

# Tablet

**ARTS & CULTURE**

Books  
Fiction  
Film  
The Internet  
Music  
Television  
Theater & Dance  
Visual Art & Design

**LIFE & RELIGION**

Observance  
Food  
Family  
Personal History  
Notebook

**NEWS & POLITICS**

United States  
Middle East  
World  
Sports

**THE SCROLL**

UNORTHODOX  
ABOUT US  
CONTACT  
NEXTBOOK PRESS

Tablet Magazine is a project of Nextbook Inc.

Copyright © 2017 Nextbook Inc. All rights reserved. | [Terms of Service & Privacy Policy](#) | Site by [Superfame](#)


**Culture News**

## I WANNA BE YOUR GOYFRIEND

Rokhl's Golden City: Plans for the 'day of immense goyish significance,' and other klezmatic holiday delights

By [Rokhl Kafriksen](#)

December 20, 2017 • 12:00 AM



Bemokem she-eyn ish iz a hering oykh a fish.

Where there is no worthy man, even a herring is a fish.

And where there is no klezmer dance party, even a **Bulgarian horo** will do. The night of my 30th birthday I dragged a gaggle of my best law-school girlfriends to folk-dance night at **Hungarian House** on the Upper East Side. Not because I had any kind of facility with the exotic skitter of Balkan folk-dance meters, oh dear, no. Rather, I'd been attending KlezKamp (in the winter) and Klezkanada (in the summer) for a while and I so wanted my non-Klez friends to get why I'd gone crazy for the scene. And they loved me enough to indulge my mishegas for a few hours. At that time there wasn't a regular **Yiddish dance night** anywhere in New York City, so Hungarian House (and that night's Balkan band) was close enough.

While the casual listener of “klezmer” today may sense the deep interplay of cultures pulsing beneath the music, without some much more recent American cross-pollination, what we think of as the “klezmer revival” would not have taken place. Before the klezmer revival was a gleam in its participants’ eyes, musicians were honing their chops in various other ethnic-music scenes, especially Balkan. In his book [Klezmer!: Jewish Music from Old World to Our World](#), Henry Sapoznik writes that his conception of a klezmer-music “camp” was directly influenced by the Balkan music and dance camp then sponsored by the East European Folklife Center; a gathering where the majority of participants were, of course, Eastern European Jews. But rather than being mainly peer-led, KlezKamp would put intergenerational cultural transmission at its center, connecting music and dance to the lived experience of Jews in the here and now. It was a brilliant insight and something that has had profound reverberations far beyond those who were lucky enough to attend KlezKamp in its [30-year history](#).

Today there is a circuit of Jewish-music festivals and retreats, winter and, mostly, summer. Klezkamp iz avek in der eybikayt (gone to its eternal reward), but you can party in places like Krakow, Weimar, and, now, in its third year, [Yiddish New York](#), the unofficial wintertime successor to KlezKamp. As much as social media has facilitated new and exciting expansions of our creative (and social, and romantic) lives, nothing can substitute for a week spent learning, loving, and jamming IRL. Of course, winter convocation is hardly unique to the klez tribe. This year my dear friend **Anthony Russell** will be acting as special Yiddish attaché and honey-voiced honey trap at Limmud UK. Those who think Yiddish art song is fusty or irrelevant are gonna flip their lids. Anthony will be interviewed by the brilliant **Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner**, senior rabbi for the Reform Movement, UK, and then lead a workshop titled *Written in Breath: Yiddish Song as Commentary*. All of this on Monday the 25th, as Anthony notes “a day of immense goyish significance, I’m told.”

Right this moment, it feels like most of my social-media feed is at the Association for [Jewish Studies](#) meeting in Washington. Every winter I wistfully follow the panels and gossip, wondering a little, not too much, but a little, what might have been. When I was applying to grad school a journal like [In Geveb](#) was inconceivable. I barely even knew anyone my age doing academic Yiddish. Today, the editors and contributors of *In Geveb* are an established AJS presence.



**In geveb**  
@ingeveb

Our session, "Yiddish Studies Beyond Borders" is happening right now in the Gallaudet University room! [#AJS17](#)

9:06 PM - Dec 17, 2017

Because I'm not currently at any winter retreat (and will have only limited time at Yiddish New York) I had to call on a special correspondent to help me paint a fuller picture. The **most unusual Jew** I know, **Shane Baker**, is in Berlin at the third annual **ShtetlNeukolln festival**. Where most of these festivals take an enormous amount of planning and forethought, ShtetlNeukolln has somewhat miraculously sprung up in the fertile soil—and still reasonably priced real estate—of Berlin. It started as a local jam in a neighborhood that had attracted a large part of the city's young klezmer-oriented musicians. Think of it as Berlin's Ditmas Park, Brooklyn. One jam night turned into a weekly thing turned into workshops turned into a multiday festival. Much of the festival takes place at **Werkstatt der Kulturen**, a vibrant public center that hosts Berlin's many ethnic communities, including Syrian refugees and its large Namibian population. Werkstatt der Kulturen is also one of the few cultural institutions in Germany run by a person of color.

Last Thursday my girl crush **Sasha Lurje** and **her band**, You Shouldn't Know From It, opened the fest to a wildly appreciative crowd. As Shane puts it, "There's much more whistling (loud fayfing, both of approval and as musical garnish) than one is normally accustomed to at a Yiddish concert without **Peysekh Burstein**. Poor things don't know they're calling up the devil." Then again, who's more fun at a party?

Though Jews are an estimated 2 percent of attendees, for Shane, the vibe of ShtetlNeukolln is in a way more heymish than other festivals due to its loose feel. There's also an educational

component on the part of the Jewish teachers for the non-Jewish crowd. Sasha and her bandmate, musician **Craig Judelman**, held a public Kiddush on Friday night. Though it could've ended up as mere spectacle for a curious crowd, Sasha and Craig feel it's important to connect song and ritual in a way that draws in all participants, many of whom arrive at Jewish music with their own sense of cultural and historical absence. In that way, the non-Jews at ShtetlNeukolln, and the thousands of Jews who have ever participated in a klezmer retreat, are drawn by the same inner journey, to connect to history, to shared cultures, to what has been—and still might be.

\*\*\*

**Attend:** There's still time to [register](#) for **Yiddish New York** (December 23-28). ... **Limmud UK:** Don't miss Anthony Russell's Written in Breath [talk](#).

**Next Year in Berlin!:** **ShtetlNeukolln** has already announced its 2018 dates of Dec. 6-9, leaving the jet-setting klezmer of leisure plenty of leeway for Berlin and New York.

**ALSO:** A couple years ago the **Klezomatics** put out an album of **Woody Guthrie** song titled Happy Joyous Hanukkah. Guthrie can pull off some goofy lyrics no one else could and, well, the Klezomatics are the Klezomatics and I listen to the whole darn thing every year. Klezomatics at **SOPAC, Thursday, Dec. 21**. ... **Hungarian House** is great (it really is), but if you want a real Yiddish Tantshoyz, also Thursday, **Jalopy** will be rocking with an [all-star band and Yiddish dance leading](#). ... And if you want check out what all the fuss is about, don't miss **Sasha Lurje** on the bill with her cross-cultural project **Goyfriend** (with **Craig Judelman** and **Zisl Slepovitch**) along with **Tsibele** and **Overnight Kugel**, Monday, Dec. 25 at **Town and Village Synagogue**. It's part of the YNY festival—non-YNy attendees \$20—so please [buy your tickets](#) in advance and get there early. This will sell out and seats will be annoyingly scarce.

**Rokhl Kafriksen** is a New York-based cultural critic and playwright.



PRINT EMAIL

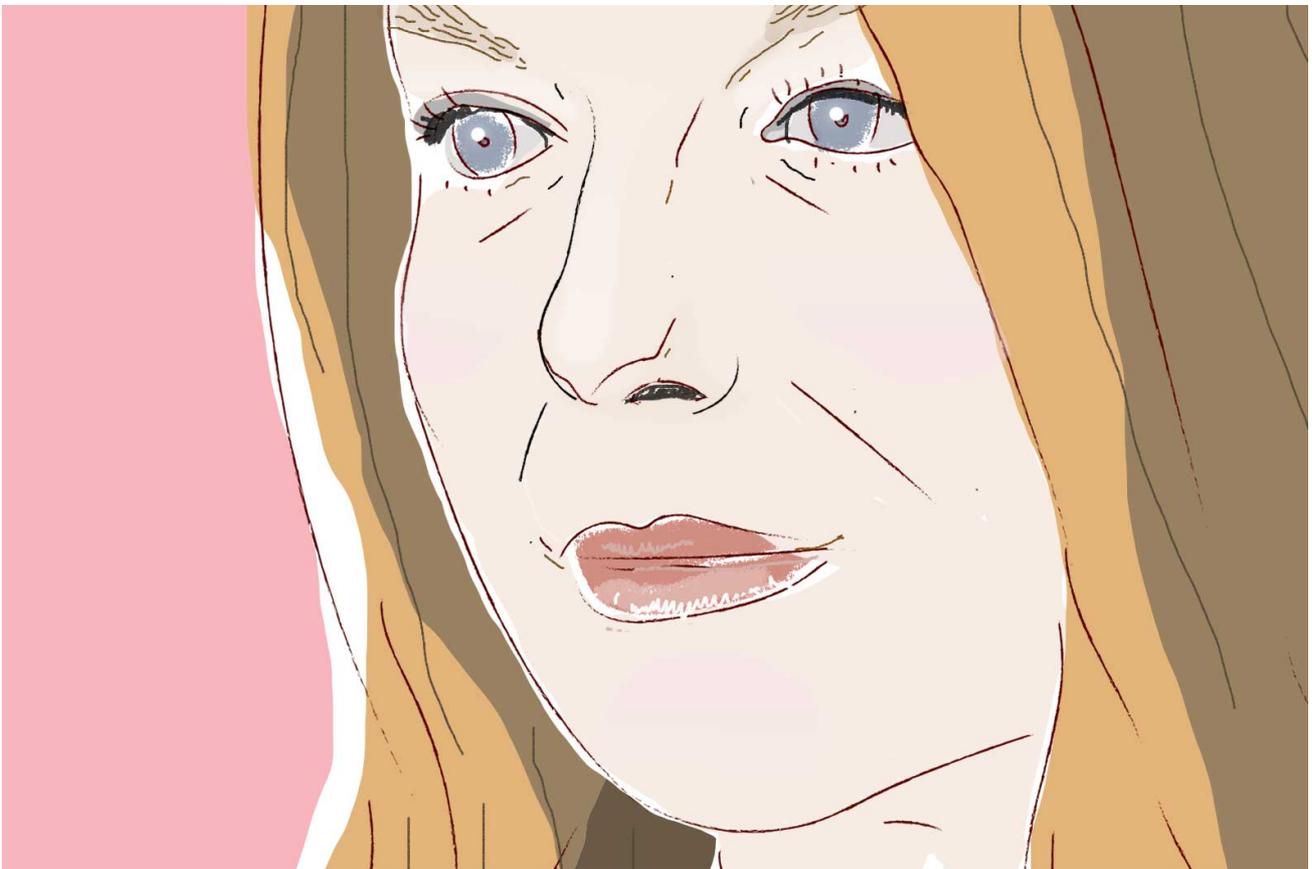
COMMENT

---

MORE IN: [HANUKKAH](#) [KLEZMER](#) [NEW YORK CITY](#) [ROKHL'S GOLDEN CITY](#) [YIDDISH](#)

---

---



| (Illustration: Tablet Magazine)

I went to visit Esther Perel, the reigning guru of couples' therapists, on a sunny Tuesday in October in her spacious, art-filled office in Midtown Manhattan. It happened to be the publication date of her new book, *The State of Affairs*, the cautiously provocative subtitle of which is *Rethinking Infidelity*. Perel, whose earlier book was the catchily titled (and bestselling) *Mating in Captivity*, is something of a marketing whiz. Along with a website and a blog, she has two TED talks that have been watched by millions of viewers, and an Amazon podcast called *Where Should We Begin* that allows participants to listen in as "The Couple Whisperer," as she has been called, does her stuff in her unplaceable accent, talking of "self-

pleasuring” and sounding altogether like a less shrieky Dr. Ruth.

Something about Perel’s hard-headed but not unempathic—and above all, nonjudgmental—approach to the transgressive byways of erotic desire is particularly suited to the zeitgeist, filled as it is with such of-the-moment concepts as “consensual” or “ethical nonmonogamy” and polyamory. But she is not so much a radical innovator as an adroit synthesizer of thinking that is already out there. Her new book is based on couples dealing with infidelity whom she has seen in her psychotherapy practice; it takes on such age-old dilemmas as freedom versus confinement, mystery versus familiarity, and the yearning for intimacy versus the call of independence. It is Perel’s contention that our moralizing conversation about infidelity “is shrouded in secrecy and shame” and needs to be opened up and demystified, with less focus placed on the damage caused to the “injured party” and more compassion shown all around. She goes further and insists that not all affairs should be seen as the death knell of a marriage— that, given the right approach and psychological negotiation, they can even be “generative” for a couple. Lest she be misunderstood as endorsing affairs outright, she follows up this observation several sentences later in her book with the slightly contradictory declaration: “But I would no more recommend having an affair than I would recommend getting cancer.”

Perel herself is a well-spoken woman (she is fluent in six languages) who appears strategically younger than her 59 years and emanates the sort of confidence that makes you want to join whichever team she is playing on. On the day I saw her she looked as though she had recently had her image tweaked; her highlighted blond hair boasted an artfully asymmetrical haircut, her sapphire-blue eyes were elegantly lined, she boasted maroon-tipped nails, and she was chicly dressed in tailored black pants, black suede boots, and a sleeveless gray blouse from which a black bra strap seductively peeked out. Right after we kissed hello, Perel went over to a bookshelf and proudly showed me all the foreign editions of *Mating in Captivity*, pulling one title out after another like a delighted schoolgirl. When I asked how she defines her position, she explained that she sees herself as a “student of relationships” rather than an “expert,” someone who’s good at figuring out the questions. “Some people,” she elaborated, “call me a thought leader ... a public intellectual ... a relationship philosopher. But I’m a therapist. I see patients.” (Perel’s actual training in her chosen field is slightly vague; after graduating from Hebrew University with a B.A. in psychology and French literature, she went on to get a masters in something called “expressive arts therapy” from Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she also studied with family therapist Salvador Minuchin.)

I asked Perel if she was surprised by the extent of the response to what she has to say—8.5 million people have watched her 2015 TED talk, “Rethinking Infidelity,” and she has received thousands of letters from “the wounded men and the straying women, the ones who are most foreclosed,” as she put it. “The experiences of infidelity are ubiquitous, and they are often very poorly understood,” she observed. “If I ask a general audience of 4,000 people how many of you have been affected by the experience of infidelity in your life, about 80 percent of the people raise their hands. There is this terror that if you talk about something you promote it, or you condone it, or you justify it, which I do not do. But I do try to understand

it. And I try to hold people accountable to their better self, which I look for in everyone, although I do not assume everyone has. I'm not naïve in this."

One of the more poignant parts of her book for me is tucked away in a chapter called "The Lover's Dilemma" and deals with "the other woman"—the adored mistress rather than "the avoided wife." I found myself sympathizing with Ingrid, a Swedish woman involved in a secret affair she describes as "an almost-religious communion" with a married man who keeps promising to leave his wife; and with Beth, who "quietly" attends the funeral of her mother's 30-year secret partner. As Perel pointed out, these women "are completely missing in the psychological literature. She's never mentioned. Partly, because when we talk about it as just cheating we forget that sometimes in these cases there are also deep love relationships. ... In opera, in the arts, in fiction, you don't say it's simply a betrayal. People are willing to see it as a love story."

"Nobody has waited for Esther Perel to cheat," she added dramatically. "This thing has existed since marriage was invented."

\*\*\*

Perel grew up in Belgium and is the daughter of Holocaust survivors, who seem to have imbued her with a sense of *carpe diem*—when it comes to her sexual life as well as other aspects. "When I look at my parents," she explained, "they were not betrayed by their lover or their partner. They were betrayed by humanity. When I lived in Antwerp, I always saw two groups of people: The ones who did not die, and the ones who came back to life. I had girlfriends who had houses with plastic on the couches. It felt morbid. These people did not die, but they were not living. They couldn't experience pleasure because it meant they were not being vigilant because you had to look for danger all the time. And then you had the others who really understood the erotic as an antidote to death. My parents loved living, and they reconnected with humanity, and they had children—and they danced and they had joy. So I think I got that inspiration from them. I see couples 'in the dread,' as they say in Yiddish, and I see them resuscitate."

In many ways, one might say that Perel has spun professional gold from historical dross. Still, given her background, one might expect her to have a more developed—call it Freudian—feeling for the tragic undercurrents of the human condition, characterized as it by conflicts and irreconcilable wishes. Instead, Perel seems like a prophet for the post-therapeutic age, more light and breezy than heavy-hearted. She is married to a psychologist, Jack Saul, and has two sons in their 20s, with whom she is in frequent touch. She also watches the intricate dynamics of the hookup culture through them. "It is no longer recreational," she commented in her brisk, clear-eyed way, "it is disaffiliated. There's a race to the bottom—how to make it [sexual connection] mean the least. I no longer have a choice between John and James in the village—I have a choice between a thousand people at my fingertips. I have more freedom than I ever had, and fewer guidelines. But then it is matched by when you find the one and only, it is just as extreme in how much it means. The same people who are laboring at making it meaningless, when they find their soulmate, have a religious fervor that they bring to romantic love that is extraordinary. People believe that on Earth you can find the

perfection that we used to find in the sanctuary of the divine.”

To back up her observations, Perel disclosed that she’s had a project for the last two years where she goes to weddings and writes down the vows. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” she said, sounding somewhere between amused and admiring. “It’s like perfection on earth ... like ... never, ever feel lonely or sad or anxious or worthless again. There has never been a more romantic generation.”

Perel, as it turns out, has always been something of a trailblazer, going where others feared to tread. “I have always, in a strange way, chosen topics that nobody wants to talk about,” she explained, with a lack of modesty that would be unappealing coming from someone else but sounds almost noble coming from her. “I wanted to speak the unspoken. I don’t know why I’m drawn to this, like a moth to a flame. Maybe it helps me deal with my own fears in life. It’s a bit of a counter-phobic stance. I’m a child of Holocaust survivors and I write about eroticism.”

Before she ever touched on the subject of desire and its discontents, Perel told me, she worked for 20 years on the topic of Jewish intermarriage. She recalls how she was told for years by the Jewish community that she was “condoning intermarriage” by even dealing with the subject, that she was “finishing off what Hitler didn’t do.” Perel maintains that, on the contrary, she was “actually encouraging Jews to think for the first time why the tribe matters to them...I’m the only one with whom these people have actually sat for hours, to talk about why they care about being Jews. And it is to their non-Jewish partner that they’re doing this with.” Here, too, as she would do with the subject of infidelity, Perel refused to pass judgment, to say “it is good, or it is bad.” Interestingly enough, she finds a commonality between Jews—who, as she sees it, are torn between two different ideologies, “the ideology of romantic love and the ideology of collective loyalty”—and couples experiencing infidelity, who “live in two systems: the system of security, of commitment and stability, and the system that wants alive-ness, adventure, or a different version of one’s self. A system that aspires to break out of the very boxes we put ourselves in.”

While we were on the topic of Jews and conflicted loyalties, I asked Perel if she thinks Jews have a healthy attitude toward sex. She responded that the very phrase “Judeo-Christian perspective” is “a total misnomer. It doesn’t exist. If there’s one place where Judaism and Christianity are really separate, this is one. And by the way, the Talmud has some of the best stories about infidelity and transgression. ... I think the Rabbis understood human weakness and human fragility and the propensity to transgress.”

I mentioned that I’ve always been intrigued by the distinction between thought and action in Jewish thinking, such that Jimmy Carter saying “I sinned in my heart” in his Playboy interview is evincing a very Christian attitude toward carnal misstepping. Perel corrected me by pointing out that in the Ten Commandments there is only one sin that’s repeated twice: once for committing adultery and once for thinking about it. So this is the one time where thought and temptation actually were part of the commandment. Usually, she added, “it isn’t about what you think, it’s about action. But when it comes to this particular one, there’s no consistency.”

\*\*\*

As our conversation continued and the afternoon waned, I began to have the sense that not even Perel, despite her self-assured convictions, backed up by a bit of Maslow here and some lesser-known researchers (Eva Ilouz, Eli Finkel) there, and her aphoristic declarations —“Love is no longer a verb, it is a permanent state of enthusiasm”—was as sure of the erotic lay of the land as she purports to be. For one thing, although she proposes a more sanguine vision of faithless marriages than otherwise, she also points out that for younger couples, especially, for whom “the One has to be the one for whom I stop looking ... so extraordinary that I can delete my apps,” infidelity has become more rather than less painful: “It is no longer painful,” she asserted. “It has become traumatic.”

Which sort of begs the very question her book assays to answer, which is how to live with and around this most primary of marital transgressions: “clandestine adultery” within “proclaimed monogamy.” I asked her why, given all the arguments against marriage (I had just been rereading Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*), this connubial arrangement still remains the solution for so many people. Perel answered with a snappy quote about the puzzling ubiquity of remarriage—“If Apple sold you a product which failed 50 percent of the time, would you buy it?”—that I seemed to have read in another piece about her, and then went on to speculate that people are constantly throwing themselves into marriage “with higher expectations ... because our social capital has dropped between 30 to 60 percent in the last 25 years. Meaning that the people you can turn to in times of crises has shriveled. Now there is one person to whom everything is being redirected. And we know that people need more than one person. We also know that some people thrive much better outside of the marital system, but I have rarely heard that said by a single woman in her 40s. It’s only a single woman in her 50s who has already been married who can say this: ‘I am free, I am nurtured by deep friendships, I may even have lovers....’”

We went on to discuss the basic, inexorable reality that, as I put it to her, domesticity doesn’t do enormous amounts for desire, which is the conundrum *Mating in Captivity* tried to address. Until recently, Perel said, “the concept of passionate marriage was a contradiction in terms. We created a model where we want to reconcile two fundamentally different human needs in one relationship. And we think we can solve that with Victoria’s Secret, by the way...” She paused, her blue eyes twinkling: “And there’s no Victor’s Secret, right? This is an existential dilemma; everything eroticism thrives on, family life defends against. Family life wants consistency, repetition, routine, clear things where you know where you’re going to be tomorrow. Eroticism is a very different story. And sometimes people want both. They don’t want to leave what they have built, they just want to leave it on occasion.” In other words, monogamy without exclusivity.

So here we are again, stuck between our longings for safety on the one hand, and our need for stimulation on the other. I was reminded suddenly of the gnarled French texts by Rene Girard, Denis de Rougemont, and Michel Foucault I read as a Barnard senior, in which erotic longing is experienced as a form of affliction by a Self, an Other, and a perceived Rival—imaginary or real, as the case may be. (Before Girard & Co. discovered the all-important function of a jealousy-arousing intermediary, there was Freud’s introduction of the

progenitive human triangle in the form of the Oedipal complex.) Well before Perel came on the scene, there was de Rougemont speculating that marriage and monogamy were the death of sexual love: “...is there something fatal to marriage at the very heart of human longing? It is obvious that Western Man is drawn to what destroys ‘the happiness of the married couple’ at least as much as to anything that ensures it.” Is it conceivable, I found myself wondering, that our very notion of sexual gratification—“the whence of desire,” as Tony Tanner puts it in his book, *Adultery and the Novel*—depends for its life on the existence of impediments and encumbrances, that without them we fall through space?

For a moment, sitting with Perel in her warm, well-lit space, I believed that we had—or rather, she had—solved the predicament of contemporary sexuality by creating a new narrative that decisively unlinks fidelity and love. Perhaps more importantly, she attempts—not entirely convincingly—to situate male sexuality in every bit as relational a realm as female sexuality. (“The internal life of men is totally directing their sexuality,” Perel asserted. “Their depression, their self-esteem, their sense of power, their powerlessness, their anxiety. If a man is afraid of rejection, if a man is afraid of incompetence, if a man struggles with performance, if a man is wondering if a woman is actually enjoying it ...what are these if not relational questions?”) In some way, I would guess, part of Perel’s enormous appeal is that she intervenes on behalf of the man—and looks pretty good while doing it. The other part has to do with her no-blame policy, letting us all off the hook for being the faithless, double-dealing creatures many of us seem to be.

\*\*\*

Like this article? Sign up for our [Daily Digest](#) to get Tablet Magazine’s new content in your inbox each morning.

Daphne Merkin, a contributing writer at the New York Times Magazine and a contributing editor at Elle, teaches writing at Hunter College. Her latest book is a memoir, [This Close to Happy](#), a reckoning with depression.



[PRINT](#) [EMAIL](#)

MORE IN: [ESTHER PEREL](#) [EXTRAMARITAL AFFAIRS](#) [INFIDELITY](#) [MARRIAGE](#)

---