the most notable mass shootings of that time—Virginia Tech, Aurora, Sandy Hook—each committed by a young man.

“Whether it’s homicidal violence or suicidal violence, people resort to such desperate behavior only when they are feeling shamed and humiliated, or feel they would be, if they didn’t prove that they were real men,” the psychiatrist James Gilligan, who directed Harvard’s Center for the Study of Violence, says in the film.

There are so few positive variations on what a “real man” can look like, that when the youngest generations show signs of reshaping masculinity, the only word that exists for them is *nonconforming*. The term highlights that nobody knows what to call these variations on maleness. Instead of understanding that children can resist or challenge traditional masculinity from within the bounds of boyhood, it’s assumed that they’re in a phase, that they need guidance, or that they don’t want to be boys....

It’s important to note that there are children who do feel they’ve been born in the wrong body, who long for different anatomy, a different pronoun. Trans kids need to be supported and accepted. And, at the same time, not every boy who puts on a dress is communicating a wish to be a girl. Too often gender dysphoria is conflated with the simple possibility that kids, when not steered toward one toy or color, will just like what they like, traditional gender expectations notwithstanding. There is little space given to experimentation and exploration before a child’s community seeks to categorize them. Boyhood, as it is popularly imagined, is so narrow and confining that to press against its boundaries is to end up in a different identity altogether.

According to the San Jose State University sociologist Elizabeth Sweet, who studies gender in children’s toys throughout the 20th century, American gender categories are more rigid now than at any time in history, at least when it comes to consumer culture. There may be greater recognition in the abstract that gender exists along a spectrum, but for young children (and their parents), consumer products have a huge influence over identity development and presentation. ...

Somewhat ironically, those pink-forsaking parents of infant girls often find themselves, three years later, remarking that in spite of shielding their daughters from overly feminized colors, toys, and media, they’ve still turned out to be princess-obsessed preschoolers. The parents display lighthearted self-consciousness that they couldn’t render their girl immune to sparkles.

It's unlikely, though, that they shame their girls for their "girliness." They throw up their hands and acquiesce to an Elsa costume. By contrast, boys' parents tend to double down on reinforcing masculinity....

There's a word for what's happening here: misogyny. When school officials and parents send a message to children that "boyish" girls are badass but "girlish" boys are embarrassing, they are telling kids that society values and rewards masculinity, but not femininity. They are not just keeping individual boys from free self-expression, but they are keeping women down too.

It is lopsided to approach gender equality by focusing only on girls' empowerment. If society is to find its way to a post-#MeToo future, parents, teachers, and community members need to build a culture of boyhood that fosters empathy, communication, caretaking, and cooperation. But how? Could there be a space or an organization for boys where they're encouraged to challenge what's expected of them socially, emotionally, and physically? What would the activities be? What would the corresponding catchwords be to the girls' "brave" and "strong" other than "cowardly" and "weak"?

It's a societal loss that so many men grow up believing that showing aggression and stifling emotion are the ways to signal manhood. And it's a personal loss to countless little boys who, at best, develop mechanisms for compartmentalizing certain aspects of who they are and, at worst, deny those aspects out of existence.

## 5. "What Feminists Can Do For Boys"

Jessica Valenti, *The New York Times*, July 25, 2018

One of the many political ironies of our time is that feminism's most powerful cultural moment has coincided with the rise of extreme misogyny. While women protest, run for office and embrace the movement for gender equality in record numbers, a generation of young, mostly white men are being radicalized into believing that their problems stem from women's progress.

Whether it's [misogynist terrorism](#), the rash of young men feeling sexually entitled to women or the persistent stereotype of "real men" as powerful and violent, it's never been clearer that American boys are in desperate need of intervention.

Though feminists have always recognized the anguish that boys face in a patriarchal system, we haven't built the same structures of support for boys that we have for girls. If we want to stop young men from being taken in by sexism, that has to change.

...[B]oys and young men who are struggling have no equivalent culture. As [Sarah Rich recently wrote in](#) *The Atlantic*, "While society is chipping away at giving girls broader access to life's possibilities, it isn't presenting boys with a full continuum of how they can be in the world."

This gap has made boys susceptible to misogynist hucksters peddling get-manly-quick platitudes and dangerous online extremist communities....Online misogynist communities offer similarly

dangerous advice to young men distressed over sexual rejection. Instead of teaching them that their value has nothing to do with their sexual experience — or that they are simply not entitled to sexual attention no matter how badly they want it — “incel” forums tell boys that the real problem is women’s freedom. If women didn’t have a choice, they say, then any man could have sex with whomever he liked.

Boys and young men are not seeking these spaces out because they inherently hate women or think they are inferior. They seek them out because they are desperate for community and answers in a confusing time of their lives. ...

## 6. Pirkei Avot (Ethics of Our Fathers) 4:1

בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם, שנאמר (תהלים קיט) מכל מלמדי השכלתי כי עדותיך שיחה לי. איזהו גבור, הכובש את יצרו, שנאמר (משלי טז) טוב ארך אפים מגבור ומשל ברוחו מלכד עיר. איזהו עשיר, השמח בחלקו, שנאמר (תהלים קכח) יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך. אשריך, בעולם הזה. וטוב לך, לעולם הבא. איזהו מכבד, המכבד את הבריות, שנאמר (שמואל א ב) כי מכבדי אכבד ובזי יקלו:

Ben Zoma says: Who is the wise one? He who learns from all men, as it says, "I have acquired understanding from all my teachers" (**Psalms 119:99**). Who is the mighty one? He who conquers his impulse, as it says, "slowness to anger is better than a mighty person and the ruler of his spirit than the conqueror of a city." (**Proverbs 16:32**). Who is the rich one? He who is happy with his lot, as it says, "When you eat [from] the work of your hands, you will be happy, and it will be well with you" (**Psalms 128:2**). "You will be happy" in this world, and "it will be well with you" in the world to come. Who is honored? He who honors the created beings, as it says, "For those who honor Me, I will honor; and those who despise Me will be held in little esteem" (**I Samuel 2:30**).

## 6. Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, 1997

In a recent review of my earlier work, Miriam Peskowitz has recorded her students’ images of traditional Jewish males, imagined as ancient rabbis;

In the imagination of my students, the Rabbis of Roman Palestine and Sassanian Babylonia are “little old Jewish guys,” ‘nice, sweet,’ ‘kind of grandfatherly.’ They are ‘bearded’ and ‘balding.’ ....Rabbis are imaged as ‘sitting, studying,’ ‘hunched over,’ and ‘slight of frame,’ They ‘would have worn glasses, had they been invented.’ My students’ ancient Rabbis do not pole vault across the Jordan river to engage a bathing woman who turns out to be a man, and Rabbi Yohanan at that, as in b. Baba Metzia 84a. Nor do they contemplate sexual desires and trade hints about sexual techniques for the marital bedroom (b. Nedarim 20 a-b), or hide beneath their teacher’s bed to listen to and analyze the sounds of sexual intercourse (b. Hagiga 5b). Invariably my students think ancient “rabbis” are ‘very unattractive,’ if their bodies can be imagined at all.

Peskowitz's students know something about the Rabbis, but there is something else they clearly do not get. In early modern eastern Europe, the ideal Jewish male, the Rabbi or talmudic student, was indeed characterized by qualities that made him very different from, in fact almost the exact opposite of, the "knight in shining armor" heartthrob of our romantic culture. The East European Jewish ideal of a gentle, timid, and studious male--*Edelkayt*--moreover, does have origins that are very deeply rooted in traditional Jewish culture, going back at least in part to the Babylonian Talmud. These characteristics, however, were not supposed to render the male even slightly unappealing, let alone "very unattractive," For Peskowitz's American students, even American Jews, the gentleness of the rabbinic male can only be imagined as sexlessness, encoded as unattractiveness, because these students (like most of us) have been molded so thoroughly by the "dominant fiction" of gender that our culture maintains. A gentle, studious, sweet man can only be imagined as old, nearsighted (i.e., castrated?) and could not possibly be attractive sexually. In the readings that follow this introduction, we will see that such a man is interpreted as anything but sexless within rabbinic texts; indeed, his is represented as the paramount desiring male subject and object of female desire.