Discourse about virginity provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between physical and emotional categories, between body and mind, and between biology and culture. The term “virginity” is used in two different sometimes contradictory ways, both as a specific physical, biological marker that might objectively reveal the prior sexual experience of a female and as a label for the cultural state of a female who has had no previous sexual intercourse. While rabbinic literature seems to assume that the meaning of the two terms usually overlaps, in fact, however, it does report cases in which a virgin has no signs of virginity and a woman who has had intercourse shows signs of virginity. Biological signs do not necessarily provide help for emotional clarity. A careful examination of rabbinic literature, including specific cases from early modern Italy, reveals that bodily processes, among them sexually charged conditions that have significant cultural meaning such as virginity may be more of a state of mind than a demonstrable physical category.
The anthropologist Mary Douglas offers a taxonomy on the role of sexual relations in social systems that provides a paradigm for an analysis of approaches to virginity in Jewish life. Her basic premise is that social systems are based on contradictions, have self-defeating aspects, and can be at war with themselves and that there are three basic ways that societies resolve sexual ambiguities: 1) In some societies clear sexual roles are enforced by men at the expense of women by using violence, which might be lethal. In such systems there is no need for legal niceties or ritual concerns. As an example she gives the Walbiri of Australia. 2) In societies without much coercion, men and women enjoy closer, often sexually free relations. Such relationships are adjusted by means of subtle, legalistic, and practical institutions based on a fluidity of definitions and fictions to protect society. She gives many examples from Asia, such as South India, Ceylon, Southern Nagar, and the Nambundiri Brahmins of Malabar, as well as the Nuer of East Africa. 3) In some societies, the principle of male domination competes with other principles involving female independence and protection. Under such circumstances, without coercive devices, in order to establish clear boundaries between men and women, ideas of pollution are invoked. Under such circumstances, Douglas asserts, sexual relations are like a conflict between enemies and the man sees the woman as a source of pollution and danger. As an example she gives the Mae Enga of the Central Highlands of New Guinea. While Douglas gives different tribes as examples of each taxon, Jewish thinking about the body offers examples of all taxons.

The charge that a bride was not a virgin constituted a stain on family honor, both hers and his. Families, therefore, wanted to redeem their honor and save face after a terrible blow. The Bible offers an example of lethal force used in enforcing sexual behavior. A new bride accused of not producing signs of virginity on her wedding night was threatened with being stoned to death by the people (anshei) of the city at the door of her father’s house because she had done evil to the entire people by having intercourse while she lived in her father’s house, and it was necessary to extirpate the evil from the midst of the people. The biblical text, however, did not grant men absolute authority over women. Before she could be stoned, her parents had

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4 Deuteronomy 22:13–21; TB Ketubbot 11b, 36b; Hiddushei Haramban, Ketubbot