

Woman's own

In her Jerusalem workshops, Beverly Damelin teaches women about female sexuality, with the help of some very private toys

By Sarah Bronson

When Beverly Damelin, 33, obtained her Master's degree in public health from Hebrew University, she little dreamed she would someday give lectures about the nature of multiple orgasms.

The immigrant from South Africa spent several years teaching AIDS awareness in Israeli schools, counseling rape victims and working for research institutes specializing in women's health. After a while, she realized that she was talking mostly about the pathological aspects of sex, such as disease, unplanned pregnancy, and violence and that her students were "getting the message that sex is bad - that it's all about fear."

"The message should be more about healthy sexuality," she decided. "If we can recognize that, we can recognize unhealthy situations or bad communication."

With the goal of helping women overcome unrealistic media images of "what good sex looks like," Damelin received certification as a sex educator from Planned Parenthood of Israel, and has started a new business venture called The Dinah Project, in which she offers workshops to women about female sexuality, the history of sex toys, sexuality in art and other topics which serve as contexts for her message: that sexual gratification

is not a luxury, but rather a natural ability. By discovering it and developing it, we improve our health, our self-esteem and our relationships."

Most of the workshops take place in private homes, in the context of all-female parties, where, among other things, Damelin sells sex toys she imports from the United States. Though she loathes the title, she has become known, particularly within Jerusalem's Anglo community, as "the upperware lady of vibrators."

All talk, no action

At first, Damelin eschewed the idea of selling the devices at her workshops, and told the women to find what they need on the Internet or in local shops. But she soon realized that such advice contradicted her clients' need for discretion. One client, M., told *Anglo File* that Damelin is providing an important service because

"where else can we buy these things? If you buy on the Internet, you have to give out your financial information, and who knows who might open the package when it arrives. In New York and London you have classy, clean [shops] for women to buy sex toys. In Tel Aviv, I wouldn't know where to go. Should we go to a seedy place near the central bus station? And anyway, there's the language barrier. I wouldn't

want to go sex-toy shopping unless I could speak English."

Despite her new identity as a distributor of vibrators, Damelin hopes her customers take away from the workshops not just new toys, but new communication skills. "I'm here to teach," she said. "I want women to be able to put in words things they haven't felt comfortable expressing. We can't wait around for [men] to read our thoughts." The devices, she said, are useful because "it's easier to talk and joke [with one's partner] about a purple toy. It takes the pressure off."

Damelin says that often she must shatter as many myths about her workshops as she does about female sexuality. She wants readers to understand that her workshops are all talk, no action. "Despite male fantasies, this is not a sex festival. This is not an orgy," she emphasizes.

N., a single woman from Jerusalem's Katamon neighborhood, recently hosted a Damelin workshop in her home "to make Katamon a happier place." Due to her embarrassment, she invited only nine friends, but ultimately 30 women showed up. "They came out of the woodwork," N. said. "There was a group of married women in wigs who had come in from Beit Shemesh - I still don't know how they found out about it. And two girls who looked like ul-

tra-Orthodox teenagers came, bought vibrators, and left without talking to anyone."

The nature and topics of Damelin's workshops depends on the host and the guests. A bachelorette party would have a different character than a feminists' meeting, though Damelin says she tries to make all her workshops fun. M. described the party she attended as "sitting around, drinking wine and eating chocolate-covered strawberries, talking and giggling. Some of these women had never seen a vibrator before. The fact that they each left with one is astounding."

Loosening up

"When you get women away from their kids and their husbands, they want to let loose a little bit, which generally means a great discussion," said C., who hosted two parties which "went down like a house on fire. There were good vibes. Literally. Almost every woman came out with a new 'friend.'"

N. recalls that after Damelin's presentation, many of the married participants went outside to call their husbands on their cell phones. "They were like 'honey, the one I want costs 300 NIS. Do you think we can afford it? I could buy a cheaper one instead,'" N. said. "All the husbands were really supportive. One woman told me

that her husband had been setting money aside so that she could buy whatever she wanted."

The Dinah Project is named for the biblical daughter of Jacob and Leah. In Genesis Chapter 34, Dinah is visiting other women when she is taken by Shechem, who rapes her. Jacob arranges for Dinah to marry Shechem, but the story ends with Dinah's brothers killing Shechem's entire clan in revenge for the defilement of their sister.

Nowhere in the story's 31 verses do we hear Dinah's perspective. "Dinah is not a simple choice," admits Damelin, who grew up in a traditional Jewish home and wanted to name her work after a Jewish icon, rather than the more typical Greek goddesses. "We do not hear her voice. We cannot assume that she wanted the sex, but then again, we can't assume that she didn't. Her story does not have a positive outcome, but it raises questions about seeking the female experience in a male-dominated society."

A main component of Damelin's classes is the theme that women do not experience sex the way men do, nor the way men imagine that women do. "For too long men have been telling us what sex is all about," she said. "We're taking it back for ourselves. After all, a confident, pleased woman is in the interest of male partners."



Eyal Warshavsky/BauBau

Damelin at home with a set of "Ben Wa balls," an invention from the Far East.

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