

## Her Career Move from Pain to Pleasure

"You see? This is what happens when you don't use sex toys," 38-year-old **Beverley Damelin** joked, motioning to her burgeoning belly. Arrayed in front of the visibly pregnant Damelin were vibrators, all of which were for sale. But ratcheting up profits was not her goal for the evening. Unlike most sex-toy parties (think Tupperware soirees with dildos), this gathering in a Jerusalem apartment was about education. Damelin was there to teach the assembled women about female sexuality. And for the first time in her five years of running these seminars, Palestinian women sat with their Israeli counterparts as she launched into her spiel about orgasms.

Before anyone starts touting the vibrator as the solution to the decades-long conflict in the Middle East (or suggests that U.S. aid to the region be invested in sex shops), it is important to note that the Palestinians did not speak up throughout the session. Nor did they purchase any products. "They were not there to coexist," insists the South African-born Damelin. Like the Israelis, they were there simply to explore their sexuality with the help of a professional.

Since arriving in Israel 19 years ago, Damelin, who lives with her partner Shlomi in Tel Aviv, has earned a BA in Psychology from Tel Aviv University and a Masters in Public Health from Hebrew University. She is also certified as a Sexuality Educator by the Israeli Planned Parenthood Federation. But her career, which began at a rape crisis center, has evolved from pain to pleasure. "I was working with a lot of the pathological sides of sex: disease, unwanted pregnancy, rape. [I thought] that maybe the way to deal with these things is not by talking about negatives, such as saying, 'Don't rape,' but talking about the way it [sex] should happen," she says in her Anglo accent.

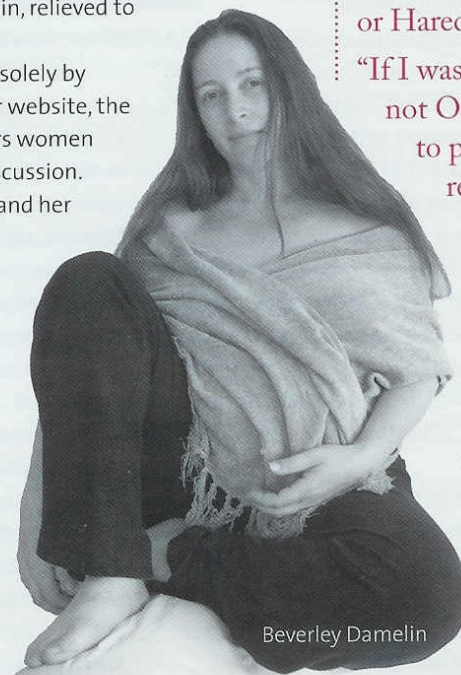
Which in Damelin's opinion is any way you want to do it so long as you're not hurting yourself or another. One of her goals is to celebrate sexual diversity, and she is admittedly peeved when less-trained sex-toy saleswomen reduce women's preferences to pat statements in order to push merchandise. "They say things like, 'Women like X,' or 'Oral sex is X,'" she notes. Damelin views the toys as simply a way of jumpstarting the conversation and thinks it's important to leave space for everyone's likes and dislikes. Especially since the women who attend her classes are often nervous at first and are trying to discover if they're "normal."

"They want to know if they're doing it right," she says. After a discussion about female ejaculation, a woman approached Damelin, relieved to know that her bladder wasn't broken.

In addition to the groups, news of which are spread solely by word of mouth, Damelin also informs the public via her website, the Dinah Project ([www.dinahproject.com](http://www.dinahproject.com)), where she offers women positive sexual information and an online forum for discussion.

Damelin's future goals are modest. She hopes to expand her groups from one-time-only events to extended series in order to delve deeper into Israeli sexual mores and taboos. And though she insists her parties are not part of a grander plan for Mideast peace, she hopes that meetings such as that one in Jerusalem are a good place to start. "The Palestinian women were actively listening," she says. Perhaps in the Israeli women's comments and questions they heard something familiar, some common ground, and that might be enough, at least to start. Damelin notes hopefully, "When change comes, it will be the women who bring it." No pun intended. But not unwelcome.

DVORA MEYERS



Beverley Damelin

When **Michal**, 28, opened her apartment door one Saturday night in June, she was expecting to find a client for her hair design business. Instead the Israeli divorcee, who left the Orthodox fold some three years earlier, found several ultra-Orthodox Jewish men. They threw her on the floor, gagged her, kicked her all over her body and questioned her relations with men, according to official accounts. After they beat her for at least 10 minutes, they warned her this was "just the beginning" and that if she continued to live there she would be killed.

Prosecutors filed charges in August against a 28-year-old man accused of being paid \$2,000 by a vigilante organization or "modesty squad" active in the religious Jerusalem neighborhoods of Mea Shearim and Geula for helping perpetrate the attack. Prosecutors say the goal of the group, dubbed the "Haredi modesty patrol," is to enforce community norms and conventions regarding modest attire and comportment in ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, neighborhoods.

"If I was doing something that was not OK, God has enough ways to punish me," Michal fumed recently in an interview at a Jerusalem coffee shop. "They don't have to take the law into their own hands. Who made himself God's policeman? Who has God given the right to come and beat someone in his name?"

**Brenda Gazzar**, from "Modesty Squad' Faces Legal Scrutiny in Israel," Women's E-news, Dec. 1, 2008