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ABSTRACT

Niddah 2.0: Jewish Menstrual Purity in the Internet Age

A thesis presented to the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies
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This thesis analyzes web based tools created by the Orthodox Jewish community to support women in their observance of Jewish menstrual purity ritual practice (JMPR). JMPR is a ritual derived from the Israelite Temple cult conditions of purity. Today, JMPR is practiced by many Jewish women, mostly in the Orthodox streams of Jewish observance. The ritual consists of tracking ones’ menstrual cycle then purifying oneself in a Jewish ritual bath. The system of JMPR education and tracking has been informal, and is one of the few areas of Jewish law that includes leadership roles for women. However, the consequences for incorrect or non-observance of JMPR are seen by some in the Orthodox community as theologically and communally destructive. Thus, the creation of web tools to support and promote JMPR observance is a fascinating negotiation between fundamentalism and modernity. This thesis focuses on three specific websites that support correct observance of JMPR. The websites are Yoatzot.org, MyMikvehCalender.com, and MikvehCalender.com. The Internet is structured as a forum for open and free discourse and is known to have a
democratizing effect on disenfranchised communities and individuals. However, this thesis will prove Jewish menstrual purity ritual support sites run counter to the common belief that the internet promotes an egalitarian agenda. The presence of online support tools for Jewish menstrual purity ritual practice has broad social and religious implication for the Orthodox Jewish community.
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JMPR historically and today

In the last decade, institutions in the Orthodox Jewish community have created web based tools to support women in their observance of Jewish menstrual purity ritual practice. The medium of these support tools – the Internet – displays a fascinating step in a fundamentalist religious community’s embracing of a modern technology. The Internet is structured as a forum for open and free discourse and research has shown the Internet to have a democratizing effect on disenfranchised communities and individuals, most notably is Campbell’s study on online and offline power in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. (H. Campbell) However, this thesis will argue that most Jewish menstrual purity ritual support sites run counter to the common belief that the Internet promotes a progressive agenda. The presence of online support tools for Jewish menstrual purity ritual practice has implications for the Orthodox Jewish community’s conceptualization of local authority.

Jewish menstrual purity ritual practice is a complex ritual and the definition of “traditional” Jewish menstrual purity ritual practice is itself, diverse. For the purpose of this thesis and for the sake of clarity, menstrual purity ritual practice will be known by the acronym JMPR and be contextualized accordingly. Traditional JMPR is outlined in various Jewish legal codes and is referred to by religious Jews and in these codes as Niddah (separation) and/or Taharat HaMishpakha (Family Purity). The legal corpus of JMPR is biblical in origin (Leviticus 15:19-30, 18:19, 20:18). Rabbinic exegesis of JMPR was compiled into Tractate Niddah of the Babylonian Talmud. Maimonides and Moses Isserles provided commentary on these laws in the 13th and 16th century respectively. In
addition to the varied understandings and regulations of JMPR in the Jewish legal cannon, JMPR labels and activities have evolved with the development of modern Judaism.

The male rabbinic authors of Jewish law after the destruction of the Temple outlined the components of JMPR in Tractate Niddah, however it is Jewish married women who observe this ritual monthly, upon the onset of a woman’s menstrual cycle. On the first day of her cycle, a woman will sexually separate herself from her husband and remain separated for the all days of her cycle and seven additional days after her cycle has finished. Thus, the comprehensive observance of traditional JMPR takes at least 12 days. During the seven days following menstruation (days 8-12), the wife performs physical internal checks for residual blood or discharges. After establishing that she is clean for seven continuous days (i.e. she finds no colored vaginal discharges), the wife will immerse in a mikveh – a Jewish ritual bath - under the supervision of a female attendant who will pronounce the wife pure. This mikveh is always overseen by a (male) rabbi or a group of rabbinic authorities, but male rabbis do not directly supervise a woman’s immersion. A male is never present while a woman is performing the ritual bathing process. JMPR also proscribes specific behavior for JMPR observant couples. During the 12 days of separation (unclean days), a husband and a wife are prohibited from marital relations. In order to prevent any sexual contact, the couple severely restricts all categories of physical interaction (intimate and mundane). Most couples will not sleep in the same bed and depending on the couple’s religious philosophical outlook (in Hebrew this is known as hashkafa), the couple will refrain from certain forms or all
forms of touching. Some couples will not touch at all and will not directly pass each other objects (i.e. they must pass a glass through an intermediary or the wife must put the glass down before the husband can pick it up). Other couples simply refrain from intimate forms of touching (such as hugging or kissing). Obviously these behaviors are very personal and vary from couple to couple.

Observance of JMPR requires both Jewish legal knowledge and meticulous tracking of a woman’s menstrual cycle and physical internal checks. The newly emergent websites that are the subjects of this study were designed for women to educate and support their observance of JMPR. It should be noted that Jewish tradition sees JMPR as a halakhic obligation (*mitzvah*), and one of the few halakhic obligations that are directly performed and overseen (via female mikveh attendants) by woman.¹

The theological foundations of JMPR are based in the purity conditions of the Temple cult. Before the destruction of the Temple, when ritual purity was intimately connected with the Land of Israel and Temple practices, the laws of purity and impurity (*tumah* and *taharah*) were much more far-reaching than in contemporary times. Ritual impurity might result from contact with the dead, loss of menstrual blood, loss of semen through nocturnal emission, or leprosy. Immersion in the waters of a ritual bath (mikvah) provided a means of transforming an individual (male or female) from a state of ritual

¹ The above synopsis was derived from a variety of books and articles. Specifically, A Lifetime Companion to the Laws of Jewish Family Life a JMPR legal guide published by Nishmat, the umbrella organization of Yoetzot.org (one of the three websites reviewed in this thesis).
impurity to a state of purity. After the destruction of the Temple, the rabbis curtailed most of the laws of purity but elaborated those laws applying to women and menstruation.

A review of the historical foundations and relevant literature of JMPR demonstrates the parallels of the purity conditions of the Israelite Temple cult and the purity conditions of the Jewish woman. At its core, JMPR is an extension of the Temple based purity standards. While the Temple served as a locus of purity for the cult, its destruction sparked a reinvention of purity protection rituals, rituals for a faith that that had a spiritual but not physical religious center. In his description of the characteristics of the Diaspora period, Jacob Katz notes, “Their basic institutions – the family, the house of study, the synagogue, the rabbinate - fulfilled similar functions everywhere. Heinrich Heine’s witty remark that traditional Judaism was a sort of ‘portable homeland’ is not without a measure of truth. These fundamentals served the Jews over and over as a basis upon which to rebuild their society wherever they settled”.(Katz and Cooperman 196)

The term “portable Judaism”, describes the theological ramifications of moving from place based religious practice to non-place based religious belief.

Portable Judaism consist of a series of laws and beliefs that are practiced by individuals in the scattered Israelites (and later Jewish) communities who formally worshiped around the Temple cult through sacrifice and prayer. After the destruction of the Temple, the architects of rabbinic Judaism reassigned the purity criteria of the Temple to women practicing non-Temple based portable Judaism. In rabbinic Judaism the
potential to embody purity was extended to the worshipers, and specifically women, through the observance of JMPR.

In the post-Temple period, through the process of rabbinic innovations, the Jewish legal consequences of menstruation were made stricter. While biblical Israelite women were only separated for a period of seven days (the length of their menstrual cycle), rabbinic proscription lengthened this period of separation to twelve. After the Temple was destroyed, the sacrificial rites and rituals performed to purify the Temple were replaced with a portable ‘network’ of Jewish practice (rabbinic Jewish practice) overseen by local rabbis in the scattered Jewish communities.

In Europe in the Middle Ages the purity network that restricted menstruating woman was guided by rabbinic text, but also evolved according to local norms and customs. In some locations menstruating woman did not attend worship services in the synagogues, and if a husband had been in contact with a menstruant (by touching something she touched); he was forbidden to enter the synagogue until he underwent a purification ritual. (Steinberg 10). Another custom prohibited menstruating women from participating in Jewish rituals, including home rituals, such as the lighting of the Shabbat candles. (Rahel R. Wasserfall 32) “These customs were fueled by beliefs concerning the destructive power of the menstruating woman’s glance or breath”. (Wasserfall and Marmon 6) However, concerns over the toxicity of a menstruating woman do not appear to be widespread. What is clear about the historical foundations of JMPR observance and mikvah use is that since the destruction of the Temple, Jewish couples did practice some
level of separation during menstruation and visited a local mikveh to purify themselves. Although the laws of JMPR have remained consistent over the ages, the rituals have continuously gained new meaning.

The term ‘The Laws of Family Purity’ (the English translation of Taharat HaMishpakha) were coined in the late 19th century and have come to connote the prohibition of sexual relations between a husband and wife during the wife’s period of menstruation and for seven clean days after until she immerse in a mikveh on the eight day. Modern Orthodox literature reframes the practice of family purity laws (as it came to be called in the rabbinic period) as a tool to promote family values, sanctify martial relations, and many other justifications based in the defense of personal and communal wellbeing, whereas, the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community still maintains a level of superstition over a menstruant's ability to transmit impurity to her family, her community, and even the entire Jewish peoples.

The rabbinic framed purity rhetoric and the taboo of the menstruating woman has taken on loaded meaning in the modern state of Israel, where government intervention in Jewish religious affairs is common. The theoretical invention of JMPR has led to a “Niddah cultural industry” in Israel based on the ultra-Orthodox conceptualization of menstrual purity laws. Orit Avishai, in a paper titled “Doing religion in a secular world” identifies the emergence of the “niddah cultural industry”, a loose configuration of “course workshops manuals, lectures, and new woman niddah ritual experts who produce educational, quasi-legal, quasi-governmental, therapeutic support to observant woman”.

6
(Avishai, “Doing Religion" in a Secular World” 416) Israel requires that all Jewish brides regardless of religious background, seeking a halakhic (i.e. state recognized Jewish marriage, as there are no civil marriages in Israel) must immerse in a state approved mikveh prior to her wedding ceremony. Thus secular woman (who after their wedding will likely never set foot in a mikveh or practice the Orthodox rituals of menstrual purity laws) are also served by the “niddah cultural industry”. Furthermore, all Jewish women marrying in Israel must attend a course on the laws of menstrual purity prior to their wedding.

In an article titled *Lived Regulations, Systemic Attributions: Menstrual Separation and Ritual Immersion in the Experience of Orthodox Jewish Women* by Tova Hartman and Naomi Marmon, the authors outline JMPR in contemporary Jewish discourse and practice. They note “Niddah, in fact, is a highly complex structure of what Foucault (1979) called "micro-practices." In JMPR, these would include awareness of beginning and end of menstruation as well as the postures of the body during this period of taboo, which can include cooking, sleeping arrangements, dress, and a very detailed range of regulations of intimate contacts.”(Hartman and Marmon 390) The micro-practices of JMPR are most pronounced in the performance of domestic behaviors. Because of the personal nature of JMPR, many ultra-Orthodox couples do not touch publically in general. This choice is may be a reflection of ultra-Orthodox standards of modesty or an attempt to diminish noticeable changes in behavior while a wife is impure. What is most relevant about these micro-practices is that the wife must decide how to perform them, extending a high level of personal female authority over halakhic behavior. Cooking,
sleeping, dressing, martial contact and other domestic behaviors are modified so that a menstruating wife limits her contact with her husband and the domestic objects and behaviors he is exposed to. The sacred precinct of the Temple was a national domain and purity standards were overseen by the Temple Priests. The Jewish home is a local domain of Jewish ritual. Although a menstruating wife has the potential to transmit impurity, the wife as a *halakha* abiding homemaker, maintains the purity of her home.

In “Lived Regulations, Systemic Attributions: Menstrual Separation and Ritual Immersion in the Experience of Orthodox Jewish Women” Hartman and Marmon interviews American women in regard to their appreciation and/or conflicts with JMPR. Marmon, in another article, interviews Orthodox women at the Boston Community Mikveh to gain insight in contemporary mikveh practice. Wasserfall’s book *Women and water: menstruation in Jewish life and law* is a compilation of research and modern reflections on mikveh use and JMPR. Finally, Polak-Sahm interviews ultra-Orthodox mikveh Attendants in Israel in the book *The House of Secrets: The Hidden World of the Mikveh*. Obviously, there is no shortage of materials that seek to analyze different women’s relationship to this ritual. These studies were instrumental to this thesis and Marmon, Hartman, and Polak-Sahm reveal that until recently preparation for taking on this ritual as a married woman was transmitted orally and informally, mother to daughter.

All the authors note that variations in JMPR (specifically in regard to a woman’s first immersion, prior to her wedding) are not influenced not only by *halakha*, but by religious custom and Jewish ethnic folklore and culture. For example, Jews from North Africa use
this first immersion as an opportunity to begin the wedding celebration. In Wasserfall’s book, the ethnographic and anthropological traditions of mikveh practice are unpacked by Sered, Kaplan, and Cooper in a chapter called “Mikveh Parties”. The author’s note, “Particularly among North African Jewish woman, the “Mikveh Party” can be a vibrant and exciting affair at which tasty foods are served and traditional (sometimes bawdy) songs are song”. (R. Wasserfall 146) Research into the variations of mikveh practice (that use the framework of ethnography and anthropology) are important to this thesis, because they prove the JMPR practice is decentralized and diverse and held together by what Sered refers to as “woman’s traditional religious wisdom. (Sered 8) Contemporary research into JMPR reveals that every woman relates to JMPR differently and with various degrees of religious fervor and liberalism.

Susan Sered in a book on the religious lives of elderly Jewish woman in Jerusalem notes that two social conditions in Orthodox Judaism neutralize male authority. These conditions are “sexual segregation” and “communality”. Sered explains that “sexual segregation”, means male authorities may be ignorant of many of the things that women do and think. Communality describes that groups of woman meet together and construct a collective, shared alternative view of reality. (Sered 17) The details of JMPR, such as menstruation, and intimate physical examinations require that JMPR is a sexually segregated ritual. Furthermore, the mikveh is a physical implementation of Sered’s definition of communality. Michelle Rosaldo has shown that “woman tend to have an intermediate status (not equal but not drastically subordinate) when groups of women can form autonomous associations.” (Sered 17)
Although the halakhic framework that dictates JMPR excludes women from positions of formal institutionalized power, JMPR as a local ritual that concerns a woman’s body, invites woman to become informal ritual experts without credentials and manage an institution (the mikveh) that is at least informally controlled by women. Although the ideological pretext that enforce the halakhic framework of JMPR are authored and overseen by men, the local practice of JMPR is guided by social polices enforced by woman. In sum, the rabbinic construction of JMPR provides a historical, legal, and conceptual framework for the local practice of JMPR. This thesis is concerned with the impact of JMPR websites on “woman’s religious culture, the rituals and beliefs that woman have chosen or/created for themselves”, (Sered 7) in the practice of JMPR.

The mikveh is an inversion of the male authoritative conditions of JMPR, whereas, the features of JMPR were created by men to contain the impure threat of the menstruate. The mikveh is a powerful symbol of women’s authority in a ritual dominated by male voices. In the practical observance of JMPR women create and oversee the social support network of JMPR. The micro-practices of JMPR are most pronounced in the performance of domestic behaviors. However, through maintaining Jewish dietary standards (kashrut), deciding when and how to separate from her husband in conjunction with JMPR, and visiting the mikveh to purify herself, the modern female observant of JMPR is parallel to the priest of the Israelite cult. Both are tasked with maintaining the purity of their space. After the destruction of the 2nd Temple, the whole of Jewish authority was broken down. When the Temple stood, religious authority was central – a job of the Temple priesthood.
When the Temple was destroyed, the central authority held by the priesthood was transmitted to the local rabbis. This shift created a Judaism where religious authority was held by local leadership. However, now that the Temple standards of purity were more strongly manifested in the practice of JMPR, JMPR observant women became local articulations of authority. With surge of mikveh interest, as Sered points out, especially in Israel, the role of the female mikveh attendant was strengthened to represent an informal institution of non-credentialed authority.

Based on the preceding description, the local and informal network of JMPR consists of a wife, her local mikveh, and perhaps some oversight from a female mikveh attendant or private conversation between a woman, her husband, and occasionally the couple’s rabbi. A woman may or may not track or cycle and her internal checks using some type of artifact (i.e. calendar, journal, and notebook). Textually, menstrual blood makes a woman impure, and a Jewish marriage and Jewish home should be kept pure. So, during her menstruation and a period of clean days after, a woman does not touch her spouse, sleep in the same bed, or pass him domestic objects, until she is purified in the mikveh. A woman’s local mikveh is a local sexually segregated space, where woman guide other woman in precise JMPR practice.

**JMPR Support Websites**

This thesis analyzes two types of technologies created to support the halakhic obligation of JMPR. The technologies are two virtual calendars (software/application) called MikvahCalendar.com, and MyMikvahCalendar.com, and "The Woman's Health and Halakha Website" of Nishmat, a virtual JMPR resource center. Nishmat is a women’s
advanced Torah learning center in Jerusalem, and created this online resource, message board, phone-hotline, and certification program to support women who observe JMPR. These websites are case studies in the development of Jewish law and Jewish practice in the digital age and target the most prominent halakhic obligation for women in the Orthodox community, JMPR.

These technologies were created in Israel and North America for both English and Hebrew speaking women (MyMikvahCalendar.com recently introduced a Spanish version). The websites call into question the autonomy of women in the Orthodox world and the dissolving boundaries between religious authority in Israel and the diaspora, and the broad context of globalization via the modality of Internet communication. The themes of gender, halakha, and diaspora are not new to the academic Jewish landscape. However, this thesis examines the specific technical tools that negotiate the rules of the formally localized practice of JMPR in real and imagined spaces (such as virtual and real) and states of being (pure and impure). Another aspect of this analysis is to contextualize the presence of a virtual community of women (Nishmat’s project) and the ordination of women as halakhic advisors in the field of Family Purity Law (Taharat haMishpachah) as the outcome of the Internet. This thesis also explores the potential reforms the Internet has facilitated within in traditional Jewish Orthodoxy. One wonders, would Nishmat have created its Yoatzot Halakha program offline/off-phone (if no online option exists)? Is a virtual presence of women with advanced halakhic knowledge (and authority) somehow less threatening then a Beit Midrash (Jewish House of Study) like center staffed by woman halakhic authorities? Are online conversations about women taking a more active
role in halakhic decision making more acceptable then the same type of conversation taking place in real life? Furthermore, if ultra-Orthodox mikveh calendaring applications allow users to more precisely track their phases of purity and impurity (as dictated by Jewish law), do these applications promote a heightened level of religious practice in all Orthodox Jewish communities?

Major questions considered in this thesis are what the presence of these technologies reveals about the participation of woman in halakhic decision making and their capacity for leadership and autonomy thereof. In Yoetzot.org, women serve as halakhic advisors to other woman, but always counsel their advisees to seek proper (implied male) rabbinical authorities as needed. Ultimately, a women’s authority is trumped by a more authoritative male. On the JMPR calendaring applications, woman as individuals approach their personal halakhic obligations (and decisions related to that obligation) through a modern software. The major questions being, do JMPR calendar applications simplify the practice of JMPR, make it more stringent, or some combination of both? Do these technologies provoke Orthodox women to take greater ownership and autonomy over the mitzvah of JMPR? Yoatzot Halakha are female halakhic experts and mikveh calendar programs could take the ‘guess-work’ out of JMPR. How do these website simplify a woman's tracking of her menstruation? Are they a forum for woman to circumvent their rabbis? How do these technologies contribute to a more Orthodox religious mentality that is incongruous with any liberating features these virtual technologies could provide? Does the purpose of these technologies target the boundaries between feminist and anti-feminist Orthodox Jewish religious identification and
expression? Does the virtual medium challenge the conceptualization of normative religious space/object/material culture? What follows is an examination of the link between meaning and technology on virtual mikveh calendars and Nishmat's hotline/website.

There are many sociological and ethnographic approaches to discern meaning and impact of websites and virtual communities. The method chosen for this paper combines sociological tools from the field of human computer interaction (HCI). Another method borrowed from HCI is the construct of the use-case scenario. A use-case focuses on the user goals, but the emphasis is on a user-system interactions rather than the task itself. It is very specific and lists the user’s actions step by step. An essential use-case is a structured narrative that consists of three parts. First, a use-case creates a name that expresses the overall user intention. Next it provides a stepped description of user actions. A use-case concludes with a stepped description of system responsibilities. An essential use-case exposes the user intentions and system responsibilities in the course of accomplishing that task. It is described in abstract, technology-free, and implementation-independent terms using the language of the application domain and of external users in role. These HCI terms are useful when trying to discern a single, discrete, complete, meaningful and well defined task of interest to an external user in some specific role or roles in relationship to a system. For the purpose of this paper, the task is tracking of JMPR and the web applications that support JMPR observance in the Orthodox community.

Yoatzot.org
The Jeanie Schottenstein Center for Advanced Torah Study for Women, established in 1990, offers women the opportunity to immerse themselves in Torah study at levels from beginners to the highest reaches of Torah scholarship. In 1997, Nishmat established the Keren Ariel Women’s Halakhic Institute to train Yoatzot Halakha, women halakhic consultants, under the direction of Rabbi Yaacov Varhaftig, Dean of the Institute, and Rabbi Yehuda Herzl Henkin. Yoatzot Halakha are women certified by a panel of Orthodox rabbis to be a resource for women with questions about JMPR. This role was created to assist women who are more comfortable discussing very personal issues with another woman. Women preparing to become Yoatzot Halakha (Yoatzot is the plural of advisors and a Yotezet refers to an individual halakhic advisor) are chosen for their extensive Torah scholarship, leadership ability, and deep religious commitment. They devote two years (over 1000 hours) to intensive study with rabbinic authorities in Taharat haMishpakha. They receive training from experts in modern medicine and psychology, including gynecology, infertility, women's health, family dynamics and sexuality.

Nishmat’s online resources center called Yoatzot.org provides a wealth of knowledge related to the Jewish legal field of family purity. Designed primarily as an educational website for women by women, this analysis of Nishmat consists of a walkthrough of the user interface and usability analysis. Launched in in 2002, the website is a venue to submit anonymous questions through email. Representative questions are added periodically to the site’s impressive compilation of questions and answers, which address all aspects of niddah and related concerns.
Questions are carefully edited before they are uploaded, the website is professional and thorough, and it provides multiple links and a useful search engine. The bulk of halakhic consultants' work is conducted through these venues. Jewish legal codes are presented in the original. Scientific and medical information is provided in medical and rabbinic language. The site also contains an extensive glossary of medical and Jewish legal terms and articles related to JMPR.

Figure 1: Yoatzot.org General Contents and Basic JMPR Information

Organization

The site consists of four navigational units that surround a dynamic content area. A permanent navigation bar on the left provides a link to the Golda Koshitzky Hotline (a hotline based in Israel where woman can ask questions related and receive immediate
responses), indicated by a phone icon. Clicking on this link displays information about the hotline. Underneath is The Yotezet link with a chat icon. This takes the user to a webpage where she can email the Yotezet a halakhic question. Underneath these two opportunities to contact an official of Yotezot.org is a search box, with an option for advanced search (powered by Google). The rest of the left navigation bar consists of topics of the website. Yoatzot.com also has a Top menu bar with four live links to “Home”, “Nishmat”, “About Us”, “Coming Events”, and “HEBREW” (which takes you to the Hebrew version of the site and is displayed in Hebrew letters). All of these links are in blue. The final link is “Donate” which is displayed in red. There is no cost to use the website but the donate button is prominent (as it is in red, and the rest of the links except “ask the Yotezet”) are in blue. The bottom left box consists of “Article’s and the bottom right box consist of “Questions & Answers”.

To reiterate there are five permanent units on Yoatzot.org

1) Left navigation sidebar (Topics related to Yoatzot Content)

2) Top menu Bar (Topics related to Institution of Yoatzot and Nishmat)

3) Center content area (dynamic)

4) Right bottom “Article” list

5) Left bottom “Question and Answers” list.

**Use-Case Scenarios of Yoetzot.org**

The following provides a model use-case scenario of Yoetzot.org

1. **Upon entering the site as an educational resource**

   Use Case Scenario 1: An educated Modern Orthodox married woman is seeking general
information about family purity. After navigating to Nishmat’s main page (either through Google or direct input), she opens the Yoetzot.org web page. Yoetzot.org has no sign-in requirement. The site also has a Hebrew language version, presumably for Hebrew speakers or an Israeli audience.

- A sidebar provided on the left of the webpage provides three categories that summarize the content of Yotezot.org. These three categories are highlighted in blue and hovering over them opens related subcategories. I have chosen to italicize the subcategories, whereas the website displays them in blue.

  - Concepts and Challenges: This link opens to five subcategory tabs that provide an overview of the concepts of JMPR in complete English some Hebrew transliterated terms. When clicked, each subcategory opens a webpage that provides a brief explanation of the concept and a few articles and “questions and answers” related to the concept. The concepts covered include Basic Concepts, which the site explains - “This section includes an explanation of some basic halakhic concepts referred to throughout the website, as well as a concise summary of the laws of taharat hamishpacha”.

  The Philosophy tab provides the philosophy of Yoatzot.org noting “This section includes philosophical approaches to taharat hamishpacha, mikveh, and marriage”. The tab The Challenge of Taharat Hamishpacha provides what the authors see as the challenges of JMPR. There is also a tab on directions as to how to ask halakhic questions through Yoetzot.org (Asking Halakhic
Question), and a disclaimer on Modesty, which is listed in English and in Hebrew (Tzniut).

- Basic Concepts
- Philosophy:
  - The Challenge of Taharat haMishpakha
  - Asking Halakhic Questions:
  - Modesty (Tzniut)

2. Using a dialogue box to ask a Halakhic Question

Use Case Scenario 2: An educated Modern-Orthodox woman would like to ask a question to one of the Yoatzot (halakhic advisors).

- The left navigational bar provides the user three options to navigate to a dialogue box that asks the user for input, including personal information. It is spam protected (by asking for code verification), asks the user to donate to the website, provides a Halakhic disclaimer, provides the user with an opportunity to subscribe to announcements from Yoetzot.org, and suggests the user phone the hotline affiliated with Yoatzot if she is seeking an immediate response.
3. Reviewing questions submitted to the Yoatzot and answers from the Yoatzot.

Use Case Scenario 3: A Modern Orthodox woman has a question related to the field of Family Purity but instead of submitting her question directly she searches for an answer among the Ask the Yoetzet question repository.

- The user can either search by entering a term into the Search Box displayed under the “Ask the Yoetzet” icon (seen in the red box), or browse answered questions by topic.

4. Accessing and reviewing articles posted to the site.

Use Case Scenario 4: A Modern Orthodox woman reviews articles posted to the site.
The user can either search for articles by entering a term into the Search Box displayed under the “Ask the Yoetzet” icon (seen in the red box), or browse articles by topic in the concepts tab.

**Technical Features of Yoetzot.org**

- The overall technical features of Yoetzot.org are clear and unobtrusive.
- Design sophistication: works on older forms of web browsers, no flash graphics.
- Type of site: free, non-membership, with option for membership
- Online framework: Educational/Communitarian
- Ease of use/navigation: easy, drop down menu, search box.

On Yoetzot.org, the questions posed by women visitors to the female Yoatzot are legal, therapeutic and informative. They are formatted in style similar to questions submitted to other virtual health communities and forums. A review of other virtual health support community websites is a useful framework for categorizing the type of questions and method of communication on Yoatzot.org. The style of questioning corresponds to the model of analysis presented in a paper on Virtual Health Support Communities.

The authors point out that participation in virtual health communities varies based on gender. They explain that men in a prostate cancer discussion group were more likely to “seek and provide informational support”, while woman in a breast cancer group were “more likely to seek and provide emotional support”, (Eysenbach et al. 32) leading authors to believe that women seek and exchange emotional information online more
than men. The authors claim that everyone benefits from posting to a virtual health community. “Psychological research has demonstrated the benefits of writing and disclosure for dealing with stressful issues or trauma”. But they have also pointed out that in online groups; everyone observes the exchange of support benefits, not just the active participants”. (Eysenbach et al. 32)

Nishmat does not require users to register as members on the site to post or read. One cannot gauge from the site how many active users (i.e. users who post) and receptive users (visitors who just read postings by others) Yoatzot.com has. The virtual venue of JMPR question and answer (for women by women) reflects the pre-internet network of mikveh, but the women are not local, and answer the questions from virtual anonymous woman. On Yoatzot.org, women are not experts but experts all the same. Their training concludes by testing their knowledge of Hilkhot Niddah by giving them an oral examination. The oral examination is similar (in fact identical) to the written examination given by the State Israeli Rabbinical Authority to rabbinical candidates on the topic of Tractate niddah but Avishai in her research of the women’s training points out that the “My informants explained that this format better captures the interpersonal skills and quick thinking that their work entails. As Nira put it: “In an oral exam, you can’t know only two-thirds of the material, you need to know everything and think quickly.” Following such explanations at the Kolech session, one woman wondered: “Then why aren’t rabbis examined orally?” A Halakhic consultant responded: “They too should take an oral exam. That would be much better. Because [this type of exam] shows your ability to relate, to talk, to be open, all important to do this work.”(Avishai, ““Doing Religion” In a Secular World” 199)
The virtual venue affirms the traditional system of knowledge (woman to woman) and its reliance on legitimate external experts (rabbinic authority is actual authority, woman are just consultants Nishmat is not a virtual community in the model of a medical community because in the medical model, only the authority (not the peer) lends advice or support. In sum is the mikveh (the physical mikveh) a unique type of health community. But privacy issues surrounding the mikveh mean that a virtual health community is not an appropriate model in which to evaluate it. The mikveh is not an anonymous space, whereas Nishmat virtual community of support is completely anonymous.

**MikvahCalender.com**

MikvahCalender.com is a paid web based calendar utility that allows woman who practice the Jewish legal commandment of family purity to track their monthly cycles in accordance with the Jewish legal tradition. The site is “In Memory of Rivkah and Gavriel Holtzberg (Z"L) and the Mumbai Kedoshim.” Rivkah and Gavriel Holtzberg were Chabad emissaries who were killed in a terrorist attack in Mumbai, India in 2009. This acknowledgment indicates the MikvahCalender.com was created by individuals affiliated with Chabad, but does not appear to be a project of Chabad International (as will be discussed in the MyMikvahCalender.com).

**Organization**
The site’s primary purpose is a calendaring application. The secondary purpose is educational materials related to JMPR, as the site includes a glossary of JMPR terms and an opportunity to “ask a Rabbi”.

Use-Case Scenarios of MikvahCalendar.com

1. Signing up for a membership.

Use Case Scenario 1: A woman who is observant of the Jewish law of family purity would like to create an account on MikvahCalendar.com.

A potential user is asked to subscribe to a trial membership (which is free) or sign up for an annual membership. A one year membership is $18, a two year membership is $34, and a three year membership is $48. This site indicated a potential member saves a dollar for every extra year she is willing to commit to membership. To automatically renew membership requires a pay-pal account (a security feature), or a user can choose to pay
once using a credit card or pay-pal. A user who does not wish to subscribe can skip this step. In keeping with the pay for service nature of this web application, MikvahCalender.com also has a store where woman can purchase Bedikah Cloths (white cloths that are used in the internal checks that are part of the ritual of family purity observance).

Figure 4: MikvahCalendar.com Store

Store

Bedikah Cloths

Bedikah Cloths are special white cloths used for examinations.

They are used during your:
Hefsek Taharah
Seven White Days
Anticipated Flow

72 soft cloths
$5.00 + Free Shipping
US Shipping only
Quantity | Add to Cart

View Cart

Customization Options:

Next, the user is asked to pick a calendar theme. This theme consists of a color for the background of the site (Purple, Green, Water/Blue, and Pink); the pink theme is the default.

Next the user is asked for her location through a drop down menu.

The user is asked to select “Reminders: emails and texts”. The user, using unlimited checkmarks can elect to receive reminders from the site on 6 occasions/dates connected to the practice of family purity “hefsek taharah” (only written in Hebrew), “Examinations
for 7 white days”, with the sub-option of “white Day afternoon reminder”, “Mikveh Night”, “Anticipated Flow”, and “estimated ovulation” (which is departure from the general requirements of family purity).

The user can send these reminders to two emails. The users can send reminders to a primary email and an alternative email and as text messages to two different cell phones (in the US or Canada). This is where the site suggests a woman can alert her husband to instances in her personal observance of JMPR. However, she cannot send different reminders to different phones or emails (i.e. the husband and wife receive the same reminders).

Figure 5: MikvahCalendar.com Interface Customization

Finally the user is asked to select an array of Rabbinic options and is asked to consult her rabbi if she needs help choosing. The options are limited (unlike the reminders discussed above which are checkboxes), but a user can choose a “Custom” rabbinic option where she can combine her practice of JMPR from all the customs. The customs are Ashkenazi
according to the Rosh Yeshiva of YU, Ashkenazi according to Nishmat, Chabad, and Sephardic (according to the Sephardic Mikveh of Israel).

Figure 6: MikvahCalendar.com General halakhic customization

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Rabbinic Options

Please consult with your Rabbi if you need help selecting among the following options.

Ashkenazic
- Custom according to Yeshiva University
- Custom according to Nishmat
- Custom according to Chabad

Chabad
- Custom of Chabad

Sefardic
- Custom according to the Sephardic Mikveh of Israel

Custom
- Let me choose from all available options
```

Figure 7: MikvahCalendar.com YU/Ashkenazi halakhic customization

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Rabbinic Options

Please consult with your Rabbi if you need help selecting among the following options.

Ashkenazic
- Custom according to Yeshiva University
- Custom according to Chabad

Chabad
- Custom of Chabad

Sefardic
- Custom according to the Sephardic Mikveh of Israel

Custom
- Let me choose from all available options
```
2. Using the calendar to track a cycle

Use Case Scenario 2: After initializing her membership the user can track her cycle on a calendar view or list view. This interface has the English Dates, the Hebrew Dates, and a color-coded scheme for the Anticipated flows (blue), Average Cycle, Monthly Cycle, and Interval Cycle. PDF of these cycles can be printed for personal records. The calendar interface is simple; it looks like a Google calendar or Outlook calendar and includes the
dates for The new Jewish month (Rosh Chodesh) and other Jewish holidays. However, to actually track your cycle requires knowledge both of calendar software and the language of JMPR. Although the site has a glossary of JMPR terms and a FAQ, it does not have any dedicated tutorials or training materials for users unfamiliar with JMPR or the computers.

3. Using the site to learn more about family purity.

Use Case Scenario 3: The website has a permanent navigation bar on the top that has a left and right menu. The left menu options include an “About us” link, a “Glossary”, a FAQS”, and “Contact”, and “Ask the Rabbi”. These are educational options. The right contains links to change the user's settings and access the store.

Ask the Rabbi

[Rabbi Paniel Jacobs, author of Family Purity and Chochmat HaTahara, would be happy to answer questions relating to Taharat HaNefesh. He displays extreme sensitivity and patience in all cases. You can write completely anonymously, and this email is seen only by Rabbi Jacobs.

RabbiJacobs@FamilyPurity.com]
Technical Features of MikvahCalender.com

- The overall technical features of MikvahCalender.com are clear and unobtrusive.
- Design sophistication: works on older forms of web browsers, no flash graphics.
- Type of site: membership, with trial free membership
- Online framework: utility, calendar
- Ease of use/navigation: top menu, must log in and out

Summary of interface:

Similar to any online or computer calendar. A woman’s cycle is marked with a red line across the days she inputted as her unclean days. Information about the woman’s average menstrual cycle length and “flows” is tabulated from prior data and displayed at all times, to the left of the calendar. The virtual self that uses Mikveh Calendar is always in state of niddah, anticipating a future period, or able to analyze her past periods of niddah. In short, virtually she is always impure. Finally, her virtual self is not located in the same place as the user. The user is able (through a drop-down menu in the top left corner) to recalibrate the entire calendar for a different time zone (by changing the city) the virtual self is able to track her menstrual cycle in a different city.
**MyMikvahCalendar.com**

MyMikvahCalendar.com is a free web-based calendar utility that allows woman who practices the Jewish commandment of family purity to track their monthly cycles in accordance with the Jewish legal tradition. The site is a project of Chabad International’s, as indicated in a disclaimer in the “about us” section of the website. The site notes “My Mikvah Calendar was developed by mikvah.org to assist the Jewish married couple in determining permissible times of intimacy according the laws of Taharat Hamishpacha – Family Sanctity.” Mikvah.org is a program created by Chabad International to “educate, inspire and enlighten” visitors about how observance of JMPR is the “secret to the success of the Jewish Home”. The site states that “observance of Mikvah brings G-d into the marriage, elevating the physical to the sublime.” Mikvah.org “is dedicated to bringing awareness and a deeper understanding of Mikvah to women worldwide via the internet by using state of the art technology to serve the world-wide Jewish community…ensuring Jewish continuity by strengthening and preserving the observance of Family Sanctity and
making Mikvah a household word.” Mikvah.org includes a link to MyMikvahCalender.com. This link implies that MyMikvehCalender is the preferred way of actualizing Chabad’s mikveh movement on a personal level.

Organization

Like MikvahCalendar.com, the site’s primary purpose is a calendaring application. The secondary purpose is educational materials related to JMPR as the site includes a glossary and an opportunity to “ask a Rabbi”.

Use-Case Scenarios of MyMikvahCalendar.com

1. Signing up for a membership.

Use Case Scenario 1: A woman who is observant of the Jewish law of family purity would like to create an account on MyMikvahCalendar.com. The site asks the user to select their permanent location and any trips they might take. A user can select to add a new trip to her calendar, by entering the English date and the return date (if it is known). She can then use a drop down menu with a seemingly endless list of exotic locations to select the destination of her trip. It does not indicate if there are mikvehs in all the locations listed. There is no evidence that there is a mikveh in all the locations listed. This author doubts there is a functioning mikveh in Abu Dhabi, UAE.
2. Using the calendar to track a cycle

Use Case Scenario 2: After initializing her membership the user can track her cycle on a monthly calendar view or list view. This interface has the English Dates, the Hebrew Dates, and a color-coded scheme for Anticipated flows, Average Cycle, Monthly Cycle, and Interval Cycle. It also has icons for the relevant occurrences in the practice of family purity. *Thest Hachodeh* (which the site translates underneath as the “Hebrew date of the menstrual cycle”) is a signified by a circle. The *Onah Beinonit* (which the site translates...
as “Average Onah”) is a diamond, and the Haflaga (translated as “Cycle Based on Interval”) is a square. These icons, colors, Hebrew dates, and English dates, are displayed seamlessly and without clutter in the month view. PDF of these cycles can be printed for personal records. The calendar interface is quite complicated. The user has an opportunity to add a memo to a date on the site and include specific anatomical information (indicate the color of the bedikah).

Figure 15: MyMikvehCalendar.com personal halakhic settings

This “add a memo” feature is not available on the Mikveh Calendar. And although the actual task is called “adding a memo” the dialogue box asks for the date, the time (hour, and minute) and a title. There are two check-boxes. One checkbox is “remind me”. The other is “Change onah’s color”. These specifications suggests “Adding a memo” is a euphemism for altering a time-based component of the niddah practice (i.e. postponing mikveh night), or seeing unusual spotting or bleeding during a clean period. This reminds the user of the meticulous nature of these laws and that a woman must be conscious of her body at all times (not only during the period of Niddah). This “add a memo” option implies this calendar can be used (and should be used) during the entire month.
The user can also see a view of the entire year of her niddah activity. The relevant niddah information is color-coded. A flow is pink, the Separation onot are displayed as light green, “Mikveh Night” is highlighted in blue, the Allowed Night/Days are dark green, and the Preparatory Days are purple. In short, a woman can see a graphical and colorful annual overview of her menstrual cycle and the Jewish legal activity and ramifications of this biological process.

3. Using the calendar to track other information

Use Case Scenario 3: MyMikvehCalender also aggregates other data (that has “no relevance to the laws of family purity” as indicated in a disclaimer on these webpages) that can be calculated from the time, date, and lengths of a woman’s menstrual cycle. A user can browse (through clicking a drop-down box in the top right hand corner titled “different views”). In these different views a user can see a chart of flow length and cycle
However, to actually track your cycle requires knowledge both of calendar software and the language of family purity.

The site provides a video tutorial that first spells out the goals of the website, how, why, and who should use the application, and celebrates the technological features. According to the video there are three goals of MyMikvehCalender.com. 1) “To monitor expected menstruation dates”, 2) “To prevent intimacy at times not halakhicly permissible” and 3) “To maintain the laws of the Onas Havest”. The first goal is clear to a visitor with limited or an elementary understanding of JMPR. The second goal is clear to someone with an intermediate understanding of JMPR, as the term “halakhicly” is a Hebrew religious term, but is not connected to JMPR. Finally the third goal is not translated, and the English phrase “Onas Haveset” (Hebrew for timeframes of menstruation) is provided in its Ashkanazi transliterated pronunciation. The order of these goals - basic to advanced Jewish background needed to understand them, is consistent with MMC goals of outreach to secular Jews and committed to promoting a traditional ultra-Orthodox lifestyle in the tradition of the Chabad Lubvatich Judasim. The video tutorial provides detailed direction on how to enter the site, how to set up a cycle, how to use the features of the sites, and how to create reminders.
4. Using the site to learn more about family purity.

Use Case Scenario 4: The website has a permanent navigation bar on the top that has a left and right menu. The left menu options include an “About us” link, a “Glossary”, a FAQS”, and “Contact”, and an “Ask the Rabbi”. These are educational options. The right contains links to change the user’s settings and access the store.
Technical Features of MyMikvahCalender.com

- The overall technical features of MyMikvahCalender.com are busy and sophisticated
- Design sophistication: lots of flash graphics.
- Type of site: free membership
- Online framework: utility, calendar
- Ease of use/navigation: top menu, must log in and out

One portion of the video tutorial is particularly revealing of the contradiction between the websites target audience of secular Jews and the contextual goals of promoting meticulous JMPR observance. The clip shows a non-vocalized Hebrew quote from the Shulchan Aruch, a 16th century commentary on Jewish law. The quote is not translated, but the headline exclaims “not optional!!” leading users or visitors who do not understand Hebrew to believe that using MMC is mandating by Jewish law, but does not provide a translation of the Jewish law. This is confusing and self-promoting. The website says that using a “Mikveh Calendar” is not option, but uses the term “Mikveh Calendar”, a vague reference to any sort of artifact (digital or manually) that JMPR observant women use to track their cycle. In short, the website though claiming to be a tool for secular women, does not provide enough direct translation of terms or educational features to build JMPR literacy. The site has pop-ups that explain how some of the dates were calculated and what certain phases in the JMPR cycle are, but these pop-ups use too many unfamiliar terms to provide a secular uses with a true grasp of the laws of JMPR. A secular user can input her cycle dates and be altered to when she is
impure, must perform internal checks, and when she is ready to visit the mikveh, but the explanations behind these alerts are geared towards the highly educated user.

Figure 19: Portion of MyMikvahCalendar.com Video Tutorial

Membership in JMPR support sites

Signing up for a membership on any of these JMPR support sites does the following:

1) Expands the JMPR support network into a system where women have two JMPR identities, a local real identity and a virtual identity. Given the boundary-less cyberspace, and the language of “Membership”, membership in these sites implies that a user is a member of a virtual Niddah network in addition to the network of her local mikveh.

2) Paying for membership expands the network of Niddah into a consumer commodity. Both MikahCalendar and MyMikvehCalendar have a pay-pall option (where you can purchase Bedikah Cloths in the website’s online store), which suggests a target user is
comfortable with purchasing things online. While most mikvehs require some sort of fee for use, the fact that this service requires additional payment implies that target users both have computers, personal credit-cards, and pay-pall accounts. Both calendar websites are a paid service and promote themselves as tools to better observe JMPR. Most mikvehs require users to pay some sort of fee. However the “Niddah cultural industry” described by Avishai consists of classes, manuals, and books that all require payment. Thus, these websites are extensions of the idea that one must be taught by experts with credentials and pay for their advice, publications, and tools, to properly observe JMPR. This is a drastic change from a system of knowledge that mothers shared with their daughters and perhaps had a nominal fee to use the mikveh that likely paid the maintenance and the non-credentialed female mikveh attendant.

3) Choosing your rabbinic option through the calendaring websites suggests that the user’s local rabbinic authority is incompatible with the website. Although the user is asked to consult her rabbi for before choosing a rabbinic custom, this option is a blatant expansion beyond the local niddah custom.

4) Submitting a question to one of the rabbi’s listed on the site expands the network of Niddah to asking rabbis not local to your community, and Niddah education to a virtual teacher (as opposed to the orally transmitted education passed from mother to daughter)
5) Tracking your cycle on your personal computer expands the network of *niddah* by controlling it mathematically and automatically, and reminding the user that technology, not herself is in monitoring her cycle.

6) Receiving reminders through text messages and emails suggests that a women can use all communication mediums at her disposal to track her cycle. The calendar websites sends multiple reminders, sometimes many times a day to the users through email and text message. This is both intrusive and convenient, as it integrates messages about *niddah* with that of your personal email or personal text messages. It also implies that many target users have regular internet access and phones capable of receiving text messages.

   It should be noted that although one can enter a new flow into the calendar using the English dates, the annual overview is limited to the Hebrew months (in annual view, the months are only listed as the Hebrew months), indicating that the biological information entered into the computer is calibrated or transformed into Jewish data. And if a woman was using this technology to track her ovulation (a tool of family planning), though the information itself is useful for her OBGYN, it is “locked” in Jewish dates and language, and would be hard for a non-observant doctor to make sense of. This is an attempt to limit the network of niddah to observant Jews. Even though the website does make available valuable biological information, it is only valuable to those who understand the laws of JMPR. This limitation implies that the audience of the printouts is the woman herself, her husband, a *Ballanit*, halakhic consultant (i.e. Nishmat) or rabbi.
However, given the fact this pdf printout is now a tangible and reproducible artifact of a woman’s niddah artifact can be sent anywhere in the world. If a user of the site was facing some sort of halakhic issue that required consultation, she is able to send the reproducible artifact (via mail, email, and fax) to any authority in the world (or virtual universe). The feature allows a woman to “print out” her entire niddah history and email it, in a matter of seconds, anywhere in the world. She is also able to print it, put it on her fridge, in her drawer, and staple it to her calendar. The possibilities are endless. Thus, the goal of this thesis is to identify and examine the changed contextual aspects and internal dimensions of JMPR in the internet age through the cases presented in this paper, and to determine the underlying factors that contributed to JMPR’s coalescence with the medium of virtual communication.

Discussion

This thesis is a conversation that combines many academic disciples and is located at the intersection or religion and the Internet. Much has been written on the performance of religion online, such as Campbell (Heidi Campbell) However, in regard to traditional Orthodox Jewish practice, the medium of Internet communication carries deep contradictions to a religious communal network that has sought to distance itself from secular culture.

The Internet challenges conceptions of space, time, place, and authority, four conditions that are deeply protected in Orthodox Judaism. The medium of Internet
communication undermines Orthodox Judaism's conceptualization of ‘place’. Place in Orthodox Judaism is bifurcated. Orthodox Jews identify with living in Israel, or out of Israel - in the diaspora (Galut). The Internet imposes a third option upon the Orthodox conceptualization of place. The Virtual Place, where one can be in Israel online, or in the diaspora chatting with someone in Israel, or in Israel chatting with someone in the diaspora. The Virtual Place is wholly outside the Israel/diaspora network that concerns a great deal of Orthodox Jewish law and spirituality. In Orthodox Judaism religious obligation in based in time and is charted by a series of holidays, weekly cycles, thrice daily payer obligations, and aspirations for a messianic redemption. Time is based on the sun and the moon, the week, the numeric symbols of six days of work and seven days of rest established in the biblical creation narrative. However, the Internet does not rest on the Jewish Sabbath and any online content is accessible thereof (including the websites reviewed in this thesis), even during ‘times’ that Orthodox Judaism prohibits the use of electricity (i.e. Shabbat).

The continuous condition of Internet communication is incongruent with the Orthodox conceptualization of time. The restrictions that Orthodox Judaism places on time and behavior cannot be imposed on the internet. Authority, specifically the hierarchy of religious authority present in Orthodox Judaism, is displaced online. The cultivation, production, and publication of new ideas by people who traditionally were not allowed to author much less access certain topics in the Jewish legal code (i.e. woman) are given license to surf the web and in some cases, contribute to its content. The term “information super-highway” is useful when sketching the breadth of accessible knowledge. Finally,
spatial boundaries are re-invented in cyber-space. The boundary between public and private (i.e. Facebook) and what we reveal about ourselves is constantly being provoked online. The boundary between sacred and profane (a website about Jewish Law can be interrupted by a secular pop-up ad) and the boundary between the isolated orthodox world and secular culture is easily breached by a search engine. With smartphone applications, iPads and other portable web-enabled devices, these conflicts can fit in a purse or pocket.

Rabbi Hyam Soloveitchik asked similar questions about the proliferation of daily Jewish Legal guides as the outcome of the cheaper printing and publication technologies. In Soloveitchik’s essay titled “Rupture and Reconstruction” (Soloveitchik), the Rabbi explains that more precise and fundamental orthodox behavior is the result of the dissolvent of the informally and orally transmitted tradition and Jewish literacy. Soloveitchik points out that the publication of daily halakhic guides overrides the local intergenerational transfer of Jewish practice. In regard to an increased stringency in kosher observance Solovetchik wonders “Did these mimetic norms—the culturally prescriptive--conform with the legal ones? The answer is, at times, yes; at times, no… the kosher kitchen, with its rigid separation of milk and meat—separate dishes, sinks, dish racks, towels, tablecloths, even separate cupboards. Actually little of this has a basis in Halakhah. Strictly speaking, there is no need for separate sinks, for separate dishtowels or cupboards…The simple fact is that the traditional Jewish kitchen, transmitted from mother to daughter over generations, has been immeasurably and unrecognizably amplified beyond all halakhic requirements. Its classic contours are the product not of
legal exegesis, but of the housewife's religious intuition imparted in kitchen apprenticeship". (Soloveitchik 3) Likewise, this thesis poses the question. Does the internet function to strengthen, formalize and/or make more ridged the observance of traditional JMPR?

The Internet is a technology that poses new challenges for how traditional codes of practice for observant Jews are interpreted and implemented. Thus, for some observant Jews the Internet is a problematic technology because it facilitates multiple voices and personal freedom. Initially, some rabbis within the ultra-Orthodox community banned Internet use, but its advantages in terms of allowing women to work at home have weakened the disapproval. Although the economic value of home internet connectivity supports the spread of internet in the ultra-Orthodox community, the “debate over the Internet did not go away” (H. Campbell) and the “Internet is still contentious within many part of the community”. (H. Campbell)

Two recent studies of ultra-Orthodox internet use highlight how virtual communication is integrated with established patterns of community practice and daily life. Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) found that fundamentalist communities often "culture" a technology so that its use preserves rather than subverts their unique culture. Noting four dominant characteristics of religious fundamentalism (hierarchy, patriarchy, discipline, and seclusion), they consider how Internet technology might influence these traits. Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai claim the Internet challenges religious authority in fundamentalist communities as it "creates better opportunities for feminine voices to be
heard" (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 27). Yet the Internet also creates opportunities for online venues to "be culturally constructed in ways that adapt to the needs of a religious fundamentalist hierarchy" (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 28).

Livio and Tenenboim's study (2004) of female ultra-Orthodox Internet users who use the Internet for work-related tasks shows how these women use four discursive strategies to legitimize their use of the technology. These include distinguishing Internet technology from the content it carries in order to frame it as an acceptable medium, separating personal and societal effects, drawing on acceptable justifications such as statements of religious officials (e.g., approval from a rabbi), and depoliticizing use by denying subversive implications of the technology. An important claim made by several women is that "the Internet will not change us," because their Internet use was controlled by their husbands, employers, or rabbis and thereby made compatible with their form of life, so as not to challenge the beliefs of the community. Furthermore, language became a powerful tool for making a technology that was otherwise considered secular be acceptable within certain boundaries. In both Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai's (2005) and Livio and Tenenboim's (2004) studies, it was important for ultra-Orthodox users to claim and see that the Internet could be controlled.

However, the Internet as an endless source of halakhic literature and discussion, and more specifically the websites analyzed in this thesis, has altered practice of JMPR by promoting that unless one uses an automated technology to calculate relevant dates in the JMPR cycle, a woman is not observing JMPR to the fullest extent. If JMPR are
diffused with the local tastes and traditions of Morocco, Tunisia, Warsaw, etc. then the Internet, a place where sub-communities proliferate, can be another location (albeit virtual location) that alters JMPR. However, communication in cyberspace occurs without markers of local context or the fluidity of mimetically transmitted tradition. Thus, conversations about JMPR online and tools related to the practice of JMPR are global not local articulations of Jewish practice, as women can sign up for these sites from anywhere in the world and need not be affiliated with a local congregation or have a relationship with a local rabbi.

Sade-Beck’s article on Internet Ethnography establishes research principles vital to this thesis. In describing a method for discerning the social implications of the internet on Israeli society, Sade-Beck establishes principles of Internet research that are related to the multi-dimensional challenges the internet poses to Orthodox Judaism. Sade-Beck proposes that internet communication is regulated by certain underlying conditions.

1) The Internet is a constant stream of information that is accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

2) The Internet integrates “personal and mass media” (Sade-Beck, “Internet ethnography” 2)

3) The Internet facilities information browsing

4) The Internet builds a social community where people are never physically present (they are not co-present with one another)

5) To make up for the lack of physical co-presence, emotion online is developed through real time “Expressive Codes” . (Sade-Beck, “Internet ethnography” 4). (sign language,
vocabulary of abbreviations, written descriptions of emotions etc.). This thesis will now examine the virtual aids for JMPR for the presence of the following factors and how they affect the offline ritual of JMPR

1) Space: The physical space of the mikveh, the non-virtual life of a JMPR support site user, and the virtual spaces created by JMPR support sites.

2) Artifacts: The digital printouts the calendar applications have created.

3) Knowledge topography: The ability to navigate to JMPR information online through the websites discussed and other online sources.

4) Authority: The local rabbis, mothers, and female non-credentialed mikveh guides versus the rabbis who created the JMPR websites and the newly credentialed female Yoetzot at Nishmat.

5) Communication: The way the Internet promotes succinct communication through chat or length limited virtual question forms.

Ron Grimes, a scholar of religion and technology notes that “[n]ot long ago, the terms ‘ritual’ and ‘media’ would have been regarded as labels for separate cultural domains – the one sacred, the other secular”. (Grimes 3) Today, rituals are performed not only with the support of computer-aided tools, but also in cyberspace. However, the transfer of a ritual into computer-supported ritual can change the underlying rationales for ritual practice and how the ritual is performed. JMPR is one of many religious rituals that have an online support system. Therefore, it is necessary to determine which key ritual factors are affected by the presence of a virtual aid and if the virtual aid causes noticeable change in the offline articulation and practice of the studied ritual. The Internet
prompts a merger between the real and virtual world. “Instead of relating to the features that distinguish the virtual world from the real world, we must adopt an approach focusing on imagination, associations and reciprocity between the two worlds” (Sade-Beck, “Internet ethnography” 9)

JMPR virtual duality results in two worlds - an online and offline world. This creates duplications of reality. Basing research on Internet ethnography (i.e. observing and researching the behavior and artifacts of the virtual discourse of a community or an individual) “cannot be the sole source of data as it provides only a partial and limited picture without a link to the ‘Real world’”(Sade-Beck, “Internet ethnography” 8) Sade-Beck points out it is problematic to make a “clear and sharp distinction between concepts from the virtual world online and the ‘real’ world offline”, because this conceptual difference creates a “duplication of reality”. Whereas technology is so integrated into our society it is has become domesticated allowing people to adapt new technologies to their homes and lives. The Internet is domesticated in society. “This virtualization process is the third dimension of the domestication process in which we transfer life, actions and objects from the physical work into the virtual environment, thus making our very lives and homes into virtual lives and homes” (Sade-Beck, “Internet ethnography” 9) In the case of virtual supported JMPR, the physical environments of the ritual has been altered. The Internet is a new medium of performance. The ritual is being negotiated in its online and offline performance. In short, it involves a transfer between different realities, the reality / physical and the virtual one.
Jeffery Shandler, in his book “Jews and Video-tape” describes his experience as Videographer for his partner’s niece’s baby naming. After spending the majority of the ritual ‘behind camera’, thick in observation, rather than experience – Shandler when arriving home after the baby naming reflects on the experience he had while watching the video. Shandler, as the ritual’s videographer felt disconnected from the ritual itself. Shandler realized that the role of the videographer “required him to serve as an ‘ideal viewer’, whose gaze remains continually fixed on the celebrants”. (Shandler 145) Shandler concludes that although “the documentation [Videotape]” had not been planned in any particular way, the videotape was not advantageous…its making and viewing were, albeit implicitly, part of the ritual itself” (Shandler 145)

Shandler's experience provokes the tension of simultaneously participating in and observing a ritual. He poses the question, what is the relationship between the rituals documentation to the ritual itself? JMPR’s documentation leads to the ritual’s practice. JMPR observant women must maintain some documentation system, whether electronic or manual, extensive or brief, about their menstrual cycle and the status of their internal checks. The components of JMPR are too numerous to memorize (Dates, times, colors) which is why a computerized system (such as those examined in this thesis) are rational solutions/aids to the ritual. However, the ease in which JMPR support documents can be transferred printed, faxed, texted etc. through the web applications means the virtual expression of JMPR creates a new cannon of JMPR artifacts that are universally formatted by the websites. The websites celebrate the fact that women can print out their
calendars and share them with their rabbis, doctors, and husbands. Suddenly, JMPR artifacts are becoming a medical-record like output.

Research by Sade-Beck on mourning relates to artifacts that can be printed from web (such as the JMPR aids discussed in this thesis). In her research on Israeli support communities for the mourning and bereaved, Sade-Beck describes the “virtual space in which commemoration, bereavement, and private and public mourning meet and maintain a dialogue with events in the real world.” (Sade-Beck, “Mourning and memorial culture on the Internet” 4) Sade-Beck establishes the multi-dimensional nature of this virtual community and in doing so gives structure to the multi-dimensional conditions of JMPR virtual tools. In her study, Sade-Beck dimensions were the Internet social space, offline interviews, and a “mixture of documents: traditional “hard copy” press, the online press, Internet databases and so forth.” (Sade-Beck, “Mourning and memorial culture on the Internet” 1) The dimensional conditions of menstrual purity, biological (bleeding), spiritual (divine commandments), social (gender), spatial (mikveh), national (pure demographic), are comparable to the dimensions Sade-Beck investigated.

The above examples of virtual JMPR tools have shown many changing processes which refer to their transfer into a new medium.

Due to communication conditions in web-based JMPR tools, the communication medium - the mode of ‘spoken’ language is transformed into written chat, postings to online forums, or emails. The orality that was once central to JMPR (conversation between the mikveh attendant and the observant and/or conversations between a mother
and a daughter) are excluded in the virtual expressions. The most striking changing process affects the communication mode and structures of rituals. The transformation of communication is visible in many scenarios. The transformation of communication causes noticeable changes in the presentation and mediation of the ritual. Specifically in a shift from oral non-credentialed information (i.e. mother to daughter) to virtual credentialed information (i.e. virtual rabbi or virtual Yoetzet). Communication seems to be one element of rituals which can be used very flexibly. The participants and the ritual experts are able to adapt and transform communication structures according to the requirements of the medium. It is obvious that the changing processes often only affect the representational structure of communication. The content of what is communicated is hardly changed.

In light of the hybrid nature of this topic (technology, history, and sociology), this thesis also engages theories of computer supported collaboration. There is also considerable literature that discusses religious expression online and technologies created for religious communities. The terms “techno-spiritual design” and “spiritual computing” are derived from the latter mentioned literature. In the article “Sacred Imagery in Techno-Spiritual Design” the authors conclude that “incorporating sacred imagery into techno-spiritual applications can be useful in guiding development” (Wyche et al. 55). The websites discussed in this thesis are not analyzed using any research methods related to graphic design. However, themes bowered from Jewish history and text appears to influence some design aspects.
Earlier technological solutions for Jewish rituals are a source of research inspiration. An article submitted for a conference on ‘Home Spirituality’ titled “Sabbath Day Home automation: “It’s like mixing technology and religion”, presents a case of 20 American Orthodox Jewish families’ use of home automation for religious purposes. Specifically, the article discusses a variety of automated technological solutions that circumvent the religious prohibition of “manually controlling electronic devices” on the Jewish Sabbath (A. Woodruff, S. Augustin, and B. Foucault 530). The article concludes that the “use of home automation appeared to have become a religious custom for the participants, both a ritual in the home and a sign of affiliation with the community…automation and/or the atmosphere it created became associated with religious commitment and ritual”. (Allison Woodruff, Sally Augustin, and Brooke Foucault 532) The authors conclude that “use of automation appeared to be a unifying force that participants associated with commitment to the Sabbath and Judaism”. (Allison Woodruff, Sally Augustin, and Brooke Foucault 533) Their research suggests that the Sabbath automotive technologies promoted community. The authors of “Sabbath Day Home Automation” explain that the adoption of automation technology is a “highly informative example of how a community orients to and sets boundaries with technology and information”. (Allison Woodruff, Sally Augustin, and Brooke Foucault 535)

The information landscape of the Internet is different than the information landscape of the halakhic discourse. Sade-Beck characterizes the social implications of the internet by way of a study on “Israeli support communities on the Internet involved in loss and bereavement”. (Sade-Beck, “Mourning and memorial culture on the Internet” 2)
Sade-Beck’s research is both thematically and methodologically in-line with the scope of this thesis, as her research examines the effects of virtual communication on Israeli society (as is the goal of my thesis). Liav points out that the “Internet integrates personal and mass media”. (Sade-Beck, “Mourning and memorial culture on the Internet” 2) The Internet is not static in content or in topography. It allows users to both shape the “quality of the data” and travel (what is commonly referred to as browsing or surfing) the vast information resources of the cyber-world. Citing Nunes, Sade-Beck asserts the information landscape online in no way resembles information retrieval or socialization in the real world. “Rather cyber-space or cybernetic space, through which users move...creates a rapid, new, immediate, multi-layered world, thanks to the 24 hour per day, 7 days a week accessibility to the Internet and site structure. (Sade-Beck, “Mourning and memorial culture on the Internet” 2) In short, the internet is a constant stream of information that is accessible 24/7 and the Internet facilitates information browsing.

This thesis focuses on the questions raised by religious engagement online in relation to religious authority in JMPR. Specifically, what happens to religious authority and power relationships within online environments that support JMPR. Do the JMPR support websites expand or degrade the role of woman leadership and rabbis in JMPR? The issue of authority is often raised in connection with the Internet, as authority is seen as a key area to be challenged by network communications. Recent studies (Barker, 2005; Barzali-Nahon and Barzali, 2005, Cowan, 2005) suggest that the Internet has the potential to threaten traditional authority in the different religious communities online.
Dawson (2000) highlighted three areas in which religious authority, specifically in "cults" online, is challenged by online religious activity. These include the potential "proliferation of misinformation and disinformation" (H. Campbell 43) by opponents of particular religious groups or disgruntled insiders; the "loss of control over religious materials" by religious organizations; and providing "new opportunities for grassroots forms of witnessing" (H. Campbell 44), thus favoring the emergence of unofficial or alternative voices, in contrast to the traditional voices.

Piff and Warburg (Piff et al.) have discussed struggles in authority in the Baha'i community online. They argue that an online group may discuss topics that are traditionally reserved for religious authorities. These conversations occur in a public forum where lay people offer their own interpretations of religious beliefs. Their study shows that tensions can arise between religious institutions and the members when online conversations create a space and a process by which the official teachings can be challenged.

**Conclusion**

This thesis has attempted to track the changing conceptualization of JMPR, both historically and through the contemporary articulation of the ritual. A textual analysis of the JMPR websites indicates the female voices of decentralized leadership that once defined the practice and the communiality of JMPR have been replaced by the digital hierarchy of a small group of male rabbis. Over the last few decades, institutions, and scholarship dedicated to research into the origins evolution and practice of Jewish Menstrual Purity Rituals have become commonplace in academic Jewish studies and the
Israeli and Diaspora Jewish communal infrastructure. Scholars of Jewish studies, Jewish religious leadership, and innovators in Jewish life and culture are witnesses of an emergence of Jewish activity based on menstrual purity rituals. These activities are varied. Some of these activities are simply inspired by components of menstrual purity rituals but are partially divorced from the foundational and requisite components of menstruation. These activities recognize certain symbols, venues, and objects of Jewish menstrual purity ritual (such as prayers, the ritual bath, water) but ignore others, as they are open to men, unmarried woman, new rituals and occasions for immersions, and do not necessarily demarcate menstruation as an impure state.

Many of these activities are centered on immersing in a mikveh but are not guided by Orthodox Jewish rabbinic legal code. Examples of Jewish activity inspired by JMPR include new uses for the mikveh and new participants (such as unmarried women or female same sex couples) in menstrual purity inspired behaviors. Today, some mikvehs are more than venues for a ritual bath house; rather they see themselves as centers for Jewish education and culture. These mikvehs (such as Mayyim Hayyim in Newton, MA) are used in healing ceremonies or to mark Jewish life-cycle, personal, or medical events (such as the conclusion of chemotherapy treatments) or as part of a Bat or Bar Mitzvah, celebration (when a Jewish thirteen year-old boy or girl is recognized as an adult in the eyes of the Jewish community). The JMPR support websites are central to an Orthodox Jewish movement that seeks to encourage more women to take on the halakhic obligation of JMPR, unlike the re-envisioned mikveh uses (ie. Mayyim Hayyim). The JMPR support cites take a drastically traditional and fundamentalist approach to JMPR
practice. The new millennium has ushered in a new wave of mikveh interests. This wave that uses advancements in technology and women empowerment for two opposite goals, one that opens mikveh to new participants in non-halakhic ways, and another that uses technology to usurp the voice of informal women’s leadership in halakhic mikveh observance.

The idea that the Internet empowers personal choice is an important issue related to religious authority. The presence of Internet forums that discuss more liberal interpretations of Jewish doctrine is accessible to any person (man or woman) with an Internet connection. The extent to which these forums affect religious practice is not the central question of this thesis. The mere fact that they exist proves the Internet is an opportunity for religious women to access and/or participate in conversations about religious life. However, these forums (unlike the JMPR support websites analyzed in this thesis) are typically not created or condoned by the established religious authority. In contrast, the JMPR support websites are produced by recognized Orthodox organizations and overseen by male rabbinic authorities.

There is scholarship that suggests the Internet may be creating new forms of religious authority. In a 1999 study, J Anderson researched internet forums that discuss Islamic doctrine. Anderson claims that mainstream Islam is being altered “by these new online interpreters as the presence online and presentation of rhetoric creates a position of power that side-steps traditional channels where religious leaders are appointed and
recognized”. (Anderson) However, the construction of the mikveh as a home/source of female leadership in JMPR discourse is itself a side-step of traditional Jewish religious channels of male appointed and recognized religious leaders. The mikveh was an offline institution that embodied a disruption to the rabbinic power structure, by empowering women to control the practice of JMPR. The rise of new JMPR support websites will allow male religious authorities greater access to JMPR discourse. There is also evidence that the Internet is altering religious authority in Christian communities of faith. The Hartford Institute study of U.S. congregational websites found that increased reliance on the Internet is changing congregational power structures, empowering previously marginalized "techies" who are taking on new leadership roles such as "church webmaster". (Thumma) The study points out that Webmasters or online moderators function as new agents of authority. In MyMikvahCalender.com and MikvehCalender.com the online moderate is a rabbi. In Yoetzot.com, the moderators are women, but the disclaimer undermines their authority.

The discursive framing of technology as acceptable in the ultra-Orthodox community raises important questions as to why these sites exist in the first place. The process by which the ultra-Orthodox community sanctioned the production of JMPR support websites needs to be studied more carefully. However, Campbell notes that the “emergence of new systems of religious authority may begin to take into account online-offline community of faith interaction.” (H. Campbell) Therefore, are these websites an expression of gender politics? Are the makers of these websites purposefully attempting to reformulate JMPR as a male guided ritual? Many scholars have proven the Internet is a
powerful engine that unravels authority. In terms of the practice of JMPR, the internet has
globalized the network of family purity experts and tools. “Global information
technologies and their associated cultures undermine traditional forms of religious
authority because they expand conventional modes of communication, open up new
opportunities for debate and create alternative visions of the global community”. (Turner
120) Historically, the practice of JMPR was dominated by local and informal female
authority. However, the virtual authority embedded in web-based JMPR tool overrides a
woman’s local network of JMPR and exaggerates the halakhic proscription. The
existence of JMPR support websites is fascinating sociological development. However,
no data exists on the actually usage of the websites in or outside the Chabad community.
This thesis takes into account the presence of these websites as academically meaningful;
an analysis of the usage of these websites is beyond the scope of this study. Thus, it
should be concluded that the websites are treated as texts and analyzed as such.

The simple presence of JMPR support websites indicates a junction of
technology, Jewish observance, and women’s authority (or lack thereof). A recent
addition to MyMikvehCalendar.com is a list of Approbations. The website has uploaded
scanned copies of three women, who they call kallah teachers (kallah is Hebrew for
bride) and eight men, who in addition to the title of rabbi (which they all hold) are called
poskim. Kallah teachers are women with some official certification in teaching new
brides the components of JMPR. There is no formal training program, but the fact the
website identifies these women as kallah teachers implies that supervising rabbis approve
of their education level in regard to JMPR and refer to them as teachers. Because of the
educational limitations for women in the ultra-Orthodox community, the Yoetzot Hallacha at Nishmat are likely more well versed in traditional text and rabbinic legal discourse than the *kallah* teachers who approve of MyMikvehCalender.com. However, the presence of their approval indicates that these women are condoned by the ultra-Orthodox community to act as official messengers of JMPR, closing the door to local ultra-Orthodox women mikveh guides, but opening the door to non-local ultra-Orthodox women with high levels of JMPR knowledge. *Poskim* are halakhic decision makers, who make final rulings on Jewish law for their constituents. The *poskim* are listed first, and a user must scroll to the bottom of the page to find the approbations of the three women consultants. The *poskim* are international (Cleveland, Buenos Aires, Israel, England, Miami, and New York), and it is clear the authors of the site went to great lengths to provide the approbations of rabbis of various countries. But all the rabbis hail from the Chabad Lubavitch branch of ultra-Orthodox Judaism. The content of these letters underscores that these websites are a “very valuable tool” that “endeavors to bring greater Taharah (purity) to our holy nation” (Rabbi L.Y. Raskin), and enhance the “sanctity of the Jewish family” (The Central Committees of Chabad Lubavitch Rabbis). However, every letter encourages JMPR observant couples to keep a manual written record of JMPR personal data in case of either “mechanical failure” (Rav Sholom Ber Chaikin), unspecified “various reasons”, (Rabbi Schmerling) and because physically written records are “required by poskim, and logically prudent, for reference and back-up”. (Rabbi Fishel Jacobs) It is quite notable that the rabbis encourage couples to keep these manual records, while the websites are clearly designed for women users.
These letters indicate that a woman herself cannot be trusted to use the websites properly without continued rabbinical oversight and the aid of her husband. Rabbi Gluckowsky states “no online calendar can replace personal rabbinical interaction”, thus reminding users that that although the websites have numerous features to ask JMPR questions virtually, this service is supplemental to regular interaction with a real (not virtual) rabbi. Finally, Rabbi Rasking feels compelled to note that the “ongoing concern of Rabbanim (rabbis) worldwide regarding domestic use of the internet, this….project should not be construed as condoning the same”. These letters of approbation allude to many of the questions addressed in this thesis. It is clear that this website is an attempt to promote “purity” in the Jewish community by providing women with tools to better track their menstrual cycles. Like the purity rhetoric of the Middle Ages, in the eyes of the Rabbinical endorsements of MyMikvehCalender.com, the more JMPR observant couples in the Jewish community, the more pure the community is. Furthermore, the letters instruct women to track their cycles online and offline. This requires women to spend double the time on JMPR observance. Although these websites provide women with virtual tools to take ownership over their JMPR observance, the letters impart that a woman must track her cycle with her husband, maintain personal contact with a rabbi, and beware of spending too much time online. These websites do little to provide women authority over JMPR; rather they triple the amount of male authority over JMPR. The woman user of a virtual JMPR calendar application is now accountable to her husband, her local rabbi, and the virtual rabbi who responds to JMPR questions online. The features of these websites are personally intrusive, as they anchor a user to a barrage of virtual reminders related to the observance of JMPR. Thus, these websites are not
designed as liberating or empowering tools for women, rather they implore women to work harder on JMPR observance and seek male approval more often.

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