In a Jewish context, as noted, Pinhas Monselice’s work was exceptional in its focus on practical advice about family life and particularly its sexual aspects. A considerably different picture emerges when we examine *Tiferet Bahurim* against the background of advice literature in its European Gentile surroundings. This literature dates back to the early Middle Ages, reflecting the problematic place of the family in the thought of the Catholic Church. In an essay entitled “Le refus de plaisir,” historian Jacques Le Goff indicates that, following Augustine, the delay of bodily pleasure and the struggle against the body and displays of physicality emerged as a central component in the rise of Western European civilization. The most prominent expression of this trend was obviously in the sexual realm, which was identified with sin—the sin—and as the prohibition leading to hell. The sexual act is the agent through which original sin passes from generation to generation, staining humanity every time anew, particularly because of the passion that accompanies it very inception. The image that appears on the illustrated tympanum of the Moissac church, of serpents biting a naked woman’s breasts and genitals, haunts medieval culture as a whole. The Church’s sexual ethic was influenced by three significant events: the Gregorian Reformation, followed by separate definitions of sexual morality for laypeople as opposed to monks and Church officials, the victory of the irreversible monogamous (forbidding divorce) and

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2 On the destructive effect of passion on human sexuality after “lapsing into sin,” see Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 9–58. Passion corrupts the world order and human society, resulting in hunger, suffering, disease, and loss of innocence. The negative connotations of sexual passion stem from its perception as failing to comply with reason and leading to a concentration on bodily desires and their satisfaction at any cost. Sexual passion injures and damages the body through “ignorance, malice, weakness, and lust.”
exogamous (expanding the family circles with which marriage is precluded) models, and the identification of carnal sins with the sin of *lussuria*, which features among the seven mortal sins. Despite the considerable gap between the positions of the Church and the patterns of family life current at the time, the Church succeeded—according to Le Goff—in influencing the depth perceptions of large segments of the population. One clear indication of this success is the endorsement of the approach stating that the peasants’ unrestrained sexual behavior was behind the spread of leprosy. Marriage was this revolution’s great sacrifice and, although only allowed as a concession to the weakness of the flesh, it was infected by an unavoidable sin.

Catholic theologians and twelfth-century canon law jurists suggested a systematic discussion of the place of sex in human life and its role in the divine plan for humanity. The outline of this approach is evident in glosses on the Bible and on the comprehensive works of Gratian and Peter Lombard. These included concrete instructions for sexual behavior within marriage, according to structured categories of time and place and of the conditions appropriate for every couple. At their basis is the assumption that sex and eroticism do not convey the partners’ mutual love, and other forms of expression are available for this purpose. The post-factum legitimation of family life for “laypeople” (who did not choose a mission within the Church) was fundamentally problematic. It led to the structuring of a strict and formal system for the discussion of concrete instances of conjugal sexual relationships, accompanied by deep suspicions about the potential harm of libidinal release. At the center of this discussion was the *debitum coniugale* [mutual duty] of husbands and wives, and the provisions derived from the analogy between eros and the payment of a financial debt, such as the duty of mutual loyalty, full and mutual ownership of the partner’s body, or the definition of adultery as an unfair act injurious to ownership rights. The scheme of prohibitions is not confined to the assumption that sexual intercourse is allowed only within the marriage, and is also meant to set rules concerning the conjugal partners’ legitimate sexuality. Moreover, the discussion is not limited to the delimitation of actual sexual behavior, and extends to include the partners’ consciousness and intentionality. Traditions dating back to Stoic philosophy and introduced

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3 The Latin term *debitum* entails the obvious economic implication of returning a debt.