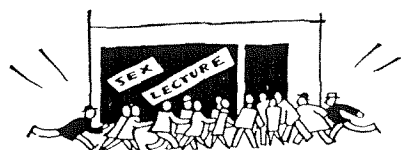




THE TALK OF THE TOWN

NOT TONIGHT DEPT.
DR. ESTHER



Twenty-odd couples, plus a handful of stags, out for a few hours on a summer evening. At going rates, that's nine hundred dollars' worth of babysitting, which is presumably about what it would cost for three hour-long sessions with Dr. Esther Perel, the SoHo psychotherapist whom they had all come to see at Mo Pitkin's, a bar on Avenue A. Normally, Perel—a motormouthed cosmopolite with twinkly eyes and a crooked smile—is the moderator of the Downtown Salon, a series of curated conversations put on by a progressive Jewish congregation that calls itself the New Schul. On a recent Thursday, however, she herself was holding forth. Tucking a piece of streaked hair back into bob formation, she began, "I'm resistant to number crunching—'How many times do we have sex in a month?' It's less about 'more' than about 'better.'"

Perel's speciality is culture and sexuality, and her forthcoming book, "Mating in Captivity," takes a hard line against one of the most time-honored, if not otherwise celebrated, institutions in human history: the sexless marriage. According to its jacket copy, the treatise "examines the conflict"—or the "existential dilemma," as Perel regards it—"between domesticity and sexual desire and explains what it takes to get lust back"; it reads like a cross between the works of Jacques Lacan and "French Women Don't Get Fat." For all those bored husbands and their overscheduled wives in flannel nightgowns, Perel's message is this: Democracy in the bedroom is erotically deadening. Stop

talking about why you have bad sex (in fact, stop talking so much, period). Dabble, if you wish, in light bondage, and cultivate "a sense of ruthlessness." To her patient Dominick, whose well-meaning seduction routine with his boyfriend involved preparing an osso-buco dinner, she asks, "Can you make a meal out of Raoul?" (Just hold the garlic.)

Back at the salon, the audience members listened raptly, clutching glasses of pinot grigio. "Parenthood is the fatal erotic blow," Perel said, as a woman rummaged for the cell phone that had erupted into a klezmer ring tone. "So you must blast the spontaneity myth, or the big-bang theory of sex," she continued. "You can't just leave it to the devices of chemistry." Invoking the scene in "Fiddler on the Roof" where Tevye asks his wife if she loves him, Perel suggested that the modern cult of romantic love has conflated two once-distinct roles: the person you lust after and the person who milks your cows. "We now turn to one person for what an entire community used to give," she said. In other words, it takes a village to have an orgasm.

After Perel's talk, the crowd broke into small groups. At one table, Gina Schmeling, who was six months pregnant, kicked off the discussion. "Our son is nearly three," she said. "He's in a relatively Oedipal stage and he's all over me all the time. He tries to kick Alani, my husband, out of bed."

(In case you're a couple dealing with this problem, Alani recommends "creating a dialogue with each other from the outset, a sort of metalanguage about alternative forms of being partnered.")

"Relationships, in a way, are a lot less exciting now that I'm at peace," a father of two with a small turquoise stud in his left ear said. His friend Sally Gottesman, who is expecting a baby, raised an eyebrow.

"What I mean is that they're better," he added.

Gottesman mentioned that she had recently hung out with some twenty-year-olds. "It was so fun," she said. "They weren't having sex with the same person every night—it's a very different energy from people in their forties."

"I know," Schmeling said. "The twenties were so free and sensual. Remember, you used to go to bars and stay out late and smoke?"

Once the larger crowd had reconvened to discuss the discussions, Perel called on Schmeling, who reported that her group had talked about the difficulties couples have finding time for each other, especially when one of them is nursing. "When the baby's finally sleeping, the last thing you want to do is give it out again," she said. "You're using your body all day. It's time to be a brain."

"Not just a nipple!" Perel interjected, before taking a final question from a man sitting on a barstool.

"How much of this dilemma is an American problem?" he asked.

Perel said that Americans obsess about the riskiness of sex. "The essential message of American sex is that sex is dirty." She went on, "You live in a culture of assertiveness training: 'Don't beat around the bush,' 'Get to the point.' These are not necessarily the most erotic ingredients in life. For that—go to Italy!"

—Lauren Collins