

The Halachic Perspective on Premarital Relationships

A common question in Jewish law is whether men and women can engage in a romantic relationship before marriage, including expressions of affection such as hugging and kissing. Many assume that Jewish law outright forbids any physical contact before a formal wedding, but the reality is far more nuanced. There are clear prohibitions against promiscuity and casual encounters, but there is also a **valid and structured halachic framework** that allows for an exclusive relationship outside of a full marriage.

One of the biggest misconceptions in this discussion is the concept of **pilegsh**. The term often carries negative connotations, as if it refers to something illicit or degrading, but that is entirely incorrect. **The true halachic definition of a pilegsh is simply a woman in an exclusive, committed relationship with a man without the formalities of a ketubah and kiddushin.** It is not an affair, nor is it a casual relationship. It is a legitimate and recognized structure in halacha, supported by major rabbinic authorities.

In **She'elat Ya'avetz (Vol. 2, Siman 15)**, **Rabbi Yaakov Emden** strongly defends the legitimacy of pilagshut, expressing frustration that his generation had abandoned this option. He argues that there is no halachic prohibition against it, as long as the relationship is **exclusive** and follows the laws of **niddah**, just as in a traditional marriage. The only difference is that it does not require a formal betrothal or a divorce document (get) if the relationship ends.

Historically, some authorities, such as the Rambam, ruled stringently on this matter, arguing that a pilegsh is only permitted to a king. However, this was a minority opinion, and there is **no clear Torah prohibition** against such a relationship. Many later rabbinic authorities acknowledged that pilagshut is fully permissible and that its rejection was more of a societal shift than a halachic necessity.

This discussion is especially relevant in today's world. In earlier generations, people married young, and cultural norms allowed for stricter enforcement of halachic boundaries. Today, however, the social reality is different. Expecting all individuals to avoid any form of romantic relationship until a full halachic marriage is finalized is simply **unrealistic** for most people. If the only halachic option is complete abstinence or full marriage, many will choose to ignore halachic guidelines altogether.

Instead, the **permissible and structured approach** is to acknowledge that an exclusive, committed relationship without formal marriage is entirely within halachic bounds. The Torah does not demand that every relationship must include a formal kiddushin; rather, it demands that relationships be **honest, exclusive, and conducted with proper halachic observance, particularly in regard to niddah.**

The time has come to clarify this issue and recognize that halacha provides multiple paths for relationships—ones that are both **permissible and practical**. Instead of forcing an unrealistic standard that drives people away, we should return to the halachic framework that has always existed and allow people to build meaningful and committed relationships within the bounds of Jewish law.