Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law

Rahel R. Wasserfall, Editor
Women and Water
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WOMEN
AND WATER

Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law

Edited by
Rahel R. Wasserfall

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A link between generations, let my soul become anchored in the waters of compassion.

Rahel R. Wasserfall
Women and Water
Introduction

Menstrual Blood into Jewish Blood

Women and water . . .
Jewish women and water . . .
Jewish women and living water . . .
Jewishness and purity . . .

Such words bring to mind a world of associations and feelings: female rituals, impurity, oppression, spirituality, health, women’s culture. The contributors to this volume unfold these and many other associations with what have become known as the laws of family purity governing the niddah (menstruating or the menstruating woman) and miqveh (ritual dipping or cleansing). In these pages, scholars from different disciplines examine the ways the laws and rituals of female purification have been understood and enacted by Jewish communities in different times and places. They show us that women’s actions and feelings during niddah and miqveh are the result not only of revered traditions but of polemics and reinterpretations that have taken place through the centuries as Jewish women and men adapted their traditions and practices to different contexts. Niddah (laws of family purity) and miqveh have played such an important role in Jewish women’s lives over the centuries that they have, in many ways, defined Jewish womanhood in the eyes both of women themselves and of the community. They have been revered as part of a symbolic order but also manipulated and contested as part of the concrete order of power relations between husbands and wives, rabbis and women, and rabbis and physicians.

To envision the importance of both niddah and miqveh in Jewish life, let us consider three stories, each taken from the recent past and each pointing
to the symbolic centrality of these issues as well as to the subtle (or not so subtle) contest for power between the people involved.

The first story comes from my own anthropological fieldwork among Jewish Moroccan women living in an Israeli moshav in the 1980s. A young woman (35), born in Fez but educated from childhood in a large town in Israel, told me with some reticence of her problems with her mother-in-law, problems that influenced her decision to leave the common roof of the extended family. Her action was both symbolic and powerful because her husband, being the firstborn, was set to become the master of the household. The point of contention in this dispute was the mother-in-law’s insistence that her daughter-in-law obey the laws of niddah and go to the miqveh.

There are a number of ways of interpreting the argument between the women. Quite plausibly, they were in conflict over influence in the house, love of the son or husband, the division of common labor, modernism versus traditionalism, and so forth. Yet it is interesting to note that the dispute crystallized around the issue of niddah. The laws of purity served as the institutionalized and hence legitimate means of channeling the tensions between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in this setting, a moshav settled by Moroccan Jews who immigrated to Israel in the 1950s. They were put forth as the reason and the cause behind her leaving the common household.¹

The second story is from Tripolitania in the 1920s, where Mordechai Ha-Cohen was born. Because of conflict with the leaders of his community, he moved to Benghazi, where he served on the Beit din. Ha-Cohen took a scientific interest in the customs and mores of his community and wrote the Iggid Mordechai. This book was not published until 1978, when H. Goldberg edited it and published it in Hebrew as the Book of Mordechai. In the meantime, however, working with Martino Moreno, an Italian Orientalist in Benghazi, Ha-Cohen also contributed to a 1924 book in Italian on various rituals and customs of the Jewish family.² It included a chapter describing rituals related to childbirth and the laws of niddah, and this was the source of Ha-Cohen’s problems with the Jewish community leaders: they accused him of writing about “private” female matters and divulging “secrets” to the Gentiles. As Goldberg writes (1993, 13, 43n. 40), the community of Benghazi was basically one of merchants, many of whom were acculturated to an Italian way of life and did not like the idea that “secrets” of the Jewish community would be known to outsiders. Ha-Cohen publicized issues that were understood to be private, and this was so problematic to the Jewish community that, when Goldberg interviewed Jewish immigrants in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s, they remembered this “run-in” and recalled how an Italian doctor would come into the house when women gave birth and ask about the things hanging on the wall and other
customs he had read about in the book published by Ha-Cohen and Moreno. People in the community did not like it at all, and the memory of the incident was still strong even among the immigrants’ children.

This story shows how in the social context of Benghazi in the 1920s, niddah and miqveh were seen as secret, very private, and central to the life of the Jewish community as a whole. These were matters not to be revealed to outsiders, to non-Jews. Indeed, they were perceived as a way of maintaining the boundaries between Jews and gentiles. Even though many of the people were assimilated, this secret was to be kept, a boundary not to be transgressed, one of the defining aspects of Jewishness.

My third story is taken from the United States in the late 1990s. The Habad movement in the United States is currently showing videos on the miqveh to attract Jewish women to return to the practice. During an evening when one such video was shown, the terms purity and impurity were never uttered. The “sophisticated” Jewish women targeted in both the movie and the discussion that followed it were middle class, educated, and very concerned with privacy. Discussion of impurity would presumably deter rather than attract such women. Hence, the movie dealt with the enhanced communication between the spouses that results when women use the miqveh, as well as the woman’s increased spirituality. The producers also made a point of showing very modern, clean, and luxurious miqvaoth (plural of miqveh), where the privacy of women is well protected. They took care to portray modern and beautiful young women talking about their personal experiences.

This example shows how the meanings of the miqveh are negotiated and reinterpreted to match contemporary values; it is an example of how, without changing the content of the Halakah (the law in the formative period of Judaism), the miqveh is represented as consonant with the values of American Jewish women in the 1990s. In the three examples given, niddah and miqveh are treated as symbols of Jewishness, reasons to break relationships, and a means of regaining spirituality and enhancing relationships in a cold modern world.

This collection takes as its starting point the view that such reinterpretation or shaping of the rituals of purification actually occurred throughout all the centuries of Jewish Diaspora. Traditions are not static. On the contrary, when we see how rituals were used, resisted, and manipulated, we understand traditions to be culture(s) in motion. The laws of purity and their enactment have come to us through a long history. They have both changed and persisted (see Biale 1995). The issues of purity and impurity manifest some of the ways in which Jewish communities have tried to regulate persistence and change. Each generation had to come to terms with the laws and, in doing so, to deal with issues of authority, power, and identity.
Each generation had to live through the tension between persistence (what is a Jewish way of dealing with one’s body and sexuality?) and change (what are the needs of each generation concerning these laws and rituals?).

Let us turn to the obvious question at this point. What is niddah, and why is it an important subject for scholars as well as for contemporary Jewish women?

Niddah, which comes from the word nadad, meaning “separation” or “being removed” (A. Kaplan 1982, 16), is addressed by one of the three biblical commandments aimed specifically at Jewish women. The restrictions concerning niddah were primarily focused on preserving the purity of the Temple cult (the first Temple, built by King Solomon in 1004 B.C.E. and destroyed in 586 B.C.E. by the king of Babylon). Researchers tend to discern two codes in the biblical literature: the Priestly Code and the Holiness Code. The Priestly Code includes, in addition to the niddah restrictions, rules governing men’s nocturnal emissions, skin diseases such as leprosy, and the birth and death of children. These conditions do not imply volition but are part of the natural processes of the body. From the standpoint of the Priestly Code, they are not connected to morality and cannot be categorized as sin: it is not a sin to menstruate. The biblical rules existed to govern the ways Israelites (males and females) behaved when in these states and how they must act to be able to enter the presence of God in the Temple.

But the laws concerning menstruation are also part of what is known as the Holiness Code and as such refer to activity that is considered to be dependent on the will of the actors. It is an act of volition, for example, for a man to have a sexual encounter with a menstruating woman. Insofar as menstruation is included in the Holiness Code, it can be understood and categorized in certain cases as sin, for one can choose or choose not to abide by the rules. In the Holiness Code, niddah comes to describe a forbidden act.

Most of the ambivalence concerning menstruation, past and present, seems to derive from this duality. On the one hand, menstruation is a natural process that, as my informants would say, improves a woman’s health. On the other hand, it might be connected to a sinful act and produce mamzerim (bastards), and it denotes the symbolic death of a potential life. In the Bible, one who had sexual relations with a niddah was subject to karet (being cut off from the community). There are four categories that fall under the purification system: the menstruant, the zava (a woman who oozes), the baal queri (a man who experiences seminal emission), and the zav (a man who oozes). Only men were required to wash to purify themselves; the ejaculant in water and the zav in living water; but neither the niddah nor the zava was required to...
wash. In Leviticus the impurity of the *niddah* lasts for seven days, and no purification ritual is prescribed; the impurity ceases automatically after the seventh day.\(^\text{11}\)

After the second exile and the destruction of the second Temple (70 C.E.) issues concerning laws of purity in the Temple became obsolete; the Temple that needed protection from impurity no longer existed. Impurity was understood in the biblical era as the state of being mortal and thus separated and inherently different from God, the source of wholeness (Biale 1995). By the end of the talmudic period (400–500 C.E.) male emission and skin diseases were removed from the system of purity, but *niddah* was not. The differences between the Temple period (before the first century) and the Mishna (second to sixth centuries) can be summarized as follows.

During the Temple period, women had to wait seven days. There was a distinction between a *zava* (a woman who has bodily emissions stemming from a disease) and a *niddah* (a woman who has the natural flow of her childbearing years). The means of purification, of reentering the presence of God, was not a *miqveh* but sacrifices. A woman—married, single, or widowed—had to wait for the end of her menstruation (seven days) and bring two birds to the priest as a sacrifice before entering the Temple. Also, during the second Temple period (before the second century), menstruating women were segregated and resided in what was called “a house of impurity.” They could not adorn themselves, had to eat alone, and could not continue their duties in their homes. This was because only “pure” food could be eaten during the Temple periods, again because of the presence of God in the Temple. Although these customs were discontinued in Europe, they were maintained among the Jews of Ethiopia until their emigration to Israel (see Antebi, this volume).\(^\text{12}\)

After the Temple period, the *tannaim* (rabbinic sages of the Roman period) and the *amoraim* (rabbinic scholars of the third to sixth centuries) “created fences” around the Torah to prevent inadvertent sins: The distinction between *zava* and *niddah* was eliminated because it wasn’t always clear when bleeding was “natural”; in addition, days of “whitening” (days a woman had to count after her menses ceased and before entering a *miqveh*), immersion in a *miqveh*, and self-examination were introduced.

It is interesting to note that unmarried women were not supposed to use the *miqveh*. After the destruction of the second Temple the focus on purity and impurity related to menstruation shifted to conjugal relations. By the Middle Ages women were segregated only sexually; that is, they continued all their duties except for intimate relations with their husbands.\(^\text{13}\) Had unmarried women used the *miqveh* before this?\(^\text{14}\) Was the *miqveh* always considered a legitimate place to reenter sexuality? Was it connected for some to menarche and womanhood?
In Europe in the Middle Ages, the practices restricting menstruating women were generally not mandated by the rabbis but had become mores, customs accepted by the Jewish population. For example, in some locations menstruating women did not attend worship services in the synagogues, and if a husband had been in contact with a niddah (by touching something she touched), he was forbidden to enter the synagogue until he underwent a purification ritual (Hoffman 1996). According to Baraita-di-Niddah, a menstruating woman was not supposed to participate in rituals, even the lighting of the Shabbat candles. These customs were apparently fueled by beliefs concerning the destructive power of the menstruating woman’s glance or of her breath. Only immersion in a miqveh at the right period could purify her and allow the resumption of sexual relations.

The laws of family purity (the term was coined in the late nineteenth century) were and are for most Jewish communities a prohibition of sexual relations between husband and wife while the woman is menstruating and for seven days after the end of her period until she dips in a miqveh. The Hebrew word miqveh means a pool, or gathering of water (Lev. 11:36). Only in a pool or gathering of water could purification of a niddah take place. The laws referring to a miqveh are found in the Talmud Yerushalmi (chagiga 1:6 [7a]). According to A. Kaplan (1982, 51), there are six necessary conditions that a body of water must fulfill before it gains the status of a miqveh.

Purification is not a static concept. It means something different to North American Jewish women than what was assumed during the Temple period when purity had to do with the relationship between the Jew and the Creator. But as we have seen, ambivalence was built into the system from the beginning because of the existence of two voices, the Priestly Code and the Holiness Code. In the Holiness Code a set of meanings connected to transgression, morality, and sin permeates the conception of purity. After the destruction of the second Temple and the subsequent collapse of the two systems, some of the meanings derived from the Holiness Code became linked with the mere fact of menstruation, while purification came to mean a way of transcending the pollution caused by vaginal blood.

Understanding what purity means is not easy for contemporary women. For those connected with the Habad movement, purity and impurity have been restored to their original meaning of permitting a connection to the Creator; they are thus not considered understandable from a human perspective. Slonim (1996) articulates the idea that while we cannot understand the reasons behind the laws of purity, we can appreciate their psychological and spiritual soundness. From this perspective, the issue of impurity during menstruation is relegated to a spiritual or even mythical realm that we humans cannot understand and must not delve into. For the
early rabbis, inherent in their conception of impurity was their vision of a
structured time and classification between holy and profane (Destro, 1996,
125). For others the meaning of purity is worked out through its opposite
impurity. Impurity in turn is linked to menstruation, which represents a
loss of potential life, a not being whole, or at least a state of transition (hav-
dalab). For still others purity and impurity are issues that are to be omitted
altogether from their reworking of their connection to Jewish traditions.19
Historians in this collection point to the fact that, among the many ways
menstruation could have been perceived by Jewish women, meanings con-
nected to pollution and dirt were the ones that came to be privileged; or at
least we find trails of these meanings and not of others.

While we intuitively connect or even conflate niddab and miqveb, in fact
we are in the presence of two distinct sets of issues: one concerns the state
of menstruation—what vaginal blood means and to whom; the other con-
cerns the process of returning from the menstrual state—how it is done
and what relation it has to a woman's sexuality (is it, for instance, con-
ected to womanhood or does it grant sexual license?). While certain
interpretations of purity and impurity have been legally privileged by the
male rabbinic elite (such as that vaginal blood pollutes the male as well as
future generations), women themselves have infused the laws of niddab
with a variety of meanings. They have understood them not only as a li-
cense to conjugal sex but as a way to protect their children from evil. They
have manipulated the sexual separation so as to avoid reentering a relation-
ship they disliked without fear of divorce (see R. Biale, 1995). They have
also manipulated the timing of their attending the miqveb, a practice found
in medieval households (Cohen, this volume; Davis 1995), as well as in the
Boston Orthodox community (Marmon, this volume) and in traditional
settings in Israel (Wasserfall 1992; Cicourel). And women have understood
menstruation differently from their husbands in regard to whether it is the
locus of illness and impurity or, conversely, a natural means to female
health (Wasserfall 1992). Miqveb, the ritual bath itself, has variously repre-
sented purity, spirituality, Jewish identity, a cosmic arena where good and
bad are debated, or merely an obsolete custom imposed by rabbis. Con-
temporary descendants of crypto-Jewish women in the American South-
west view miqveb as a mark of renewal of their Jewish identity, privileging
this meaning over that of sexual separation as described in the laws of nid-
dab (see Jacobs, this collection). On the other hand, for Algerian Jewish
women, niddab as sexual separation has been much more important than
the ritual of miqveb. They substitute for miqveb a shower in their own
home (Allouche-Benayoun, this volume), although from the halakhic
point of view, one must be physically clean before entering the miqveb, and
one's bathtub cannot provide purification.20 As we will see in this volume
(Cohen, Allouche-Benayoun, and Sered), the relation between cleaning and purification was a point of contention for many women, especially those of Sephardic origin.

As the essays here make clear, there were often significant differences among the actual halakah (Jewish legal teachings understood as divinely ordained), how this legislation was carried out in practice, and the meanings these observances had for Jewish women and men in different times and contexts. For instance, women use the **miqveh** at night because the Jewish day ends at night. But going out at night is a different experience in different climates. Using the **miqveh** in Sweden during the winter nights could be a very different experience from using it during warm nights in Jerusalem (see Zager 1996). Moreover, for some women, going out at night might add to a feeling of secrecy and be a joyous time for oneself; for others it could be a burdensome and oppressive experience. If a woman lives in a place where it is dangerous to be out at night, fear and resentment will be mixed into the event. A woman's experience of the **miqveh** also varies with her place in the life cycle (Marmon, this collection) and the nature of her marital relationship. For a young bride in a satisfying relationship it may be a source of heightened desire, while for an infertile woman trying to conceive or for a woman in an abusive relationship, it is quite different. In the United States most Orthodox women use the **miqveh** as part of the package of what it means to be an Orthodox woman, whereas in Israel not only Orthodox but non-Orthodox and even nonobservant women wearing immodest clothing tend to frequent it as the only commandment that they respect (Cicourel).

Most scholars agree that the texts that have come down to us have been written by men for a mostly male audience. But they have also been addressed to women, and women are present in the texts. Did women accept or resist and change the rabbinical model imposed on them? Was the model in most contexts oppressive to women? The past few years have seen an outburst of scholarship seeking to reinterpret the Jewish texts and discover the place of women in them.21 This volume, which opens the study of **niddah** and **miqveh** as scholarly topics, has come into being in the context of this explosion. The topics dealt with here have seldom been treated in all their social and symbolic ramifications.22 The strength of the present collection lies in its bringing together textual specialists in ancient and medieval history with those working in ethnography. It is fascinating to hear echoes of ancient practices in the lives of contemporary women. Some practices are like threads that can be followed from century to century, as they are woven, meshed, and reworked. For example, “sprinkling” as a substitute for **miqveh** is echoed in the practices of modern Algerian or American women who shower and bathe in their homes. In juxtaposing the two genres—
history and ethnography—the historical texts come alive and the ethnographic stories acquire depth. We are finding that many concerns expressed by modern women echo an uneasiness felt by their ancient predecessors.

As the meanings and uses of the laws of family purity depend on the broader social and historical contexts in which they are practiced, it is interesting to ask, How has niddah been used to reorganize one’s own relation to the past? What were the social contexts in which niddah and/or miqveh were abandoned? What were “traditional” contexts in which they remained an important part of women’s identity formation? Moreover, when they were abandoned, what took their place? Joselit (1990) argues that for American women in the period between the two world wars, kashrut (dietary rules) became a symbol of Jewish identity. Anthropologists (e.g. Pitt-Rivers 1983) have long pondered the symbolic connections between food and sex. My Jewish Moroccan informants drew a blatant parallel between kashrut and miqveh: For meat to be kosher, blood has to be removed; the meat has to be soaked in water or cooked by fire. For a sexual act to be “kosher” the woman must be sure she is no longer niddah, by counting some days of whitening (see n. 16 below) and dipping into the water of the miqveh.

In contrast to miqveh having been abandoned in the early part of the century as a relic of ancient times, contemporary American women returning to the Law (Ba’alot Teshuva) view niddah and miqveh as enhancing family life. They reinterpret the laws of family purity in a feminist framework, and Jewish orthodoxy is presented as a gynocentric haven in a “rootless” world (Davidman 1991, Kaufmann 1991). For the Ba’alot Teshuva the laws of niddah have again become important to the definition of Jewish womanhood. In Israel, as part of a national revival, the laws of niddah are reinterpreted in the context of religious Zionism. In this discourse, women, by practicing niddah, take responsibility for the purity not only of the family but of the Land of Israel (Yanai and Rapoport 1997).

Did Jewish women choose to continue fulfilling the miqveh even in extreme or crisis situations? What price did they pay? For modern women, who intrinsically favor individual morality over strong communal connections, niddah is a difficult issue. It is about blood, and miqveh is about the primordial identity formation of a pure people, which could be seen by modern, not to mention postmodern, women as negating their own choices as individuals and thus morally wrong (see Adler 1993). In contemporary Jewish feminist history, niddah has been a focus in the struggle over the role accorded to women in rabbinic Judaism. Was rabbinic Judaism misogynistic in its treatment of women’s blood as different from men’s
blood? The former was regarded as polluted, whereas the latter was interpreted as the sign of the covenant between God and humankind (men).24 “Tradition” from a Jewish perspective always comprises multiple traditions. Thus, the question of whether the Halakah was oppressive to women in most contexts may be a very difficult one to answer. It depends ultimately not only on the texts studied but also on the conceptual framework in which one reads them (see Hauptman 1998). We may never be in a position to assess what women’s ritual and spiritual lives in past centuries really were like, but our goal in this volume is to unravel as much as possible of the “minority position,” of that which may not have been conceived as mainstream tradition.25

The anthropological method teaches us the richness of cross-fertilizing, of asking questions from one context into another. The massive ethnographic data on menstruation in tribal societies could be used to discuss the Jewish context.26 Conversely, we may ask, What does the Jewish context add to the debate on the question of the universality of beliefs surrounding menstrual blood? Do we have a possible range of meanings, or are they random? In which social and historical contexts did Jewish societies develop meanings connecting menstrual blood to death, life, and/or sexuality? Is menstrual blood a universally marked category of thought or do we find in the Jewish context nuances and complexities in the understanding of menstrual blood? What belief system concerning menstrual blood was prominent, and when? What were the influences of the Gentile world—the host cultures—in which Jewish societies found themselves? Is the symbolism surrounding menstruation, niddah, and miqveh one of the main avenues through which most or all Jewish societies passed on their way to establishing their Jewish identity?

Here I just want to give one example of what can be learned by using the cross-fertilizing method. One of the major differences between modern and tribal societies in relation to the female menstrual cycle is that, because tribal women lactated longer and more intensively, they actually did not experience their menstruation every month: menstruation was a liminal stage. Harrell (1981) argues that scholars, influenced by psychoanalysis, tend to see menstruation as a recurrent monthly phenomenon because modern women, using contraception and having fewer pregnancies than in earlier centuries, do actually experience their menstrual blood as a monthly phenomenon. This may not have been the case for women in preindustrial societies, where lactation was prolonged and intensive, children numerous, and menstruation therefore quite possibly relatively uncommon.

Derr (1982) asks what the infrequency of preindustrial women’s exposure to repetitive menstrual cycles might mean for theories advanced to explain the existence of menstrual rituals and taboos in both preindustrial and
modern societies? Tribal societies lived in precarious physical circumstances, where dissemination of lineages was common. Jewish societies have also had a long history of uncertain physical circumstances. In such a context, the menstruating liminal woman, as one whose potential for fertility was not activated, may have come to symbolize mortality. And if we adopt Harrell’s (1981) idea of the nonmenstruating woman as normal in preindustrial societies, we can more easily understand the associations of fear, defilement, death, and danger that developed around menstruation in some tribal as well as some Jewish societies. Even more separate, therefore, would be the myriads of Jewish women who were infertile or whose husbands were (though it was the woman who bore the blame for infertility). For them miqveh might have been not a liminal event but a recurrent one, a continuous symbol of death and sorrow. Their “otherness” must have been exacerbated again and again by using the miqveh in cultures where motherhood was seen as the most important role of mature women.

Sexuality and death, beyond the control of human agency, are issues that all societies must find a way to make sense of. In times of war, epidemic, and famine the task is more urgent than in times of relative peace and quiet. Thus, issues of death and sexuality take on different meanings in different cultural and historical circumstances. Universal, however, is the fact of their emotional charge and the development of rituals to deal with that charge. Rituals are ways social orders deal with the uncontrollable, ways in which societies try to make sense of the fear, the ambivalence, and the unknown.

As the twentieth century draws to a close, we are witnessing a renewed interest in miqveh, at least in the United States, which may be the mark of a renewed interest in women’s rituals and women’s culture as a means of reconnecting to the past. In the very unorthodox Jewish community in Boulder, Colorado, for example, planning for a new community center has included a debate about the need to build a miqveh. Many nonobservant women, even non–Shabbat-observant women, have expressed an interest in at least trying the miqveh. At this point in time, all institutionalized religions are faced with women’s desire for full membership. For Judaism, women’s participation in ritual and in learning is becoming the cutting edge and is playing a dominant role in shaping what kind of Judaism we will have in the next century.

Many American Jews have already opted for nonsegregation and equality in ritual life where gender is not an issue. But the paradox of gender and niddah is that, while we do not want gender identity to matter in the public domain, it matters tremendously in private life: we live in particular bodies,
male or female. Acknowledging this paradox does not mean abandoning our quest for a better and more ethical way of life, however. For some, the ways of niddah are a relic of ancient times; for others, niddah is central to what defines them as women and as Jews. Every fundamental paradox is difficult to grasp and even more difficult to embrace.

In this context, could we call for a searching of our traditions for meanings connected to womanhood? I long for a ritual to introduce and unite my daughters to their past, and I long for a ritual that would connect me to my women friends in times of joy and need. Could we create a ritual involving water, (not necessarily miqveh) to invite a young girl into womanhood at the onset of her menarche? Could we use “sprinkling,” performed by friends to communicate the sense of women’s knowledge and culture?

In response to the institutionalization of a woman’s bodily function, Jewish women, over the many centuries of their history, have contested, manipulated, and changed the meanings of the halakah, the laws of family purity. It is to the studies of these changes that we now turn.

NOTES

1. Older women in the moshav, when questioned about their religious practices, never mentioned niddah but only education and charity. No one mentioned the laws of family purity, niddah, or kashrut (the dietary rules). It was as if niddah had nothing to do with Jewish law and yet there was a miqveh in the moshav. As soon as I put the question directly, the women cried out, “You are not Jewish?” (Don’t you know that for us niddah is essential?) or “Are we Arabs?” (for not obeying the laws of niddah). Niddah occupies a central place within these women’s thinking about themselves as Jewish women (see Wasserfall [1990 and 1992]).

2. M. Ha-Cohen, Usi, costumi, e instituzi degli Ebrei Libici, fasc. 1; Religion e magia, feste e cerimonie, vita e morte, trans. M. Moreno (Benghazi: Ministry of the Colonies, 1924).


4. See, for example, R. Slonim (1996), a treatment of the subject from the Habad perspective; catering to modern women with specific needs in dealing with relationships and meaning in a rootless world.


7. P (Priestly) and H (Holiness) are two priestly sources. For their history, see Jacob Milgrom’s introduction to The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1–16 (1991). Most of P is found in Lev. 1–16 while most of H is found in Lev. 17–27.

8. In the halakah, mamzer refers to the status of the child of an illegal sexual re-
lation between a man and a married woman. My informants used the term to refer to a child conceived while the wife was niddah, because intercourse without mikveh was seen as having strong and unwanted consequences. Also see Koren, this collection.

9. The connection between menstruation and death can be found in many works. See, for example, Martin (1987) and Couchard (1990) for discussion of these issues in contemporary Western societies.


11. See Cohen (1991) for a discussion of the four types. Concerning the difference between these states of impurity, see Boyarin (1993, 50).

12. For a discussion of beliefs and customs curtailing the freedom of menstruating women during the early times of the Mishna and Talmudim redactors and its influence in the Middle Ages, see R. Biale (1995, 166–74). Concerning the Beta-Israel, I am not arguing for or against its continuation during the centuries of these rituals. For a discussion of the Beta-Israel, see, for example, A. Salomon (1993).

13. For a discussion of when and why this change was introduced, see R. Biale (1995, 163) on Rabbi Akiva's ruling.


16. A woman must count five days for menstruation and add seven days of purity before resuming physical contact with her spouse. The days are usually called the days of whitening.

17. The mikveh must consist of water; no other liquid can be used. The mikveh must either be built into the ground or be an integral part of a building attached to the ground; it cannot consist of any vessel that can be disconnected and carried away, such as a tub. The water of the mikveh cannot be running or flowing; the only exception is a natural spring or a river whose water is derived mainly from springs. The water of the mikveh cannot be drawn (shavim); that is, it cannot be brought to the mikveh through direct human intervention. The water cannot be channeled to the mikveh through anything that can become unclean; for this reason it cannot flow to the mikveh through pipes or vessels made of metal, clay, or wood. The mikveh must contain at least forty sa£ah (200 gallons). The first attested mikveh, according to archaeologists, were at the Hasmonean palace of Jericho, dating the second century B.C.E. See Cohen (1991, 297n. 13).

18. For a well-known theory of purity, see Douglas (1966). For this famous anthropologist, theories of purity and impurity have to do with the boundaries and identity of the group and its symbolic relations to its neighbors.

19. See R. Adler (1993), who, in reworking her feminist theology of purity, asks what it means in a modern world to be pure or impure (41). She concludes that the laws of purity are unjust and do not teach us to be better humans.

20. The level of cleanliness expected is very high. Women have to clip their fingernails, scrub all their body parts, make sure that no hair remains on their bodies. This process is time-consuming and can be experienced as a blessed time for oneself or as a nuisance in a busy schedule; see Berkovic (1997). In the Middle East, Jewish women would use the hannaham, in Hungary, the sweat bath. For a discussion of the culture of the hannaham, see Staats (1994).
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22. See Adler (1974, 1993), R. Biale (1995). The only previously published book on the topic was from the perspective of the Habad movement (Slonim 1996). Blu Grinberg is preparing a volume on niddah and miqveh that will collect different experiences of the miqveh.

23. See, for example, the memories of Sossonko (1996) and Huberand (1996) and the description of the last miqveh in the Bochnia ghetto by Eliach (1996).


25. Rabbinic texts have been the focus of inquiry from more than one viewpoint (see Frymer-Kensky 1994). Judith Hauptman (1994), reviewing the material published on the formative years of rabbinic Judaism, argues that more than one voice can be found, and that such voices may be termed more protofeminist. She claims that a central agenda for feminist research is to locate these voices in the Mishna and Tosefta, to render more accurately the range of attitudes toward women in Judaism’s formative period, “and to propose a multifaceted model of rabbinic Judaism,” where women’s images are not mainly negative and imbued with defilement due to niddah (55). Hauptman’s approach, shared by many contributors to this volume, coupled with an in-depth ethnographical gaze at some contemporary situations, may give us a much better understanding of what niddah meant and means.

26. For a good summary of anthropological work on the menstrual taboos, see Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) and Powers (1980). For a different vision of menstruation in the premodern world, see Grahn (1993) and Knight (1991). The latter contends that the experiences of menstruation “created” and regulated early cultures. For a psychoanalytical approach, see Kristeva (1982).

27. In premodern settings the nonmenstruating woman—the lactating mother or the pregnant woman—for the most part came to symbolize continuity and fertility as opposed to sexuality and/or death.

28. Infertility has always been an issue for Jewish women. See the discussion of charms and spells against barrenness by Patai (1983, 342).

29. When I presented some of my work at Bonei Shalom in February 1997, I had many discussions with women on their interest in a miqveh.


31. Many Jewish feminists have tried to reappropriate the miqveh. For example, Rabbi Elyse M. Goldstein (1986) writes about building migvaot for nonattached women to dip in on Rosh Hodesh, to dip in in the daytime—in a sense, to turn the miqveh into a Jewish women’s center (16). She writes: “It was a moment I shall never forget. It was a moment of taking back what was mine a long time ago, offering a new wisdom of the water which can be uplifting for all women.” See also Adler (1993).
16 ❖ Women and Water


PART I
The Historical Context

This section opens with a short history of the laws of Niddah. In her contribution, Meacham sets the stage and describes the context in which the laws of Niddah and the challenges to these laws have evolved. Fonrobert and Cook then discuss a fundamental historical moment in Jewish history, the emergence of the rabbinic culture. This process took shape in the midst of a political and cultural disaster that followed the destruction of the Second Temple. The early rabbis had to make sense of this historical and cultural catastrophe.

The rabbinic literature includes the Mishna (the teaching) and the two Talmuds. The Mishna was compiled by Rabbi Judas the Nasi in 215 C.E. The Mishna is an arrangement of rabbinic law, including the written collection and the oral tradition of the past several generations. The Babylonian Talmud and the Palestinian Talmud (Jerusalem Talmud) are commentaries on the Mishna. The Palestinian Talmud was edited in 380 C.E. Much of its material serves as the basis for the Babylonian Talmud, which was finished and edited in 499 C.E.1

Cook presents that moment in which Israelites had to transform Judaism after the catastrophe of losing the Temple as the focus of identity and ritual. She argues that the early rabbis had to build new meanings for their new position without the Temple. Cook contends that the ritual of niddah was used as a way to connect women to God, to transcend their biological nature. Niddah becomes a sort of covenant with God in this early and difficult period of historical destruction.

Fonrobert takes us a step forward when she follows the talmudic rabbis (300–600 C.E.) and shows how they invented a new science and expertise of menstrual blood. She departs from Cook by stating that in this process women’s authority and self-control were lost, at least in the texts. The displacement of women themselves as authorities over their own bodies is the focus of her rereading of the Yalta story. For Fonrobert, Yalta’s story is a particular focal point in which the underlying contestation of rabbinic gender politics emerges to the textual surface. The rabbis historically became the experts on menstrual blood, but this did not come without contestation, as we will see in Cohen’s essay on the medieval context.
Although the rabbis successfully established themselves as experts in *niddah*, women during the subsequent centuries may not have accepted the rabbis’ authority easily. Cohen presents some historical moments in which women’s whispers can be heard through the rabbis’ voices. We learn that women in Maimonides’ Egypt (1135–1204) may not have accepted that their practices were less legitimate and that they were less “religious” than the rabbis. In seventeenth-century Europe, according to Storper Perez and Heymann, older women may well have taught younger women different practices from those required by the rabbis. In both essays we can sense the existence of women’s culture and women’s friendship struggling to define women’s experience from their own point of view. This women’s culture seemed to receive a strong blow when the rabbis’ authority converged with the establishment of medical authority in the eighteenth century. Women’s bodies became the subject of a new science, and women again lost control over their own bodies.

Koren, in her exposition of thirteenth-century kabbalist views, takes another course, focusing not on the contentions but on the new rationalization given to the laws of *niddah* by mystics. The sixth-century text †Baraita-di-Niddah,† which presents menstruation as an abomination and the source of much human suffering, became incorporated into Ashkenazic practice by the thirteenth century. Faced with the laws regulating purity and sexuality, the kabbalists had to make sense of them. They presented these laws not only in terms of “the lower world” (relations between the genders) but in terms of a theurgic struggle in the divine unity itself. Menstrual impurity could empower the demonic other side.

The essays in this section span many centuries, each providing a glimpse into a world of Jewish practices and belief systems. These are in part echoed in today’s Jewish world, for example, the belief that a child born without a *miqveh* is a bastard (*mamzer*) (Koren) and the practice of bathing at the end of the seven days of whitening without dipping in the *miqveh* (Cohen).

**Notes**

Chapter 15 of Leviticus serves as the basis for the Jewish menstrual laws. The Hebrew term used for menstruation in Lev. 15:19, 20, 24, 33 is niddah, which has as its root ndh, meaning “separation,” usually as a result of impurity. It is connected to the root ndd, “to make distant.” Later, but still within the biblical corpus, this meaning was extended to include concepts of sin and impurity. The Aramaic Bible translations (Onkelos, Pseudo-Jonathon, and Neofiti) use the root rhq, “to be distant.” Both roots reflect the physical separation of women during their menstrual periods from physical contact or from certain activities in which they would normally engage at other times.

Separation because of menstruation had both public and private aspects. Because of the prohibition against entering the Temple in a state of ritual impurity, this manifestation of female physiology clearly limited cultic contact for women of childbearing years, which in turn served as a factor determining female status in a patriarchal environment. In the private sphere, food or objects that required a ritual state of purity could not be touched by menstruating women without becoming contaminated or made unfit for priestly consumption. Touching a menstruating woman yielded impurity until sunset. Touching what she sat or lay on contaminated the person, who was then required to bathe and wash his clothes and was impure until sunset. Coitus transferred to the man the entire seven days of impurity, as well as the power to contaminate (Lev. 15:24). In Lev. 18:19, the people of Israel are enjoined not to approach a woman sexually during her separation. In Lev. 20:18 coitus with a menstruant is
forbidden, carrying the punishment of karet, excision from the Jewish people. Modern Orthodox practice is based on a harmonistic reading of these three chapters and of Leviticus, chapter 12. The destruction of the Temple put many purity laws in abeyance. Menstrual laws, however, remained in force and became more restrictive in the private sphere, chiefly in areas concerning physical separation from one’s spouse and internal examinations.

The verses dealing with women must be understood both in their own context and in the context of the larger legal system. We will begin with an examination of Leviticus, chapter 15, which covers several topics: verses 2–15 state the laws concerning a zav, a man with an abnormal genital discharge, often (and probably correctly) translated as gonorrhea; verses 16–17 deal with a man who ejaculates semen; verse 18 refers to semen impurity due to coitus; verses 19–24 state the laws concerning menstrual impurity; verses 25–30 concern a zava, a woman with a uterine discharge of blood not at the time of her period, or as a result of a prolonged period. Each of the five sections in the chapter describes the type of genital discharge. For the male, in the case of the zav, the reference is to mucus-like discharge from a flaccid penis (according to rabbinic interpretation) and to normal ejaculate for other men. In the case of the female, the reference is to a discharge of blood from the uterus with no distinction between the abnormal blood of the zava and the normal menstruation of a niddah. Each section also prescribes the length of time the impurity lasts and objects that are subject to that impurity. The zav and the zava must count seven clean days after the abnormal genital discharge ceases. The zav must bathe in “living waters” (a spring or running water). Both must bring a sacrifice. For normal male seminal discharge and contamination by semen during coitus, a purification ritual is prescribed that includes bathing and waiting until sunset. For normal menstruation, only a waiting period is prescribed in the Bible, though bathing is part of the purification ritual for those who have been contaminated by the menstruating woman or who have touched the objects she contaminated. Such bathing and laundering of clothes is required for the person contaminated by the niddah or the zava.

Leviticus 15 has an obvious chiastic structure (A-B-B’-A’) in which the verses dealing with abnormal male discharge (A) are followed by those concerned with normal male discharge (B). V. 18 serves as the intersection point where male and female genitals meet (become one flesh, basar ehad in Genesis 2) in coitus. Normal menstruation serves as B’, while abnormal uterine bleeding, A’, ends the section. This structure suggests that there is more in common between these male and female discharges than the fact that the discharges are from the genitals and cause impurity. This is the most intense concentration of verses dealing with reproductive organs in
the Bible. It is clear from the terminology that in the case of the normal
male the text is referring to semen, *zer'a*, while in the case of the female the
discharge is blood, *dam*.

To understand more fully the connection between semen and blood, we
must turn to Leviticus, chapter 12, which deals with birth impurity. This
chapter also uses the concept of *niddab* and the laws mentioned in chapter
15 as a reference point. The text refers to conception as a very active fe-
male process, “female semination.” Verse 2 of this short chapter may be
translated: “A woman who seminates (*tazri'a*) and gives birth . . .” The
chapter goes on to delineate the laws of separation after birth, the blood of
purification, birth sacrifices, and the purification ritual in the Temple. The
time of ritual impurity after a birth is likened to *niddab*. Following this is a
time during which any blood seen does not cause ritual impurity. The
blood during this period is called *dam tohar*, blood of purification. *Tazri'a,*
which I have translated as “seminated,” is the causative form of the root *zr*'
and also the root of the word *zer'a*, semen, mentioned in chapter 15. The
Aramaic translations use the root ‘*adi*, “to be pregnant, carry.” The best of
the manuscripts of the Aramaic translation attest to an active form of this
root, meaning “to give off seed.”

The idea that menstrual blood and fertility are connected is found in
several midrashic sources and in the *tannaitic* material. In Mishnah Nid-
dah 9:11, R. Yehuda connects virginal blood and menstrual blood to ferti-
licity: “R. Yehuda says: ‘Every vine [woman] has wine [menstrual and virginal
blood] within her. But one which does not have wine [menstrual and virgi-
nal blood] within her—she is *dorqetei* [infertile].’” In Babylonian Talmud,
Tractate Niddah 64b records the statement of a sage of the *tannaitic*
period, R. Meir, who makes a very positive connection between blood and fertility:
“Each woman whose [menstrual and other] blood is great, her children are
numerous.”

Despite some modern interpretations by biblical scholars, anthropolo-
gists, and feminists viewing menstrual laws as a taboo system, it is likely
that Leviticus, chapter 15, is, in fact, a medical or scientific chapter in the
Bible, dealing with ideas of seed and seed impurity. Uterine blood was seen
as female seed, the parallel to male semen. This idea was quite widespread
in the ancient Near East and is clearly stated in the Greek medical texts, in
Aristotle, and in later Roman texts. The idea itself is an attempt to explain
female physiology on the basis of a male paradigm. Males ejaculate seed.
Females menstruate when they are not pregnant but not during pregnancy.
Menstrual blood must therefore be the female contribution to conception.
The paradigm, of course, loses its coherence when one tries to correlate fe-
male orgasm, conception, and menstruation, but it was one fairly logical
model of reproduction available in antiquity. Only when ovulation came to
be understood in the nineteenth century could female fertility be separated from menstruation and female sexuality.

The difference in seed impurity between males and females essentially reflects differences in male and female physiology. Male ejaculation is completed quickly, and the semen is generally either deposited in a woman’s body or absorbed by clothing, bed covers, or some other material. This would account for the short duration of the impurity—until nightfall. Irregular loss of seed or seedlike substance, as in the case of the zav, is more complicated because it is lost not by ejaculation but by slow oozing from a flaccid organ. This, in fact, makes it much more like female discharge. Abnormal male discharge and normal and abnormal female discharge progress over a period of time, none of them having an exact moment like ejaculation that marks the discharge. Therefore, they are apt to be deposited on a variety of places and types of furniture.

The difference between the niddah and the zava is the time factor. Normal menstruation is considered to end within seven days, which may reflect either the choice of a significant number (as found in other rituals) or the fact that nearly all women complete their periods within seven days. Abnormal uterine bleeding is that which comes at a time other than the menstrual period or exceeds the seven days allotted to menstruation by several days. It is uncertain when the zav and the zava will complete their discharge; consequently, they must simply wait until there is no longer any discharge and then count seven clean days.

Although the resulting differences between male and female seed impurity limited women’s cultic contact, it seems that both sets of rules were motivated by the same concern for seed pollution rather than by a motive to restrict female sexuality or to exclude women from society. However, if we add to a woman’s menstrual impurity of seven days the impurity that she contracts from male seed pollution during sexual contact (one day for each day in which there was intercourse), the woman’s ritually pure time is greatly limited. The man’s ritual impurity is one day for each day in which there was an ejaculation unless he had intercourse with a niddah, in which case he had the same period of ritual impurity. A nonmenstruating woman, such as one who is pregnant, nursing, or menopausal, would have no menstrual impurity. In contrast to the normal state for males and females, the abnormal states of the zav and the zava parallel one another quite exactly: length of abnormal discharge plus seven clean days. The difference is in the purification ritual for the man; he must bathe in “living waters,” whereas the woman simply waits until the seven clean days have been completed.

We must consider one other aspect of the pollution: its transmission. In Lev. 15:17–18, normal coitus yields impurity until sundown for both the man and the woman. Ejaculation as a result of masturbation or nocturnal
emission has the same consequences for the man. For the zav there are several additional rules, involving not only touching things which he had polluted, but direct contact with his genital discharge (which because of its nature may be found in many places) and saliva (possibly while speaking with him). This would mean that sexual contact with a zav would also yield only a short period of impurity, and that period of impurity is transmitted only to a person in contact with his emissions. This is similar to the short period of impurity transmitted to a person in contact with whatever a menstruating woman has sat or lain upon—that is, wherever menstrual or abnormal uterine blood is likely to be found. If she has intercourse with someone during the seven days, whether or not she is actually still menstruating, she transmits to that person her entire seven-day period of impurity.

It must be emphasized that being in a state of ritual impurity was not in itself sinful because menstruation and ejaculation are part of normal physiology. The sin mentioned in Lev. 15:31 is the act of polluting of God’s cultic space by one’s presence while ritually impure. One may ask: If there is no sin involved in being impure, why is a sin offering brought for the atonement of the zav and zava? The answer, I believe, lies in the abnormality of their condition: they may be in a dangerous state of health. Biblical and rabbinic theology often attributed illness to divine retribution for sins. The clearest example of this might be Miriam’s leprosy, which was the result of her sin of speaking against Moshe in Numbers, chapter 12. It is likely, therefore, that the sin offering was required to atone for the actual sin that caused the abnormal condition.  

The idea that medical or scientific assumptions underlie Leviticus, chapter 15, finds support in the lack of actual prohibition of sexual relations during menstrual impurity in this chapter, where there is merely the single warning not to pollute the Temple when in a state of ritual impurity from seed pollution. As we have seen, however, Lev. 18:19 prohibits sexual intercourse with a niddah, and Lev. 20:18 mentions the punishment of karet if one has coitus during menstruation. In Lev. 20:21, the sin of adultery or incest with the wife of one’s brother is described using the word niddah, thus extending the meaning of the word to include a clearly forbidden sexual act. In other parts of the Bible, the term niddah includes abominable acts, objects, or status, especially sexual sins and idolatry. This usage of the term may have influenced subsequent reactions to the state of menstruation, as the term niddah came to be a metaphorical expression for sin and impurity in general.

The biblical position on menstrual impurity can be summarized in the following manner: normal menstruation lasted seven days. There was no particular cleansing ritual—one merely waited the prescribed seven days. There may have been an underlying assumption that the woman bathed
following the cessation of her period, but according to the text, only those who had contact with whatever she sat or lay on were required to bathe, wash their clothes, and wait until evening. This is probably due to the possibility that the beds or chairs came into contact with her menstrual blood.

Direct contact with the menstruant transmits ritual impurity until evening, but no explicit reference is made to bathing for such a person. Coitus transmits the entire seven-day period of impurity to the man and also consigns to him the power to pollute whatever he lies on for the same duration. Again, no mention is made of his bathing, but it may have been assumed as an analogy to other kinds of contact. Later sages certainly did read the text as if the conditions, which were not always stated in full for each case, were indeed to be assumed and transferred from place to place. In many cultures, however, where there are menstrual segregation policies or other avoidance techniques, there is no specific purification ritual other than waiting to the end of the menses. We should not be surprised to find that, in a climate where rainfall is not plentiful, a waiting period alone was prescribed. Archaeologists have not found public bath houses or private miqvaot in Israel earlier than the Hellenistic period, which had a bathhouse culture.

Uterine bleeding at a time when the woman’s period was not due, or prolonged uterine bleeding lasted for several days beyond her period, placed her in the category of zava. Lev. 15:26–27 uses normal menstruation as the reference point; when describing the means of pollution by contact with her bed or chair it states “like the bed (chair) of her menstruation.” Once the discharge ceases, she must count seven clean days. She then must bring two bird offerings to the priest at the Temple, one for a sin offering and one for a burnt offering, and he atones for her impurity. There is no reference to bathing and no prohibition of coitus with a zava stated in the text, although this may have been assumed.

Rabbinc Period and Normative Judaism

The rabbinic period transformed the biblical practices and remade them into a new, normative Judaism. The uncertainties about the text were clarified, generally by extending, transferring, or comparing the meaning in one verse to another by means of certain legal midrashic methods. Such transformation took place in all areas of biblical practice, and many new legal issues developed at this time. For our purpose, it is very significant that this transformation took place in a period of strong Hellenistic influence, not only in terms of bathing practices but also in terms of the low status of women in Greek culture.
The rabbinic period is divided into two sections: first was the tannaitic period. It began at the destruction of the Temple in the first century of the Common Era and ended in the middle of the third century. There were a few sages who preceded that period whose sayings are recorded in tannaitic texts, for example, Hillel and Shammai. Next came the amoraic period, from the third to the sixth centuries. The major literary creations of the tannaitic period were the Mishnah, which formed the basis of the later talmudic discussions; a document parallel in structure and content to the Mishnah called Tosefta, which was redacted slightly later than the Mishnah but also contains earlier and parallel material; and the Midreshei Halakha, the legal midrashim, which were based on the last four books of the Pentateuch. During the amoraic period the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmudim (henceforth PT and BT, respectively) were created, as were several collections of Palestinian aggadic literature. The tannaitic period was a time of political upheaval. The Temple had just been destroyed, creating a need for a new Judaism not based on the Temple. Legend has it that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai convinced Vespasian, the Roman governor, to release the imprisoned sages and allow him to remove them to Yavneh as a school site. Thus, a new epoch began.

Ritual Purification through Immersion

Among the first assumptions made about menstrual laws in the tannaitic sources was that bathing was required of the woman to purify herself. This was done, no doubt, as a parallel to the requirements for purification for those who had contact with her. The most common place in the land of Israel to do this bathing was in a ritual pool capable of holding a certain volume of water. Immersion of the entire body was required. The pool had to be filled with water that was collected naturally, that is, the water could not be drawn and poured into the pool. The pool could be constructed in such a manner as to collect rain, spring water, or water from a river. There is an entire tractate of Mishnah, Miqvaot, that delineates the laws of these pools. Some were constructed; others were caves in which water naturally collected but became stagnant during the six-month dry season. However, as long as the quantity of water remained sufficient, it purified the woman, proving that the ritual impurity is indeed ritual, not physical.

The Evolution of Normal Menstruation, Niddah, into Abnormal Bleeding, Ziva

During the tannaitic era the biblical waiting period of seven days for normal menstruation remained in force. Several details were added to the concept of niddah, including sexual separation from one’s spouse for twelve
hours before menstruation began, the idea that uterine blood in the vagina pollutes, checking vaginally with cloths to ascertain the beginning and end of menstruation, the requirement of women in the priestly households to check vaginally for possible blood before and after eating the priestly tithes, a clarification of the colors of impure blood and the size of the bloodstain, and the status of irregular bleeding resulting from birth, pregnancy, nursing, abortion, menopause, famine, and so on. Restrictions were also put on hymeneal blood. Although there is some question regarding the frequency of menstruation in antiquity, because of pregnancies, prolonged nursing, and in some years borderline nutrition, the extensive discussions and regulations demonstrate not only that the sages were excellent observers of this phenomenon but also that at least some women, perhaps many, menstruated regularly.

The minimum time between one menstrual period and the next was established in the tannaitic period. It was set at eleven days with the term ba-lakha leMoshe miSinai, that is, a law whose source is not biblically derived but whose legal status is nearly equivalent to such a law. This concept of eleven days as a minimum between one menstrual period and the next, combined with the seven days of niddah, is called pithei niddah, the beginnings of the menstrual reckoning. This meant that a woman was niddah for seven days. If she then saw blood during the next eleven days (days 8–18), it was considered abnormal bleeding, ziva, which would put her into the category of zava. She would then wait seven clean days and the next blood she saw would be considered her next period. The seven days of niddah would then begin again followed by the eleven days between periods. A woman with a normal cycle would fit easily into this pattern because the eleven days were a minimum. Anyone having any kind of irregular bleeding, however, would be obligated to make such calculations until she had seven clean days. Then she could start with the normal seven- and eleven-day system.

Another crucial clarification during this period was the meaning of “many days” in Lev. 15:25. The sages interpreted the phrase as three consecutive days, which meant that if a woman saw blood for three consecutive days during the eleven days mentioned above, she became the zava mentioned in the Torah and must wait the seven clean days. If, however, she saw blood for only one day or two consecutive days, she was considered a minor zava and required only to sit one clean day for each day she saw blood. This was a new category not mentioned in the Bible. This system required careful reckoning of one’s menstrual cycle.

Rabbi Yehuda haNasi, considered to be the redactor of the Mishnah, made a statement (see Appendix A) that started a trend of thinking in which the category of normal menstruation was eliminated and all uterine
bleeding came to fall in the category of abnormal bleeding, *ziva*. His statement reflects the possible confusion in keeping track of one’s period, especially in light of the new system of *pithei niddah*. If a woman erred in her menstrual history, she might end up having sexual relations at a forbidden time. If this was done intentionally, the punishment was *karet*; if done accidentally, the woman was obligated to bring a sin offering. Atonement by sacrifice, however, could not be made after the destruction of the Temple in the year 70. Great efforts, therefore, were made to prevent accidental sins of this nature.

Over the next two generations, the elimination of the category of *niddah* and the view that all uterine bleeding was *ziva* was quickly accepted. There were probably objections to it, for it went far beyond the biblical requirements for the menstruating woman and significantly reduced the possibilities of normative halakhic sexual contact. There also may have been concern for fertility because some sages thought that conception is most likely near the time of one’s period and another opinion set the time for conception near immersion (BT Niddah 31b). It is likely that the issue of fertility was settled quickly by observation of its enhancement in the majority of the population. The time for immersion was very close to ovulation if we assume a twenty-eight- or thirty-day cycle and a period lasting about five days. The seven clean days would then set the time for immersion at the night after the twelfth day’s sunset. Unfortunately for the few women with consistently much shorter cycles, such an extension of sexual abstention doomed them to infertility. This extended period of abstention coincidentally allowed a woman to practice a form of rhythm birth control by delaying her immersion in the *miqveh* for just a few days. To explain how the reduction of sexual contact became normative, we must assume that this was an era of asceticism, possibly related to mourning for the continued state of exile and the destruction of the Temple.

Further motivation for this radical shift may have been a weakening in the traditions of blood checking. According to Mishnah Niddah 2:6, there were five colors of impure blood. There were eleven days in which that blood might be considered *ziva*. Bloodstains had to be of a given size. The color of blood changed as it dried, and the color and texture of the fabric influenced the way it appeared. Thus, the sages to whom such blood samples were brought for examination had to be experts. Several sources indicate that sages stopped checking blood or at least certain kinds of blood; some no longer taught the younger sages through an apprenticeship. It is likely that with increased asceticism this system, which required discussion concerning sexual matters between married women and men who were not their spouses, was a source of embarrassment. If the number of competent sages decreased, other modes of dealing with doubt had to be
employed. The most efficient means would be to eliminate the distinctions between the categories. In light of the severity of the repercussions, any development that sought to maintain this system would have to be in the direction of eliminating the less stringent category and expanding the more stringent one. The decree brought by R. Zera (see Appendix A) in the name of the daughters of Israel suited that need.  

(See Appendix B for further discussion of impurity and the different kinds of blood.)

*Other Influences Toward Stringencies: Family Purity*

In the late Middle Ages, widely distributed books in Ashkenaz contained several extreme formulations of menstrual laws, apparently influenced by the book *Beraita deNiddah*. The authorship of this book is uncertain. It does contain early material that was not accepted as normative in earlier periods. Among the prohibitions are that the dust of the menstruant’s feet causes impurity to others, that people may not benefit from her handiwork, that she makes food and utensils impure, that she may not go to synagogue, that she may not make blessings even on the Sabbath candles, and that if she is married to a priest, he may not make the priestly blessing on the holidays. Some of the descriptions of the negative powers of the menstruating woman are reminiscent of Pliny’s descriptions of crop damage, staining mirrors, and causing ill health. These notions entered the normative legal works and influenced behavior, particularly among the less educated, who were not knowledgeable in rabbinic literature.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries another term became popular as the designation for menstrual laws: the Hebrew *Taharat haMishpaha*, which means “purity of the family” or “family purity.” Originally, a similar term was used to refer to the soundness of the family, to indicate that there was no genealogical defect such as bastardy or non-kosher priests. The particular term and its usage in reference to menstrual laws seem to have derived from German through Yiddish: *reinheit das familiens lebens*. It was probably generated by the Neo-Orthodox movement as a response to the Reform movement’s rejection of some of the normative menstrual laws, particularly use of the *miqveh*. The Reform movement claimed that the law was instituted at a time when public bathing facilities were the norm but was no longer valid with the advent of home bathtubs and greater concern for personal hygiene. This argument had previously been made by the Karaites in Egypt and was uprooted by the vigorous objection of Maimonides in the twelfth century. In modern times an intense interchange with Orthodox rabbis on the topic erupted. As part of the neo-Orthodox response, a philosophy of the elevated state
of modern womanhood emerged, along with the sanctity of her command-
ment to keep the family pure.

The term *family purity* is euphemistic and somewhat misleading, since
the topic is, in fact, ritual impurity. Family purity became connected with
the idea of purity of a nation, particularly by early Israeli rabbis like Rav
Kook. It is likely that this was also motivated by the desire to create a Torah-
observant state and avoid the curse of the nations who preceded Israel in
the land, who were “vomited out” for their abominations. The polemics
concerning such abominations occur in chapters 18 and 20 of Leviticus,
where the prohibition of sexual relations during the time of menstruation
first appears.

The term was taken up with great enthusiasm by those involved in re-
suing the remnants of European Jewry after the Second World War. Many
of the young women had no older female relatives to instruct them in men-
strual laws. Committees were formed to disseminate information in over
twenty languages, all of which took up some version of the term family
purity or purity of family life as the translation of the concept. The book-
lets are directed to particular target audiences and are phrased, at least in
the view of the committees that wrote them, in appropriate terms for each
audience. The postwar pamphlets were directed by the need to preserve
the remnants of the people and to fortify traditional Judaism. Some of
them played on the guilt feelings of the survivors, who were trying to re-
create the world their parents and grandparents had left. Others preyed on
fears and folktales of deformities that would result from improper sexual
expression. The latter were generally directed to groups who were consid-
ered more “primitive” in their worldviews and less well educated. More re-
cent manuals are highly sophisticated, with numerous notes and appen-
dixes. The bottom line of all of the works is to convince the readers of the
efficacy of the family purity laws and of the need to rely on a competent
rabbi to answer any questions and to check the discharge, if necessary, to
ascertain whether it is among the five colors of impure blood.

*Movements within Judaism*

During the rise of Reform Judaism in the mid-nineteenth century, many of
the commandments connected with physiology were categorized as primi-
tive. The most obvious of these was circumcision; but in the era of private
plumbing, ritual bathing also went by the wayside. Given general society’s
hesitation to engage in sexual relations during menstruation, it is likely that
the Reform movement maintained a notion of privacy creating an attitude
of “staying out of the bedroom.” Later, the Reform movement, in tune
with the feminist movement, used menstrual laws as an example of negative, sexist, Orthodox attitudes toward female physiology. Most recently, there have been Reform women rabbis who have advocated use of the *miqveh* as a spiritually cleansing process following unsuccessful relationships, both spontaneous and induced abortions, divorce, childbirth, and sometimes even menstruation.

The Conservative movement, in its desire to remain faithful to halakha but be in tune with changing mores, finds itself at cross purposes with menstrual laws. The halakhic stance is that there may be room to reduce the waiting period from twelve days (five for the actual period and seven clean days) to eleven days. However, most rabbis simply avoid the topic in their premarital counseling because they themselves are uncomfortable with the topic or feel that most couples would be uncomfortable with the idea. On the other hand, among many young couples connected to the Jewish Theological Seminary, observance of menstrual laws in some form seems to be on the rise. The observance may be based on the biblical law—that is, seven days of menstruation—rather than menstruation plus seven clean days.

Among the Orthodox in North America and much of Europe we must distinguish between affiliation with an Orthodox synagogue and actual ortho-practice. A very significant percentage of Orthodox synagogue membership is made up of people who are more or less Sabbath observant and who keep kosher homes but who may be less conscientious about kashrut or other ritual matters outside the house. Hence, observance of menstrual laws varies considerably, as does *miqveh* usage.

Normative Orthodox practice would include separating from one’s spouse sexually twelve hours before the expected arrival of the period; checking internally before sundown on the final day of one’s period to ascertain that it has stopped completely; checking daily thereafter while counting the seven clean days; and finally, shampooing, bathing, trimming nails, and removing any dead skin; removing cosmetics, jewelry, and contact lenses; combing out tangles (or removing all hair for some groups), including underarm and pubic hair; flossing and brushing teeth; and cleaning nose and ear canals before presenting oneself to the female *miqveh* attendant, the *balanit*, for inspection. She checks to ensure that nothing intervenes between the body and the water and possibly to ascertain that it is the correct day for immersion. The *balanit* makes sure the blessing is recited and that the entire body, including the hair, is completely submerged. Certain conditions such as false teeth, scabs, and casts, create problems for which a rabbi must be consulted. Irregular periods are treated slightly differently in terms of separation. The woman checking the immersion may be able to answer some of the questions that arise, but a rabbi is frequently
called for a decision. Immersion on Friday evening requires slightly different conditions in order that the Sabbath not be transgressed.

Immersion for women must be done in the evening and at a ritually approved miqveh. Bathing in rivers is mentioned in the Talmud. Jewish families in rural areas often construct their own private miqvaot. In the early and mid-twentieth century there were several attempts to get rabbinic approval of private miqvaot constructed in homes, sometimes in closets, so that the couple could be absolutely private about their sexual lives. The main point of criticism was that the water supply to homes was not a natural gathering of water but rather fell into the category of drawn water, thereby making it unfit for a ritual pool. Some private homes do have kosher miqvaot constructed in accordance with halakha. It is an obligation of the Jewish community to provide and supervise the miqveh. These pools also may be used for male immersion in the daytime (but usually men have their own pools) or for the immersion of vessels made outside Israel. The level of sanitation in the miqvaot has been a point of contention. Poor sanitation and unattractive settings were seen as discouraging the fulfillment of the commandment. Some miqvaot have closed-circuit television so that a woman may avoid encountering a relative. Others are quite open about having friends or relatives accompany the woman.

The atmosphere in the miqveh is also determined by the balanit in charge. Often it is she who sets the tone of the encounter, perhaps by being rough in the examination or abrasive in her demeanor. She may also make the miqveh a warm and welcoming place, allowing the women to immerse several times for the sake of a special blessing or other customs, and she may send the woman off with a blessing.

In Israel, observance of the menstrual laws is nearly universal among those who are affiliated with an Orthodox synagogue. It serves as a dividing line between the Orthodox and everyone else. Other groups, even though not always Sabbath-observant, still maintain observance of menstrual laws, sometimes out of worry about the purported physical repercussions to children born of nonobservance or for themselves during childbirth, but perhaps also from concern about the possibility of incurring the punishment of karet. Mishnah Shabbat 2:6 mentions lack of care in observance of the menstrual laws as a reason women die in childbirth. The Israeli rabbinate tries to enforce observance of menstrual laws as far as possible. The most significant opportunity they have to do so is prior to a wedding, by refusal to conduct the marriage ceremony, which is entirely under the control of the Orthodox rabbinate, unless the bride has previously immersed in the miqveh. While registering for marriage in the rabbinate, the bride is sent to a woman in charge of instructing her in the laws of niddah, who also helps to set a wedding date on the basis of those laws. She is given a special
card that allows her free entrance to the miqveh. The rabbi officiating at the wedding may require a form signed by the balanit stating that the woman did actually immerse. Of course, this may not be effective or may be subverted because a woman can always ask a friend to go for her or not give the accurate date. This has become a source of contention between the observant and secular communities in Israel, and charges of religious coercion have been leveled at the practice. There are also attempts by the male religious establishment to limit parties in honor of the bride at the miqveh, thereby interfering in the positive aspects of folk culture around the miqveh by controlling this female domain.¹⁹

Conclusion

In summary, Jewish menstrual laws have undergone enormous change from biblical to modern times. Some of the changes have come as a result of the loss of the Temple and the resultant inability to atone for inadvertent sins. The rabbinic clarifications of the biblical text added many laws and complicated the observance of them. The process of ascribing to the daughters of Israel the restrictive laws of the talmudic period was probably a convenient mechanism to gain consensus for the restrictive expression of priestly or rabbinic asceticism. The laws have been responsible for a high level of body awareness among Jewish women, albeit not necessarily in a positive sense. The biblical laws themselves may have limited women’s sexual expression by legislatively against coitus during menstruation, which in some women is a peak time of sexual desire. The additional rabbinic laws certainly functioned to limit sexual expression for everyone, especially once polygyny was no longer widely practiced and was finally forbidden altogether to the Ashkenazi community in the Middle Ages.

Observance of the laws has become the focal point of arguments among the various streams of Judaism. Apologetics and accusations of sexism and male chauvinism have flowed regularly. The irony is that such charges are leveled today at Jewish men, who are as affected by this practice as Jewish women are. In antiquity, polygyny served as a possible outlet for male sexual frustration. Menstrual observance is not a blood ritual like circumcision; the latter may be difficult for some contemporary groups to accept, but it is still a blood-centered ritual in a very private sphere.

As women attempt to spiritualize the observance through meditation, extension of the rules, additional immersions, and creation of various customs and philosophy, the tendency toward stringency is evident in the way contemporary niddah manuals are written. Some of these manuals go so far as to deal with the question of how someone conceived in a state of ritual
Impurity should be treated by those who are Orthodox from birth, reflecting the inherent divisions within the Jewish community and creating additional areas of conflict. Politicization of the issue is evident in the attempt of the rabbinate to control the use of *miqvaot* and to demand adherence to the laws. For those women interested in adding a dimension beyond observance of the laws there is also ample opportunity, particularly if there were to be a shift in control of this ritual area, to directly empower the women users themselves, including examination of bloodstains and answering halakhic questions. For those viewing the observances as antiquated, restrictive, and superstitious, there is much material in the talmudic period and later periods to rely on.

**Notes**

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Shoshana Shier, an ardent student and supporter of Jewish Studies and a quietly courageous woman.

Some of the material was produced in a different form as part of my doctoral dissertation for the Department of Talmud at The Hebrew University, Jerusalem (Meacham 1989). The dissertation is in the process of becoming a book on the development of the laws of *niddah*.

1. Some of the Aramaic translations on this verse and those in chap. 12 add “of her impurity” to the root *rhq*, creating the translation “in the separation of her impurity.” See Meacham (1989), esp. chap. 4, sec. a: “The Term Niddah.”

2. Abnormal uterine bleeding may be the result of several medical conditions: a carcinoma of the uterus or cervix, hormonal imbalance, a threatened or incomplete abortion, and cysts, to name but a few of the possibilities.

3. I am grateful to my spouse, Harry Fox, for calling my attention to the connection with Genesis here and for the many productive discussions of Torah we have had.

4. See Appendix B for a fuller explanation of the differences in birth impurity and blood of purification between the birth of a male and a female child.

5. For a much more complete discussion, see Meacham (1989), chap. 4, sec. b: “Female Seed.”

6. *Tannaitic* literature includes Mishnah, Tosefta, and the Midreshei Halakhah (the legal exegesis on the last four books of the Pentateuch). This material was re-dacted in the third century of the Common Era. The Mishnah serves as the basis for the *amoraic* discussions in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, which were re-dacted around 350 C.E. and 500 C.E., respectively. These texts frequently quote the various collections of *tannaitic* literature. There are several midrashic collections from the *amoraic* period. *Bereishit Rabbah* on Gen. 18:12 refers to a connection between menstruation and fertility.


8. Despite the fact that the sages were excellent observers and describers of pre-menstrual and menstrual symptoms, one can mention several examples where female physiology is forced unsuccessfully to conform to a male physiological paradigm—for instance, urination and seed leakage. The sages excelled in observation, but their theories were limited by their science.
9. It was assumed that these women had their menstrual blood in abeyance due to pregnancy or nursing or that they no longer had menstrual blood due to their age. According to some sages, menstrual blood did not leave the body during pregnancy because it was the female contribution to the fetus or that it nourished the fetus. Some sages believed that menstrual blood was transformed into milk during nursing.

10. A similar idea may be seen in the sin offering after birth. In this case, in addition to the fact that giving birth is a life-threatening situation, which would require atonement, the sacrifice may also atone for Eve’s original sin, which brought death into the world for living beings birthed by her descendants. In this sense the Pauline idea that Jesus’ death on the cross is a sacrificial atonement for original sin and other sin reflects the priestly idea in Leviticus of atoning for original sin via birth sacrifices. Jews and Christians parted on the way in which original sin is atoned for, and hence, Christians abandoned the method found in Leviticus. In Judaism the method of atonement is, of course, in abeyance due to the destruction of the Second Temple. With the lack of such cultic methods of atonement, the idea of original sin waned in Judaism, whereas it became a central idea in Christianity. This section is a very brief summary of a paper presented to the Oriental Club of Toronto (February 1995), entitled “Original Sin.” An expanded version may be found in Meacham (1996) and in an article entitled “The Sin-Offering of the Woman who Gives Birth” (Hebrew), which will appear in the same journal in the near future; it offers additional examples of the connection of birth, atonement, and original sin. A separate article addressing notions of original sin is also in progress.

11. These sections of Leviticus belong to the so-called Holiness Code and apparently reflect the philosophy of the priestly editors. Their attitude to menstrual blood seems to mark them as a reactive group of strict pietists who were attempting to make general Israelite society conform to priestly standards of purity. The priests benefited from their high level of ritual purity. They received tithes and parts of sacrifices brought by individuals, as well as parts of the daily communal sacrifices, all of which they could consume only when in a state of ritual purity. An ordinary Israelite came infrequently to the Temple and could have dealt with his ritual impurity on an ad hoc basis; however, being in a state of purity had profound ritualistic and economic ramifications for a priest.

12. The use of the term niddah to describe the impurity of the land due to sin is found in Lam. 1:8 and Ezra 9:11; abominable objects in Ezek. 7:19–20; and as antonym of holiness in 2 Chron. 29:5. See Meacham (1989), chap. 4 sec. a: “The Term Niddah.” Susan Sontag (1978), 60–61, 71–72; and (1989) deals with a similar metaphorical development of the terms tuberculosis, cancer, and AIDS.

13. Tractate Niddah is found in Mishnah, Tosefta, Palestinian Talmud (through chap. 3 and the beginning of chap. 4), and the Babylonian Talmud. The legal midrash to Leviticus, Tārāt Kohanim (Sifra), sections tza’rāʾ and metzorāʾ, also deals with the topics. These are the richest sources of legal literature on the topic from the rabbinic period.


15. This idea was presented in a paper entitled: “Development in the Laws of Niddah” that I delivered at the Ohio State University Conference on Woman in Judaism in 1981. M. Gruzman (1981) also suggests such influence, as does Biale (1984), 153.

16. Many men now take the sample to the rabbi for his decision, which avoids the embarrassment.
17. In a prayer book from Renaissance Italy, this source is brought in a slightly different form: “They [the Sages] became more strict with the daughters of Israel.” This version may represent the true history of the decree.

18. Dinary (1980) describes some of these customs. We see that a woman’s impurity is still in use in the polemics against women’s use of prayer shawls or phylacteries, despite the fact that in the twelfth century bodily impurity was not seen as an impediment to ritual acts. R. Moshe of Coutzy explains in the introduction of his book Sefer baMitzvot baGadol (Jerusalem: reprint, 1973) that fulfilling the mitzva is more important than being in a state of purity. See, for example, the recent article by Aliza Berger, “Wrapped Attention: May Women Wear Tefillin?”

19. Sered (1997) has described this phenomenon as part of the conflict over holy spaces between the rabbinate and women.

20. In fact, a two-year training program for women has recently opened in Jerusalem. The graduates will answer halakhic questions on the issues of menstruation for women, thereby acting as legal experts, posqot.

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Introduction

A popular feminist position with regard to Jewish practice is that it places women in a subordinate position to men. Indeed, in the frame of the synagogue in modern forms of Orthodox Judaism, women do not share the “power seat.” They sit geographically removed from the dynamic center of the conversation between divine and human—that is, removed from the ark and the Torah (the five books of Moses) it contains. Women are not offered Torah honors: they are not called to open the ark, to carry the Torah, to read from the Torah, or to return it to the ark. They are not invited to lead davening (Jewish prayer). In some environments one cannot even hear their voices joining in the congregational chanting of prayer.

If what happened in the context of synagogue worship defined the boundaries of Judaism, one would be fully justified in the complaint that Judaism is a patriarchy and religious Jewish women devalued in relation to men. Yet attempting to understand Judaism and the role of women in the ritual cosmos of Judaism through the window of the synagogue is a narrow perspective indeed. Much of Jewish ritual life has no direct relation to what occurs in the context of the communal worship of the synagogue; yet as we widen our perspective, we can see that both synagogue worship and the ritual activity that occurs outside the synagogue are parts of a larger system. In the larger ritual system the role of women is not, in fact, subsidiary. The statement that Judaism is a patriarchy and women are subordinate to men is more a problem in contextualization than a reality in terms of Jewish ritual.
An examination of the texts concerning niddab, the laws of menstrual separation, provides an important example of how context can significantly affect the interpretation of material. Whereas I will argue in the course of this essay that niddab and its associated blood symbolism can be understood only in the context of the priestly sacrificial system, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, in The Savage in Judaism, discusses blood symbolism in the context of bodily fluids. As a result, his conclusion is very different from mine.

Eilberg-Schwartz presents the feminist position mentioned above: niddab represents devaluing of the female in relation to the male. He supports this position by comparing the attitudes toward menstrual blood and the blood of circumcision: “Circumcision coincides with the end of a boy’s impurity caused by the mother’s blood at birth. The entrance of a male into the covenant thus occurs with his transition from female blood to male blood. The contrast between circumcision and the blood of birthing not only reflects differences between genders but it interprets them. Women’s blood is contaminating; men’s blood has the power to create covenant.”

On the surface, this statement appears to be a positive one for feminism: these ancient texts, written by men, ascribe positive characteristics to men’s blood and negative characteristics to women’s blood. Is this, however, an accurate characterization of the material, and is it really a useful interpretation for contemporary women?

In regard to the first point, if it is true that “men’s blood has the power to create covenant,” then it shares this distinction with animal blood. The blood of the Passover lamb also “creates covenant.” Failure to circumcise, a rite of covenant, results in being karet, “cut off,” as does failure to offer the Passover sacrifice. This parallel can only be accidental since the Bible consistently differentiates between human beings and other animals. The language of blood-food-body-time-space in the priestly text of the Bible signifies not gender differences with relation to blood but the difference between human beings, God and the world of nature. Men’s blood, like the blood of the Passover lamb, has “the power to create covenant” only in the context of the sacrifice in the Temple.

Second, in terms of its impact on women’s understanding of themselves in the context of Judaism, it is a short step between the statement that women’s blood is negatively valued to the statement that women themselves are negatively valued. This kind of negative interpretation of biblical and Jewish material with regard to women characterizes significant segments of the interpretive tradition in both Judaism and Christianity (some, referring to the Garden of Eden story, interpret menstruation as a punishment for Eve’s sin while leaving corresponding male states of ritual impurity unexplained). Ultimately, a devaluation of women’s blood leads
to a devaluation of women themselves. Considering menstrual blood in the context of the priestly sacrificial system again leads to a very different conclusion.

Examining *niddah* and blood in the frame of sacrificial and literary systems supports Schwartz’s idea that blood has a dual valence; however, by redefining the context—that is, looking at blood as part of priestly sacrificial and literary systems rather than as part of a system of fluids—it becomes apparent that *this dual valence does not follow gender lines*. This is not to say that gender is of no importance in the priestly imagination. The meaning of gender, though, is that it is one of the significant symbols describing the difference between God and Ha-Adam, the human being. Gender, represented through the body, is a symbol of difference. God is undifferentiated unity.

Niddah in Context

By way of widening the window opening onto female rituals of purification in Judaism, this study examines them in their larger ritual and textual contexts. *Niddah* is presented in the Bible and Mishnah as part of sacrificial and literary systems. Sacrifice is the overarching concern of the priests; and as Stephen Geller demonstrates, the priests were also consummate literary artists. Any discussions of meaning must take place against the backdrop of their overarching literary structure.

Further, since the laws of *niddah* have to do with the presence or absence of blood, an understanding of the symbolic significance of blood for the priests is essential. As Geller points out, blood is the dominant symbol in the priestly sacrificial and literary systems: “bloody because dominating all the ritualia is a sacrificial cult that attains to an almost Aztec infatuation with blood. It is sprinkled, splashed, poured and smeared on altars, persons, on the veil of the Holy of Holies, even, once a year, on the Ark of the Covenant itself. No other people of the ancient Near East had a sacrificial system in which blood played so prominent a role.” Therefore, seeking to understand blood symbolism in the context of a carefully crafted priestly system is central to my analysis. In that frame, menstrual blood is only one form of blood. It would be remarkable indeed if one form of blood were treated differently from other forms of blood. Menstrual blood is blood, and we expect it will be treated consistently throughout the system.

Thesis

With the context defined in this way, it becomes apparent that the ritual systems of the Bible and Mishnah are profound statements of belief and the foundation of positive self-identity for the human being in general and the
Israelite/Jew in particular, regardless of gender. More remarkably, ritual in the Bible and Mishnah is directed toward reconstructing the religious and social environment in the aftermath of catastrophe, and women are incorporated as equal partners in that endeavor.

The biblical text, according to some scholars, was redacted in a period of restoration after the first exile from the Land and the Temple. If this is the case, then the pages of the Bible are an effort to answer the question, “What went wrong, and how can we restore and maintain the original order now that we have returned?” In the Bible, niddah, like the other purity regulations, is a symbolic representation of the idea that the world is a harmonious system of differences established through a series of divine acts of separation. To the extent that human beings maintain and mirror this divine action, they exist in the harmony of Eden; conversely, to the extent that they do not, they are in exile.

The context of the Mishnah is vastly different. Therefore, the questions that motivate it and to which it responds are very different. When it was completed, in approximately 210 C.E., 140 years after the destruction of the Temple and 70 years after the time at which restoration should have occurred based on the prophecy of Jeremiah, the sages of the Mishnah were concerned with forging a new order. The Temple and the priestly system were no more, and restoration was not imminent. The sages of the Mishnah were concerned with replacing the Temple sacrificial system and providing a new path to communication with God. In this agenda, niddah became part of a strategy to empower the individual Jew as priest in the context of a world without a temple and priestly system. This strategy incorporated and established both men and women as the symbolic successors to the priests—a bold and creative reconstruction of the Temple system in the absence of both Temple and priests.

The Priestly Worldview in the Bible

Literary Unity of the Pentateuch

This study is founded on the assumption that the first five books of the biblical text, the Pentateuch, represent an integrated literary document. While the text may indeed evidence multiple traditions and sources, a final priestly redaction provides it with an overall unity of theme and structure. This overall unity of the text includes a close relationship between its narrative and its legal portions, legal portions being the repository of information about ritual practice. Narrative and legal portions are merely different expressions of the same worldview, the same “definition of reality.”
While we may readily perceive narrative texts as an expression of worldview, it can be more difficult for moderns to understand ritual texts in this way; yet as Jacob Milgrom points out, “Theology is what Leviticus is all about. It pervades every chapter and almost every verse. It is not expressed in pronouncements but embedded in rituals. Indeed, every act, whether movement, manipulation, or gesticulation, is pregnant with meaning.” On the other hand, narrative portions of the text provide easier access to the worldview of the priestly redactors.

Narrative Texts

Narrative texts use the motifs of body, blood, food, time, and space to define relationships among the elements in a system of differences. Not only the worldview but the symbolic language of narrative texts is echoed in legal texts. Body, blood, food, time, and space are the building blocks of ritual. The creation stories of Gen. 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–3:24 set out the foundational belief, namely, that the created world is a system of differences. We might even say that the acts of creation, described in the first story, are acts of differentiation (b-d-l). There are three major elements in this system of differences: God, the human being, and the world of nature.

The second creation story, Gen. 2:4b–3:24, demonstrates how the body and food define the relationship between these three elements. The second story asks the questions who is God and who is the human being? How do they relate? God prescribes an order of creation that, as the story progresses, is disrupted as an animal, the snake, achieves dominion over the human beings and the human beings encroach on God’s prerogative. God restores order, but the order is significantly different from what is described at the beginning of the story. This new order represents a new set of relationships, the relationships that exist in a state of cosmic exile: the world in exile from Gan Eden. The questions about who God is and who the human being is and how they relate in this exilic world are answered directly and specifically in Gen. 3:22–24:

And the Lord God said, “Now that man (ha-Adam) has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever?” So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he was taken. He drove the man out, and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life.

God knows the difference between good and evil, and like God in this respect, human beings do as well; however, in another respect human beings are radically different from God, namely they die. God is not born and
does not die. Saying that God is not subject to death and decay is, in effect, a way of saying that God does not have a body as we know it. Thus, the second creation story projects its worldview through differentiations related to the body: “What if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever?”

The second creation story defines the difference between God and human beings, not only through body symbolism but through related food symbolism: structural analysis of Gen. 2:4b–3:24 demonstrates that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is not only in the middle of the garden but in the narrative middle of the story. Thus, it becomes the most important element and the center of action and interpretation. The food of this tree is explicitly forbidden to human beings (and may we assume, therefore, reserved for God?), and eating that food results in exile of the human beings from the Garden. Food symbolizes the difference between God and human beings and in so doing defines the human being.

Other priestly narratives are explicit about a corporeally defined relationship between God and human beings. Genesis 5:1–3 indicates that it is not so much the fact that a human being has a body and dies that differentiates Adam from God as it is sexual differentiation and procreation. In a carefully crafted text filled with references to the creation stories in Genesis, chapters 1–3, God, in Gen. 5:1–3, creates the human being in His “likeness.” In an exactly parallel way, Adam begets a son in his own “likeness,” after his “image.” “Likeness” explicitly links 5:3 to 5:1, and “image” links 5:3 to the creation of the human being in Gen. 1:27. According to Gen. 5:1–3, then, the difference between God and human beings is not whether or not they assume a physical form but rather how that form reproduces (God “creates,” and human beings “beget”). This body-centered passage demonstrates that the difference between God and human beings is that God is not sexually differentiated (as human beings are), and God therefore does not procreate (as human beings do).

The second creation story already hints at sexual differentiation and procreation representing the difference between God and human beings. Adam, in the image of God, is both male and female (“earth creature,” according to one writer); however, through the story, Adam becomes differentiated into *Ish* and *Isha*, man and woman (Gen. 2:23). Note that Adam is not the Hebrew word for man as it is most often translated into English; rather, *Ish* and *Isha* mean man and woman. The first occurrence of this vocabulary is in Gen. 2:23, after Eve is taken from Adam, thus differentiating Adam into male and female. Neither gender is prior in creation (Gen. 1:27 and Gen. 2:21–23). Even the second creation story, to which most commentators refer when giving priority to man, uses the word *Adam* until the explicit sexual differentiation occurs in Gen. 2:21–23. Indeed, if one
were to give priority to either gender, the skillful wordplay of the text suggests that it must be the woman, since Adam (masculine Hebrew form) is taken from Adamah (earth: feminine Hebrew form). Adam, containing male and female principles, is in the image of God. Through the story, Adam is differentiated sexually into male and female and at the same time is differentiated from God.

Another creation text, the Noah story, again uses food to set up a differentiation between God, human beings, and the world of nature. Further, in this story we have an opportunity to begin to explore priestly meanings on blood. As Stephen Geller points out, the scheme of differentiation in the Noah story creates a world that is radically different from the world created in Genesis, chapters 1–3; this postdiluvian, exilic world is one in which there is enmity and fear rather than harmony and peace. In the Garden, the human being (Adam) is placed in a position of superiority over the world of nature—naming the animals and thereby achieving dominion over them. However, in Genesis, chapter 9, (part of the Noah story) human beings are specifically granted the permission to eat other animals for meat, with the exception that they may not consume the blood, reserved for God. Thus, it is now the human prerogative to kill other animals for food that symbolizes their dominance over the world of nature.

On the other hand, the fact that human beings may not consume the blood differentiates them from God. With the Noah story we discover that blood is intimately connected not only to death but to life in the priestly imagination: “Only the flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat” (Gen. 9:4). Similarly Gen. 3:22–24 tells us that the human being is prohibited from eating from the Tree of Life and Death.

The Noah story constructs differences between God and the human being in a similar way to that of Gen. 3:22–24. In an even more explicit way than in the prior text, human beings are differentiated from the rest of nature and from God. This radical differentiation is accomplished through food and blood symbolism.

One more dramatic example from a prophetic text will complete the case for blood and food signifying the difference between God, human beings, and nature: Isaiah 25:6–8 describes a banquet prepared by God: the Lord prepares a “banquet of rich viands, a banquet of choice wines” in which the people participate through their consumption of these items. God has different fare at the banquet, however. Verse 8 reads: “He will swallow up death forever.” Once again, God and human beings are differentiated through the medium of what they consume. Again, that differentiation has to do with life and death, represented through food.

The priestly scheme seeks to define a reality through delineating a system of symbolic differences. In this worldview, it is precisely male-female
differentiation and consequent sexuality, along with procreation and death, that differentiate human beings from God. These differences are expressed through the symbolism of body, blood, and food.

Legal Texts: The Priestly Literary System of Leviticus

If one wishes to study ritual in the Bible, one looks to the “priestly document.” Responsible for carrying out the sacrificial worship associated with the Temple cult in ancient Israel, the priests left a distinctive literature that is most comprehensively represented in the Book of Leviticus and in portions of the Book of Numbers. As with the narrative passages, these books are also about the differences between human beings, God, and the world of nature, expressed in the same symbolic language of body, blood, and food.

Three structural analyses follow that highlight blood symbolism in the context of a priestly literary system.

Dualism: Holiness, and Purity. The first structural division of Leviticus is between what constitutes roughly the first and second halves of the book, separated by the Yom Kippur ritual. These two distinctive subsections of Leviticus have been recognized by scholars, respectively, as part of the Priestly (P) text of the Bible and part of the Holiness (H) text. This study focuses on chapters 8–15, here designated the “Purity Code,” in line with their overriding concern, and chapters 18–27, designated the “Holiness Code.”

Scanning these subsections demonstrates important differences between the orientation of the laws contained in them. They describe, with characteristic examples, two taxa, holiness and purity: “that you may differentiate between holy and unholy and between unclean and clean” (Lev. 10:10). We must examine the significance of these taxa further.

The Holiness Code begins with forbidden sexual relationships and continues to deal with laws like keeping the Sabbath, not worshipping idols, offering sacrifices in the proper way, leaving the corners of the field for the poor, not damaging the body, not practicing divination, and so on. On the other hand, the Purity Code is primarily concerned with the times an individual becomes impure, a state associated in chapters 8–15 with childbirth, death, menstruation, seminal emissions, unexplained genital discharges, and leprosy. Systematic examination of all the statements related to holiness and those related to purity demonstrates one fundamental difference between these two classificatory rubrics: holiness has to do with things that for the human being are volitional, and purity has to do with things that are perceived as nonvolitional. In simple terms, one has a choice about what one will eat, whether or not one will observe the Sabbath, or whether or
not one will leave the corners of the field: these are matters of the will. On the other hand, one does not have a choice about birth, death, and menstruation: these are matters of the body that, as part of the natural world, are determined.

These two taxa, holiness and purity, frame the issue of sin: in the Holiness Code, sin is about making the wrong choice; in the Purity Code, sin is not about being impure but is, rather, about not engaging in the correct rituals of purification before approaching God. Purity is essentially a statement of difference: in having a body, the human being is radically different from God. The human being is subject to impurity; God is not. Impurity is not in its essence a moral issue.

In summary, Leviticus as a whole defines, through ethical and ritual practice, the relationship described in Genesis between God, human beings, and nature. This definition centers around the idea that God is both holy (makes the right moral choices) and pure (does not have a body and consequently is not subject to death and organic processes). Conversely, the human being, like God, knows right from wrong and freely chooses; but the human being, unlike God, has a body that is subject to death and decay. Holiness is essentially a moral category and a representation of similarity. Impurity, generally speaking, is not a moral category but is, rather, a representation of difference.

Now to apply this structural theory related to the material of Leviticus to the topic at hand, niddah: the biblical text treats menstruation as both an ethical and a ritual issue to the extent that we define ethical issues as volitional and purity issues as nonvolitional. Whether or not one engages in sexual relations during niddah is a matter of volition, and both male and female are held accountable accordingly: Lev. 20:18 says that he has “laid bare” and she has “exposed” her blood flow. For the female Israelite, however, niddah is also nonvolitional and therefore a ritual issue, a matter of self-definition in relation to transcendence: the woman has no choice but to come into contact with her own menstrual blood. Thus, with regard to niddah, a woman is part of the world of nature in her own unique way at the same time that she, like a man, can transcend it for the purpose of entering the ritual frame: “And she shall continue in the blood of purification three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification be fulfilled” (Lev. 12:4).

The fact that menstruation is both an ethical and a purity issue explains why it appears in Leviticus in both ritual and ethical contexts. Chapter 12 of Leviticus, which deals with the menstruous woman, is part of what we have designated the Purity Code, focused on ritual. Chapter 20, quoted above, is part of the Holiness Code, concerned with ethics, albeit with the bodily orientation so typical of the priests.
Proper contextualization of niddah demonstrates that in the Bible this set of ritual practices does not constitute a system in which women are devalued in relation to men. The female Israelite, like her male counterpart, is rendered either pure or impure by contact with blood, depending on the context; and the textual context signals the reader as to whether menstrual blood is an ethical or a ritual issue.

The ethical and ritual practices of Leviticus echo the statements of difference put forth in Gen. 3:22–23: “And the Lord God said: ‘Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever.’ Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken.” This statement of radical difference between God and human beings is made in both the narrative and legal texts of the Bible.

Ritual activity in Leviticus is on one level directed toward reminding human beings that they are bound by nature and that God is not. This ritual activity centers around sexual differentiation, involuntary seminal emissions, disease, and death because it is these issues of corporeality that, in the Bible, symbolize the difference between human beings and God. Rituals of purification center around the body, food, and blood. The body generates impurity. Blood in the proper context purifies. Blood out of context renders one impure, and in that case absence of blood is part of the ritual of purification. Portions of the sacrifice accompanying rituals of purification are designated for God, and different portions are designated for consumption by the human being.

Chiasm: Women’s Rituals of Purification Are Part of a Literary Structure. My second structural analysis is of chapters 8–15 of Leviticus, which form a subunit of the text. This subunit deals with five different categories of people who must purify in various ways in order to participate in the system of sacrificial worship: priests, Israelites, women, lepers, and zavim (those with a “flow” of some sort). This “list,” like Leviticus itself, is presented as a chiasm, a literary structure bracketed by a story of priestly sin and ritual purification. Since women are the topic once again in the second half of the discussion about zavim and priests, the chiasm works as follows: (1a) priests, (2a) Israelites, (3a) women, (center) lepers, (3b) zavim, (2b) women, (1b) priests.

The centerpoint of a chiasm is significant as its highlight, a fact that reveals something surprising in this case: in this structure, which deals with the purification of various classes of Israelites, the rites of purifying the leper are at its center. This structure parallels the larger structure of Leviticus itself, in which the rites of Yom Kippur are at its center—indeed at the
center of the Pentateuch. Further, the leper parallels the priest in an even more dramatic way—note in particular the strange application of blood to the thumb and large toe of the right side (Lev. 8:23–24 and Lev. 14:14–18). Indeed, both priests and lepers are given literary positions of prominence as the envelope (priests) and the center (lepers) of the chiasm. In regard to both, blood is a distinctive part of the purification ritual. Male and female Israelites are given equal prominence in “filling out” the chiasm, representing the bulk of the Israelite community in a structurally balanced way.

Chiasms are also interesting for the insights provided by their parallels. The envelope of this chiasm, focused on priests, repeats not just the idea of priestly purification but of priestly transgression. We are not only told but reminded that Nadav and Abihu, sons of Aaron, were killed when they entered the Tabernacle with “strange fire.”

Once again we turn to Geller for an appreciation of why this contradictory motif should bracket a systematic description of the priestly purification system with regard to Israelites. Geller suggests that the Yom Kippur sacrifice is not only atonement and restoration but re-creation. “The purity of that day was beyond time itself. Owing to the connection of the shrine to creation, the Day of Atonement may be said to leap over all history and return the cult to a state of closeness to God mankind experienced only before the rebellion in Eden.”

Chiasm is a reminder at the outset and at the conclusion of laying out the purity regulations that they must be followed with precision in order to enter this timeless ritual state. Further, the connection to creation parallels Nadav and Abihu’s action with Adam and Eve’s: it was an ill-considered encroachment on God’s territory that destroyed the original system and the set of relationships that were part of it then, and the same will destroy the new creation/Temple.

Another parallel in the chiasm is between Israelites (presumably male) and women. The purification of Israelites from corpse impurity parallels the purification of women from menstruation, a literary device supporting the traditional rabbinic interpretation that menstruation is associated with death. Finally, it is curious why purification of women from the blood of childbirth is not mentioned in the same passage as purification of women from the blood of menstruation; one explanation may be precisely that separating them in the chiasm allows the blood of menstruation to parallel death/corpse impurity. Purification of women from the blood of menstruation, then, parallels the purification of zavim. In contrast to Eilberg-Schwartz, who hypothesizes that women’s blood contaminates and men’s blood purifies, this particular parallel highlights the idea that both men’s and women’s discharges can generate impurity in certain contexts. The defining factor seems to be not whose blood—not even blood—but rather the context of the discharge.
Time and Number Symbolism. The fact that priestly rituals are presented in a literary and symbolic system also explains why a woman’s period is seven days and purification occurs on the eighth day and why this seven-eight-day equation enters once again into the discussion of childbirth. With both menstruation and childbirth, purification involves counting seven days and an eighth-day marking point—circumcision of the male child in the one case and bringing an offering in the other. From this we might assume that the biblical text offers an average length of seven days for a woman’s menstrual bleeding; however, this still cannot explain why “seven days” enters into the discussion of childbirth in chapter 12. Further, the Mishnah suggests five days of bleeding, leading to a conclusion either that the length of women’s menstruation changed or that the perception of length changed.

There is, however, a more explanatory and comprehensive approach: the numbers 7 (and 8) are symbolic and have specific meaning in the context of the priestly literary system. The priestly calendar of chapters 23–25 of Leviticus demonstrates the symbolic value of this combination of numbers. In these chapters, the yearly cycle is schematized as seven plus one (eight):

- Passover (one day) plus the Feast of Unleavened Bread (seven days)
- Seven “weeks of days” and one day from Passover until Shavuot
- Sukkot (seven days) and Shemini Atzeret (one day)

In the seventh (sabbatical) year, the farmer lets his field lie fallow. In the eighth year, people enjoy the bounty remaining from the sixth year and begin the cycle again. The odd phrasing for the fifty years to a Jubilee Year, “seven weeks of years” and one year, shows again the priestly emphasis on this numerical scheme.

More specific to the present study, Aaron and his sons, in Leviticus, chapters 8–9, engage in rituals of purification for seven days and are consecrated on the eighth day. Lepers are separated for seven days, then are judged by the priest. They engage in the culminating rituals of purification and offer a sacrifice on the eighth day. Men with a “flux” count seven days and offer a sacrifice on the eighth day. And the male Israelite is circumcised on the eighth day. In light of Eilberg-Schwartz’s reverse analogy between circumcision and menstruation, it is especially noteworthy that circumcision occurs on the eighth day, marking it as essentially a sacrifice.

Thus, we see that the number 7 symbolizes the world before recreation, as we have called it, a world differentiated from the divine by impurity (bodies and sexual differentiation, mortality and decay). The eighth day is consistently the day of purification and consecration, a day one enters the timelessness of ritual space, Gan Eden.
Blood Symbolism in the Sacrificial System of the Priests

Blood symbolism is also part of the priestly sacrificial system. In this context, on the negative side, blood has the power to communicate impurity. Geller attaches this negative valence to the violence that is part of human nature and that results in unlawful bloodshed. As part of lawful bloodshed—that is, as part of the sacrificial system—blood purifies. Like Eilberg-Schwartz’s analysis, Geller’s furthers our understanding of blood in describing its dual power: “To [the priestly writer] blood is, in the ‘old dispensation’ of Noah, a symbol of human sinfulness. In the ‘new dispensation’ of Sinai it is to become the means of atonement for sin.”

In the vocabulary of ritual impurity, blood itself is not tameh (impure). It is, rather, forbidden, except in certain specified ritual contexts. In those specified contexts, blood purifies (e.g., the consecration of the priests in Leviticus, chapter 8, and the parallel purification of the lepers in Leviticus, chapter 14). In the Yom Kippur ritual, it purifies the community. Out of context, it renders a person impure.

At the same time, however, there is an absolute prohibition on the consumption of blood (Lev. 3:17, 7:26, 17:10–14, Deut. 12:15–16, 20–24). This prohibition applies in the context of sacrificial worship as well as outside it and extends not only to Israel but to all human beings (Gen. 9:4). It is presented along with a prohibition of murder. The rationale appended to the law is that the life is in the blood (Lev. 17:11, 14, Deut. 12:23). Only God “consumes” life and death; human beings are barred from consuming the blood as they are barred from the Garden, lest they eat from the Tree of Life and Death.

Finally, blood symbolism begins to explain the close and perhaps somewhat mysterious relationship between food, body, and blood in the ritual cosmos. The priestly code insists repeatedly that blood is reserved for God, that is, that all permitted flesh must be sacrificed and the blood poured out at the altar. It is not even, as in some religious cultures that also value the blood, drunk as part of a religious ritual, although the flesh of the sacrificial animal is often consumed, at least in part. Unlawful contact with blood—that is, shedding blood outside the context of sacrificial worship—makes one impure. As both Milgrom and Geller suggest, this impurity is associated with death. Only in the timeless ritual context, a context that the faithful community creates in elaborate detail, can one come into contact with blood (conversely associated with life) and be purified.

Again, food consumed serves to differentiate between God, human beings, and the rest of creation. The same differentiation occurs in the context of sacrifice. The sacrifice is an animal, permissible to kill. Although sacrifices vary by type, and some are wholly burned, most allow human
consumption of some part of the flesh. The blood, along with the fat, is reserved for God. The priestly imagery is that God “consumes” the sacrifice: “And there came forth fire from before the Lord, and consumed upon the altar the burnt-offering and the fat” (Lev. 9:24). The body differentiates. Blood out of context generates impurity. In context, it purifies. The human being (in bodily form, in a purified state) shares food with God; but even in re-created Eden, food differentiates between divine and human.

Proper contextualization of the study of blood makes it clear that women’s blood is not valued differently from male blood—or from animal blood, for that matter; rather, those who shed blood outside the context of sacrificial worship become tameh. On the eighth day, in the sacrificial context, blood purifies. In the context of the priestly worldview, blood has a dual meaning, and purification rituals have a consistent meaning.

The Early Rabbinic Worldview in the Mishnah

The Agenda of the Mishnah

What happened with the ritual system of the priests once the Temple and its sacrificial cult were destroyed? Clearly, the agenda of the Mishnah is substantially different from that of the Bible. The authors of the Mishnah were concerned with somehow replacing the Temple sacrificial system and providing a new path to communication with God.19

System Reconstruction in the Mishnah

Although the rabbis make it clear that their purpose is to replace sacrifice with prayer (Ta’an. 2a, Ber. 26b), their agenda, represented in the Mishnah, is much more comprehensive than this simple statement suggests. Close examination of the literary context of the Mishnah shows that throughout its pages a new system is being created to correspond to and replace the old.

One example of this kind of system (re)construction is Mishnah Pesakhim, a tractate of the Mishnah that deals with Passover. Jacob Neusner has noted what appears to be an arbitrary scheme of organization for this tractate: he suggests that M. Pes. 10 appears to be grafted onto the rest of it;20 however, the structure of M. Pes. and, in particular, the placement of the tenth chapter in relation to the preceding nine, demonstrates the transformation of the symbolic structure of Judaism that begins in the Mishnah. Nine chapters are oriented toward cultic preparations for observing the Passover sacrifice, which we are therefore led to expect will occur in the culminating tenth chapter. Instead, that final chapter is a seder. The seder
has replaced the sacrifice as a symbol of the link between the divine and human worlds. The structure of the Temple cult, the system attached to Temple observances, serves as a constant. Sacrificial worship in the Temple itself, at the center of the cultic system, is replaced, however, by the seder of the tenth chapter. Thus, the link to God is maintained in exile. The symbols and rites of Passover begin a process of systemic transformation that we will see repeated throughout the Mishnah. The agenda of the rabbis, revealed through structural analysis, is ritual self-determination and empowerment in the absence of priests.

Just as the priests present a consistent system in the pages of the Torah, so the rabbis present a consistent system in the pages of the Mishnah. Not only is the male Israelite “empowered” in this literary and ritual system, the woman is as well, through the practices associated with niddah.

We recall that, in Leviticus, menstruation was dealt with in both the Holiness Code and the Purity Code. So too, in the Mishnah, menstruating women are treated in both ritual and ethical contexts. Variations in placement are related to variations in the object of discourse: in M. Niddah, the rabbis are “speaking” to women about menstruation and childbirth as necessary facts of a woman’s life. Menstruation is being treated as a nonvolitional issue for a woman and accordingly is treated in the ritual frame.

In M. Avot 18:3, on the other hand, the rabbis are speaking to men in regard to religious observance: “[The laws concerning] bird-offerings and the onset of menstruation are essential traditional ordinances.” Avot is a tractate in Nezikin, one of the two middle books of the Mishnah, books concerned with ethics. As we have seen, the laws of menstruation are volitional matters in relation to men, since it is a matter of choice whether or not they have relations with a menstruous woman.

Our interest is in the role of women in the early rabbinic ritual frame, so we will focus here on Mishnah Niddah, primarily concerned with the issues of a woman’s body related to menstruation and childbirth. M. Niddah is located in that book out of the six that is specifically concerned with “Purities” (Tohorot), a topic concerned with the body and characteristically with those aspects of physical existence that are nonvolitional (in the Bible: birth, death, menstruation, seminal emissions, and leprosy).

This choice of location is significant when one considers that the Mishnah devotes an entire order to women (Nashim) and the authors of the Mishnah might just as easily have chosen to locate the material on niddah under this topic heading. Their choice to place it in the Purities section indicates their wish to emphasize menstruation, in this instance, as a ritual issue. On the other hand, the fact that we are here examining women in the ritual realm may explain the difference in conclusions reached in this study and in J. Romney-Wegner’s Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the
Mishnah, where she deals with women primarily in the social frame, that is, in the context of Seder Nashim.21

Another literary clue to the agenda of the rabbis is the rhetoric of the tractate itself. Reading like a medical compendium, M. Niddah details every contingency and the variations on those contingencies that might place one in a state of niddah or which might communicate impurity through contact with a niddah. Following is an example from M. Niddah 9:5:

If three women were sleeping [together] in one bed, and blood was found underneath the middle one, they are all accounted unclean; [if the blood were] under the inner one [next to the wall], the two on the inner side are considered unclean and the outer one is clean; [if the blood be found] below the outer one [farthest from the wall], the two on the outer side are deemed unclean but the inner one is clean. R. Judah said, “This ruling [that if the blood be found under the outer one, the inner one near the wall remains clean] applies only if they passed [into the bed] by way of the foot of the bed, but if all three had passed [into the bed] across it, all of them are considered unclean. If one of them made examination, and found herself clean, she [alone] is clean but the two [others] are deemed unclean. If two examined themselves, and they found they were clean, they are clean but the third one is unclean. If [all] three of them [examined themselves], and they found themselves clean, all of them are unclean.

Two qualities are immediately evident from this passage: an obsessive attention to detail, considering every possible contingency and giving a ruling for that contingency, and the new (in relation to the biblical material) idea of self-examination. These features of M. Niddah are probably not unrelated: information is empowering in the sense that it tells one what one needs to know to make the proper decision. Self-examination completes the picture, and a woman who both examines herself and has the information necessary to make a determination becomes, in effect, the structural equivalent of the priest.

A comparison of this passage with the biblical passages related to niddah is instructive. At no time does the biblical material refer explicitly to the priest conducting an examination in the way that he does in the case of the leper; however, neither does the biblical material refer to self-examination. While one might argue that the rabbis are merely making what is implicit in the biblical text explicit in the Mishnah, the forcefulness with which they accomplish it signifies their agenda: M. Niddah repeatedly refers to self-examination. Further, in the Bible the woman is not permitted to reenter the sanctuary until she brings her sin and burnt offerings to the priest who “makes atonement on her behalf, and she [is] clean” (Lev. 15:30). M. Niddah, like M. Pesakhim, does not specifically discuss the sacrifice itself.

Although M. Niddah deals with other issues than menstrual bleeding, the concept of self-examination has to do only with menstrual blood. It is expressed through a vocabulary that includes the words examination, obser-
vation, experience, and test cloths. There are almost fifty references to self-
examination, four of which are particularly interesting and will be dis-
cussed below. There are almost twenty references to observation; almost
ten references to experience; more than ten references to test cloths, and at
least ten references to a related idea, “assigning cause.”

The cumulative effect of the explicit addition of the concept of self-
examination and the vocabulary associated with it is to make the woman
the structural equivalent of the priest, making her the judge of whether or
not she is niddah. And if one were inclined to doubt this interpretation, one
would have only to look at M. Niddah 8:2, in which a woman is granted
wide discretionary powers in terms of determining the source of a blood-
stain—“assigning cause.”

Finally, there are four references to examination stated in the passive
voice (nīvdakin), which is to say that the female must be examined, but sig-
nificantly, this particular pericope deals with minors. In summary, in the
context of the Mishnah, the mature woman is capable of self-examination
and is responsible for her own determinations of status in the ritual cosmos
in relation to menstruation.

Women in the Ritual Cosmos of the Mishnah

In the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, the near destruction of
the Jewish people, and the chaos that followed this first-century disaster,
the Israelite woman (equally with the Israelite male) takes on the respon-
sibilities of the priest, albeit in those parts of the ritual cosmos that are per-
tinent to her self-definition as a female.

According to the Mishnah (M. Shab. 2:6), women have three primary
obligations: niddah (the laws of menstrual separation), challab (the laws of
removal of a portion of dough before baking for the purpose of burning it),
and badlakat ba-nerot (lighting the Sabbath candles). Thus, women are re-
sponsible for three categories of ritual, all formerly associated with the
priest: (1) the woman is the arbiter of her own menstrual separation, the set
of rituals that defines not only her womanhood but her ritual status; (2) she
carries out the role of the priest as the one who offers the sacrifice when
she removes a portion of the challah and burns it; and (3) just as the priests
were responsible for lighting the Temple menorah to mark the separation
of day and night, women mark the separation of the Sabbath from the rest
of the week by lighting candles.

The woman is fully engaged in four primary areas of ritual activity we
have discussed: blood, body, food, and time. Undoubtedly, one might
argue, as many feminists have, that these rituals “relegate” women to the
home, the result of the androcentric attitude of the rabbis. However, this
interpretation makes another error of contextualization, that is, attributing our own cultural biases to other cultures. For the rabbis the home, more than the synagogue, replaced the Temple, and here we have the one remaining ritual element. The home is the ritual space. Within that ritual space the woman in the world of the Mishnah becomes, like the male Israelite, the structural equivalent of the priest. She acts to create ritual time and participates in the self-definition of ritual activity through ritual strategies connected to food, blood, time, and her own body.

In the pages of the Mishnah a small group of human beings courageously took on the task of leading a recovery from a monumental national catastrophe. Faced with overwhelming and antagonistic forces, the early rabbis, consciously I believe, developed ritual strategies that guided their people away from feelings of impotence toward self-empowerment for the purpose of worshipping God. The rabbis offered a path that restored human and Jewish dignity. The path to ritual restoration incorporated women along with men as successors to the priests.

Conclusion

Literary and structural evidence presented in this study suggests that the priests and the rabbis were conscious and deliberate in developing ritual texts. Geller proposes that the priests were delicately promoting a specific ideology to compete with the more popular Deuteronomistic ideology. We have proposed here that the early rabbis were concerned, in the aftermath of the Temple destruction, to offer a new path to communication with God, a quietly revolutionary system to replace what was lost. We can judge the ultimate success of their labors and the truth of our assumption that ritual represents an interaction of individual and culture by the fact that one of the most tenacious ritual practices among Orthodox Jewish women is niddah. Studies show that many who practice it view it as a positive source of identity. I set out to demonstrate that contextualization can result in important differences in interpretation. Examining niddah in the context of priestly meanings on blood and in the ritual context of the Mishnah yields a deeply positive understanding of this set of ritual practices. In biblical religion and in Mishnaic Judaism, the woman as well as the man comes to represent basic elements in the project of defining the human being in relation to transcendence. In Leviticus the female Israelite, equally with the male Israelite, is a symbolic representation of the idea that creation is a system of differences. In the Mishnah, women are included in a brave social and religious reconstruction following the catastrophic destruction of the Temple and the total life system it defined in the year 70 of the Common Era.
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NOTES

2. “The verdict against Eve consisted of ten curses, the effect of which is noticeable to this day in the physical, spiritual and social state of woman” (Erubin 100b). Ginsberg (1968) reports that menstruation is regarded in “all the sources as a penalty for Eve’s sin, and since sexual desire is considered as the result of eating the forbidden fruit, the Gnostics, as well as the Kabbalists, maintain that menstruation came to Eve with the enjoyment of the fruit.”
4. Ibid., 99.
10. Ibid., 116.
12. J. Milgrom hypothesizes two separate texts in Leviticus—the first, “P,” part of the Priestly Document (1–16) and the second, “H,” part of the Holiness Code (17–27). Milgrom hypothesizes that H is chronologically later and the redactor of P (The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1–16, Doubleday, New York, 1991, p. 28). According to Baruch Levine in his commentary on Leviticus (The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1989, pp. xi, xii), torat kohanim, the phrase used to describe the book of Leviticus, has two dimensions of meaning: “instructions for the priests” and “instructions by the priests.” Instructions for the priests are focused in chapters 1–16 and are concerned with purity. Instructions by the priests for the entire Israelite nation are focused in chapters 18–27 and are concerned with holiness.
13. Ibid., 47. Here Milgrom states: “Because the quintessential source of holiness resides with God, Israel is enjoined to control the occurrence of impurity lest it impinge on His realm.”
15. Milgrom, “Introduction to Leviticus,” 46. Like Eilberg-Schwartz, Milgrom parallels men and women but, in the case of the latter, parallels men’s seminal discharge and women’s menstruation, associating both with the life force—and in their flow, with yet a third source of impurity, death. Thus, for Milgrom, impurity is identified with death.

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Yalta’s Ruse
Resistance against Rabbinic Menstrual Authority in Talmudic Literature

Introduction

The impurity of menstruation is one of the areas in which we can witness a significant development and change from biblical to rabbinic law. The priestly section of the biblical Book of Leviticus includes a chapter that associates ritual impurity with different kinds of genital emissions, both male and female. The reference point of such ritual impurity is the tabernacle and, by extension, the Temple in Jerusalem. Thus, a man or a woman in a state of impurity because of the different kinds of genital emissions described in Leviticus 15, is barred from the Temple for a period of time, also specified in that chapter. In an important way the impurity of genital emissions is contingent on the existence of the Temple. At the same time, the so-called Holiness Code in Leviticus (chapters 17–26) twice states the absolute prohibition of sexual intercourse of a married couple while the wife has her menstrual period. It will be important to remember that this prohibition is not contingent on the existence of the Temple.

The rabbinic discussions of menstrual impurity, beginning with Tractate Niddah in the Mishnah as the earliest text of rabbinic Judaism, are based mostly on Leviticus, chapter 15. The rabbis continue the analysis of the various aspects of ritual impurity in spite of the destruction of the Second Temple. In this aspect they remain faithful to the framework set by biblical law despite the change of historical circumstances. At the same time, the rabbis reinterpret the biblical law in significant ways. The current essay will focus on one specific innovation instituted by the rabbis vis-à-vis
biblical law and its consequences for women’s lives in rabbinic cultures. This innovation is the invention of the rabbi as an expert on menstrual blood, as the authority to be consulted by women. In traditional Jewish communities today, women still consult a rabbi as to their menstrual cycles in certain circumstances. The biblical chapter itself simply describes the kinds of genital discharges of a man or a woman. It does not institute the requirement of any kind of inspection by a second party. The implicit assumption is that a person will be able to evaluate his or her own ritual status.

In this essay we will trace the invention of the rabbinic science of women’s blood that institutes the rabbi as an authoritative expert in this new science. The analysis will focus particularly on the aspect of gender: the gendering of authority in rabbinic culture and the displacement of women themselves as authorities over their own bodies. At the same time, I will focus on a short but rich narrative embedded in the rabbinic discussions. This narrative importantly discloses the problem with the rabbis’ claim to menstrual expertise. I read this narrative as a crucial moment of resistance against the implications of this expertise for women’s lives. This moment, I claim, enables us to read the gender politics encoded in the rabbinic discussion.

**Yalta’s Ruse: Take One**

Amid a series of stories about the extraordinary ability of certain rabbis to identify various types of blood and their origins, the Babylonian Talmud in Tractate Niddah records the following brief case story: “Yalta once presented some blood to Rabbah bar bar Hana who informed her that it was impure [i.e., menstrual]. She then took it to Rav Yizhaq the son of Rav Yehudah, who told her that it was pure [i.e., not menstrual]” (bNid 20b).

The heroine of the story is Yalta, one of the few women in the Babylonian Talmud known by name, otherwise recognizable within this literature dominated by male actors through her relationship to famous men, primarily Rav Nachman bar Ya’akov, her husband and one of the more prominent Babylonian rabbis at the beginning of the fourth century c.e. What is remarkable about Yalta’s story in Tractate Niddah and what sets it apart from the numerous others in which women are represented as bringing blood samples to rabbinic experts is the fact that Yalta is not satisfied with the judgment of the first rabbi, who declared the blood in question to be impure, or menstrual. He thus foreclosed the possibility of Yalta’s sexual relations with her husband, based on the biblical prohibition. In other stories in rabbinic literature in which a woman is represented as consulting a rabbi about the status of her blood, the narrative pattern is
most commonly that she shows it to him and he evaluates it as to whether or not it is menstrual blood. According to this typical pattern our story would have ended after the first sentence: Yalta brought the blood before Rabbah bar bar Hana and he declared it impure. Instead, she follows her desire and turns around to consult a second rabbi, Rav Yizhaq, who declares it to be “pure”; by implication this enables her to have sexual intercourse with her husband. This narrative is indeed the only one in the Babylonian Talmud in which a woman is represented as “turning around,” rejecting a rabbi’s authoritative evaluation and as doing something unexpected. The Talmud itself seems to be puzzled by this case as well and develops some interesting arguments to explain it.

To understand the implications of the case story and its discussion in the Talmud, especially the gender dynamics embedded in this moment of talmudic discussion, we must at least briefly trace the background of the practice requiring women to consult rabbis on the nature of their bleeding. How does it happen that women are required to take samples of their blood to be inspected by some male scholars?

**The Rabbinic Science of Menstruation**

Two rabbinic halakhic, or legal, innovations vis-à-vis the biblical text form the background and framework of the rabbinic expertise concerning menstrual blood: the halakhic discussion of what is called the *ketem*, the blood-stain discovered in proximity to a woman, and the distinction of various types or colors of women’s genital blood. Both phenomena are extensively discussed by the rabbis, beginning with Mishnah Niddah. Biblical law, on the other hand, nowhere raises either as a problematic issue. Leviticus, chapter 15, does not make the distinction between different types or colors of women’s genital blood, nor is it concerned about the meaning of a bloodstain found on a shirt. Rather, it defines menstrual bleeding by a simple timeline. According to the imagined timeline, a woman has a fixed menstrual period (Lev. 15:25) that is presumed to occur regularly. If she bleeds during that period, she is considered to have her menstruation and is in a status of ritual impurity for seven days, regardless of how long she bleeds: “When a woman has a discharge, her discharge being blood from her body, she remains in her menstrual impurity seven days” (Lev. 15:19).

Any bleeding beyond this fixed period or any bleeding for several days outside this period constitutes the abnormal impurity of what is called a *zavub*:

“When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her menstrual impurity, or when she has a discharge beyond the time of her menstrual impurity, as long as her impure discharge lasts, her impurity
shall last” (Lev. 15:25). The abnormality is marked by adding a waiting period of seven days without any discharge before the woman can perform purification rituals (Lev. 15:28).

The Mishnah, however, raises questions as to how specifically menstrual blood can be identified. The biblical time line is ignored completely. Instead, the Mishnah and subsequently the talmudic discussions of the Mishnah begin to focus on the blood itself. What colors constitute menstrual blood? How can such colors be identified? What is the possible origin of a bloodstain found on a shirt, on a pillow, or even on a woman’s body? What does the shape of such a stain indicate? The questions are designed to channel the thinking about menstruation into certain directions. On the one hand, the rabbis suggest that not all genital blood is necessarily menstrual. This would seem to make it easier for women. At the same time, it is the very distinction between types of blood that institutes the rabbis as experts on menstrual bleeding. Both potential effects of the rabbinic discussions on women’s lives have to be weighed carefully against each other. Let us briefly look at the two innovations of the new rabbinic “science.”

The Taxonomy of the Colors of Blood

In the Mishnah we read the following passage:

Five [types or colors of] blood are impure in a woman: the red, the black, the [color of] saffron, the [color of] muddy water, and the [color of] diluted wine.

The school of Shammai says: also [the color of] the water of [soaked] fenugreek, and [the color of] the juice of roasted meat.

The school of Hillel declares [the latter] to be pure. Concerning the yellow [color]—Aqavia ben Mahalalel declares it to be impure and the sages declare it to be pure. . . . (mNid 2:6)

The subsequent Mishnah explicates those colorful descriptions:

Which one is the red? Like the blood of a wound.

The black? Like the sediment of ink. If it is deeper than that—it is impure, fainter than that—pure.

And like [the color of] saffron? The brightest part of it.

And like [the color of] muddy water? [Earth] from the valley of Beit Kerem, and inundate it with water.

And like [the color] of diluted wine? Two parts water and one part wine, from the wine of Sharon. (mNid 2:7; tNid 3:11)

On a first reading, this list of colors and their description strikes one as quite bizarre, especially since, in a Western context, menstruation is often
ignored. Where do the creators of the Mishnah derive this list of colors of menstrual blood from? What could it be that drives this taxonomy? If all these different shades of red to black are impure anyway, why even make the effort to distinguish them? And importantly, what is it that would make these fine distinctions between colors of blood believable?

To begin with, from an anthropological perspective this preoccupation with the various colors that women’s genital blood might assume is quite fascinating. In fact, the vast ethnographic literature on menstrual rites and rules in other cultures does not report a similar “knowledge” of different colors of menstrual blood. However, before dismissing this rabbinic menstrual science as some fantastic outgrowth of male nonunderstanding or paranoia about menstrual blood, I think we should make an effort to understand the text and the culture that has been built around it. Mary Douglas’s (1993) recent remarks about anthropological scholarship and its production of meaning also applies the study of rabbinic texts: “We study taboo, symbolism, blessings and curses, oracles and magic come into our purview. Largely our effort is to make sense of what we find. We are not there to pour contempt or to despise. If an anthropologist can only attribute nonsense to a ritual or a text, it is a confession of defeat” (2). Hence, we must assume that the creators of the Mishnah and the talmudic discussions of the Mishnah take this taxonomy quite seriously. We also have to remember that this Mishnaic text continues to “be alive” in contemporary halakhic handbooks on the laws of niddah and is thus read by some as structuring reality and as guiding their vision.

The talmudic discussions themselves note the innovative nature of the distinction of colors of blood and question the biblical basis of such a distinction. In a classic procedure, that need not concern us here, these discussions lend biblical support and authority to the distinction through midrashic hermeneutics.

Beyond the Talmud’s own explanation of the Mishnah we have to uncover other levels of meaning that are only implicit in the distinction between colors of women’s genital blood. Often those levels of meaning that are only implied or hidden within a legal discourse are the most effective. By remaining hidden they are prevented from being rendered debatable and hence from being questioned as to their authoritativeness. Based on this assumption, I suggest two different approaches to uncover such different levels of meaning. The first discloses the implied biblical role model of authority to which the rabbis lay claim and that makes the rabbis’ claim believable in their own cultural terms. The second approach investigates the implied gendering of seeing the colors.

As to the first approach, we find in the Mishnah itself an important intertext. In the same order (“Purities”), which contains the tractate dealing
with the impurity of menstruation, we find a tractate dealing with the impurity of “skin diseases,” or Nega’im. This tractate is based on the biblical laws concerning a disease that has commonly been translated as leprosy (Lev. 13:14). The Mishnaic discussions of skin diseases equally take up a debate on colors. In mNega 1:1 and 1:2 we learn about the four different shades of white of skin lesions in addition to the various reddish variations. The Mishnaic discussions of the colors of skin lesions, however, have a biblical foundation: biblical law inscribes a careful color code of skin diseases (Lev. 13:19, 24, 42, 43, 49). Importantly, the biblical text explicitly requires the afflicted person to be brought to and/or to be shown to the priest for inspection, for it is the priest who supposedly has the expertise to identify the lesions. Indeed, the key word throughout this biblical chapter is “to see” or “to inspect.” The command that “the priest shall inspect the diseased spot” (Lev. 13:3, among others) is repeated again and again. By contrast, Leviticus, chapter 15, the chapter that deals with genital discharges, never requires inspection by the priest, and it most certainly does not provide a color code for the discharges. Since the Mishnaic rulings do not have a biblical base with respect to menstrual impurity, the revolutionary innovation of the rabbis is to rethink menstruation in the terms derived from the biblical laws on skin diseases. The inspection of skin diseases, biblically required, is turned into the palimpsest through which to read the laws concerning menstruation. The analogy is a procedural one: in the case of skin diseases, which are an integral part of the priestly purity and impurity system in the Bible, the priest is installed as the inspector and hence the prime expert. This is made analogous to the case of (irregular) genital bleeding of women, which is also an integral part of the priestly purity and impurity system, biblically as well as throughout rabbinic culture. The rabbis then lay claim to inheriting the authority and expertise of the priest. Just as the priest/rabbi is the biblically prescribed inspector of skin diseases, so he is made by the Mishnah into the inspector of menstrual blood.

This is a powerful redefinition of the laws concerning menstruation, legitimizing the rabbis’ claim to expertise over women’s blood. It is all the more powerful since it is not made explicit and therefore operates on the level of the cultural subconscious. As such, the Mishnaic system does not open itself to the question of why menstruation should be analogous to skin diseases, which biblically it clearly is not. At the same time, the claim to authority gains in believability.

If we turn now to the second approach to the gender dynamics implied in the distinction of colors of blood, we can ask further questions: How were the rabbis supposed to determine the color of menstrual blood? How could, hypothetically, even women themselves determine the exact color of
their menstrual blood? And most important: what are the authority structures inscribed in this taxonomy?

We did observe that what the Mishnaic text primarily does is provide analogies. It describes colors of blood in terms of other objects: the shade of red like that of saffron, of ink sediment, and so on. Both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmudim, in their effort to interpret the Mishnah, provide many further analogies. This interpretive effort in both Talmudim reads from a certain angle like a desperate effort at the proper articulation or cultural translation of menstruation. Let us for a moment conceive of menstrual blood as a language or culture of the body that is, by and large, foreign to the rabbis. We could then read the creators of the talmudic texts as translating and explaining the foreign culture in terms familiar and accessible to them. This process of translation entails the displacement of the “native speakers,” the women who menstruate who are excluded from the production of the text on menstrual regulations. As soon as the translators claim that they understand and know the native culture, they claim legitimacy for speaking in place of the native speakers and actually to represent them more appropriately than they could themselves. In our case, this is precisely what the menstrual taxonomy attempts to institute. The following narrative in the Babylonian Talmud illustrates this point:

Amemar and Mar Zutra and Rav Ashi once sat before a cupper, and when the first cupping-horn was taken off Amemar, he saw it and said to the others: “The red of which we have learnt (in the Mishnah) is a shade like this.” When the second one was taken off from him, he said to them: “This has a different shade.” “One like myself,” observed Rav Ashi, “who does not know the difference between the one and the other must not act as an examiner of blood.” (bNid 20a top)

In the scene with these three rabbis, the narrative shows how the Talmud envisioned learning the blood colors. It is men talking and debating among themselves the meaning of the Mishnaic text on menstrual blood that they study together. This scene resembles, therefore, a rabbinic version of what John Winkler (1990) has called men's coffeehouse talk to characterize much of Greek literature on women. Only the scenario is different: we are witnessing cupper-house talk. Women are absent from the scene of learning, and so is their blood, which, though being the subject of the debate, is present only as text: “the red of which we have learnt (in the Mishnah).” Finally, the women’s blood is even further displaced by men’s blood.

To summarize so far: what the last narrative illustrates is the displacement of women from learning about menstrual blood. Any potential involvement of women in the invention of the new rabbinic science of blood is excluded. The process by which this is achieved is to redefine menstruation in terms that subject it to the biblical model of priestly inspection. The
rabbis who lay claim to inheriting the role of the exclusively male priesthood can then automatically lay claim to authority over women’s blood. Women are disowned of knowledge of their own bleeding since the projected scientists of the science of blood, are, of course, the rabbis.

*The Case of the Stain of Blood (Ketem)*

As mentioned before, the Mishnaic Tractate Niddah also focuses much of its discussions on the phenomenon of the bloodstain, or *ketem*, especially in the later part of the tractate. I argue that this focus on the bloodstain creates an effect similar to the distinction of the colors of blood. The bloodstain is part of the new rabbinic science of blood. Fundamentally, the question posed by the bloodstain is its origin, whether it can be determined that its origin is genital and hence menstrual or something else. The Mishnah discusses various criteria, such as the exact location of the stain in relation to the woman, its shape, and its size. Depending on these and other criteria, the origin of the stain can be reconstructed, at least hypothetically, and on this depends the status of a married couple’s sex life.

Thus, the Mishnah reports the following case:

A case about a woman who came before Rabbi Aqiva:

She said to him: “I saw a blood-stain.”

He said to her: “Perhaps there was a wound in you?”

She said to him: “Yes, but it healed.”

He said to her: “Perhaps it is possible that it tore open and exuded blood.”

She said to him: “Yes,” whereupon Rabbi Aqiva declared her to be in the status of purity. (mNid 8:3)

In this Mishnaic legal case story a woman consults Rabbi Aqiva, one of the giants of the Mishnaic cultural universe. This story for the first time, “stages” the new rabbinic science of women’s blood: a woman goes to a rabbi to consult with him as to the evidence of blood she has found. Reading the story with respect to the effects it creates, it is again irrelevant whether this case is a historical case or not or whether the historical Rabbi Aqiva actually did consult women with respect to their menstruation. We cannot prove whether he did or not. What is extremely relevant, however, is the fact that in the Mishnah, the founding rabbinic text on menstruation, women are represented as consulting the rabbis and the rabbis are already staged as gynecologists, so to speak—as authoritative interpreters of women’s bodies—in contrast to the women, who are staged as the object of the rabbis’ interpretation. This is the only such story in Mishnah Tractate Niddah itself.
The Mishnaic story is remarkable for its length and for its construction of an extended conversation between the rabbinic expert and the woman. We do not learn much about the particular circumstances of the woman; obviously the Mishnah is primarily interested in Rabbi Aqiva’s position and in his reasoning. In contrast to the Yalta story, this narrative represents Rabbi Aqiva as being the one who encourages the woman to attribute the bloodstain to something other than a source of impurity. A wound in her internal organs that produces blood would leave the woman in the status of ritual purity (and would allow her to continue to have marital intimacy with her husband). She seems reluctant at first—“yes, but it healed”—but Rabbi Aqiva pushes her further and finds a way to declare her to be in the status of ritual purity.

The story illustrates how the bloodstain becomes the external, visible, and accessible object under the jurisdiction of the rabbis. The rabbis, equipped with the science that they themselves created, are now the judges; they can tell a woman whether she is menstruating or merely has an internal wound. The rabbi is the one to judge whether to be lenient or stringent. Thus, we can understand the Mishnah’s focus on the colors of women’s genital blood and the bloodstain as external evidence of a woman’s menstruation. My hypothesis is that the rabbis, who had no direct access to the woman’s body itself, focused their attention on the colors of blood and the bloodstain because they could establish control on external evidence more readily and more “objectively” than on the blood flow itself.

The inspection of a bloodstain or blood on a testing rag by a rabbinic expert is a way to objectify menstrual bleeding. The emphasis on visual identification of blood—rather than, for instance, an identification by the woman’s sensation or pain—is a symptom of this tendency. Further, it allows for the construction of authority structures that were transformed into social reality until the modern period. What the talmudic texts attempt to project is a process of epistemologically separating menstrual blood from women. Thus, the blood is turned into an object that men, or rabbis, can appropriate as subject to their expertise; they can talk about it, evaluate it, and classify it. Women are pushed into the role of advisees only.

However, the following ambiguity in the Mishnaic discussions of the bloodstain must be considered. On the one hand, the Mishnah allows a woman to attribute a bloodstain to any number of origins that she can reasonably produce: “she can attribute [the bloodstain] to any origin that she can attribute it to” (mNid 8:2, tNid 6:17, tNid 7:4). Suggested origins are, for instance, lice or the blood of animals after she has visited the butcher. On the other hand, it is the rabbis who define the size and the shape of the stain, depending on which it may be attributed to a louse or, alternatively, to a woman’s uterus. Ultimately, the woman is always expected to consult
with the legal expert. So the legal case stories, such as the one involving Rabbi Aqiva, as well as others in the Talmud, all envision the woman coming before a rabbi. In these scenarios she merely finds the bloodstain and presents the case to the authority, who decides for her. However, at the same time, the Mishnah implies that the woman herself can make an informed decision; the woman is allowed to attribute a stain to whatever she can. The implication of this suggestion is that a woman would obviously need some expertise and learning of rabbinic categories to form her own judgment. Clearly, such an expertise might be quite limited, but it could also imply the requirement of some knowledge of the halakhic discussions of the rabbis.

That this ambiguity is not merely a rhetorical one, but does indeed touch on the gendered authority structures that are contested within the rabbinic discussions of menstrual regulations, will become obvious immediately, as we return to Yalta’s story.

**Yalta’s Ruse: Take Two**

Let us once more cite the story of Yalta, now with the brief talmudic discussion appended to it. In the anonymous voice of the editors of the Talmud, the discussion takes the form of question and answer, designed to highlight a certain aspect of the story:

[Case-Story:] Yalta once presented some blood to Rabbah bar bar Hana who informed her that it was impure [i.e., menstrual]. She then took it to Rav Yizhaq the son of Rav Yehudah who told her that it was pure [i.e., not menstrual].

[Talmudic Discussion:] But how could he act in this manner, seeing that it was taught [in an earlier tradition]: “If a sage declared anything impure his colleague may not declare it pure; if he forbade anything his colleague may not permit it”? At first he [Rav Yizhaq] informed her that it was indeed impure, but when she told him that “on every other occasion he [Rabbah bar bar Hana] had declared for me such blood as pure, and only on this occasion he had a pain in his eye,” he [Rav Yizhaq] gave her his ruling that it was pure. (bNid 20b)

Yalta’s story appears in the Talmud shortly after the scene at the cupper’s house, at a point in the discussion when the women have been entirely displaced from the knowledge of menstrual blood. From one perspective the scene at the cupper’s house sets the stage for the introduction of Yalta’s story. The three rabbis at the cupper’s house are represented as not gaining absolute control of the knowledge of women’s blood. Rather, their learning remains tainted by insecurity. After this scene women reenter the talmudic discussions through the story of Yalta.
The question raised by the extended talmudic discussion of the Yalta narrative is how much authority a woman can be admitted to hold in blood matters. This is an important moment in the talmudic construction of the rabbis’ expertise on women’s blood. In fact, this is one of the moments in the talmudic discussions where the rabbis reflect on the gender dynamics effected by their claim to authority. I would like to analyze this moment carefully, through a close reading of the talmudic argument, since it lies at the heart of the emergence of the rabbinic science of women’s blood. Toward this goal, I suggest, therefore, that we read the narrative and its discussion as a symptom of the difficulty with creating male expertise of women’s blood and thus male authority over women’s bodies. We can detect in the talmudic discussion of Yalta’s story a phenomenon that the biblical scholar Mieke Bal (1987) has called a “lapsus” in a text: “We can speak of a lapsus whenever a word is attributed to a woman that is ‘normally’ exclusively attributed to a man” (83). In the case of Yalta, we will see that a woman is represented as making an extended argument that is normally attributed to a man. Hence, the lapsus indicates the gender trouble of the rabbinic science of blood.

Our second take on Yalta’s ruse thus focuses on the talmudic discussion of the story, which is where the lapsus occurs. We have already observed that the case story itself is unusual among all the other case stories in the Talmud of women presenting blood to a rabbinic expert. Yalta is not only one of the few women named, but she is the only one to turn around and consult another rabbi. The Talmud is also puzzled by this story and the reversed evaluation of Yalta’s blood. As a first step the Talmud points out a contradiction between this case and the firmly entrenched talmudic principle that a rabbi cannot contradict the previous evaluation of another rabbi in matters of impurity.

To solve this contradiction the Talmud suggests that it was because of a specific argument presented by Yalta that the second rabbi, Rav Yizhaq, reversed the original opinion, which he himself had at first agreed with: “At first he informed her that it was indeed impure”; hence, the lapsus. That is, the Talmud attributes to Yalta an argument that is strong enough not only to convince Rav Yizhaq but also to justify going against a widely quoted, firmly entrenched talmudic principle: “[S]he told him that on every other occasion Rabbah bar bar Hana had declared such blood as pure, and only on this occasion he had a pain in his eye.” At first view, Yalta seems to fabricate, somewhat arbitrarily, the story of Rabbah bar bar Hana’s ailment, in which case Yalta would function somewhat like a trickster figure who challenges authority from within the system.

However, on further thinking, this argument actually appears as a strong and powerful halakhic argument that the Talmud attributes to...
Yalta. This would then present the lapsus because a halakhic argument is attributed to a woman that in the talmudic text would “normally” only be made by a man. Yalta’s argument, I would suggest, presents an allusion to halakhic principles learned in the different context of the Mishnaic discussions of the impurity of skin lesions (nega’im). We have already encountered these discussions above as a possible palimpsest superimposed on the discussions of menstruation. Accordingly, we learn in the Mishnaic Tractate Nega’im that “a priest who is blind in one eye or the light of whose eyes is dim may not inspect leprous lesions for it is written ‘as far as appears to the eyes of the priest’ (Lev. 13:12)” (mNeg 2:3). With this allusion the Talmud presents Yalta herself as making the halakhic argument that the inspection of women’s blood is modeled on the inspection of leprous lesions. Just as in the context of inspection of leprous lesions, so equally in the context of the inspection of women’s blood: the inspecting rabbi should have perfect eyesight which, according to Yalta, Rabbah bar bar Hana did not have on the occasion of this case story. The Talmud imagines Yalta not merely to be familiar with Mishnaic halakhah (i.e., she is imagined not merely as replicating rabbinic knowledge), she is presented as making a creative halakhic argument, which is strong enough to convince Rav Yizhaq. In the talmudic context this presents a male form of learning and communication now attributed to a woman. Thus, we see several dynamics at work in the narrative of Yalta and its discussion in the Talmud that identify the story as a symptom of Mieke Bal’s (1987) principle that “[‘dominance’ is, although present . . . , not unproblematically established]” (3). First, the Talmud deploys one of the few named women characters, hence rendering her recognizable and memorable. Second, in the discussion of the story, the Talmud takes the unusual step of portraying Yalta as making a halakhic argument, as encroaching on what is normally the rabbis’ territory. Taken together, these aspects reveal the efforts the Talmud makes to justify the displacement of women from rabbinic learning, specifically in an area that involves them directly. Yalta’s story brushes against this dominant cultural effort. Nonetheless, over the centuries the knowledge of menstruation and the laws related to it has remained one of the more central areas of rabbinic expertise. Long commentaries on the talmudic tractate were composed for the male audience of the yeshivot and the continuous training of rabbinic experts. Women have remained in the role of advisees.

Let us turn one more time to the talmudic discussion of Yalta’s story and attempt to trace the strategies of argument that enable this cultural development. We have to keep in mind that talmudic discussion in general is characterized by dialectic structuring. An argumentation explores different positions, which often remain unreconciled with each other. Thus,
the Talmud itself often offers many more cultural possibilities than later halakhic readings of the Talmud suggest. The very heterogeneity of the talmudic argumentation allows us to explore different cultural possibilities and different gender relations from those that post-talmudic rabbinic culture promoted. At the same time, we have to remain aware of which possibilities the talmudic discussions allow and which they try to ignore or even suppress.

**Containing the Power of the Ruse**

The subsequent argumentation in the Talmud is an interesting exercise in containing the force of Yalta’s ruse. It introduces the question of women’s believability and asks whether Yalta can indeed be believed in such a situation. Again, in talmudic terms the question of believability is not necessarily out of the ordinary. But it is a crucial strategy to be selected exactly at this point. By framing the discussion of Yalta’s case in this manner the Talmud clouds up the force of Yalta’s argument, thus countering the encroachment of the a-normal (a woman who makes a halakhic argument) into the normal. Yalta and, along with her, all women are once again pushed into the position of the “other,” the “them”—women that can and must be evaluated by “us” (the rabbis), especially when “they” question “us.” But now, women are strictly distinguished from the “us” of the rabbis, a distinction that the discussion of Yalta’s story so far questioned. With the introduction of the question of trustworthiness, women are once again marked as clearly being “the others”:

But is she reliable?

Yes, since has it not indeed been taught [in an earlier tradition]: [Case A] A woman is believed when she says [to the rabbinic expert she consults]: “I saw a kind of blood like this one but I have lost it.” (bNid 20b)

The Talmud sets out to argue that Yalta can indeed be believed or that she is reliable. In what respect? This is left open in the question, but from the citation of the earlier tradition it appears that the question is about another, unexpected aspect of the case—that is, the question of whether Yalta can be relied on when she compares her current blood sample, which she presents to the rabbis, with former blood samples on “every other occasion.” The earlier tradition is cited to affirm Yalta’s reliability in her comparison of different samples of her own blood. Thus, the question about Yalta’s reliability is an amazing strategy of refocusing the force of the story. The focus is now on the question of whether she sees correctly, not whether she made a good argument. At the same time, the implied assumption is
that the rabbinic experts can see and are in full control of the science of blood, but women themselves may not be able to see.

A question was raised: [Case B] (What is the rule concerning the case when a woman says) A kind of blood like this has been declared pure by such and such a sage? Come and hear: A woman is believed when she says “I saw a kind of blood like this one but I have lost it.”

The Talmud continues and raises the question about another abstract case scenario in which a woman claims that the blood in front of her is like the one that has been declared nonmenstrual by a different rabbi. In this abstract case the woman would indeed almost be fulfilling the function of the rabbinic expert eye. It is she who judges the blood in question.16 Such an assessment would be completely based on her own authority, even where she has to bolster that authority by her reference to a different rabbinic authority, who has declared such blood to be pure. Still, in this case she no longer consults another—male—authority about the blood in question but in fact forms her own opinion about it, and she is also the one who pronounces it to be pure. Rashi, the medieval classic commentator on the Talmud, suggests, in fact, that the scenario of this latest case has to be imagined as one between two women: one woman comes to her woman friend to ask her about her blood. The first declares it to be nonmenstrual. Such a scenario would, however, undermine the Talmud’s attempt to gender as male the rabbis’ expertise and authority on menstrual blood. If she were believed in such a case, the rabbi’s expert eye would be displaced. Still, the evaluating woman of this case is represented as referring to a previous rabbi’s evaluation of another, similar type of blood, but it is she who is making an independent judgment on blood that a friend brings her.

As a preliminary answer the Talmud suggests that the two abstract cases are analogous and that, therefore, a woman is considered to be reliable in her own take on the science of blood. However, the argument continues: “But is not this case [Case B] different, since there [Case A] the blood is not in front of her?”

The Talmud rejects the suggested analogy of the cases based on the following argument: In Case A the blood in question is absent. The woman evaluates the similarity of two types of blood herself and brings a different sample to the rabbinic expert. The blood sample in question no longer exists, in which case the woman’s vision is relied on. The rabbinic expert has the last word. In Case B, however, the blood in question is in existence and in front of the evaluating woman, who has a role similar to the rabbinic expert. Rashi comments on this rejection of the analogy between the two cases in a telling manner, by spelling out the difference between the two
cases: “but in this case [Case B], where the blood is in front of us, we will look at it” (Rashi ad loc.). The “we” in this case, I would argue, is to be understood as an exclusivist “we,” a self-consciously gendered “we.” That is, “we, the (male) scholars” do not have to let the woman make a judgment, since the blood in question is present and “we” can judge it ourselves.

“Come and hear the case of Yalta.” Now the whole case of Yalta from above is cited, and then the Talmud continues: “[From Yalta’s case and Rav Yizhaq’s acceptance of her argument] it follows that she is believed!”

However, against such an objection the other position in the classic dialectic argumentation of the Talmud insists that, nonetheless, the evaluating woman (in Case B) is to be believed. This time it bases the assertion on the claim that this case is analogous to Yalta’s case. As Rav Yizhaq did indeed believe Yalta, so the woman who pronounces a blood sample to be pure can be considered to be reliable. The Talmud’s question behind these cases is, ultimately, about how much autonomy a woman can be granted in assessing her own and perhaps even another woman’s blood and therefore their ability to have intimate relations with their husbands. Discussing this question and refocusing Yalta’s story in this manner is the Talmud’s strategy to contain the moment of crisis in the invention of the rabbinic science. At the same time, the dialectic flow of the talmudic discussion reaches a point where a scenario of women rendering evaluations and assessments of women’s blood remains a possibility. In such a case women are imagined as (rabbinic) experts of women’s blood. The extent of women’s imagined expertise may remain limited. But at least for a moment in the talmudic argumentation, women are imagined as participants in rabbinic learning.

Finally, however, the Talmud concludes the discussion with the following statement: “Rav Yizhaq ben Yehudah [actually] relied on his own traditions” (bNid 20b).

The final statement of this Talmud is that Rav Yizhaq, whose secondary opinion Yalta seeks, really had his own traditions and reasons for reversing his colleague’s assessment. This claim throws out altogether the Talmud’s initial suggestion of Yalta’s possible argument to persuade Rav Yizhaq. Thus, this concluding claim renders the whole preceding argumentation, including the various case scenarios, superfluous. Now Rav Yizhaq was not really convinced by any claim of Yalta’s at all but had his own reasons to declare her blood to be pure, over and against the previous rabbinic evaluation by Rabbah bar bar Hana. However, it seems that even though this reading of Rav Yizhaq’s motivation has the final say in the talmudic discussion, it nonetheless appears almost like an afterthought and a pretty weak one at that. If we were to dramatize the talmudic discussion, the anonymous editorial voice that grants women some participatory role in the new
rabbinic science of blood, to whatever limited degree that may be, has clearly dominated the discussion. The conclusion of the discussion leaves us convinced that the much more plausible explanation of Yalta’s story is that Rabbi Yitzhaq simply believed her argument.

**Conclusion**

What the episode of Yalta suggests is, first of all, that the question of the (male) rabbis’ control over women’s menstrual blood was indeed a “problem” in the cultural conscience of those who told the story of Yalta and those who subsequently integrated it into the talmudic structure. Even where we cannot prove, for lack of other historical data, that women resisted this kind of rabbinic control, the text itself nonetheless shows that it has to negotiate this tension. Furthermore, the Talmud plays with the considerable differences of opinion concerning women’s roles in the new rabbinic science of women’s blood. One voice actively promotes not only women’s trustworthiness in menstrual matters but women’s (limited) autonomy of judgment, even on other women’s blood. The other voice questions such a position. In the end, neither cancels out the other.

It is our task as readers of the rabbinic texts to carefully analyze this difference, preserved and promoted in the texts, in terms of the various gender-political options. None of the options considered suggests total autonomy for women in assessing blood when required. Even the position in the dialectic that is most open to the concept posits a woman’s basic reliance on some rabbinic expert’s prior judgment. At the very least, this talmudic discussion brings to the fore the struggle that is involved in the creation of the new rabbinic science. The rabbis will historically become experts on menstrual blood. However, the story of Yalta leaves a trace of how problematic establishing structures of displacement and dominance may be.

We can read Yalta in many ways, but basically there seem to be two options. We can read her as a protofeminist hero of protest, whose lonely voice somehow made it into the canon of rabbinic literature. However, a reading that discusses Yalta merely as the token woman of rabbinic culture perhaps does not exhaust the full potential of this narrative. Thus, we can also read her story as an index of a more systemic problem in the rabbinic science of women’s blood. Both readings have advantages: In the first case we highlight a woman figure, one of the few in talmudic literature; in the second case we make the story much more central to the discourse as a whole, as a moment of disturbance or rupture in the androcentric fabric of niddah. Both readings also have disadvantages: In the first case the Yalta story would be marginalized as merely the story of a token woman; in the
second case the one named woman character we find as a model of women’s resistance is dissolved into an abstract element of discourse, however powerful that may be. In this essay I have pursued the second strategy, reading Yalta’s story as a particular focal point in which the underlying contestation of rabbinic gender politics emerges to the textual surface. Hence, it provides us with a narrative concentration of tensions that is fundamental to the cultural universe of the Talmud. This has allowed me to pose the question of who has the power to see the rabbinic science of blood in a more systemic way. At the same time, it is a character such as Yalta’s that allows women’s desires to slip back into the rabbinic text.

Notes

2. The name is derived from either the Aramaic word for “mountain-goat” or the Aramaic word for “doe” (Kohut, Arukh Ha-Shalem, 4:134).
3. According to the earliest chronology of Babylonian rabbis available to us, he would have died around 320 C.E. See Stemberger and Strack (1991, 54).
4. It is important to emphasize the innovative nature of these items. In his extensive work on the rabbinic purity and impurity system, Jacob Neusner (1978) has pointed out that the Mishnaic Order of Purities relies more heavily on biblical law than other sections of the Mishnah. Tractate Niddah in particular, according to Neusner, does not present any innovations. (For this argument, see Neusner, 135–78). However, I argue that the observation that “the Written Torah’s system of uncleanness and cleanness is augmented and enriched by the Oral Torah [of the rabbis], not revised or overturned” (148) presents only one limited aspect of this tractate. The Mishnah’s halakhic developments vis-à-vis the biblical texts are far more relevant than Neusner would have us believe, particularly for an analysis of the gender politics of rabbinic literature.
5. In fact, the Hebrew term for bloodstain, ketem, comes to prominence only in the postbiblical Hebrew of the Mishnah. The one exception in the Bible is Jer. 2:22: “Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, says the Lord God.” Here the prophet uses the term metaphorically. Interestingly, the two kinds of lye in this verse, extremely rare terms in biblical Hebrew, are later prescribed in the Mishnah as washing agents by which a bloodstain may be distinguished from mere color (mNid 9:6, tNid 8:10).
6. For the biblical texts I am using Jacob Milgrom’s translation (1991, 903).
7. This term is difficult to translate. In terms of biblical law the most appropriate way to render this term into English seems to me to be “a woman who has a discharge not during her regular cycle” (Cohen 1991, 277) and not gonorrhea.
8. This point has been emphasized by Judith Hauptman in her recent book Reading the Rabbis: A Woman’s Voice (1998). She emphasizes the rabbis’ effort to declare women not to be menstruous even in a situation when they obviously seem to have their menstruation: “A remarkable feature of tractate Niddah is the attempt to minimize the number of cases in which the dry blood stain a woman sees . . . renders her impure” (158).
9. See also mEduyot, 5:6, and Sifra Metzora, 4:4, 78a.
10. See, however, the Samaritan halakhah, which is also based on a reading of the biblical text. According to Boid (1989) in the Samaritan halakhah “blood itself, as opposed to a discoloration of the vaginal fluid, is recognized as being pure red, black-red, or yellowish” (199f). The Samaritan texts that Boid discusses stem from the tenth to the nineteenth century. The colors of genital blood in these texts are apparently the same as the ones recognized by the Karaites. A point of discussion, however, would be how far the Samaritan and Karaite discourse can really be considered as separate from rabbinic discourse or whether, in fact, their texts could be considered a part of the same discourse of biblical hermeneutics. Thus, Boid claims that “the Samaritan, Karaite and Rabbanite [sic] systems have more points of agreement than disagreement, and are three variations of one system” (17).

11. See, for instance, the popular handbook Halachos of Niddah by Rabbi Shimon D. Eider (1981) who notes with reference to our Mishnah and subsequent halakhic source: “What color discharges and stains render a woman a Niddah? If a woman discovers a red or black discharge or stain, regardless of how light or dark a hue or shade [unless attributed to other causes], she is considered a niddah. If a woman discovers white, blue, green, or pale yellow discharges or stains she is not considered a niddah” (8–9).

12. See, for instance, bNid 9a and yNid 2:6, 50a. The concern of such hermeneutics is to justify preexisting rabbinic law by providing a scriptural basis of such law. This concern, which is tantamount to the talmudic discussions, is only of secondary importance to the analysis pursued in this essay.

13. What the biblical text in Leviticus, chapter 13, discusses as zara'at is not necessarily leprosy, as it is often translated, but some kind of skin disease that becomes a source of impurity. Rabbinic rules pertaining to this kind of impurity are discussed in the Mishnaic tractate entitled Nega'im, which does not have a gemara, or talmudic discussion.

14. I am grateful to Professor Martin Jaffee for directing my attention to the discussion of colors in Mishnah Nega'im.

15. The emphasis on the visual will play a role in our understanding of the story of Yalta as well as in our analysis of the gender dynamics of the inspection of menstrual blood as a whole.

16. For example, red like the blood of a slaughtered ox at the first stroke of the knife or like the blood of a live bird, of a head louse, of the little finger, or of blood-letting (bNid 19b, 20a); or in the Yerushalmi, like the blood of a goat. Also, black like a raven, like ink, like certain types of garment; or in the Yerushalmi, like blood of fish (yNid 2:6, 49d/50a).


18. Literally, “skillful person” or “artisan” but often used to designate the bloodletter and sometimes the circumciser. On the role of the bloodletter in rabbinic culture, see Preuss (1978, 33ff).

19. The Palestinian Talmud reports an incident in which Rabbi Abbahu brought to the study session of Rabbi Eleazar various sorts of blood contained in bloodletters' vessels, which Rabbi Eleazar, however, invalidated since “the color has already dimmed” (yNid 2:7, 50b).

20. This phenomenon is structurally paralleled in the development of Greco-Roman gynecological literature, which I discuss in chapter 4 of my forthcoming book, Menstrual Purity. See also Ann Hanson (1991, 73–111), Lesley Dean-Jones (1991, 111–38), and Aline Rousselle (1988).
Within the larger context of rabbinic thinking about impurity, the blood-stain (ketem) is not necessarily an unusual phenomenon. The Mishnah often discusses cases of doubt and how to evaluate the ritual status of impurity in such cases. The doubtful situation that such cases, including the bloodstain, raises are discussed in detail in my dissertation “Women’s Bodies, Women’s Blood: The Politics of Gender in Rabbinic Literature” (Berkeley, Calif.: Graduate Theological Union, 1995).

The narrative does not end here: the Mishnah adds an illuminating conversation between Rabbi Akiva and his students. But this discussion evolved around halakhic principles that would lead us too far away from the discussion at hand.

The Tosefta and subsequently the Babylonian Talmud list a number of case stories in which a woman is represented as coming before a rabbi to consult with him. It is always the woman who comes before the rabbi. One may argue that this is not so surprising, since in rabbinic literature rabbis are constructed as experts on almost anything. Because there is virtually no representation of a woman sage among the rabbis, it would seem only logical that women are represented as advisees only, even in cases of menstruation. However, it is important to remember that rabbinic self-fashioning is somewhat more drastic in its gender dynamics where women’s bodies are involved.

The length of the conversation is unusual in that it repeatedly grants the woman the position of speaker. Other case stories (e.g., in the Tosefta) often are structured much more simply: something happens to an anonymous woman, who normally does not speak, and the rabbi is represented as pronouncing his ruling. See, for instance, tNid 4:3, 4:4, 4:6.

Cf. Judith Hauptman’s (1998) reading of this story in her recent book. Her reading focuses on Rabbi Akiva’s leniency and makes a case for his intentionally ruling with leniency. She writes: “This set of mishnahs is amazingly self-critical. The rabbis are fully aware of their knowing and intentional avoidance of declaring a woman to be ritually impure. R. Akiva goes so far as to place words in a woman’s mouth about the origin of a spot in order to dodge the most likely explanation that the blood came from the uterus. . . . For R. Akiva, this meant that any stain that could possibly be explained as anything other than uterine blood should be explained in that way” (154). Her reading is convincing, especially since she provides a parallel from a discussion in the Mishnaic tractate on the ritual impurity of male seminal discharges, Tractate Zavim 2:2. I take a somewhat different approach by focusing on the position of the woman.

There seem to me to be two ways to read this reluctance: She might be particularly meticulous in her observance of menstrual impurity, or she did not want to be declared to be in the status of purity. In other words, did she want to be declared a niddah, perhaps to avoid marital sexual duties?

This point is argued more extensively in chapter 5 of my forthcoming book, Menstrual Purity.

At the end of a long historical and cultural development based on these texts we thus find in contemporary handbooks on the laws of niddah the repeated request to consult a rabbi in all cases of doubt: “If a woman discovers . . . questionable colors [of blood], a Rav must be consulted and the cloth or garment containing this stain must be shown to the Rav for his determination. Various factors may possibly affect this determination. Where applicable, these should be mentioned to the Rav” (Eider 1981, 12).

See, for instance, bNid 58a: “Concerning a case in which a woman found
blood on the fabric (which she was weaving). When she came before Rabbi Yannai he told her to go and repeat (what she was doing, to see whether it would happen again).”

30. Such an earlier tradition is called a baraita or an “outside” tradition (i.e., a legal tradition outside the Mishnah). Often the Talmud quotes such a tradition to point out a contradiction between legal traditions that requires a reconciliation. For an excellent introduction to talmudic literary genres and specifically to the function of a baraita, see Stemberger and Strack (1991, 158–60).

31. Interestingly, it does not question Yalta’s behavior. It is only a medieval commentary, the Tosafot (bNid 20b, ad loc.), that raises this point by suggesting that “one could raise an objection in the case of Yalta: how could she have acted this way? Don’t we say in the first chapter of Tractate Avodah Zarah (bA.Z. 7a) that if one consults a scholar for a decision on an issue in a ritual case and he declares it impure, one should not consult another scholar to have it declared pure?” However, the Tosafot maintains that to this objection “one has to answer that the onus does not lay upon the person who inquires, but on the scholar, whereas the inquirer can ask as much as he [sic] wants to. For because of this they [the scholars] will be thorough in the matter to be examined, since sometimes the first [opinion] errs, and thus the mistake will come to light.”

32. This principle is introduced in the form of a baraita (see n. 30), which is cited repeatedly in the Babylonian Talmud (e.g., bHullin 44b, bBer 63b). The basis for this baraita can be found in tEduyot 1:5, which is cited also in bA.Z. 7a, as well as in yShab 19:1, 16d. Rachel Adler (1993) has claimed that the point of the baraita is to secure a solidarity among the judges that would protect them from critique: “Yalta exposes the hidden relativity of the law and the hidden fallibility of its interpreters. The purportedly divine Torah must be translated into human authority. The baraita seeks to protect this authority and its appearance of objectivity through a policy of judicial solidarity” (54). However, the principle of halakhic decision making as such is exactly in dispute. The Talmud’s immediate problem is how this principle “works” in the Yalta narrative.

33. This is approximately Rachel Adler’s (1993) angle on Yalta in her short essay on the “feminist folktale of justice.” In this essay she goes so far as to call Yalta a “legal guerilla” (52).

34. Compare the halakhic midrash on Leviticus, Sifra Tazria 4:4, 95b, which is a third-century c.e. text but later than the Mishnah and actually cites this Mishnah. The biblical verse rules: “And if the leprous disease (zaraʿat) breaks out abroad in the skin, and the zaraʿat covers all the skin of him that has the disease from his head to his foot, as far as appears to the eyes of the priest, then the priest shall consider” how to evaluate the person (Lev. 13:12–13). The midrash in Sifra, which leans on the Mishnah, suggests that the biblical verse uses specifically the plural formulation—“as far as appears to the eyes of the priest”—to indicate that the priest must have full sight in both eyes and no less.

35. The printed edition of the Talmud makes no sense grammatically, because it asks the question in the masculine plural: “But are they [masc.] believable?” There is no referent for this pronoun. However, most manuscripts have either the singular feminine participle or an abbreviation that leaves out the suffix.

36. I do not believe that the Talmud’s assumption is that the woman would necessarily lie in such a case. Nonetheless, the issue seems to me to be one of control.

37. Rashi’s commentary is based on a version of the text that reads “(that case is different) because the blood is not in front of us,” whereas our text edition reads
“not in front of him.” Some manuscripts, such as Var. Ebr. 111 and 127, read “in front of us,” whereas Var. Ebr. 113 and Munich MS. read “in front of him.” It seems to me that an “us” against the woman would have a much greater rhetorical force of exclusion than a singular “him” over and against the woman.

38. Another halakhic aspect that plays a role here is the problem of biased witnesses (i.e., concerning matters pertaining to themselves or to their relatives). The suspicion on which the hypothetical cases in our discussion are predicated is that most likely the woman is driven by desire when she has her blood assessed, since her real question is whether she can engage in sexual intercourse with her husband. She might, therefore, be biased in her judgment. This suspicion is not necessarily based on the rabbis’ perception of women’s essential trustworthiness as a generic gender problem but is a legal problem of biased witnesses raised in all kinds of different contexts in the Talmud. In our context of the inspection of women’s blood the case of the inspection of leprous lesions might again be considered as an intertext, since here the person’s status of purity or impurity is at stake. In mNeg 2:5 we learn: “A person may inspect any leprous lesions, except his own. Rabbi Meir says: Not even the leprous lesions of his relatives.” We do not learn why this is so, but the most obvious reason would be that, understandably, the person might easily be biased in his or her judgment.

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In the rabbinic purity system, menstrual impurity lapses only if the niddah observes two procedures. First, after her actual menstruation, which typically lasts five days, she must wait seven days, all of which are to be free of spotting. These additional days, which were prescribed by Leviticus, chapter 15, not for the regular menstruant but for the irregular zav and zavah (“oozer”) alone, were called “days of whitening” (libun) or “clean days” (ne-qiyim). Second, after waiting the seven additional days, she must immerse in a miqveh. Leviticus 15 prescribes washing only for males and washing in “living water” only for the zav, the male oozer, not for the zavah, the female oozer, and not for the menstruant; but by rabbinic times menstruants, too, were required to wash for their purification. The zav needed “living water,” that is, a spring, but a niddah could use even still water as long as it had collected naturally and not through human artifice. This was the function of the miqveh (literally, “pool”; plural, miqvaot), an artificially constructed reservoir of natural water. A regular bath consists of “drawn water,” water that has been drawn through pipes, poured out of vessels, and poured into vessels; this water does not effect purification. A miqveh is ingeniously constructed in such a way that its pipes are not pipes and its vessels are not vessels, so that its water is not drawn but gathered; this water effects purification. The miqveh became the classical vehicle by which the niddah regains her purity. For a woman to lose her status as a niddah and to be regarded as pure, that is, sexually available to her husband, she must follow this regimen precisely; if she does not wait the seven additional days and does not immerse in a miqveh, she remains a niddah, even if she is not actually menstruating.
The innumerable rules and laws governing menstrual impurity were formulated by men and canonized in literature written by men. In a few exceptional instances rabbinic texts attribute the origins of a specific practice to women, but these exceptions do not detract from the fact that the voice and gaze of all these texts belong to men. If we ask how much of this regimen was actually observed by women, our sources will fail us, because rabbinic literature is not only overwhelmingly masculine but also overwhelmingly prescriptive. It explains at great length how things ought to be, not how things actually are; it prescribes the ideal and seldom describes the real. Thus, although menstrual impurity and the purification from that impurity were—and for some women still are—essential aspects of the feminine experience of Judaism, our sources are not interested in revealing to us the nature of that experience. The Judaism of the Jewish women of premodern times is hidden from us.

The veil of secrecy is lifted somewhat when our texts polemicize against “incorrect” practices observed by women in connection with their menstrual impurity and purification. The incorrect practices are of many sorts: the women do not properly count the days of their period and the seven clean days; during the days of their period and the additional seven days they separate themselves too much from their households and their household tasks—or they do not separate themselves enough; during the days of their period and the additional seven days they incorrectly abstain from contact with sacred objects, places, and actions—or they do not abstain enough; they do not properly prepare themselves before going to the miqveh; they do not purify themselves properly. While some of these polemics may have become conventional tropes routinely repeated in compendia of the laws of niddah, most of them, I think, constitute bona fide evidence for the actual behavior of actual women. Even if there was a large gap between rabbinic prescription and lived reality, I assume that there was only a small gap between rabbinic polemic and lived reality. When the rabbis tell us that women were not doing what they were supposed to be doing, they give us a brief glimpse at the religious lives (from the rabbinic perspective, the irreligious lives) of Jewish women.

In this essay I shall discuss four medieval polemics against incorrect purification practices. Three of the four polemics concern the use of baths as supplements to or replacements for the miqveh; the fourth concerns the use of sprinkled water instead of the miqveh. I present first the polemic that presumes the smallest deviation from normative rabbinic practice and conclude with the polemic that presumes the greatest deviation. On the basis of these polemics, at the end of the essay I shall attempt to draw some conclusions about the place of purification from menstrual impurity in the religious lives of medieval Jewish women.
The Tosafist

R. Solomon ben Isaac (1040–1105) of Troyes (northern France), known as Rashi (an acronym for Rabbi Shelomo ben Isaac), is one of the most important and best-known rabbinic sages of medieval Europe. He wrote commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud and was active in establishing normative rabbinic law for the growing communities of northern France and the Rhineland (which, for the sake of convenience, I shall group together and simply call Ashkenaz). In the twelfth century his disciples and followers, known as the Tosafists, wrote numerous works on rabbinic law. Among these works are four large books (and several smaller ones) that claim to represent law and custom as observed by the master himself, Rashi. These works are closely related one to the other, and modern scholars have not yet fully succeeded in disentangling one work from the next or attributing them to identifiable authors. All of them seem to have been expanded in the course their transmission, and the manuscripts offer numerous variations in content and arrangement of material. Thus, while these works claim to represent the views of Rashi in the eleventh century, it is likely that in their current form they represent Jewish law and custom of the twelfth century. In their discussions of the laws of niddah, these works report the following (for the sake of convenience I shall refer to the author of this text as the Tosafist):\(^1\)

\ldots since women require immersion, what is the purification that they do in warm water? Know and understand that the women have concocted it on their own. At the time of their impurity they would change their clothing and dress in dirty clothes so as to be repulsive to their husbands, and thus they would not come to intimacy that might lead to sin. And after their period would cease and they would begin their seven days, they would wash and dress in nice clothes, because it was difficult for them to be repulsive to such a degree. And since they saw [in rabbinic texts] reference to “the days of whitening for a woman,” they began to say that these are the days of which the sages spoke [i.e., that this is what the sages meant by the notion of “whitening”], and they began to make these days permanent. They would serve their husbands in those days [of whitening], even though it is prohibited to do so. \ldots And the woman who does not whiten herself [in this manner] and does not wash and remains repulsive to her husband until she immerses—may her strength be firm! [i.e., may she be blessed!]. \ldots

And there is another evil sickness to which they have adhered: since they have become accustomed to that washing which they do in the days of their whitening, they have made it a permanent practice. They have forgotten the principle of washing just before immersion (when the immersion is done properly), and they have all but come to the point of producing absolute mamzerim. That washing [which they do at the beginning of their days of whitening] is distant from their immersion, and all their scales and scabs have dried on to them and block the water of immersion
from reaching their skin, and thus their immersion is not valid. They have sex [on the assumption that their immersion is valid], and it turns out that they are having sex while in the state of niddah, and their mates have [committed the sin of having] sex with menstruants, and all of them are liable to karet, if the sin is willful. Therefore it is the right thing to forget this custom, to reduce it, to make a fence around it. Since they have made it permanent they have begun to say “Not these [waters] purify, but those,” like the ruling decreed by our rabbis in tractate Shabbat...

The target of this polemic is twofold. First, some women are making light of the separation from their husbands during the seven days of “whitening.” According to rabbinic law, the entire time a woman is a niddah (even if she is not actually menstruating), she must avoid any physical contact or intimacy with her husband, lest they be incited to sin. Some women, however, who strictly observed their separation during their menstruation, made light of it during the additional seven days, shedding their repulsive attire and donning attractive raiment. Why? Because they have invented (“concocted,” beda’uba miliban) the custom of washing in warm water (i.e., in a bath) after the cessation of their period. The women know that they are still niddot (the Tosafist does not accuse them of having sex with their husbands during the seven additional days) but believe that their impurity has been reduced by the cessation of their period and the washing in a warm bath, and it is this belief that is the source of the trouble. They have misconstrued the meaning of “the days of whitening”; the women think it means that on these days they are permitted to dress in white and to look attractive to their husbands, whereas it really means, as the Tosafist implies, that these are the days on which a woman is free of blood and thereby “whitened.”

Second, as a result of the warm bath that they take at the onset of the additional seven days, the women neglect the washing that is to precede the immersion in the miqveh. This in turn has two negative consequences, says the Tosafist. The first negative consequence and most serious is the possibility that their immersion in the miqveh will not be valid. The Talmud requires the niddab to wash before immersing, so that she would thus remove any dirt, scales, or specks that may interpose between her body and the waters of purification (B. Baba Qamma 82a; B. Niddah 66b–68a). Without such washing the immersion may not be valid because the water may not have reached the entire body. Therefore, a real possibility exists that the woman was still in the state of niddab when she had sex with her husband and that any child conceived as a result of that union would be a mamzer (an “illegitimate” or “bastard” child). The Tosafist surely knows that this latter statement is a rhetorical exaggeration, because in B. Yevamot 49a the Talmud explicitly states that the child of a niddab is not a mamzer.

The second negative consequence, less serious, is the skewing of prior-
ties; by making a postmenstruation bath a regular part of her routine a woman might come to slight not just the pre-miqvah washing but the miqvah itself, thinking that “not these [waters] purify but those”; that is, not the waters of the miqvah purify but the waters of the warm bath. The Tosafist claims that the women of Ashkenaz actually believe this to be the case, but it is likely that he is imputing this belief to them for the sole purpose of further delegitimizing their behavior. His evidence is B. Shabbat 14a, cited at the end of the excerpt, in which the Talmud decrees that washing in drawn water after immersing in a miqvah confers impurity (at least for purposes of eating terumah, the tithe presented to priests, from which wives and unmarried daughters of priests are entitled to eat). Of course, washing in drawn water does not really confer impurity; the impurity was decreed because the rabbis feared that people would begin to say “not these [the waters of the miqvah] purify, but these [the drawn water].” Thus, the Talmud says that by a special edict the post-miqvah bath was declared to nullify the purifying effects of the miqvah. (Medieval sages discussed at length whether this nullification applied not only to the eating of terumah but also to marital intercourse; opinions were divided in the matter). Our Tosafist applies the same logic to the pre-miqvah bath: there is really nothing wrong with it, but we fear that women may come to think of it as an essential—or, worse, the essential—part of their purification, and therefore it should be stopped.

A page earlier in tractate Shabbat the Talmud told a story of a young rabbinic sage who died young because he was insufficiently rigorous in separating from his wife during her seven days of whitening (B. Shabbat 13a–13b). The story was immensely popular in the Middle Ages and was cited in virtually every discussion of the laws of niddah. The story shows that leniency in the isolation of the niddah during the seven additional days—and polemic against that leniency—have their origins hundreds of years before the time of the Tosafists. Numerous other legal works, both before and after the Tosafists, continue the polemic. But the pointedness of the polemic here suggests that the Tosafist is not simply transcribing the polemic of an earlier source but is responding to the practices of his time and place. In Ashkenaz in the twelfth century (and if the polemic really derives from Rashi himself, in the eleventh century too), at least some women took a warm bath at the cessation of their periods and as a result did not separate themselves from their husbands during the seven additional days with the rigor they had observed during the days of their period; the Tosafist also suggests that these women saw that bath as an integral part of their purification process, but here our polemicist may not be reliable, because his argument has been shaped by a talmudic source.

It is striking that the Tosafist directs his polemic exclusively at the
women. Surely, the men should have been accorded some of the blame, too, because they must have noticed that their wives changed their clothes and their demeanor with the cessation of their periods and the onset of the additional days. Why did they not rebuke their wives, and why did the Tosafist not rebuke them for failing to do so? If husbands are committing a sin whose punishment is karet, should they not be warned and chastised? Perhaps the answer simply is that the Tosafist’s polemic is contained in works that were intended for a male audience and until the late twentieth century, actually had an exclusively male audience. Thus, while the text explicitly treats women and their ways, it implicitly exhorts male readers not to permit their wives to behave in this manner. Women are the targets of the polemic but men are the audience of the text. I shall treat an analogous question in my discussion below of an edict of Maimonides.

R. Abraham b. Nathan and R. Isaiah di Trani

R. Abraham ben Nathan (ca. 1155–1215) of Lunel (Provence), known as Raban (an acronym for R. Abraham ben Nathan) hayarhi (“the lunar,” i.e., of Lunel), is the author of Sefer Hamanhig, a large work that surveys the various customs of the Jewish communities of Provence, northern France, and Spain. He traveled widely in Europe and spent much of his life in Toledo (Raphael, 1.11–15). In his section on the laws of niddah, he reports the following (Hamanhig 2:548–49):

I have found in the responsa of the geonim in several places the view that immersion in a miqveh has no legal effect for a niddah in our days, because the sages, as the result of doubt, have deemed all women to be zavot [and a zav requires immersion in a spring of “living” water, not a miqveh].

But I, the writer, say that it was this responsum that led astray most of the people of Spain in various places, so that their wives wish to immerse only in a spring [not in a miqveh]. The result is that their severity has become an excessive leniency, because the women, unable to bear the coldness of a river, immerse in baths and then have sex with their husbands. [They do not realize that] even if they wash in a thousand baths they shall not be purified of their impurity until they immerse in a spring or a miqveh. The men thus have sex with a niddah, and the two of them are liable to the punishment of karet. The responsum [on which they rely] is thoroughly corrupt [because only a male zav requires a spring of living water for purification, but a female zavah does not]. . . . And thus is the custom in all the borders of Israel—in France, Provence, and Spain in all places—that women immerse in a miqveh wherever they do not have a spring.

R. Abraham is not sure of the extent of the aberrant behavior he has witnessed. Is it characteristic of “most of the people” in Spain or, as he
immediately adds, only “in various places”? In the last sentence of this excerpt he declares that the correct practice is to be found in Spain “in all places.” How is this possible if the aberrant practice is observed by most people? This difficulty prompted a medieval copyist to emend “all” to “most,” a reading adopted by the modern editor of the text. The contradiction is thus softened: the aberrant practice is observed by most people in Spain, while the correct practice is to be found “in most places” in Spain. It is evident that we cannot press our informant on this. R. Abraham has observed that some/many/most Jewish women in Spain purify themselves after their menstruation, not in springs, rivers, or miqva‘ot, but in baths. He suggests that this behavior is the result of a wayward and corrupt rabbinic responsum of the geonim (the heads of the rabbinic academies in Babylonia), which suggested to the pious Jews of Spain that immersion in a miqveh does not effect purification after menstruation, since menstruants must be purified in free-flowing water (as in a spring or a river). Therefore, the women washed in a warm bath, preferring it (especially in winter!) to the cold river. After attempting to understand the origins of this behavior, R. Abraham condemns it as aberrant (a minority practice) and wrong. He reinforces the point a few pages later (Hamenbig 2:572): “If a man has sex with his wife while she is a niddah: even if she washed in a thousand baths, as long as she has not immersed in the waters of a miqveh after ceasing to see [a discharge] and counting seven clean days, both she and her mate are liable to the punishment of karet.”

R. Abraham’s explanation of this behavior is his own. He takes credit for it himself (“But I, the writer, say . . .”) and does not ascribe it to the men and women of Spain. Indeed, the explanation cannot be correct, because it is a rabbinic explanation of a nonrabbinic practice. By purifying themselves in the bath, these women are violating normative rabbinic law no less than they are violating the nonnormative rabbinic law cited by R. Abraham (which declares that menstruants must be purified only in a free-flowing spring or river). That is, R. Abraham’s explanation does not reduce the gap between the women’s actual behavior (purification in a bath) and the behavior that would be expected of them (whether purification in a miqveh or purification in a spring). Both with R. Abraham’s explanation and without it, the women’s behavior is improper. It is likely, then, that purification in a bath was a nonrabbinic practice. For some/many/most men and women in Spain in the twelfth century, purification of a woman after her period was an important part of their Judaism, even if purification in a miqveh was not. Perhaps some Spanish Jewish communities simply did not have miqva‘ot, and the women in those communities used baths instead. Perhaps some Spanish Jews regarded purification in a miqveh as an unnecessary severity, a practice only for the religious virtuosi but not for the masses.
A remarkably similar report is given by R. Isaiah ben Mali (the Elder) of Trani (ca. 1200–before 1260), known as the Rid (an acronym for R. Isaiah di Trani), a native of Apulia in southern Italy. As the following excerpt demonstrates, R. Isaiah traveled widely throughout the Byzantine empire, which then included Apulia. He is the author of numerous rabbinic works, including responsa and a commentary on the Talmud (Isaiah of Trani 1967, 17–66; Bowman 1985, 61, 74, 121–27; Tâ-Shema, “Isaiah”). Many of his responsa deal with the laws of miqveh; one of them ends with the following report (no. 62, p. 319):¹⁰

Now my lord [the anonymous recipient of R. Isaiah’s letter], like an angel of God, knows that this generation is lawless... . On account of what R. Hillel (may the memory of the righteous be for a blessing) wrote in his commentary on the Sifra, that “drawn water” renders a miqveh unfit only by virtue of rabbinic law [not biblical law], all the communities of Byzantium (Romania), without exception,¹¹ have been accustomed to immerse only in the stench of baths, and [as a result] most of them have sex with menstruants.

When I was among them I learned that not one of their women immerses [properly]. A man from Crete, a rabbinic scholar and a man who properly observes the rabbinic laws of sexual purity,¹² married a woman there [i.e., in the place that R. Isaiah was visiting] and accustomed his wife to immerse [properly]. The women of the community united against her, saying “This wicked custom [i.e., the custom of immersing] is not the custom in our place,”¹³ just as the women of Sodom did to the wife of Lot.¹⁴ When I heard this I became furious at them and rebuked them with much shame and abuse, even though they were exceedingly haughty. They babbled against me that “drawn water” [renders a miqveh unfit] only by rabbinic law, as R. Hillel explained in [his commentary on] the Sifra, and that I should hold my peace, because it is better that Jews sin unintentionally rather than deliberately. I carried on with them until they conceded and recognized that the prohibition of drawn water is biblical [not just rabbinic]. They [the men] all gathered together in the great synagogue, and all the women gathered in the courtyard of the synagogue, and they swore under penalty of anathema, both the men and the women, that they would not continue to act in this evil manner. When I was in other communities, they were not willing to accept what I expounded, and I was unable to prevent them [from acting improperly]. Their illicit conduct proliferated,¹⁵ and this sin was licit in all the communities of Byzantium (Romania). Therefore it is not right for any scholar to have any doubt on these matters....

R. Isaiah reports that none of the Jewish communities of Romania (i.e., the Byzantine mainland [Greece, Asia Minor]) properly observes the purification of the niddah. In these communities, after her period a woman would purify herself in the baths, not in a miqveh (or a river or a spring). The women believed so strongly in the rectitude of their practice that when a rabbinic Jew who hailed from Crete tried to get his wife, a local woman, to follow the rabbinic practice, the women of her community ganged up on her to convince her that the local custom was valid and that
the rabbinic practice was wrong (or perhaps they said that the local custom was just as valid as the rabbinic practice—the text is not secure at this point). When R. Isaiah inquired as to the source of their custom, they replied that they were following the view of R. Hillel (to whom I shall return) that a bath consisting of drawn water was invalid for purification only under rabbinic law, not biblical law. Furthermore, they argued, R. Isaiah should hold his peace because, even if R. Hillel’s view is wrong and the widespread practice invalid, the masses will not listen to R. Isaiah anyway. Better that they should sin in ignorance of the correct law than in outright defiance of it. R. Isaiah, however, persisted in his crusade for truth and, no doubt with the assistance of the rabbinic Jew from Crete, succeeded in convincing one community, men and women alike, that purification in a bath was improper and that henceforth women would purify themselves properly. R. Isaiah concedes, however, that in other Byzantine communities his oratory had less effect and that the Jews continued their improper use of the baths. It is most unfortunate that R. Isaiah does not give us the name of the community whose practices he reformed and the names of the communities that turned a deaf ear.

The Jews of Byzantium attempted to justify their behavior by citing the view of their compatriot R. Hillel ben Eliakim, a prominent Byzantine sage of the twelfth century whose commentary on the Sifra (an ancient rabbinic commentary on the Book of Leviticus) was already widely acknowledged as authoritative in the time of R. Isaiah, even outside Byzantium (Koleditzky 1967, Rabinowitz). R. Hillel’s view, that drawn water was valid for purification under biblical law, appears in his Sifra commentary (Koleditzky 1967, 86b). It is hard to see how this view could have led to the aberrant practice of the Jews of Byzantium, since according to this view, too, purification in a bath is invalid. If one wishes to be a pious rabbinic Jew, surely one will avoid practices that are prohibited “only” under rabbinic law. Perhaps the Byzantine Jews, under Karaite influence, took biblical law more seriously than rabbinic law (although we must note that washing is not enjoined upon the menstruant by Leviticus, chap. 15), but we cannot attribute such a motive to R. Hillel. His view must have been not the source of the Byzantine practice but a reaction to it. Two or three generations before R. Isaiah, R. Hillel, too, observed that the Jews of Byzantium used baths rather than miqvaṭ for postmenstrual purification. Perhaps he attempted to uproot the practice and (like R. Isaiah) was defeated; perhaps he did not attempt at all (“better that they should sin in ignorance”). Instead he came up with a modicum of justification. “Their sin is not that great; after all, according to biblical law, purification in a bath is valid; their sin is only under rabbinic law.” This post hoc justification by R. Hillel was then misinterpreted, by both R. Isaiah and the Byzantine Jews themselves, as a propter hoc justification. We
have seen the same phenomenon in R. Abraham’s report on the Jews of Spain. He attributed to them a rabbinic justification for their nonrabbinic behavior, a justification that does not work. Similarly, the rabbinic justification that the Byzantine Jews allege for their non-rabbinic behavior does not work, because their behavior is wrong in any event. This does not stop R. Isaiah from arguing at great length that R. Hillel’s view is without foundation.

What, then, is the source of the behavior of the Jews of Byzantium? Bowman suggests that they were influenced by their “millennial long exposure to the availability of public baths in the Greco-Roman world” (Bowman 1985, 124). For the Jews of the Roman empire, the bath habit was much stronger and much more ingrained than the miqveh habit. There is no doubt some truth to this explanation, but as we have already seen, even in areas like Spain and Ashkenaz, where bath culture was not as ancient nor as well entrenched as in Byzantium, the bath appeared to many Jews to be an effective purifying agent, perhaps even as effective as the miqveh.

Maimonides

R. Moses ben Maimon (1135–1204), known in European languages as Maimonides (and known in Hebrew as Rambam, for R. Moshe ben Maimon), hardly needs any biographical introduction. Even in his lifetime he was venerated and feared, and he exerted much authority in the Jewish community of Egypt (and elsewhere). Among his responsa is the following, an edict written in Judeo-Arabic (no. 242, pp. 436, 439–40, 443):17

... [We have discovered that] a great sin has become widespread in the majority of the community, and only very few individuals have been saved from it, and it is this: the Jews in the entire land of Egypt have been careless in the matter of the immersion of the niddah in the waters of a miqveh, and in the counting of seven clean days. They have [instead] followed the heretical custom of relying on washing in “drawn water” and have thought that by this [washing] purification will be effected and the niddah will become permissible to her husband. Even worse, most of the women rely on complete heresy, a matter not spoken by God, and it is this: the niddah takes a woman who is not a niddah to sprinkle her with water that she supposes is pure; the niddah thinks that if she should sprinkle herself, she will not be purified and will not be permissible to her husband. This activity is called by them [the women] “sprinkling.” Some of them delay this sprinkling so that it will take place at twilight, in accordance with the belief of the heretics. . . .

[We protested mightily against this practice.] After we publicized this matter for several years, we saw that the plague remained as it was, that only one of a thousand repented, and that this snare derived mostly from the women, because they held fast to heresy, and immersion was difficult for them. [Therefore] we, the undersigned
sages and judges, have seen fit to issue the following decree unanimously: any Jewish woman who shall not immerse in the waters of the miqveh after counting seven clean days in accordance with the proper laws of Jewish women, or who should be sprinkled with the aforementioned sprinkling—that woman shall be divorced and shall forfeit her marriage settlement. She forfeits both her marriage settlement and any other sums stipulated in her marriage contract, if it should become evident that she has committed any of the following three sins: avoidance of immersion; neglect of the seven clean days; or [the performance of] sprinkling, even in conjunction with immersion. . . .

We have agreed to this enactment, so that every court in the land of Egypt shall rule according to it, from the month of Sivan in the year 4927 [1167 C.E.; an alternative reading is the year 1487 of the Seleucid era, which is 1176 C.E.] and forward. . . .

We have agreed to all this, a full agreement, we who are signed below: Moses ben Maimon [nine other names follow].

According to this edict, most of the Jewish women of Egypt, with few exceptions, followed the purification practices of the heretics rather than those of the rabbis. The heretics are, of course, the Karaites, Jews who reject rabbinic authority and law and claim to follow the plain meaning of the written Torah. Observing the simple meaning of Leviticus, chapter 15, the women think that a menstruant is impure for only seven days, that she need not observe any additional “clean” days or days of “whitening,” and that she does not require immersion in a miqveh. But even these Karaite-inspired women believed that a menstruant must be washed in water if she is to be purified. But for these women purification is effected not by immersion in a miqveh but by “sprinkling” (sakh in Arabic, yetziqah in Hebrew), which is as nonbiblical as the rabbinic practice. One woman (a non-menstruant) purifies the other (the menstruant) by sprinkling her with water. This is done on the twilight of the seventh day of her impurity, and come nightfall she is pure.

Maimonides tried for several years to eradicate this practice and to persuade the women to adopt the rabbinic norm, but his efforts were all in vain, “because they [the women] held fast to heresy.” Finally, in 1176 C.E. (this seems to be the correct date, not 1167 C.E.), he and nine rabbinic colleagues attempted to force the issue by threatening recalcitrant women with divorce and the loss of their marriage settlement (ketuvah), a serious penalty indeed, since it would mean the loss of any means of support. Husbands who had been considering divorcing their wives but dreaded the prospect of paying the marriage settlement could now divorce their wives and suffer no financial liability if the wives had not been observing the rabbinic purification regimen. This edict had an immediate impact on public behavior: in many marriage contracts issued after this date and preserved in the Cairo Genizah the two spouses promise to observe the rabbinic laws of sexual purity (Goitein 1971, 2:154–55; 3:107).
Conspicuously absent from the Maimonidean edict are the husbands. Even if the husbands feigned ignorance of the sprinkling (on the grounds that it was a “womanly” matter), surely they noticed that their wives were not extending their menstrual impurity for the additional seven days prescribed by rabbinic law. Maimonides threatened the women with divorce but did not threaten the men with anything; since rabbinic law does not permit a court to initiate divorce, a threat of divorce is not meaningful unless it is accompanied by threats to compel the husband to initiate the divorce, but the edict contains no such threats. If a man was content to allow his wife to follow the nonrabbinic mode of purification (and therefore to have sex with her while she was a niddah), the edict of Maimonides contains nothing to dissuade him from his sinful path. The intended audience of this edict, written in Judeo-Arabic, was the entire Jewish community of Egypt, men and women alike (contrast the work of the Tosafists, mentioned above, which was intended only for men); why, then, did Maimonides and his colleagues ignore the men and condemn only the women? The men were as guilty as the women. I do not know how to answer this question. The absence of the men from Maimonides’ edict is a puzzle. In any case, Genizah documents show that husbands, too, were expected to promise to adhere to the rabbinic regimen (Goitein 2:155, cf. 3.154).

Let us return to our immediate concern. How are we to understand the sprinkling performed by the Jewish women of Egypt? In the sixteenth century R. David ben Solomon ibn Abi Zimra (known as the Radbaz, 1479–1573), who, like Maimonides, was rabbi in Cairo for many years and an ardent opponent of the Karaites (Zimmels), informs us that the Karaites claimed that their practice was supported by Ezek. 36:25, “I will sprinkle [vezaraqti] pure waters upon you and you shall be pure” (Radbaz responsum no. 796, cited by Schepansky 1993, 170 n. 2). The Radbaz does not elaborate on this scriptural prooftext, but I assume that the full proof consisted of more than just a simple citation of Ezek. 36:25. A few verses earlier the prophet likened the sinful ways of the Israelites to the impurity of the niddah: “their ways were in my sight like the impurity of a menstruating woman” (36:17). If the people of Israel, whose impurity resembles that of a niddah, are to be purified by the sprinkling of pure water, should not the niddah herself be purified in exactly the same manner?

This deduction from Ezekiel, if I may conjecture further, perhaps would have been fortified by appeal to Numbers, chapter 19. That chapter prescribes that the ashes of a red heifer, which had been slaughtered and burned, be mixed with water and that the resulting solution be sprinkled on any one who has become impure through contact with a corpse. The ash-water solution is called mey niddah (Num. 19:9, 13, 20, 21), a difficult phrase usually translated “water of purification” or “water for cleansing,”
even though the word *niddah* does not otherwise mean “purification” or “cleansing.” The word *niddah* means “impurity” or “menstruant”; in the former case the phrase should be translated “water of impurity” or “water for impurity,” and in the latter case the phrase should be translated “water of the menstruant” or “water for the menstruant.” This latter possibility makes little sense in context, but it may have suggested to medieval readers that this water, sprinkled by a pure person on the impure (Num. 19:19), thereby rendering the impure person pure, was called “water for the menstruant” because the *niddah*, too, was to be purified by the sprinkling of pure water. Thus, it is possible that the Karaite practice derives from a creative reading not only of Ezekiel, chapter 36, but also of Numbers, chapter 19.

It is also possible that the sprinkling practiced by the Jews of medieval Egypt was simply a continuation of a purification practice observed by the Jews of Egypt in Greco-Roman times. Philo of Alexandria, the Jewish philosopher and scriptural exegete of the first century C.E., frequently refers to purification through “ablutions and sprinklings.” While the exact reference of these words is uncertain, what is clear is that Philo was referring to more than just the sprinkling of the waters of the red heifer. E. P. Sanders (1990), who discusses these Philonic passages in detail, suggests that Alexandrian Jews in Philo’s time used washings and sprinklings to purify themselves from the impurity caused by sexual intercourse, contact with corpses, and perhaps menstruation (263–70). Other diaspora communities, too, may have used sprinklings. The *Didascalia*, a Christian text written in Greek in Syria in the third century C.E. and translated into Syriac perhaps a century or two later, closes with a plea to its Christian readers to avoid Jewish practices. The plea opens with the following words (chap. 26, p. 223, in the translation by Vööbus): “You, however, who have been converted from the people [i.e., the Jews] to believe in God our Savior Jesus Christ, do not henceforth remain in your former manner of life, brethren, that you should keep vain bonds, purifications, and sprinklings and baptisms and distinction of meats.”

Jewish converts to Christianity and indeed all Christians are to avoid three Jewish practices. The first of these, “bonds,” actually is the entire set of Jewish observances, what the *Didascalia* (1979) calls “the bonds of the second legislation” (as opposed to the “first legislation,” which refers to those laws of the Torah that remain binding on Christians). Among these bonds, the author of the *Didascalia* singles out two for special mention: purification from impurity (“purifications and sprinklings and baptisms”) and the avoidance of meats prohibited by Leviticus, chapter 11. The author returns briefly to sprinklings a few pages later, where he argues that “when he [Jesus] came, he did fully and perfectly abrogate the second legis-
lation. Indeed, he did not use sprinklings or washings” (230). If Jesus did not use Jewish sprinklings and washings, Christians shouldn’t either.

What are these sprinklings? Perhaps the author simply is referring to the sprinkling enjoined by Numbers, chapter 19. This is possible but unlikely, because this entire chapter of the Didascalia deals with Christian observances that the author finds too “Jewish.” Were any Jews in Syria, let alone Christians, in the third and fourth centuries still using the “water of lustration” prepared in accordance with the dictates of Numbers, chapter 19? It is more likely that “sprinklings” refers to purification rituals elaborated and observed by the Jews of Syria, like those observed by the Jews of Alexandria centuries earlier. Whether menstruants in Syria were being purified by sprinklings, I do not know. The last part of this chapter of the Didascalia is a polemic against Christian women who observe menstrual impurity and seek to be purified after their periods, but the author nowhere associates sprinkling with their purification.

Perhaps, then, the sprinkling observed by the Jewish women of Egypt in the age of Maimonides was not a medieval Karaite innovation but a tradition reaching back to Roman times. The practice may have been not only nonrabbinic but prerabbinic. Neither Philo nor the Didascalia, our sources for the observance of sprinklings by diaspora Jewry (in Egypt and Syria, respectively), associate that mode of purification with menstrual impurity, but the association of the two is not a big step, especially if interpreted in the light of Ezekiel, chapter 36, and Numbers, chapter 19. The origins of this purificatory sprinkling need further research.

Whatever its origins may be, the nonrabbinic sprinkling described by Maimonides has a social dimension entirely absent from the rabbinic immersion in a miqveh. Purification by sprinkling cannot be observed by the menstruant alone. She needs a pure woman (i.e., a nonmenstruant) to sprinkle water on her. Perhaps this fact explains some of the popularity of the practice among the women of medieval Egypt: purification became a social occasion, a ritual that solidified bonds of friendship. One week a woman purifies her friend; a week or two later her friend purifies her. In contrast, immersion in a miqveh is a private affair. A woman purifies herself by herself, a solitary exercise. In Germany, in the circle of R. Meir b. Baruch of Rothenburg (known as the Maharam, d. 1293), there arose the custom of having one woman oversee the immersion of another in order to make sure that it was performed properly; sometimes the overseer would enter the water herself alongside the woman undergoing purification (Cahana, 1990, 240, no. 160, and 242, no. 166). Thus, in the thirteenth century, rabbinic immersion, too, was a social occasion, at least to a modest degree. But the rabbinic legal theory, that a woman purifies herself by herself, always remained unchanged; and the later custom of entrusting the supervision of immersion to
Conclusion

I have surveyed four medieval polemics against “incorrect” purification practices. Written within a century or so of each other (early twelfth century to early thirteenth century), they derive from four corners of the Jewish world: Ashkenaz (the Tosafist), Spain (R. Abraham), Byzantium (R. Isaiah), and Egypt (Maimonides). No doubt a thorough and systematic search of medieval rabbinic literature will uncover many other such polemics. My sample is small and not necessarily representative; nevertheless, what does it reveal?

We see that in the high Middle Ages women (and their husbands) took seriously the Torah’s requirement that they be purified after menstruation. They also took seriously the nonbiblical requirement that they be purified in water, even if they did not always follow the mode of purification that was enjoined on them by rabbinic law. The deviation from rabbinic law by the women of Ashkenaz was relatively minor: they bathed at the cessation of their periods and thus slighted or were thought to have slighted the bathing that was to precede the immersion in the miqveh after the seven additional days. The deviation from rabbinic law by the women of Spain, Byzantium, and Egypt was more serious. The women of Spain and Byzantium apparently observed the seven additional days but, instead of immersing in a miqveh, washed in baths. The women of Egypt did not observe the seven additional days and, instead of immersing in a miqveh, had themselves sprinkled with water. Our rabbinic sources polemicize against these practices, seeing them as mistaken (Ashkenaz, Spain, Byzantium) or heretical (Egypt).

Now to the crucial question: the women who preferred bathing or sprinkling to immersing—did they think of themselves as ignorant, irreligious, and/or sinful, or did they think that they were acting properly? When chastised by rabbinic authorities, did they contritely accede to the superior authority of rabbinic erudition, or did they regard the rabbis as extremists, fanatics, and/or madmen? Regarding the women of Ashkenaz and Spain we cannot be sure, because the Tosafist and R. Abraham do not preserve the women’s responses to the polemics that were leveled against them. But R. Isaiah (Byzantium) and Maimonides (Egypt) preserve the women’s responses, and these show that the women thought that their practices were
The women of Byzantium tried to prevent one of their own from defecting (if that is the right word) and following the rabbinic mode of purification asked of her by her husband. They may even have referred to the rabbinic practice as “this wicked custom.” In many communities, R. Isaiah tried and failed to “correct” the women’s behavior; in one community he claims he enjoyed success, but, of course, we do not know whether his victory was real or illusory, permanent or temporary. In Egypt, Maimonides tried and failed for years to get the women to behave “properly.” In the end he resorted to the desperate expedient of a public decree threatening divorce and loss of the money stipulated in the marriage contract; whether this decree had a greater effect on private behavior than his previous efforts, we do not know. In any case, the women of Byzantium and Egypt thought of themselves as righteous and of their customs as legitimate. Their piety was no less sincere and real than that of their rabbinic opponents.

Perhaps the use of baths instead of miqva’ot suggests that the women saw a close connection between menstruation and “dirt” and thus between purification and cleansing. Rabbinic law unambiguously tried to distinguish between purification and cleansing: a niddah must wash herself thoroughly even before immersing in a miqveh; washing in drawn water (e.g., a bath) confers impurity (at least for the purposes of eating priestly tithes and perhaps for sexual relations as well); washing in drawn water after immersion in a miqveh undoes the purification (at least for the purposes of eating priestly tithes and perhaps for sexual relations as well). This is the rabbinic law, the law of men. For women the link between menstruation and dirt may have been much stronger than it was for men, and consequently they readily and naturally associated purification with cleansing. As a cleansing agent, the bath is superior to the miqveh. If we knew how much water was sprinkled on the menstruants of medieval Egypt (Friedman [1990] refers to the sprinkling as “a kind of shower”), perhaps we could see the same logic at work there.

On the rabbinic side, polemic against “incorrect” or “heretical” practices was a political statement, an assertion of power. Menstrual practices were the preserve of women, taught by mother to daughter and woman to woman and observed in privacy, but even here (male) rabbinic authority was to be supreme. Women’s traditions were wrong if they conflicted with the norms established by the (male) rabbis. Women must consult rabbis to know what to do. The source that tells us about the premature bathing of the women of Ashkenaz also reports that a woman named BLLT (vocalization uncertain) “in the name of her brother R. Isaac ben Menahem got the women of her town to pick [between] their teeth before immersion” (Sefer Haorah 2:172–73). The learned R. Isaac taught his sister how she should
conduct her purification, and she in turn taught the other women of the town. Two or three centuries after the polemics treated in this essay, R. Jacob Molin (known as the Maharil, d. 1427) implored one of his contemporaries not to write a Judeo-German compendium of the laws of niddah: women (and ignorant men) might read it and foolishly assume that they understood the law. Knowledge was power; ignorant women were powerless to resist rabbinic authority. The women of Byzantium and Egypt, however, were neither ignorant nor powerless.

NOTES

1. For an excellent brief survey of the Jewish laws and practices concerning menstruation, see Ta-Shema, “Niddah.”


4. Karet, usually translated “extirpation,” is a punishment prescribed in several biblical texts. In rabbinic law karet involved a court-inflicted whipping and a divinely inflicted punishment, whose precise contours were the subject of debate.

5. See, for example, R. Israel Isserlein, Terumat Hadeshen, no. 254, and R. Isaiah di Trani, Teshuvot Harid (1967), no. 73, with Wertheimer’s notes ad loc. The discussion continues even in contemporary times; see R. Ovadiah Yosef, Yabi’a Omer, vol. 8 (Jerusalem 5755/1995), 310–12 (Voreh De’ah 10).


7. Israel Ta-Sh(e)ma, Early Franco-German Ritual and Custom (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992), 51; and “On Some Franco-German Niddah Practices,” Sidrit 9 (1993):163–70 (both in Hebrew). Ta-Shema assumes that the polemic derives from Rashi himself, but I see no evidence for this assertion. Nothing in the text suggests that Rashi himself knew the custom of bathing at the onset of the seven days of whitening. Ta-Shema suggests that the custom reached Ashkenaz from the land of Israel.

8. Lunel is actually in Languedoc, but Jewish sources regularly refer to it as located in Provence.

9. This responsa was widely quoted and debated; see Raphael’s note ad loc. (Abraham ben Nathan 1994). See also Rashi on B. Shabbat 64b, cited in Responsa of Rashi, ed. I. Ellenbein (New York, 1980), p. 81, no. 69. Many medieval rabbinic authorities also debated the propriety of purification in rivers, but that is not our concern here.

10. I have freely drawn on Bowman’s translation (Bowman 1985, 213–14), but his is much looser than mine.

11. Context indicates that this must be the meaning of ifilu qabal ‘ebad, but the syntax is awkward.

13. The text here seems to be corrupt; I have followed Wertheimer’s emendation of HRGW to HR™, but the resulting text is still not smooth. Bowman’s translation, “was not the custom,” is a paraphrase.


15. “Illicit conduct” is my translation of issur. Bowman’s translation, “And this ban proliferated,” is possible but makes no sense in context.

16. In the rabbinic system a law can be defined as biblical even if it is not explicitly enjoined by the Torah, as here. A biblical law is any law that the rabbis believed could be traced back to the Torah, as opposed to a rabbinic law, whose authority derives solely from the rabbis themselves. The rabbis themselves are really the authors of most of the laws that they call biblical, as here.

17. Since I do not know Arabic, I translate Jehoshua Blau’s Hebrew translation, which I have checked against Friedman’s Hebrew translation (Friedman 1990, 10–11; Friedman, however, does not translate the entire excerpt I have given). In responsum no. 320, Maimonides briefly summarizes our text. For discussion of this edict, see the bibliography assembled by Blau (Maimonides 1986), Friedman (1990, 10–14), and Schepansky (1993), 170.

18. Vööbus translates as “in your former conversation,” which I cannot fathom. The Syriac word is dabarnykbon.


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While the ideal of Jewish observance was ostensibly “we shall do and obey” (Ex. 24:7), mankind, by nature curious, could not long conform to this paradigm. People want to understand the reasons for their religious observance. Discussions of the underlying principles of the commandments are therefore found in the biblical text itself. They become commonplace in the talmudic and midrashic corpus, and in the Middle Ages an extensive literature specifically devoted to such rationales began to appear.1 This genre, known as ta‘amei ha-mitsvot (rationales for the commandments), was popular among early Kabbalists, philosophers, and halakhists alike.2 While Kabbalists and other authors of the rationales shared the common goal of discerning the hidden reasons for the commandments, their methods and their results differed. Rather than try to find the “rational” or historical basis for a given commandment, Kabbalists imbued existing laws with cosmic significance and looked to the divine realm for the source of the law. Only when they had described the divine origin could they propound the need for observance in the terrestrial world.

Few laws escaped their notice. They discussed the long defunct sacrificial system with as much vigor as they used for the weekly Sabbath rituals. Personal practice did not diminish their interest, because the commandments represented a higher reality. Thus, it is not surprising that these male Kabbalists spent so much time and energy discussing menstrual laws. Menstruation represents not only an earthly state of impurity but also a cosmic process. I propose to analyze some rationales for the laws of the

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menstruant in order to throw light on Kabbalistic conceptions of the divine and of the human female.

Leviticus states that a menstruant (niddah) is impure for seven days, while a woman who has had an issue of blood at a time other than her usual period (zavah) must count an additional seven days after the cessation of her flow until she may be considered pure and present a sacrifice (Lev. 15:19–30). The Talmud conflated these two categories, so that the niddah, like the zavah, must wait seven days after the end of her flow until she may immerse herself in the ritual bath. Thus, husbands and wives must separate for at least twelve days, the five to seven days of actual flow and an additional seven “white” days, allowing roughly fifteen days of the monthly cycle for marital relations. To ensure proper practice, rabbis undertook to discover the underlying reasons for the imposed separation. For in the absence of direct means to enforce the laws of the niddah, which by their very nature were observed (or not) in the privacy of the bedroom, they had to fall back on the cogency of their interpretive powers. Rabbi Meir explained that a niddah was declared impure so that she might remain as beloved to her husband as the day he entered the marriage canopy. The medieval commentator Rashi adds that if a man has relations with his wife at will she will begin to disgust him. The enforced seven-day separation therefore protects against satiety and contempt.

If these inducements were not sufficient to ensure observance, fear of divine retribution might. The punishment of karet (literally, “cutting off”), prescribed in the Holiness Code for men who have had relations with menstruants, may not have been entirely persuasive in everyday life. Less remote forms of retribution were therefore proposed. Women who did not fulfil their purity requirements were threatened with death during childbirth. Transgressors who survived labor would bear leprous children, whereas those who observed the laws of niddah would be rewarded with male offspring. According to a minority opinion, children conceived during niddah were considered bastards (mamzerim). Not only would their status and health be affected by the unfortunate circumstances of their birth but their character as well. Children of niddot were believed to be especially arrogant, a serious flaw in a culture that valued modesty. Rabbi Judah claimed that the destiny of the arrogant was hell, while the humble might look forward to heaven. A child conceived during niddah was therefore doomed from the moment of conception.

Women and their offspring were not the only ones in danger. According to two opinions in the Babylonian Talmud, a menstruant not only had the power to frighten a snake (BT Shabbat 110a) but could also kill a man (BT Pesahim 111a). In the same vein, improper separation during the menstrual flow was believed to cause a husband’s premature death. The extrarabbinic
**Beraita d’Niddah** includes a long list of disasters that could befall those who even approached a menstruating woman. Her nail parings and the dust upon which she trod were believed to cause boils. Since such casual contact could inflict bodily harm, it follows that, according to the Beraita, having sexual relations with menstruants would give rise to leprous births in families for generations to come and cause men to be cast out of the community of Torah learning. To forestall such dangers, the Beraita d’Niddah prescribed extreme measures to isolate the menstruant. These prescriptions were eventually incorporated into Ashkenazi practice and influenced Jewish pietistic and mystical practices.

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**The Significance of the Terrestrial Niddah in Kabbalah**

Thirteenth-century Kabbalists were not content to consign the laws of the menstruating woman to the lower world. They saw them not merely as useful to promote affection or stay human suffering but especially as essential to maintaining divine order. Proper observance of the laws of niddah would foster divine unity, whereas infraction could empower the demonic other side, the sitra ‘ahra. Thus, menstrual impurity was considered the most severe form of pollution.

Human practice could entail such dire consequences because Kabbalists believed that man had the power to influence God. While one aspect of God, known as the Ain Sof, lay beyond the realm of human cognition, other elements of God were within man’s reach. These elements were present as a series of ten emanations, which came to be known as the sefirot. This structure was often identified with “man in his purest form,” Primordial Man (Adam Qadmon). Each sefirah represented a limb of the primordial body and the final emanation, the Shekhinah, was the feminine aspect of the male God. Any action by lower man would affect a corresponding aspect of this primordial body. Thus, performance of the commandments became one of the most effective means by which a Kabbalist could influence the supernal realm, because proper observance would foster divine harmony.

Kabbalists believe that the male and female forces in the cosmos were initially one united being. The androgynous whole divided as a result of primordial sin and formed a syzygy of male and female elements. In the terrestrial world, thirteenth-century Kabbalists struggled to recreate the state of primeval union through the theurgic powers of the commandments. Physical intercourse sanctioned by the Torah was a particularly effective means of attaining this desired goal.
When performed under proper conditions, physical intercourse between husband and wife fosters both divine and mystical union, for the act enables both Tiferet and the male mystic to unite with the Shekhinah. Many texts elaborate on the conditions necessary for a mystically significant sexual encounter. Perhaps the most famous primary work devoted to the subject is the 'Iggeret ha-Qodesh (the Holy Letter), the popular Kabbalistic text erroneously ascribed to Nahmanides, which discusses not only the correct thought and time for intercourse but also physiological concerns such as the appropriate diet to ensure healthy offspring. The author justifies his regimen with a common refrain from Leviticus. In the Holiness Code, God exhorts the children of Israel to avoid sexual abominations in order to become holy like God. Sexual propriety is thus understood to be an essential means of imitatio dei: man imitates the creator of all life by creating life through sanctioned sexual reproduction. In the 'Iggeret ha-Qodesh sexual conduct also becomes a means of “sanctifying” or “desecrating” God’s name.

Kabbalists identified God with his name. Each of the four letters of the tetragrammaton, YHWH, corresponds to a specific sefirah. Thus, any act that sanctifies or desecrates the name of God takes on cosmic significance. Illicit sexual relations violate the name of God on both the sefirotic and the physical level. Kabbalists believed that the first letter of the tetragrammaton, yod, is engraved on a boy’s penis during circumcision. The name of God thus becomes a partner to any male sexual act. Moshe de Leon therefore warns that “one must be constantly vigilant so that he might not sin against his flesh and wander and place the engraving of God in an evil place. For the individual who inserts the covenant, the mark of God, in another place (maqom ‘aher) causes a blemish in that place and deceives the mark of God.” Circumcised men must therefore avoid menstruating women lest they pollute the sign of the earthly and supernal covenant.

Terrestrial women are the material means by which men can experience spiritual success because their physical purity is essential to divine and mystical union. Joseph Gikatilla, a suspected author of the 'Iggeret ha-Qodesh, describes the centrality of menstrual laws in his Sod ba-Nahash (Mystery of the Serpent). Joseph Gikatilla believed that everything in the world, including evil, has a purpose. “There is no evil that does not contain some good . . . there is nothing evil in its proper place.” Harmony will prevail as long as the boundaries between good and evil are maintained. If barriers break down and “the externals enter the internal, or the internals [enter] the externals,” however, then “all orders will be corrupted.” For Gikatilla, observing menstrual separation is an essential means of maintaining temporal boundaries. Women are forbidden for approximately twelve days a month. Trespass over this temporal boundary violates the boundaries
between the pure and impure realms and enables the evil serpent Samael to enter the “divine sanctuary,” a Kabbalistic symbol of the Shekhinah.41

Like female impurity, the impurity of the first fruits is time-bound. The term for first fruits (‘orlab) derives from the same root as the term for foreskin (‘arel). According to Eilberg-Schwartz, this suggests that both immature fruits and the penis must wait a requisite amount of time and be “pruned” in order to be sanctified and productive.42 Leviticus Rabbah extends this analogy to the menstruant: “‘Three years shall it be forbidden unto you’ (Lev. 19:23), after which is written, ‘Ye shall not eat with the blood’ (Lev. 19:26). Now what connection is there between this text and that? The Holy One, blessed be He, in effect says to Israel: ‘You wait three years in the case of forbidden fruit, yet you do not wait for your wife to observe the period of her impurity.’”43 Both women and fruit are forbidden for a set period. A niddah is biblically forbidden for the first seven days, ‘orlab for the first three years.44 After the established waiting period, however, both are permitted and their use is blessed.45 Gikatilla gives cosmic significance to this analogy. Women, like the serpent, are beneficial as long as they respect their boundaries; whereas the serpent is bound by place, women are bound by time. Sexual relations during the period of purity are a blessed act because they foster divine and mystical union. Sexual relations during impurity are illicit because the act breaks the barriers between the holy and the impure in the cosmos.46

Other Kabbalists describe the cosmic ramifications of sexual relations with menstruants differently. Menahem Recanati, for example, explains that transgressing niddah laws causes a defect in the supernal chariot.47 Others equate sexual relations with menstruating women with idolatry. The Ra’aiya Mehemna compares a man who has sexual relations with a menstruating woman to Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron, who offered an improper sacrifice unto God.48 Elsewhere, Gikatilla enlarges on this Temple imagery and compares the Shekhinah to the hekhal, the vestibule in front of the Holy of Holies. One who has sexual relations with a menstruating woman introduces impurity into this supernal hekhal.49 According to the Zohar, sexual relations with a menstruant are one of “three acts that drive the Shekhinah away from the world and prevent the Holy One, blessed be He, from dwelling in the world, so that people cry out and their voice is not heard.”50

The Divine Menstruant

The purity laws and their observance are not only a theurgic means of protecting the Godhead on earth; they also reflect a divine reality, for the two
The sexes and their relations are but counterparts of a divine presence. Thus, the functions of the human female appear also in the feminine aspect of God. The Shekhinah engages in sexual relations and may become pregnant; she also menstruates. The Shekhinah’s flow, like that of woman, is cyclical. Just as menstruation suspends sexual relations on earth, the menstruation of the feminine aspect of God interrupts divine union. The Shekhinah may resume intimacy with the sefirot of Tiferet or Yesod only after immersion. Indeed, Kabbalists identify the purity requirements of women with those of the Shekhinah to such an extent that the cycle of the supernal female became the Kabbalistic rationale for rabbinic Halakhah.

The circle of the Zohar used the symbol of the menstruating Shekhinah in its exegesis and adjusted the length or frequency of her menses to correspond to and prove its interpretations and practices. For example, certain texts describe the Shekhinah as having a weekly cycle: during the week, the supernal female menstruates and is therefore niddah, banned, from her husband, the sefirot of Tiferet or Yesod. When her flow ends on Friday, she may purify herself and resume relations with the male aspects of God on the Sabbath. This divine union served as a model for mystical praxis. Mystics were exhorted to have relations on Friday nights alone, while other married couples were permitted to engage in sexual relations throughout the two weeks of the month that the wife is considered ritually pure.\(^{51}\)

Another Zoharic text associates the Shekhinah’s cycle with the ‘omer in order to give cosmic significance to this seven-week period between Passover and Pentecost (Lev. 23:15). Israel—that is to say, the Shekhinah—was represented as a niddah during the captivity in Egypt, a symbol of the sitra ‘abra.\(^{52}\) Her flow ended as soon as she was freed from the impure power. Yet like the zavah and the niddah, she had to wait seven clean days before she could resume relations with her spouse. According to the Zohar’s interpretation of the Exodus story, these seven days become seven weeks, corresponding to the ‘omer. At the end of that period, the Shekhinah was purified by the living waters of Binah, the sefirah Understanding.\(^{53}\) She could then adorn herself and resume relations with the king, the sefirah of Tiferet.\(^{54}\)

Kabbalists used the myth of the menstruating Shekhinah to impart significance not only to Sabbath and ‘omer rituals but also to niddah observance. One of the most common representations of the Shekhinah, the moon, most closely reflects female biology.\(^{55}\) The four phases of the moon—new, waxing, full, waning—represent burgeoning life, fullness, and death. The dark phase corresponds to menstruation, while the full moon represents the most fertile period, ovulation. To this correspondence, observed by many cultures, ritual purity laws add a layer of special significance to Jews.\(^{56}\) As noted, husbands and wives separate for at least twelve days, leaving approximately fifteen days of the monthly cycle for marital
relations. This division perfectly matches the waxing and waning of the moon. Many medieval Ashkenazi sources therefore observed that “just as a moon waxes for half a month and wanes for half a month, so the woman is close to her husband for half a month and lonely in her impurity for half a month. And as the moon is accessible at night, so is the woman, as it is written, ‘in the evening, she would come (Esther 2:14).’” This association is the basis for the belief that the first day of the new lunar month (Rosh Hodesh) is a holiday meant specifically for women.

Kabbalists adapted these earlier beliefs to create their own lunar symbolism. Like terrestrial women, the Shekhinah, the supernal moon, has a twenty-eight-day cycle that coincides with the lunar month. Clearly, this myth was born out of biological experience. Kabbalists, however, reverse the equation. They derive the biology and ritual requirements of terrestrial women from supernal experience and adduce the Shekhinah’s cycle as the rationale for the observance of the laws of niddah.

The Menstruant in the Writings of Joseph Hamadan

Joseph Hamadan, the Kabbalist who provides some of the most sexually explicit interpretations of the inner workings of the divine realm, offers an extensive example of this reasoning in his Sefer Ta’amot ha-Mitzvot (Book of Rationales for the Commandments). Hamadan begins his discussion of the commandment to refrain from sexual relations with menstruating women by citing the biblical proscriptions and several rabbinic incentives for observing the laws of niddah. Then, disclosing part of the cosmic mystery of the law, he observes that the ultimate purpose of ritual sacrifice is to unite the bridegroom Tiferet with his bride the Shekhinah when she is “full.” But the supernal woman, like her human counterpart, is not always “full.” There is a time when she is “whole” and may unite with the king and also a time when she is “blemished” and may not receive the efflux of the sefirah Tiferet. Hamadan expatiates, using the example of the sun and the moon. Like man, the lower sun, Tiferet, the supernal sun, is always whole because he never menstruates. The moon (i.e. the Shekhinah), by contrast, is defective. Like women, she waxes and wanes each month.

Hamadan derives her cycle not from the human condition but rather from a creation myth. In Genesis 1:16, God is said to have created “two great lights.” The end of the verse, however, refers to a “great light to rule the day” and a “lesser light to rule the night.” How did the power of one of the “great lights” become diminished at the end of the verse? The Talmud provides an answer, and Kabbalah elaborates. The moon was diminished as punishment for her hubris. Initially, the sun and the moon were equally
brilliant. Not content with parity, the moon asked God if it were “possible for two kings to wear one crown.” Angered by her presumptuousness, God retorted, “Go then and make thyself smaller.” Thus, she was humbled and forced to rely on the sun for her light.  

The Shekhinah’s condition corresponds to this event. Hamadan ties the defect in the lower moon to a stain in the supernal one. The term used for stain (ketem) is the legal term for blood spots that could render a woman impure. Accordingly, the moon is “stained” precisely when the Shekhinah is impure, and one may ascertain the Shekhinah’s condition by the phase of the moon. Eve’s sin and “curse” are thus a later reflection of a cosmic event. Where earlier authors saw a parallel between the waxing and waning of the moon and the pure and impure states of women, Hamadan found a basis in it for the law. The Shekhinah is purified and whole at the beginning of the full moon. She may then engage in marital relations with her husband, Tiferet. This intimacy may last for precisely fifteen days. When her flow begins, she must separate until she can immerse herself in the ritual bath (miqveh). 

Kabbalists also derive the conditions of the Shekhinah’s immersion from the terms of the human law. According to Jewish law, terrestrial women must bathe in a ritual bath filled with forty se’ahs of water that meets certain requirements. Spring water, rainwater, and melted snow may be used to fill the miqveh. This water may not be drawn. “Pure” water that has been collected in any type of receptacle is considered drawn and would render the ritual bath invalid. Special pipes are therefore attached to the exterior of the miqveh to conduct water to a main pool. Because these channels are structurally connected to the building, they are not considered separate containers but rather a part of the bath itself. This water may then be channeled to satellite baths.

Insufficient or misappropriated water, of great halakhic concern, becomes a divine concern in Hamadan. The conveyance of undrawn purificatory waters to the miqveh reflects the emanative processes within the sefirotic realm. Divine energy flows from the upper to the lower sefirot through channels or pipes. These energies meet at Yesod and are there filtered down to Shekhinah. Thus, Yesod acts as a supernal ritual bath, purifying the Shekhinah with his supernal effluxes. Like undrawn water that fills a ritual bath, these flowing emanations fill and purify the Shekhinah.

There is an overt sexual dimension to this analogy, for Yesod also represents the divine phallus. Hamadan enlarges upon this analogy and compares the method of conveying water to the ritual bath to ejaculation. Like the penis, the sefirotic channels and miqveh pipes convey purificatory water to Yesod, who in turn purifies the Shekhinah with his spermlike efflux. Similarly, terrestrial woman is first ritually cleansed by the miqveh water and
then is further purified by the sign of the covenant, her husband’s circumcised penis.73

The issue of both the supernal channel and the earthly channel must be like undrawn water. And if valid water is like a husband’s semen, foreign or drawn water will represent extramarital relations. Should this “water” be contaminated or come from some other source, the “immersion” would not be legitimate. On earth this would point to a wife’s promiscuity; in the heavens the Shekhinah would remain impure and come under the dominion of the demonic sitra ‘abla.74

The quantity of water is no less important than its quality. Just as a miqveh must contain forty se’ah of undrawn water to purify terrestrial women, Yesod must emit forty se’ah’s of efflux to purify the Shekhinah.75 This measure determined the number of days that Moses remained on Mount Sinai. He waited on the mountain for forty days to learn the mystery inherent in each efflux.76 When the Shekhinah was eventually filled by Tiferet, she gave birth to the Torah. This “child” of Tiferet and the Shekhinah weighed forty se’ahs. The Shekhinah then gave her offspring to Moses in the form of two twenty-se’ah tablets as a gift for Israel. The written Torah may therefore be compared to a valid miqveh,77 empowered to purify both men and women of their sins by their immersion in study.

Thus, Joseph Hamadan, more than any other medieval Kabbalist, richly elaborated the analogy of biological function and ritual observance. The menstrual cycle of the Shekhinah determined the auspicious times for supernal union. When niddah, she was banned from her husband. She could resume conjugal relations only when purified. The flow of the supernal woman thus became the archetype for human experience. These ideas inspired the works of the fourteenth-century Kabbalist Menahem Recanati and later the anonymous author of the Sefer ha-Qanah.78

Moshe Idel has described the theurgic sexual relationship between man and the sefirot as “vertical descending symbolism” and intersefirotic sexual activity as “horizontal descending symbolism.”79 Menstrual laws play a significant role on both of these planes. On the vertical plane, proper observance of niddah laws on earth was an integral part of theurgic attempts to promote divine harmony through sexual intercourse. Medieval Kabbalists, therefore, were vigilant in their separation from niddot, for violation of niddah laws on earth empowered the sitra ‘abla and led to the exile of the Shekinah. On the horizontal plane, the menstrual cycle of the Shekinah dictated the auspicious times for supernal union. When niddah, the Shekinah was banned from her husband. She could resume conjugal relations only when purified. The terms of the Shekinah’s cycle were clearly derived
from female experience. Thirteenth-century Kabbalists, however, reversed this equation and conceived the flow of the supernal woman to be the archetype for human experience. Female biology thus became the mere reflection of a cosmic reality.

NOTES

I dedicate this article to Flora Kimmich, with love.

1. For more background on this genre, see Isaac Heinemann (1993), Matt (1988).

2. These categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, Maimonides was a Halakhist and a philosopher; Nahmanides was both a Halakhist and a Kabbalist.

3. See BT Berakhot 31a; BT Niddah 66a; BT Megillah 28b. The Bible does not require immersion for niddah and zavot. The need for immersion is first found in the Mishnah. After the destruction of the Temple, a zavah could no longer offer a sacrifice. Ritual immersion became the final step toward purification. On the development of niddah laws, see Cohen (1991).

4. I will capitalize the term Rabbis when referring to the scholars of Talmud and Midrash. In this sentence, I refer to both the Rabbis of the Talmud and to the early medieval Halakhists known as the Rishonim.

5. It is the private nature of the observance that is specifically praised by the author of Avot d’Rabbi Natan (1945, version A, chap. 2, p. 5); see also BT Sanhedrin 43a.

6. BT Niddah 31b. The desire to limit marital relations to maintain their sanctity and special character is very different from the rationale given for the laws of seminal emissions. The meaning of the term ba’al qeri in talmudic literature is unclear. It may refer to an emission such as gonorrhea, a nocturnal emission, or an emission of semen after engaging in masturbation or intercourse. This type of impurity continued to be relevant after the destruction of the Temple because of the rationale given for this ordinance was that Israelites ought not behave like roosters, who engage in sexual relations at all times and immediately resume eating (PT Berakhot 3:3,4 6c). Man must conquer his natural inclinations lest he be deterred from engaging in other activities. For this reason, Rabbis in particular are exhorted to engage in sexual relations only at certain set times (BT Ketuvot 62b; PT Ketuvot 5:8 29d). The sanctity of intercourse is not discussed. The limitations on Rabbis were eventually interpreted as relating to sexual sanctity and took on cosmic significance in Kabbalah. See n. 30, below. It is interesting to note that Philo connects the idea of seminal emission and menstruation in the Special Laws. He explains that a menstruant is deemed unclean because a man must “remember the lesson that the generative seeds should not be wasted fruitlessly for the sake of a gross and untimely pleasure” (Special Laws 3:32). For more on seminal emissions, see Cohen (1991), Dinari (1983), Revel (1934).
7. There are many parallels to these ideas in medieval Halakhah. See, for example, Isaac ben Moses of Vienna (1862, the laws of Rosh Hodesh, 4:48b).
8. Dinary (1980) shows that many of the scare tactics were used to ensure separation during the additional seven “clean” days counted after the cessation of the actual flow (309).
10. Women are said to die in childbirth for failing to fulfill the commandments of niddah, to separate the hallah, and to light Sabbath candles. Tosefta Shabbat 2:10; PT Shabbat 31a,b; Midrash Tanhuma on Gen. 6:9, ed. Buber, 1:21, p. 14; Midrash Tanhuma on Lev. 15:25, ed. Buber 3:4:17, p. 27; Midrash Shemuel 2:4.
11. Leviticus Rabbah 16:5; Numbers Rabbah 9; Beraita d’Niddah 1:4 p. 6.
12. Leviticus Rabbah 14:7; Pesiqa Rabbati 4:5.
13. BT Nedarim 20a,b; Massekhet Kallah, 10, p. 139; Kallah Rabbati 1:17, 185.
15. Pirque Avot, 5:20, Massekhet Kallah, 16, 146; Kallah Rabbati 2:2, 190–93.
16. See Tanna de-vei Eliyahu, 209–10; Seder Eliyahu Rabbah and Seder Eliyahu Zuta, 76–77. BT Shabbat 13a-b cites Tanna de-vei Eliyahu as its source; PT hagigah 2:2; Sanhedrin 6:7; Rashi on BT Sanhedrin 44b, BT Shabbat 13b; Avot d’Rabbi Natan 1945, ver. A, 2; Midrash Tanhuma on Lev. 15:25, ed. Buber 3:5:13, p. 26; Yalqut Shim’on, “Metsora” 401, “‘Aharei Mot,” 565; Beraita d’Niddah, 2:4, pp. 15–16; cf., 1:2, p. 3; Abraham ben David, Ba’ale Tefillah ha-Nefesh, 18 (note that Abraham ben David requires only three days of separation after the flow); Solomon ibn Adret, Bedog ba-Bayit ha-Arakh, 7:2; Rabbenu Nissim, commentary on BT Shabbat; Nissim ben Jacob ibn Shain, Hibbur Yafeh ba-ha-Yeshu’a, 3b; Meir of Rothenberg, Darkhei Tesbukh, in Shevet ha-Teshuvot, end; Eleazar of Worms, Sefer ba-Roqueh, 218; Isaac ben Meir Dueran, Shavi’ati ha-Ra‘a, 18. The many versions of the tale attest to its popularity. Indeed, Nathan ha-Yarhi claimed that it appears in all the books of the world (Nathan ben Avraham ha-Yarhi, Sefer ba-Mankig, 546). Cf. the sexual relationship of Imma Shalom and Rabbi Eliezer in BT Nedarim 20b and Massekhet Kallah, 10, p. 137.
18. Ibid., 1:4, p. 6.
20. Menstrual impurity is described as the gravest form of impurity several times in the Zohar. See, for example, Zohar 2:3b. Yet the Zohar is often inconsistent. For example, one may also find references to the extreme gravity of corpse impurity.
21. Idel (1980, 1982) has found several exceptions to this general rule.
22. Scholem (1965, 104). Although there were many ways to describe the sefirotic realm, Yehuda Liebes notes that it is most often compared to a body, gufa, or to the limbs of primordial man. Liebes, “Ha-Zohar, ve-ha-Eros,” Alpayim, 99.
The Historical Context


25. A similar idea is found in Plato’s Symposium (1989, 189e–193). Parallels also are found in Jewish sources. See BT Berakhot 61a; Genesis Rabbah 8:1.


27. Scholars interpret the essence of the union between male and female in Kabbalah differently. Gershom Scholem (1987) contends that the goal of Kabbalah is to create an androgynous union (142; also Scholem [1961, 223, 227]). Moshe Idel (1989b) argues that there is a union between male and female in Kabbalah but that each sex retains its individual essence (211–12). Charles Mopsik (1986) suggests that the ultimate goal of sexual union in 'Iggeret ha-Qodesh is the unification of the sefirah of Hokhmah, with its female counterpart, Binah, in order to engender Da™ at (165, 186). Elliot Wolfson suggests that divine union in Kabbalah creates an androgynous male (1994a, 270–392; 1994b, 167–69, 185–86; 1995, 80–98; 1997a, 301–43; 1997b, 154–74).


31. For more on this text see Guberman (1984, 53–95), Harris (1962, 197–226). On the sanctity of sexual relations in the Zohar, see Zohar Hadash, Bereshit, 11a–11b.


33. 'Iggeret ha-Qodesh, 1:292–95.


35. On the nexus between divine vision and circumcision, see Wolfson (1987a, 1987).

36. Moses de Leon, Sheqel ha-Qodesh, 62, 63.

37. The author of the 'Iggeret ha-Qodesh is a subject of scholarly debate. Most recently, Charles Mopsik has reintroduced Gershon Scholem’s suggestion that the author was Joseph Gikatilla. For a review of the literature, see Mopsik (1986, 10–29).


39. This idea is first pronounced by Isaac ha-Kohen. See Scholem (1927, 249 n. 1, and 1987, 298).


41. We find that good and evil are attached to the Tree of Knowledge. Good is attached when the snake is outside, in his familiar place. Evil [is attached] when he enters the holy sanctuary. We find the [forces of] good and [the forces of] evil attached in one place. And by means of the matter known as the path (ba-derekh) they are joined on the Sabbath. And after you learn this know that God, may He be blessed, wrote in the Torah, “thou shalt not approach to a woman in the impurity of her menstrual flow” (Lev. 18:19). And it is written,
“and of her that is sick in her menstrual flow” (Lev. 15:33). And it is written, “but if she be cleansed of her issue [then she shall number to herself seven days, and after that she shall be clean” (Lev. 15:28). And it is written, “then you shall reckon their food as uncircumcised” (Lev. 19:23). “And in the fourth year [all its fruit shall be holy for praise-givings to the Lord” (Lev. 19:24)) this is the opposite. And it is written “in the fifth year [shall you eat of its fruit” (Lev. 19:25)], this is the woman.... (Joseph Gikatilla, Sod ba-Nahash, MS Bibliothèque Nationale 841, ff. 275b–276a).

44. The period of cleansing of the zavah is likened to fourth-year fruits that are consecrated to God.
45. Cf. Sha’arei Tsedek 10a, where Gikatilla explains that the biblical laws of zavah are more strict than those of niddah because the niddah’s flow is restricted to a certain cycle, whereas the zavah’s flow is not restricted to any temporal boundary (“out of place”). For this reason, zavot rather than niddot were banned from the camp of the Israelites in the desert (Num. 5:2).
48. Lev. 10:1–2; Zohar 3:23b (RM); cf. Zohar 2:110a (RM).
52. For a possible source of this motif, see Exodus Rabbah, 23:12, where an emancipated Israel is compared to a purified menstruant. Isaac of Acre (1981) similarly compares the Shekkinah’s menstrual state to the ‘omer (174, 241). See also Marcus (1996, 151 n. 29). Note that while the Shekkinah is portrayed as niddah in Egypt, terrestrial women are not. According to Midrash Tanhuma, Jewish women did not menstruate while in Egypt because their fear of the Egyptians interrupted their flow. Midrash Tanhuma, on Lev. 15:25, ed. Buber, 3:5:18, p. 27. On Egypt as a seat of demonic power, see Wolfson (1986, 33–34).
53. The waters that purify the lower divine female are those of the supreme female, Binah. See also Zohar 3:25b (RM).
55. The moon and Israel are related in talmudic literature, and from the known affinity between Israel and the Shekkinah, the Rabbis devised the following transitive relationship. If the moon is compared to Israel, which is identified with the
Shekhinah, then the moon is like the Shekhinah. This idea, introduced in BT Hullin 60b, is further developed in BT Sanhedrin 42a, where Rav Judah explains: “The moon, He ordered that it should renew herself as a crown of beauty for those whom He sustains from the womb (Israel). The moon is a sign to them that, as they reckon her days by it, they shall also renew themselves in their exile like the moon.” The text goes on to connect the Shekhinah and the moon directly by stating that whoever recites the benediction over the moon at its proper time welcomes the face of the Shekhinah. Liebes (1993a, 49), Wolfson (1997c, 245–53).

56. Reproduction and the menstrual cycle were linked to the moon in the Greco-Roman world, where the connection was referred to as a principle of sympathy. The relationship between the womb and the moon can be traced to magical amulets found in Egyptian, Jewish, and Babylonian traditions and continues to be discussed today. Aubart (1989), Eliade (1958, 154–85), Wolfson (1997c, n. 59). The connection between the lunar and menstrual cycles remains a subject of medical debate. See Cutler (1980).

57. Sefer Hasidim, ed. Margaliot, par. 1148, 571–72; Perush ha-Roqeah ‘al ha-Torah, 249; Liebes (1993a, 50). These motifs also appear in the non-Ashkenazic Pir-qi es Rabbi Eliaser, 45. The flow of terrestrial woman is also connected to the phases of the moon. Eleazar of Worms notes that just as the moon waxes for half the month and wanes for half, so too does the woman who sees blood separate from her husband for half of the month; just as the moon grows, the woman is pure for half of the month. Eleazar of Worms, Siddur Hasidei Ashkenaz, 2:393.

58. Liebes (1993a, 50). Glosses on BT Megillah 22b; BT Hagigah 18a; Rosh Ha-Shanah 23a. Eleazar of Worms notes, from Hemdat Yamim, 2:23d–24a, that is of particular interest. Women who do not work on Rosh Hodesh unite with their source, the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of the Godhead. Their failure to observe this convention will cause a blemish in the divine realm. See also Hayim Vital, Sha’ar ha-Kavanot, 76b, which reads: “On Rosh Hodesh there is no ascent at all [of the feminine] to [the masculine] Lower Countenance (Ze’ir Anpin), but the feminine alone ascends from gradation to gradation. By means of this you can understand the reason why women are forbidden to work on Rosh Hodesh and not men.” Cited by Wolfson (1997c, 257, n. 13).

59. Other aspects of the Shekhinah’s character were also represented by the moon. For example, the idea that the Shekhinah’s behavior depends on external influences derives from descriptions of the moon in medieval astronomy. Scholem (1976, 3:38, 381). See also Zohar 1:181a; 2:88b.


61. The Sefer T’amei ba-Mitzvot is divided into two parts. The first, the positive commandments, has been published; the second, the negative commandments, remains in manuscript. In most manuscript versions, the commandment to refrain from sexual relations with menstruating women is negative precept 45. For a discussion of the different versions of the Sefer T’amei ha-Mitzvot, see Altmann (1965, 256–76; 405–12), and Idel (1989a, 47–55). Nine of the thirteen manuscript versions of the Joseph Hamadan Sefer T’amei ba-Mitzvot identified by Altmann (1965, 256) contain the mystery of the niddah. These are:
1. Jerusalem 8°597, 1529, precept 45, ff. 177a–79b.
3. Vatican 177, dated 1551, precept 45, ff. 146a–48a.
5. Cambridge Dd 4.2.6, commandment 45 appears in a truncated form on ff. 170a–72b. The prohibition is divided into three mysteries: the need to keep away from a niddah, the need to have a ritual bath, and the meaning of the required forty se'ahs of water for the ritual bath.
6. JTS Adler 2391, 16th century, precept 45, ff. 177b–79b.

I use MS Jerusalem 8°597 as the base text for the discussion, citing varia when necessary.


63. This is not the only parallel between supernal man and woman and their human counterparts. Hamadan explains that just as the moon is illuminated and filled by the efflux of the sun, man enlightens woman. The parallel extends beyond sociology to biology. According to medieval theories of medicine adopted from the Greeks, men were made up of hot and dry elements; women, of cold and wet elements. This distribution of qualities also belongs to the cosmic order. The male sun rules during the day and is responsible for the growth of warm and dry vegetation; the moon rules during the night, freshening springs of water and promoting the growth of cold and wet plants. Hamadan, Sefer Ta'améi ha-Mitzvot, MS Jerusalem 8°597, f. 178a. There is an enormous literature on the influence of Greek medicine on medieval thought. For the ancient period, see Lloyd (1983). For the medieval period, see Green (1985), Jacquet and Thomasset (1988).

64. BT Hullin 60b; Zohar 1:168a–b, 252a. For a different interpretation, see Zohar 1:73b, where the sins of man cause the flaw in the moon.

65. The moon is often connected to the sitra ‘ará. Many sources blame the primordial serpent for inflicting a defect on the supernal moon. This idea parallels the midrashic motif of the earthly serpent instilling Eve with his filth (BT Shabbat 146a, BT Yevamot 103b, BT Avodah Zarah 22b). Hamadan mentions this idea in passing. For an extensive discussion of this motif, see chapter 5 of my dissertation, “The Woman from Whom God Wanders: The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism.”

66. The blessing over the new moon is therefore compared to the marriage ceremony (Qiddushin). Hamadan, Sefer Ta’améi ha-Mitzvot, MS Jerusalem 8°597, f. 178a. Hence, recitation of the prayer over the full moon was extremely important for Kabbalists. Many kabbalistic secrets (sodot) discuss this blessing.

67. Hamadan discusses this prescription in connection with the Nazirite vow in the middle of negative commandment 50, the reasons that Nazirites may not drink wine. He explains that the Rabbis limit the Nazirite vow to thirty days because this represents the cycle of the Shekhinah. The cycle of the moon is thirty days: for fifteen days she waxes and for fifteen days she wanes. This is like the cycle of the woman, which is thirty days. She is admitted to her husband for fifteen days and
must sit in her impurity for fifteen days. She is in the image of the supernal moon and of the lower moon, which governs for thirty days. Because the Nazirite state is intricately connected with the supernal woman, human women are permitted to become Nazirites (Num. 6:2). Joseph Hamadan, Sefer Ta’améi ha-Mitsvot, MS Jerusalem 8°597, f. 187a; MS Bibliothèque Nationale 850.3, ff. 230a–231b.

68. For a discussion of different types of valid water, see Maimonides, Hilkhot Miqva’ot. In Mishneh Torah, 11:1–12.

69. BT ‘Eruvin 4b; Maimonides, Hilkhot Miqva’ot 1:1; 4:2.

70. BT Baba Batra 65b; Maimonides, Hilkhot Miqva’ot 6:6.

71. Kabbalists often compare dynamic interplay in the heavenly realm and the process of emanation to rivers, streams, and fountains. Water flows from the hidden supernal source through the path of all the sefirot. The various streams meet at Yeasad and are filtered down to Shekinah. See, for example, Zohar 1:18a. The Shekinah is therefore often compared to the ocean or a well. Hamadan incorporates this association into the image of the Shekinah as a miqveh. However, the symbol of the supernal ritual bath is usually applied to the sefirah of Hesed, lovingkindness. See Moses de Leon (1648, par. 63), Zohar 3:54a; Menahem Recanati (1962, 12:1).

72. Cf. Zohar 1:244b, where Yeasad is described as a water-filled ritual bath (miqveh mayim).

73. Note that the Zohar compares seminal emission to a spring of water. Spring water is not drawn and could therefore be used in a miqveh. See Wolfson (1997a, 305). On male and female waters, see Wolfson (1996, 110–15; 227, n. 160; 228, n. 168).

74. Cf. Menahem Tsoni, Sefer Tsoni, 46a. The flow of divine energy reflects medieval medical theory. Just as medieval physicians believed that sperm originates in the brain and then flows through the torso to the penis, Kabbalists posited that the supernal efflux flows through the head of primordial man to Yeasad, the divine phallus.

75. On the significance of circumcision in Kabbalah, see Wolfson (1987a, 1987b).

76. Cf. Menahem Recanati (1880, 61c).

77. A se‘ah is a unit of measurement equaling 7.3 liters. Joseph Angelet relates the forty se’ahs of water of the miqveh to the waters of the Siloam Spring, Jerusalem’s ancient water source. Joseph Angelet, Livnat ba-Sappir, MS BM 771, f. 326b.

78. Menahem Recanati (1880), who bases his commentary on niddah on Hamadan, remarks that although he is not at liberty to disclose the meaning of the forty se’ahs of water, wise men will be able to deduce it from Exod. 24:18, (61c).

79. The written Torah is a symbol of Tiferet. Its secrets are brought to light by the oral Torah, the Shekinah. The comparison between the written Torah and a ritual bath in the passage is therefore significant. Tiferet not only purifies the Shekinah but, as the written Torah, also purifies Israel.

80. See Kushnir-Oron (1980, 82, 104). On Hamadan’s influence on the later strata of the Zohar, see Liebes 1993a, 103–10.


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After the expulsion of Jews from Spain at the end of the fifteenth century and the massacres of 1648 in eastern Europe, the center of gravity of European Judaism shifted toward central and eastern Europe, where successive waves of immigrants congregated around the “resident” nucleus. Demographically, the Jews, who originally settled in urban centers, were subsequently banished from some cities, and they migrated to smaller towns and rural villages. They were concentrated in some regions more than in others. In Poland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, geographic movements and demographic explosion together brought about changes in behavior and practices and forced the authorities to invent new strategies of living, designed to better contain and discipline the Jewish population, combat assimilationist tendencies, and reforge the unity of the Jewish people. Was not one of the leitmotifs of Jewish literature of the age standing guard against the danger of spreading ignorance, the relaxation of moral standards, and the non-observance of rites? It is in this unstable historical context that the evolution of wedding customs and conjugal life within Jewish society must be traced.¹

In this perspective, the behavior of women is more specifically targeted. The rabbinical authorities, sometimes seconded by women themselves, endeavored to make religious practice—especially those rites associated with niddah and the miqvei—more extreme. They did this through various approaches: the musar literature⁴ and tekhanim⁴ part of it written in the vernacular (Yiddish); and responsa, in Hebrew or Aramaic.⁴
The tendency in the Ashkenazi world to greater stringency in the laws dealing with menstrual impurity—at a time when, in the absence of a sufficiently sacred space, the other laws of ritual purity were deemed to have lapsed—is probably to be explained by the Jewish communities’ relationship with their host cultures. In the Muslim world, which evinced some rigidity with regard to menstrual prohibitions, Jews could allow themselves a degree of flexibility. In a Christian environment, on the other hand, the wish to differentiate themselves led to a stricter application of these laws. In eastern Europe during this period, women continued to be excluded from the centers of public religious life. Most did not know Hebrew, and many were illiterate, even in the vernacular. From the end of the seventeenth century, Ashkenazi Jews developed a voluminous Yiddish homiletic, ethical, and devotional literature for women. This was the period, too, when the tekhibhes first appeared and gained wide acceptance. To some extent, the emergence of this literature can be viewed as an advancement of the status of women; however, with all the treatises that insist on the importance of the role of the wife and the centrality of her religious obligations, it seems to us that this new literature was actually establishing tighter control of women. This type of control could be applied as much to women from affluent backgrounds, who had the time and means to obtain a certain level of education, as to those from more modest backgrounds.

In this essay, we shall try to show how the halakhic texts reveal the coincidence of the rabbinic and clinical view of the female body. Nonetheless, the two views moved in opposite directions—one toward the symbolic, the other toward the literal. This dual movement, centripetal and centrifugal, ultimately led to a silent control of women, substantial but limited. Women, caught between these two orders, were also creatures of the transition, the “smugglets.” These two orders, symbol and literal meaning, communicate, positively or through conflict, through the body and, with regard to the tekhibhes, through women’s speech—or more specifically, through a speech partially devoted to women about their own bodies.

**Responsa: Nostalgia or Transmission?**

An oral tradition is no more than a direct or indirect testimony. As such, it has a special relationship with the supposed truth of the past. The time of rituals or the life cycle, such as the female biological cycle, operates on a succession of begetting (toledot) and on a tradition (masoret), both of which are continually reworked and in which transmission is the driving force. The responsa constitute one of the fundamental materials of this transmission. We are not dealing with a fixed body of beliefs and practices...
transmitted intact from one generation to another. On the contrary, the writing and collecting of responsa implies a collective memory that is constantly being reorganized according to the givens of the present and future imagined by the group.  

When questions prove too difficult for local rabbis to answer or when the conceptual tools available to them are inadequate, they appeal to greater scholars. Their responses, once consigned to writing, have prescriptive halakhic authority. The responsa literature (she’elot u-teshuvot, “questions and answers”) fills more than three thousand volumes. Because it gives an idea of the types of problems that emerged on a day-to-day basis within a community, it also constitutes an inexhaustible mine of information and a tool for learning about the past. Hayyim Soloveitchik, for example, has studied the responsa of eleventh-century Ashkenazi of northern France and the Rhineland. Considering the possibility of using this literature as a historical source, he shows that the copies sometimes contain errors or have been transformed by a wish to convince or by a legalistic orientation. It is a question of working with remains. In this sense the procedures adopted by historians or anthropologists who investigate texts that have reached them after a complex itinerary and a sorting process that frequently cannot be reconstructed parallel those of archaeologists who also work with remains or vestiges. As Soloveitchik (1990) shows, the responsa are texts that preserve an echo, a reflection of irrevocably lost words, gestures, and situations. As such they provide us with precious testimony about the manner in which Jewish culture, in its own way, has defined the boundaries of the permissible and the forbidden, the standard and the deviant, the normal and pathological, the functional disorders and behavioral problems of society, the family, or the individual.

Here we shall present several responsa on niddah-related issues by four rabbinical authorities: Rabbis Yaakov ben Yosef Reischler, Yosef Shaul Nathanson, Israel Yehoshua Trunk, and Shalom Mordekhai ha-Kohen Schwadron, whose halakhic works cover the period from the end of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, in Galicia and several other regions of eastern Europe.

Rabbi Yaakov ben Yosef Reischler was born around 1670 in Prague, where he studied in his youth. He served as rabbi of several communities. His Shevut Yaakov was widely circulated. Yosef Shaul Nathanson was one of the best-known authors of responsa in the nineteenth century. Born in Berezhany, Galicia, and called to the rabbinate of Lemberg (Lvov), he was acclaimed one of the leading halakhic decisors of his generation, a great sage with a mastery of the Talmud and the works of the posekim (halakhic decisors). His six-volume collection of responsa, entitled Shovel u-mesbib, is recognized as halakhically authoritative. Israel Yehoshua Trunk (Plock...
[Poland], 1820–Kutno, 1893), was an adherent of the proto-Zionist Hibbat Ziyon movement and took part in the famous controversy (1888–1889) concerning the issuance of a rabbinical authorization (beter) to cultivate Jewish farmland in Eretz Israel during the sabbatical year (once every seven years, during which the land is supposed lie fallow). Rabbi Shalom Mordekhai ha-Kohen Schwadron, known as the Maharsham (Galicia, 1835–1911), was also considered one of the leading decisors of his generation. His fame spread through all the Jewish communities of Europe and America. His work dealt with problems of modern technology and industry and with the changes within Jewish society characteristic of the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.9

First, we present a responsum that epitomizes both the development and the contents of this type of material, which in that age and region dealt with questions raised by niddah. This very long text (15 typed pages) deserves to be quoted in full. But it is not our intention here to assume a diachronic perspective and deconstruct the intertextual mechanisms that support that rabbis’ reasoning, the give-and-take between the arguments of the Gemara, the responsa of various authors, Tractate Niddah, the Beit Yosef commentary, the Shulhan Arukh, and so on. Our objective is rather to understand, in a synchronic perspective, the interplay among rabbis, women, and physicians. We have made every effort to preserve the nonliterary character of the text. The responsum style is very representative and specific. It proceeds by way of allusions, concise references, and elliptical use of talmudic or halakhic concepts, with the assumption that the reader to whom it is addressed will understand them all. A typical text begins with a florid salutation and then presents the case in question, along with any analysis of it that the questioner himself may have made. The decisor then develops his own analysis, adducing many opinions by earlier authorities on similar questions to support his reasoning and analysis, using both metaphor and metonymy. Last but not least, the conclusion bears on the practical applications.

Responsum by Shalom Mordekhai Schwadron, the Maharsham (1835–1911), known as the gaon of Berezhany, I:13. To our most distinguished master, Rabbi Hayyim Zevi Ashkenazi, nero ya™ir [may his light shine forth], president of the rabbinical court of Psechevorsk:

Your letter has reached me. It deals with the case of a woman who has already been married six years, who married at the age of 17 and who, until that age, had never had a menstrual cycle. Her menarche appeared about one year after her marriage, following which she went to the miqveh. Several weeks later, she once again bled abundantly; then on several occasions she found stains and discharges of pus mixed with black and brown blood, so that she could not purify herself for several months.10 She subsequently went to Vienna to consult physicians. A senior professor
told her that she needed an operation. In the letter referring her to the hospital (which she still has) he explained that the woman was suffering from a complaint known as a polyp, which appears as a growth of fibrous and mucous tissues. The growth was excised and, in consequence, the [menstrual] bleeding and the discharges disappeared for about four months. The cycle then recurred, accompanied by staining. The next year she returned to the hospital and was told that the polyp had grown back. Once again they cleaned out the area and she had no blood for ten months. The cycle then reappeared, followed by staining, and her period came every five to six weeks, with a fluid and abundant flux of blood, as experienced by all women, but with no feeling that the neck of the womb has opened. She felt only a liquid discharge. The heavy bleeding was always followed by discharges of pus and mucus mixed with black or brown blood, without any other sensation. She also found stains of the same kind. Last year she went to Cracow, where the doctors cleaned out the area for a third time. She then recovered her health for five or six months. Her cycle recurred regularly every five weeks, although she could not remember if it was exactly the same day. However this may be, she never saw anything less than four weeks. She could thus count seven clean days and go to the *miqveh*. Last winter, however, the discharges and stains reappeared and consequently she was unable to purify herself. His eminence then sent her back to Cracow to consult the physicians there. Three of them, consulted separately, confirmed that the aforementioned complaint had indeed recurred and was the source of her discharges, and that it was not a case of menstrual bleeding. The first, however, stated that the polyp was located in the cervix, the second thought it was in the uterus itself, while the third was of opinion that it was located at the opening of the cervix at the beginning of the uterus.

Each doctor’s opinion was based on a manual examination, by means of a speculum they inserted, but also on their knowledge of the kinds of discharges and pus, on the strength of medical works. When they proceeded to operate they did in fact remove mucous tissue of a consistency that was compatible with the nature of the complaint. They said that it was common for polyps to keep growing back. These are the facts of the case.

His eminence has dwelt on the issue of the doctors’ credibility. He has cited the commentaries of the Hatam Sofer, chapters 158 and 175, as well as other *aharonim* (modern [post-sixteenth century] decisors), concerning the case mentioned in tractate *Niddah*, page 22 [a woman who has discharged clotted blood]. He has established that in such a case the doctors had provided theories as to the source of these clots; that the Sages had to examine whether this was really the case and did not rely on the doctors’ opinion; that the situation is entirely different when [the doctor] declares that such and such a person is sick, in which case we believe him. In any case, as far as treatment is concerned, there is room to question whether their knowledge is reliable. . . .

We also find, in connection with giving food to a sick person on Yom Kippur, that we rely on the doctor’s opinion, even if the sick person states that he can manage without eating. And we see that we frequently rely on the opinion of non-Jewish doctors and make [the sick person] eat at the doctors’ instructions. It therefore appears that according to him, we can rely on the diagnosis of non-Jewish doctors. . . .

In *Damesek Eliezer* on tractate *Hullin*, chapter 4, end of paragraph 14, I have found that he proves, based on the passage in *Hullin* that begins, “I asked the Sages and physicians,” that whenever it is a question of non-Jews, even though it follows directly from the laws of medicine, one cannot exclusively rely on them without
also consulting rabbinical authorities. For medical science with respect to humans cannot be compared to the prohibition of an animal. And it makes no difference whether the physician or the rabbi is consulted first.

The outcome of all this seems to be that for human beings one can rely on the physician, as we see in tractate Niddah: “They inquired of the Sages, who consulted with the physicians” and relied on their diagnosis. In the Hatam Sofer’s commentaries on Shabbat 61 and Avodah Zarah 31, however, I have found that he asks whether one must distinguish between the body of a non-Jew and that of a Jew, because it affects the body. But this needs further study. And in the responsa Shevut Yaakov I, 65–66, and Iyyun Yaakov on Sanhedrin 75, he writes that two doctors are necessary. . . .

The book Minhat Am by your teacher, Rabbi Aryeh Leib, rabbinical judge of Kamenetz, Lithuania, in Russia, reports the following case: “A woman had a regular cycle, but, each time, sometimes the flux would consist of thick blood and pus, sometimes of blood mixed with pus, and sometimes of just a trickle of blood. Eminent physicians established that her uterus was one open sore and seemed to be completely destroyed. The woman, for her part, was unaware of anything, except for the pain that persisted at that spot. Whereas in our case, if her condition triggered bleeding outside her regular period, the woman knew about it only because of the doctors. . . .

“The case of this woman is extremely unusual. None of the responsa on questions of niddah offer a comparable case. The woman went to Königsberg, where eminent physicians consulted and agreed on the following diagnosis: A piece of fabric must be located in her uterus and had caused the deterioration of the mucous membranes and the uterus to the extent that, as a result of the wounds and lesions, the condition of the uterus had seriously degenerated. She was treated to force the uterus to dilate, as in birth, and she expelled a piece of rough linen cloth that had become lodged there. The doctors were then able to establish that, during her last confinement, the midwife had inserted a piece of thick and rough fabric to absorb the blood that she was losing. Her uterus, still being open, had pulled in the cloth, which had caused an inflammation of the uterus and the serious lesions from which she suffered, which no doubt caused the losses of blood. When I heard this I was extremely gratified.” Thus far the text of Minhat Am. . . .

There is, however, room to say that the above applies only in the case of Jewish doctors, cf. Mitzvat Nashim at the end of Kunteras Aharon: One might perhaps have to consider whether Jewish doctors of our present age who transgress the Sabbath in public can be considered to be trustworthy.

If two of them testify separately, however, it would seem that one can accept their opinion, particularly if the facts also seem to point in the same direction.

Now his eminence has pointed out that, in our case, the woman has no sensation at the time of her cycle except for that of a fluid discharge. This, according to several modern decisors, cannot be considered a sensation, because only when the neck of the uterus opens can there be a sensation. . . .

In any case, if one adds to this the fact that the appearance of the blood is different from that of the menstrual flux, it may be assumed that the woman is clean, as in the passage from the Hatam Sofer cited above. And this being so, it must also be so in the case of the woman whose case we are discussing. . . .

As far as the examination preceding the seven clean days and the seven clean days themselves are concerned, his eminence has correctly replied that she must count at least one clean day and if, unfortunately, this too proves impossible, I
wrote in the aforementioned responsum that one may be lenient in this case and the woman may simply clean the area without probing into every crevice. . . . I have seen, in the new edition of Rosh Hama'mad on tractate Zevahim, page 35, which was sent to me by its author, that he criticizes this opinion on the grounds that a liquid cannot constitute an intervening object. He has overlooked, however, the explicit passage of the Talmud, Zevahim 78b, as well as the commentaries of Rashi and Tosefot, to the effect that cold and thick saliva may constitute an intervening object even with another liquid, and all the more so in the case of body fluids. Having said this, the opinion of Sidrei Taharah cited above must be accepted with caution, because who can know whether the blood is in contact with the flesh. But since in our case there is a wound, we can say that here there is a double doubt, which favors our opinion. I have written what in my humble opinion appears to be the correct answer.

The extremely dense text of this responsum is a clear demonstration of the interplay among a number of registers that we shall discuss below, namely, the question of the control and “channeling” of body fluids and discharges, whether natural or pathological; the relationship between physicians and rabbis; the emergence of the clinical point of view and its convergence with the rabbinical one. Note, however, that for any given period one must take into account the various modes of life within a socially differentiated group, even if it is unified by a common worldview. What is written here between the lines is the manner in which women view and experience their own bodies, an experience whose echoes can also be found in other texts such as the tekhinot.

Niddah, or the Construction of a Symbolic Order

Every social group is confronted with the problem of an equilibrium of the world, derived from the irrefutable fact of the anatomical and physiological differences between the sexes. Female time follows a biological rhythm and that of the family microcosm. Women’s position in the reproductive cycle endows them with actual or potential power. This power must be channeled. The attitude of submission must be inculcated all the more forcefully in proportion as the woman’s position as genetrix—in so far as it is not irrevocably inscribed in the cultural register11—places her dangerously close to the uncontrolled forces of what is perceived as savage nature:

If women in particular need education, it is because they are periodic creatures. In this capacity they are constantly threatened—and the universe with them—by the two possibilities we have just mentioned: either their periodic rhythm slows down and immobilizes the course of events; or it speeds up and precipitates the world into chaos. For one can just as easily imagine that women cease giving birth and having periods, as that they bleed constantly and deliver at every available opportunity.12
Motherhood and women’s biological cycle place them on the side of possible chaos, whereas paternity and the cognomen “father” place men on the side of the Law. Hence, women must be educated to respect the proper distance and must be confined to the positions and places that best guarantee that that distance is maintained. To the ungovernable biological rhythm of the menstrual days, the niddah interval associates seven “clean” days, immutably fixed, like the time of culture or the “surnature.” Although the consistency of these rules and laws may be disturbed by random events, the space of the house and of the migveh continues to guide women’s actions, whether cyclical or daily, ritual or recurrent. Like men, women have their cults and rituals; in Judaism, however, verticality, time, and genealogy appertain essentially to men, whereas the lateral and horizontal order of places relates rather to women.

Women, much more than men, are viewed as the disturbing sources of flux, since from time to time they bleed, give birth, and nurse. One must at all costs shield oneself from their excesses and if possible shield oneself among men. In certain cases, women will make so bold as to attempt to share the responsibility for “disorder” with their husbands; then the role of the decisor is to put her in her place, on both the social and cosmic levels.

From the eminent rabbi, Mahavran Yudah Miller, of the province of Dayatch, in the matter of a woman who found blood after sexual relations, when she wiped herself off on her inspection cloth. Because her period was not due, she wondered if perhaps her husband was responsible, that is, that the blood had come from him when he urinated. In the urine receptacle there was a redness similar to the stain that the woman had found on her cloth after sexual relations. Here the presentation of the question ends. The text is obscure and I have written him asking for further details, although at first sight there seems to be no reason to cast responsibility on the husband.

Women are specifically enjoined to perform three mitzvot, even though they are as a rule exempt from time-dependent positive precepts (mitzvot aseh she-ba-zeman geramah): the commandments to set aside a piece of the dough (hallah), to kindle the Sabbath lights, and to observe the laws of niddah.

Prescriptions and prohibitions are the expressions of division. Theirs is an ambiguous function: on the one hand they mark a limit, but on the other hand they open onto the space of transgression, or averah. There is no corporeality without this spatial limit, nor social space without a body that enrobes it. Body and space mirror each other, reflecting visions of the world and the specific relationship among the members or groups of a particular society.

Regarding a woman who has clearly had sexual relations when she was niddah, what is the balakhab on this subject?
The answer to this *balakhab* is found in the Babylonian Talmud and the first decisors. Your question is very obscure: Were there kosher [legally valid] witnesses, or did she herself listen to my words, or has she been turned away by the rabbinical court—since in a situation of this kind there can be no witnesses, it being a private affair? If, however, other women or a maidservant was present in the house, the testimony of a woman on this subject can be trustworthy . . . inasmuch as only women can know what happens with respect to other women in this matter.\(^{20}\)

The list of prescriptions and prohibitions regarding discharges from the female body was first elaborated in the Tanakh in the Levitical legislation on the laws of purity,\(^ {21}\) amplified in the Mishna, allocated an entire tractate in the Talmud, codified in greater detail in the Shulhan Arukh, and further refined in the responsa literature. Without limiting ourselves to a purely culturalist approach, it does, however, seem necessary to try to articulate, for the period we are examining, the economic and cultural adjustments and changes that the Jews of this region experienced, triggered, or were exposed to, with the clear, “archived,” and ritualized vision of the modes of operation, maintenance, perpetuation, and transmission of tradition.

*Niddah*, from the verb *lenadot* (to distance, drive away, banish), places us in a problematic of the “separation” that is required to keep the created world from reverting to chaos.\(^ {22}\) In Jewish society the distinction between nature and culture is very carefully defined through a transcendence whose symbolic register is inscribed on the biological body. It is perhaps for this reason that Jewish society can continually be exposed to the difference of other cultures without its orders being radically shaken.

A cultural grammar is founded on the opposition between identical and different, on the classification of objects in one or the other category, and on the movements that affect these objects by virtue of the characters attributed to them as a function of their classification within a category. Thus, the concepts of impurity and purity—*tum'ah* and *taharah*—were originally linked to the Sanctuary and then to the Temple,\(^ {23}\) entry to which was regulated by a series of complex laws applying to both women and men. Certain emissions of bodily fluids, as well as contact with impure objects or with the dead, engendered states of impurity that had to be remedied by various processes of purification, including offerings, sacrifices, and immersion. Basically, a physical experience associated with noncreative aspects of life leads to a disjunction with the universe of the creation. The union, the connection must be reinstated by an immersion, that is, by contact with another transitional fluid, which represents reintegration with the force of life.

With respect to the power of [blood] stains to confer a state of impurity, something that is no longer applicable today, I am surprised to have found in the Rif [R. Yitzhak Alfasi, a medieval commentator on the Talmud] (tractate *Shabbat*, chapter
“These are the knots” (chap. 15) a comment on the prohibition that a Sage not wear a doubtful garment [in terms of cleanliness]. I would suggest that the reference is to bloodstains that might arouse suspicion of his having had relations with a woman who is in the state of niddah [the surprise is because nowadays blood stains on clothing do not as such render a person impure]. The prohibition against wearing [red] garments would then be to make it easier to distinguish blood stains and thereby to detect a cause of impurity (when, as formerly, stains transmitted impurity, as in the period of the Temple when repurification was necessary before entering the Temple or touching “consecrated” produce, or later in Babylonia, where some of these rules continued to be observed).24

The niddah laws were preserved after the destruction of the Temple, when all other forms of tum'ah related to discharges of corporeal fluids lapsed.25 For Rachel Adler (1976) tum'ah represents the confrontation with our mortality, whereas tahara is the reaffirmation of our immortality and our reinstatement to the light.

“The point at which tum'at niddah was isolated from the general category of tum'ah and made a special case was a point at which pathology entered halakha. At that point, tum'at niddah became divorced from the symbolism of death and resurrection and required a new significance related to its accompanying sexual prohibitions.

“Whereas tum'at niddah had been a way for women to experience death and rebirth through the cycle of their own bodies, it became distorted into a method of controlling the fearsome power of sexual desire, of disciplining a mistrusted physical drive.

“The change was also related to an aesthetic horror of the female body. While in the classical sources, corpse tum'ah and tum'at tzara'at were the most severe forms—that is, the most intensely communicable and requiring the most complex ritual for their removal—tum'at niddah suddenly became, in practice, the severest form of tum'ah.”26

In this perspective, the domains of permitted and forbidden, with regard to sexuality, are determined not so much by the goal of procreation as by the need for a moralizing and disciplinary purity that allows the rabbinical order to exercise almost unlimited control of women’s behavior. Caught in a male trap, they are considered to have “gone astray” if they escape it.

Sunday, Parshat Va-yakhel, 15 Adar 1889
To my esteemed friend, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Dometz, of the community of Silmovitch near Radamsk.

. . . On the outermost boundaries of female impurity. The case is that of a woman who informed me that she does not immerse herself when niddah. You sent someone to speak to her and she informed you that the truth is that she has not performed ritual immersion for several years now, or at least not more than three
times, and that they had relations only after the days of niddah and clean days had elapsed, but without her immersing, and . . . asked her why she did not immerse. She answered that she did not know that immersion was so important. As a result she is suspect with regard to the prohibition of niddah as well with regard to not having announced the days of niddah and the counting of days, since most women have regular periods and know that their husband knows their days of impurity and purity; but if the order [of the menstrual period] changes, in particular due to stains, she would hide this from her husband. The latter reasonably enough wanted to “live with her”; she swore to her husband that she had just been to a special house of immersion and the husband asked if she had been there. There is therefore no reason to find him lacking. It is proper that the rabbinical court inform the husband that it would be a great mitzvah for him to divorce [his wife], because it is clear that she deceived him, and since he does not have to pay her ketubah, he may keep the debt in a safe place."

The concepts of defilement, of sin, and of purity and impurity add a moral connotation to the original concept of imbalance, danger, and a possible and necessary separation. They are grafted onto the original concept without replacing it. Hygiene ushers in or at least reinforces a new order. The literature of the decisors, the posqei halakhah, who are reluctant to admit the positive value of conjugal life and tend to view it as a shameful necessity, shifts from the symbolism of tumah-taharah to that of purity-purification, and then to the new order of hygiene.

From Sign to Sign, from Rabbi to Doctor: The Birth of Clinical Medicine

From their profound relationship with the spaces of life, death, joy, and suffering, where bodies are made and unmade, women drew knowledge about and power over illness. The history of the exclusion of women from the medical order, of the eclipsing of their knowledge and practice, is that of the progressive intensification of their subjugation to the masculine order. In these responsa we note that the bulk of the effort of control on women is a play between religious and medical or “traditional” authorities who, in varying degrees, possess a knowledge of the female bodies that is denied to the women themselves.

This question was sent by my mebutan, Shmuel Zangwill of Alsace, about a woman who was struck by a beam falling from a veranda five or six years ago. Since then she finds blood every day and at all hours. This woman maintains that all the blood she is losing comes from this wound and not from any other place. Since then she has no longer had a regular period. Sometimes, though, she has a headache and her limbs ache, and she feels a pain “similar to menstrual cramps” around the time when she ought to be getting her periods; but the blood comes from the same
wound she suffered when the beam fell on her from the veranda. She has no sensation of blood originating from any other place; she hemorrhages most during the day and only a little bit at night; sometimes, too, she finds blood stains. When she notes that she is impure, she asks the old women. They told her that she can go to the miqveh without counting the seven “clean” days and that she was permitted to her husband. She acted according to the old women’s instructions. She found herself pregnant and gave birth. After the postpartum unclean days she went to the miqveh and had conjugal relations as before. During her pregnancy she hardly ever saw a bloody discharge, but when she nursed she had one all the time. She continued to act in this way until she had brought three children into the world. Today a spirit of purity has entered her. She decided to inquire of the Elders and Sages. She wants to know if she acted in accordance with the law by listening to the old women’s advice. She does not want to immerse herself until she knows whether she did it in accordance with the rules of the law and religion of our holy Torah. End of question.

During the Jewish Middle Ages, from Asaph to Maimonides, the rabbi and halakhic decisor was often also a physician. Moreover, gynecology was one of the most developed branches of Jewish medicine. There are at least fifteen such treatises, most of them in Judeo-Arabic, including The Book of Dinah, which gives details of the treatment of numerous female maladies.

Starting in the seventeenth century, but particularly in the eighteenth century, with the birth of the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment) and in the nineteenth century, medical authority became divorced from religious authority. In the Jewish world, both retained considerable importance, however. The conflict between the divine and the human aspects of health is reflected in all the sources. The question that arose was which opinion carried greater weight, that of the medical authorities or that of the religious ones. Decisors had to request clinical opinions from physicians. But doubts, tensions, and even quarrels between the two communities sometimes erupted and left their mark. In the difficult case of the responsum that we cited at length, the young woman must have come from a sufficiently affluent milieu to be able to undertake frequent trips from the Pschevorsk region to Vienna, to consult physicians and a practitioner whom the rabbi readily refers to as “a senior professor.” She underwent several surgical procedures at the hospital in Cracow, which was evidently closer to her home. There she was examined, operated on, and curetted by several physicians, whose diagnosis was forwarded to the rabbis. The latter evaluated the professional opinion by the yardstick of halakhic knowledge. Rather than the nature of the discharges, what was at stake here was the reliability of the physicians’ sight and speech.

According to Michel Foucault, the end of the eighteenth century marked the birth of modern medicine, that is, clinical medicine, which is a science dealing essentially with the sensory field and the practice of medical sight
For this discipline, it is not the conception of disease that was changed but the ways to diagnose it. There is a disturbing correspondence between this clinical sight and the halakhic one that indicates and prescribes a guide for women through the world of the signs of their bodily discharges—their color, frequency, rhythm, and duration—and that of the talmudic rabbis, who could distinguish among sixty types of blood. This may partly explain the overrepresentation of Jews in the medical profession, especially among gynecologists.

The practice of clinical observation developed from increased control of the body through different power mechanisms. Blood, with its various manifestations and rituals, is a major element in these power mechanisms.

Learning to interpret the signs of niddah implies a more or less intense control of women’s bodies—by the old women who transmit their knowledge to the younger women, by the rabbis who must always be consulted when there is the slightest doubt and whose knowledge accordingly increases from case to case and generation to generation, and (since the eighteenth century, especially after the emergence of clinical medicine) by physicians. The state of niddah and the modalities of control, medical and rabbinical, seem to occupy a zone that derives from two distinct but paradoxically convergent logics. The oversight of women’s bodies returns women to their place in the cosmic order and symbolic register and, by managing the women’s sexuality and fertility, as well as the health of their children and the well-being of their families, to the register of meaning.

It is a painful paradox that women’s bodies, which were traditionally supposed to be totally concealed from scrutiny, are at the same time the most exposed, passing brutally from the modesty of the veil to an obscenity that is imposed in the name of the selfsame modesty. For if this knowledge is transmitted in the intimacy of the “sorority,” it is valid only when the authorities receive surety for it. The same applies to the decoding of the signs of niddah. Even if women have learned to detect these signs, only the rabbis, sometimes in collusion with the doctors, are capable of organizing them and giving them a legalistic stamp. Through the lens of the responsa we see women being sent to and fro, from rabbi to physician, from physician to hospital, from one physician to another, from physician to rabbi, from old women to rabbis and to physicians—circumcised and uncircumcised—on a merry-go-round that never stops, with all of them treating women’s bodies as clinical objects, in their most concrete corporeality. The dialogue conducted about their bodies ultimately leaves the women in the corner. They become the subjects of debates among men, the objects of medical opinions versus rabbinical ones, of disagreements (in Hebrew or Aramaic) among the rabbis themselves, and finally, starting in the eighteenth century, of the opinions of clinicians, who also are able, in their own
way, to “distinguish among sixty types of blood.” Thus, women find themselves doubly trapped by these dual orders of the custodians of “truth,” by these two systems that concurred to relegate them to their “proper place.”

From Symbol to Meaning: The Power of Women

There seems to be no doubt that the female body is manipulated and anatomized by the centers of power, that it constitutes the substrate of all sorts of strategies, that the very subjectivity that organizes how it is perceived is modeled by the social order and structured by group affiliations. But the question remains: How are we to account for the way in which the forces of life are revealed behind these apprenticeships, anatomizations, dispossession, techniques, and strategies? How are we to speak of suffering and pleasure, of the joy of being, without which this entire scene, in which the body plays the leading role, could not take place? According to the rabbinical texts and the interpretations of the masar sages, menstruation is a punishment for and reminder of Eve’s transgression. The blood represents a “measure for measure,” since, by tasting the forbidden fruit and then getting her husband to do so, she condemned him to death. In this context, immersion is seen as an act of repentance.

In the tekhines, by contrast, observance of the mitzvot specific to women is tied up with fertility rather than penitence. The word of death is transformed into an affirmation of life. This is apparent in two tekhines relating to niddah from the Seder tekhines u-vakoshes, first published around 1750 but considered to have far older roots. The tekinah to be recited before ritual immersion draws on a vocabulary of purity and cleanliness:

“God, my God, please consider my cleansing, purification, and immersion as equivalent before You to all the purifications of all the pious women of Israel who purify themselves and immerse at the correct time” (Tekhines 1648, no. 14; Seder tekhines u’vakoshes [1762, no. 92], in Weissler, 1987).

This prayer shows that observance of the precepts of niddah relates to two registers: the cycle of reproduction and, even though a woman’s self-inspection, counting of the “clean days,” and immersion are private acts, to the community of “all the pious women of Israel,” among whom she constitutes a link in the chain of intergenerational transmission.

The tekinah to be recited after immersion focuses on the wish for a pious male descendant, a learned son, or a female, a well-behaved daughter:

God, my God, I,———daughter of———, have observed Your commandment today with love, and have purified myself from my “uncleanness,” so that I can attain a state of purity and have sexual relations with my husband, in a state of cleanliness...
and pure thoughts, in order to lead my husband to be well-disposed to fulfill Your commandments to multiply and fill the world [cf. Genesis 1:28]. O Gracious God, send Your angels to meet me before I join my husband and preserve me from encountering anything unclean. Purify my heart and thoughts so that I think of nothing untoward while making love with him, and may all his desire be of great purity, and not unchaste and brazen. Send me a good angel to wait in my inner recesses and carry the seed before You, Almighty God, for You to pronounce that from this seed there emerge a just man, a pious man, who fears Your holy name, who keeps Your commandments, and finds favor in Your eyes and in those of the entire nation, who will study Torah day and night, who will never be put to shame in the rabbinical college and will never err in halakhah. And if it must be a girl, grant that she be well-mannered and not impudent, and that she learn to accept the corrections of all who teach her. (Seder tekhines, 1752, 9b; Seder Tekhines u-vakoshes, [1762, no. 93]).

The authors of the tekhines want to know why women suffer, not why they bleed; the blood itself does not disgust them even if in most cases they are men. By the same token, nothing in these texts suggests that they question their status in society. The questions are more on the metaphysical order. It is clear that the halakhic decisors speak as men, whereas the women (or the men speaking for the women) in the tekhines express a different attitude toward the female body and ask different types of questions. While accepting, in general, the halakhic regulations that govern sexual behavior, the women introduce a more emotional approach, asking questions about the legitimacy of physical suffering, previously and traditionally interpreted as punishment for Eve’s sin.

The responsa imprison the female body behind a screen of sensations, signs, and clinical manifestations. But in the face of the reifying word and scrutiny of men—rabbis or physicians—women nevertheless reappropriate their feelings and sensations and a symbolic space where they can rediscover a subjective delight. From text to text, the responsa on niddah reduce women, bodies imprisoned in the body of a text, to the stark nudity of signs. It is not at all paradoxical that it is through the tekhines, whose words restore them to their own corporeality, that they can experience the depth of their own lived experience.

NOTES

2. Other articles in this volume explain the basic laws governing marital sexual behavior: the prohibition on conjugal relations a little before and during menstruation as well as during the seven “clean” (no sign of blood) days following the monthly period. At the end of this week the woman immerses herself in the ritual bath, or mikveh, after which normal marital relations may be resumed until shortly before the expected onset of her next period.
3. The ethical literature, including works on morality, composed in Hebrew and to a lesser extent, in Yiddish, during the period we are dealing with.

4. Supplicatory prayers in Yiddish, intended to be recited by women and often written by them.

5. We shall explain the responsa below.

6. This idea has been developed by Samuel Cooper (1990, 11). We take it up “à la lettre,” as a simple hypothesis whose subject should be deepened further. This idea goes along the lines of what Jose Faur (1992) is writing about Islamic Spain; he has developed a strategy of biculturalism in opposition to Western civilization, including Christian Spain, which has not allowed the minorities to participate in its culture or to adopt its key symbols. In reaction, there has been a rigid withdrawal of their own cultural values (93–95).

7. Rachel Adler (1976) mentions the existence of a popular oral female devotional tradition that circulated alongside these texts until the early twentieth century.


9. The responsa texts were studied by means of the CD-ROM, *Bar Ilan’s Judaic Library, Responsa Project* (Bar Ilan University, version 3.0, 1994).

10. The halakhah, as currently codified (and briefly sketched out in note 2, above), is that sexual relations and all other associated intimate relations are forbidden from the moment the woman anticipates her period, throughout the actual course of menstruation (at least five days) plus the seven “clean” days during which no sign of blood may be detected. On the evening of the seventh clean day the woman immerses herself in *miqve*; thereafter, normal marital relations may resume until the appearance of the next period. The sages and decisors distinguish between various types of blood, as the responsum shows. A show of blood may lead to a woman’s being considered *niddah* and therefore required to count seven “clean” days. But it may also be related to an external cause. In such a case, the woman is not impure and can immerse herself as soon as the bleeding stops. A large number of responsa, including those presented here, deal with this subject, which was and remains of extreme importance in conjugal life.

11. The first of the 613 commandments governing the existence of the practicing Jew is that of procreation—“Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it” (Gen. 1:22, 28)—stated on the fifth day of Creation for animals and on the sixth day for human beings. From the third chapter of Genesis on, the lot of the woman, *isha*—henceforth named Eve, the mother of all living beings—is defined as punishment for her transgression, as suffering in childbirth and a sexuality dominated by the male. “And to the woman He said, ‘I will make most severe your pangs in childbearing; in pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you’” (Gen. 3:16).


13. In Jewish tradition the seven “clean” days that women must count after their monthly flow before immersing in the *miqve* and resuming marital relations are also considered an indication that female time is in natural time. The seven days correspond to the days of Creation; the eighth day, to the supernatural.

14. The paternal relationship is less evident than the maternal one. It is therefore not surprising that, for example, circumcision has become the major symbol of the Covenant, especially in the context of the Levitical community. It effectively allows men to assume an intergenerational link with their male offspring. Circumcision also establishes a contrast between the world of men and that of
women. The blood—pure, masculine blood—of a male child is shed exactly at the moment when he passes out of the state of maximum impurity caused during birth by the mother’s blood. Note, incidentally, that, for a newborn male, blood is the symbol of the patrilineal lineage; whereas, for a newborn female, it symbolizes menstrual blood and postpartum bleeding and is associated with transgressions of the laws of sexuality, such as incest, homosexuality, and bestiality.

15. The white cloth the woman used to check her vulva for blood.


17. The precepts, or mitzvot, of the halakhic system fall into two groups: mitzvot aseh, or positive precepts (“Do this!”) and mitzvot lo ta’aseh, or negative commandments (“Don’t do that!”). The first group is further subdivided into those precepts that must be performed at a particular time (mitzvot aseh she-ha-zeman geramah) and precepts that can be fulfilled at any time.

18. When a woman bakes bread and pastry, she is enjoined to separate out a portion of the dough. In ancient times this was destined for the priests, as stated in Numbers 15:20: “As the first yield of your baking, you shall set aside a loaf as a gift E.E. to the Lord.” Today women break off a small piece of the dough and consign it to the flames.

19. The Sabbath lights are kindled “between the two luminaries,” bein hashemashot, at twilight, between light and darkness, at the juncture between the sixth and seventh days. Female time is an intermediate time, a time of transition. For a discussion of female time, see Samuel Cooper (1990b).


21. The laws of ritual purity originally applied equally to men and women.

22. In much the same way, the root of the word qodesh (sacred) also refers to separation.

23. The concepts of tumah and taharah, usually rendered “purity” and “impurity,” really refer to broader categories of the sacred and the profane and their mode of contact, rather than to cleanliness and contamination, as the advent in the Western world of an era of medicalization and hygiene would lead us to believe.


25. Some forms of impurity have been maintained, such as those related to the death and funeral rituals. The priests, cohanim in particular, are kept strictly away from contacts with this sort of impurity.


27. Yetzerot Malko, 70,51.


29. Mehutan: The father-in-law of one’s son or daughter.

30. The situation has not really changed to this day. A friend of ours, a gynecologist in Jerusalem, told us about the perplexity of a young patient of hers whose rabbi referred her to an elderly woman, who was sanctioned by the religious authorities but had no medical education, who conducted a gynecological examination to determine the origin of a bloody discharge. The category of “old women” found in this responsum seems to occupy an intermediate place between the cyclical biological time of woman and the linear time of men.

31. In other words, the old women concluded that the blood was a result of her wound, not menstrual blood.

32. Postpartum blood is in the same category as menstrual blood. After childbirth a woman is impure, like a menstruating woman—for two weeks if she bore a girl but for only one week if she bore a boy who, through the male blood of circum-
cision, is detached from the maximum impurity of female postpartum blood. When girls are born, the conjunction of the identical doubles the length of the two stages of impurity.

33. That is, relying on the opinion of the old women and considering that the blood was not niddah blood, hence not counting the seven “clean” days before ritual immersion and the resumption of sexual relations.

34. Shevit Yaakov, 3, 81.


36. This includes the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and halakhic works like those we are examining. Jewish doctors were not welcome in all medical specialties, however; surgery and internal medicine were only partly open to them. See Samuel S. Kottek (1995, 33).

37. Ibid., 39; see also the text of the responsa of Maharsham, I:13.

38. The region of Pshevorsk was probably in Galicia, less than 100 kilometers from Cracow (we cannot be certain because place names have changed over time as a function of territorial and political vicissitudes).


40. “One day Ifra Hormiz, the mother of King Shabur, sent some blood to Rava; R. Obadiah was sitting with him. After sniffing it, he said, ‘This is the blood of lust.’ She said to her son, ‘Look how wise the Jews are.’ He said, ‘Maybe it is like a blind person [walking] into a skylight’ [i.e., it was pure luck]. Thereupon she sent him sixty different types of blood, all of which he identified except the last, which was louse blood” (BT Niddah 20b).


42. See above responsa of Rabbi Yaakov bar Yosef Reischler.

43. See in the responsa, quoted at length above, the passage concerning the accumulation of knowledge from the time of the medieval decisors, the rishonim, until that of contemporary rabbis, for whom comparable clinical cases sound an echo:

... He adduces a reply by Beit Shammai on the issue... I have found in the responsa Tashbatz, in the reply to Rabbi Doran... and have found in the reply of the Maharash that the blood does not originate from the uterus, that there is some doubt, and that the change in the appearance of the blood itself proves the correctness of the doctors’ opinions. One must also add to the Rakhakh’s reply in the Kunteras She‘elot Hakham, that she sees without feeling, according to the doctors... Another decisor from Kraminetz in Lithuania has brought the case of woman who has a regular cycle but had a daily discharge of blood mixed with pus. ...

44. Foucault (1967, 116).


46. Ibid., 106.

47. Here the woman inserts her own name; this is an “interactive” prayer.


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PART II
The Ethnographic and Anthropological Tradition

After looking at the different practices, contentions, and beliefs of Jewish women in past centuries, let us turn to how these laws are understood, used, and contested in the modern period. The anthropological tradition seeks to broaden our understanding of human life by recording and putting into context the practices and beliefs of women as expressed in their own words. The anthropological method has been under fire in the past decades, and the authority of the anthropological recording has been contested. Where are the women? Who has the right to speak for different groups? In this section all but one of the authors are Jewish women speaking for other Jewish women. While I know that this in itself is not a proof of good work—we might have misinterpreted our women informants’ voices—I still believe that we are mostly interested not in the introspection of the anthropologist and in her angst of recording and giving meaning but in her informants’ lives. The aim of the anthropological work is to produce a certain kind of cultural knowledge. This knowledge, which comes from spending time with one’s informants even if one dislikes them, will help shape a humanistic project of living in a postmodern world while both honoring cultural difference and seeking political parity.

The anthropologists who contributed to this section used the basic method of spending time and living with their informants. Formal and informal interviewing as well as observing and recording the women’s practices were their main tools. In the following pages, Jewish women living in different countries talk, expressing their views concerning niddah, purity, sex, and identity. The women’s practices of niddah (not to be conflated with the laws of niddah), as contested as they have been, still seem to be a very important venue for expressing one’s connection to the Jewish tradition(s). In the Diaspora, niddah and miqveh seem to be an arena in which symbols of Jewishness (collective and personal) are played out (Jacobs, Allouche-Benayoun, Marmon, Wasserfall). In contemporary
Israel, although niddah might still be perceived by women within the context of personal identity, miqveh has become a locus of contest between women’s sense of religiosity and the hegemonic rabbinic definition of religiosity (Anteby, Sered). In contemporary Israel, miqveh mirrors problems of wider power imbalance between different groups.
Introduction

In discourses of female purity, themes of gender, hierarchy, and social control tend to become prominent. On the most obvious levels, purity and impurity frame cosmological, moral, and spiritual hierarchies; and female and male frame social, political, and symbolic hierarchies. From an anthropological perspective the perpetuation of hierarchy is not a given but rather an ongoing process that involves both symbolic and pragmatic manipulations of power and authority. In this chapter, I look at a ritual event—miqveh parties—in which questions of hegemony and hierarchy are brought into sharp focus.

In Israel all weddings are conducted by religious officials who are selected and supervised by the state. For Jews who marry in Israel, it is obligatory to go along with a variety of ritual practices that, while often meaningless and sometimes even offensive to the bride and groom, are mandated by the Israeli Religious Authority. Specifically, brides are required to dip in the miqveh before the wedding and to bring a note attesting to their ritual purity from the balanit (miqveh attendant) to the rabbi who conducts the wedding.

In addition to these required, state-controlled miqveh observances, some Jewish ethnic groups in Israel continue to carry out traditional, voluntary prenuptial miqveh ceremonies. Miqveh parties, among a number of Jewish ethnic communities, customarily have been celebrated the night before a wedding. The bride, accompanied by female friends and relatives,
visits the *miqveh* to purify herself prior to engaging in conjugal relations on her wedding night. Particularly among North African Jewish women, the *miqveh* party can be a vibrant and exciting affair at which tasty foods are served and traditional (sometimes bawdy) songs are sung. The central act of this ceremony consists of the bride disrobing and immersing in the *miqveh*, in the presence of the future mother-in-law and a small number of female relatives. These parties continue to take place today in Israel on the evening of the bride’s obligatory immersion.

In Jerusalem (and presumably in other Israeli towns and cities) the Religious Authority—that is, the government agency that, among other duties, funds and administers *miqvaoth*—has made some rather unsuccessful efforts to curtail or abolish *miqveh* parties. However, North African and Asian women, who in other matters willingly go along with the directives of the state Religious Authority, continue to hold *miqveh* parties; in fact, *miqveh* parties have recently spread to ethnic groups among whom they were not celebrated in the past.¹ This dynamic, I believe, reflects conflicting interpretations of the meaning of *miqveh*, marriage, and sexuality and conflicting views of who should control these institutions: men or women, the individual, the family, or the state.

In the discourses of *miqveh* parties the gendered voices of women versus the male-dominated and state-funded religious establishment are prominent. Simultaneously, however, other kinds of social hierarchies also come into play. Indeed, I would argue that gender can never be understood in isolation from other forms of social status and control. In this essay, I examine the discourses offered by a variety of people involved in *miqveh* parties. I argue that these competing discourses revolve around three distinct hierarchical axes: gender, ethnicity (or social status), and age (or status within the family).

**Background**

The ethnography on which this chapter is based was collected during observations of *miqveh* parties held over a period of four months at one *miqveh* in Jerusalem. Fieldwork at this *miqveh* was part of a larger project investigating the meaning of *miqveh* and *niddah* in contemporary Israeli cultures; observations at this *miqveh* are consistent with what I have seen at other Jerusalem *miqvaoth*.

Baka‘a, the neighborhood in which the *miqveh* is located, is home to Jews from a variety of ethnic groups. This particular *miqveh* was selected because it is one of the few Jerusalem *miqvaoth* at which it is still possible to hold the parties. For this reason, women who celebrate parties at this *miqveh* come
from all over Jerusalem, although local women constitute a solid core. In addition to observing the parties, I held informal conversations and formal interviews with the head balanit, the assistant balaniot, the head Ashkenazi rabbi of the neighborhood, and two North African rabbis. With the exception of the head balanit, all of these informants live in the neighborhood.

I begin with a description of a typical party. This description draws on the fifteen parties that I observed; each of the specific parties left out one or more of the elements summarized here.

The celebration may begin before entering the miqveh building. Anywhere from five to forty women and occasionally a few men will sing their way down the street toward the miqveh building. Some of the women beat on drums. If men are present, as they reach the door of the building, the mother-in-law will dismiss them, telling them that it is forbidden for them to come in. In the lobby of the building the balaniot sit behind a desk and collect the entrance fees from women coming to dip, direct them to a bath, and dispense toiletries. The balaniot have very little interest in the miqveh parties and barely greet the groups of women as they enter and make their way through the lobby to a room in which there are tables and chairs that can be arranged for a party. On some evenings two or three parties take place simultaneously in the one room, and so some time may be spent dividing the furniture equitably.

The party consists of the bride, her mother, sisters, and female cousins and friends and the mother-in-law with her female relatives. Sometimes a few children also attend. The style of clothing worn depends on the group; sometimes the women wear slacks, sometimes dresses and head scarves; the latter is a sign that the women are religiously observant. They do not wear party clothes.

A few minutes after arriving, while the guests are setting out trays of food and chatting, the head balanit comes and beckons to the bride to follow her. The bride is taken by the balanit into her office, where they talk for a few minutes about the laws concerning ritual immersion and specifically about when it is permitted to dip (how many days after the cessation of menstruation). The bride has supposedly been checking herself for blood by inserting a clean cloth into her vagina twice each day for the seven days preceding immersion in the miqveh. The balanit will ask the bride how many days it has been since her last period finished and whether she has indeed been checking herself. (The bride will have received instructions about checking herself at a compulsory brides’ class held at the offices of the Jerusalem Religious Authority.)

The balanit then takes the bride to a room on the far side of the miqveh building, where she instructs her, in accordance with halakah, to bathe thoroughly so as not to leave on her body any barrier (batsitsa) that may
separate her skin from the water of the *miqveh*. The bride will be reminded specifically to wash her ears, navel, and other bodily orifices, shampoo her hair, cut her nails short, remove makeup and nail polish, scrub the soles of her feet with a stone or file, and brush her teeth. When the bride finishes bathing she summons the *balanit* by ringing a bell; the *balanit* examines the bride to see that she has prepared properly (for example, that her toenails are cut short and that no loose hair is adhering to her body) and then leads her to the *miqveh* and supervises her while she dips. Typically, the mother-in-law and a few other female relatives demand to enter the *miqveh* room with the bride, and the *balanit* endeavors to turn them away; this interaction sometimes turns into a loud argument. The mother or mother-in-law may light candles on the edge of the *miqveh*. Sometimes a relative who has been suffering from infertility will dip in the *miqveh* immediately after the bride as a charm (*segula*) for pregnancy.

After dipping in the *miqveh* the bride emerges from the bathing room, sometimes in a housedress or robe and sometimes in her street clothes. The bride is greeted with ululations, and candy is thrown at her. Female relatives waiting outside the door of the bathing room or inside the door of the party room break a yellow sponge cake over the bride’s head and then pass around pieces of the cake to the guests. The cake, made with many eggs, is a symbol of fertility.

The party consists of snacking on cakes, cookies (often traditional Moroccan-style cookies), and in the case of Kurdish families, stuffed vegetables and fried meat-filled dough (cf. Sered 1992). At all the parties many sweet foods are eaten as a charm for a sweet marriage. Most groups bring a tape recorder (and sometimes drums) and play both Arabic and Israeli music. Some of the guests dance. The parties typically continue for about an hour, and then the guests leave, with the mother or mother-in-law paying the *balanit* on the way out for use of the party room. Afterward, the women may join up with their male kin and friends at the house of the bride or groom and hold a henna party, in which henna dye is spread on the hands of the bride and other relatives.4

Although *miqveh* parties are most developed among North African Jews, parties are held for brides of other ethnic groups and usually are more low-keyed.

*The Bride*

Since the bride is the obvious focus of the ritual, I begin with how the brides talk about *miqveh* parties. This discussion will be brief because, as became apparent in the course of observations at the *miqveh*, the brides
rarely have anything to say. This silence is consistent with anthropological understandings of rites of passage (such as weddings) as communal rituals in which not only the supposed “object” (in this case the bride) undergoes a change but the community at large also experiences social shifts and makes public declarations of shifting power relationships (Paige and Paige 1981). In the case of North African Jews, wedding rituals have more to do with two families exchanging a woman (the bride) and thereby publicly establishing a social confederacy of sorts than with the bride undergoing a personal, existential passage.

At many of the parties the bride chooses to sit with her friends rather than with her relatives. This choice serves to turn her into something of an outsider at the party. On one occasion when the bride was asked why she invited her friends to the party her answer was “for support.” This support seems to be necessary for coping both with her mother-in-law and with the balanit. Although, as will be seen later on, the balanit and the mother-in-law see themselves as representing opposing points of view regarding miqveh parties, the brides are often troubled by the same issue regarding both the balanit and the mother-in-law: privacy. On one occasion a friend who had accompanied the bride into the miqveh room was overheard complaining to the bride’s mother about the balanit, “That’s too much; she’s too intrusive.” On many occasions the bride objected to the mother-in-law accompanying her into the miqveh room, and on one occasion when the mother-in-law insisted on entering, the bride cried and threatened to leave and go home rather than dip. At least one bride claimed that she was having this party because her mother-in-law forced her to.

It would not be inappropriate to say that at the parties the bride has a passive role: her body is probed and prodded by the balanit and by the mother-in-law for reasons of their own (see below). During the parties, guests and relatives make frequent comments—almost always favorable ones—regarding her physical appearance. This serves, I believe, to focus attention on the bride as an object who is observed and evaluated by others, rather than as a subject who herself observes and evaluates. I found, for example, that the brides do not take it upon themselves to introduce relatives or friends at the parties, although it can be assumed that in many cases the bride is the only one present who knows all of the participants. Some of the brides seem to be attending the parties reluctantly; others seem to have fun and enjoy themselves. Often, the bride would dance with each of the important guests at the party, but again, the dancing was typically initiated by the guests rather than the bride.

The brides were quiet in general and mute in particular in response to questions about the meaning of the parties. At several of the parties the sisters of the bride were more forthcoming. Because the bride’s sisters are
located in the same structural position as the bride on each of the relevant hierarchical axes (bride and sisters share the same subordinate age, gender, and ethnic status), I suspect that the sisters, many of whom were recently married themselves, represent the bride’s point of view, at least to some extent. In general, the bride’s married sisters claimed to have had quieter and smaller parties. While this may or may not have been true, it is significant that the sisters speak of smaller parties in more positive terms than of bigger parties; the bride and her sisters tend to be uncomfortable with the public aspects of the *miqveh* parties.

While the bride is under enormous pressure to be on good behavior (friendly, quiet, and compliant) at the parties, the sisters are freer to speak their minds. Thus, at one party the two somewhat sullen sisters declared that the bride did not want the party, but the “mother of the groom wanted it . . . and she was forced into it.”

In contrast to traditional agricultural societies in which marriage symbolically and practically forges bonds between corporate groups, in modern industrial societies marriage is usually an individual concern (Bott 1972). For the majority of the brides who attend *miqveh* parties in Jerusalem in the 1990s, marriage is a matter of romance and personal choice (they have grown up watching the same movies and television shows as other Western women) and not a matter of clan or lineage (Shahar 1988). *Miqveh* parties, as I see them, do not relate to or reflect contemporary brides’ understanding of marriage. It should not be surprising that brides tend to treat the parties with silence, lack of interest, or even disdain.

*The Mother-in-Law*

The mother-in-law plays a central role in the *miqveh* parties. She is often the one who insists that a party be held and who organizes the party. The mother-in-law’s role reflects the traditional North African view of marriage as a joining of two families. Marriage is not a matter of union between two people but rather of union between two families (Goody 1976). In contrast to the bride, who is in a classic state of transition, the mother-in-law firmly represents the corporate group. As the representative of her (actually her husband’s) family she is responsible for making sure that this union will be an advantageous one. It is in this light that one can understand the insistence of the mother-in-law—typically against the wishes of the *balanit* and of the bride—that she be present when the bride undresses and immerses in the *miqveh*.

As the representative of her husband’s family she has several interests and responsibilities. First, she has to ensure that the bride is a likely candi-
date for bearing healthy sons for that family. In other words, she wants to know that the bride is fit and equipped with normal reproductive organs. Second, she must ensure that the bride will not pass off a child of another man into her new husband’s family—that is, the mother-in-law wants to know that the bride is not pregnant. And third, she has to ensure that the young woman coming into the family will accept the control of her mother-in-law and not continue to behave as either a free agent or as a member of her natal family; the mother-in-law wants to test the waters and see that the bride is compliant. All of these interests can be met by the mother-in-law’s presence in the miqveh room. The importance of these issues emerges in exchanges like one in which the balanit tried to discourage the mother-in-law from entering, and the mother-in-law answered in some anger, “Then what did I come here for?”

Unlike the bride, who perceives marriage as a private matter, the mother-in-law perceives it as a semipublic (familial) one. Thus, she organizes relatives and guests, prepares food, brings music, and generally ensures that the party makes a public statement that this bride is from now on part of her husband’s family. The mother-in-law’s strong feelings emerge in the following incident: On leaving the building after the party the mother of the bride thanked the balanit for allowing them to hold the party. The mother-in-law declared, “What do you mean ‘thank you.’ It is obligatory (hova).”

The Aunts

At many of the parties the aunts of the bride and groom play a central role. Their eagerness to participate in the parties reflects, on the one hand, their identity as carriers of tradition and representatives of the kin group and, on the other hand, their comfortable position of not being too close to the sexual nitty-gritty of the marriage bed (cf. Schely-Newman 1995). The aunts are free to make sexual jokes and innuendos that would be inappropriate from the bride, the bride’s mother, or the mother-in-law. For the most part, the aunts represent the same discourse as the mother-in-law does, but because they are further removed and therefore have less invested in the whole business, they can present this discourse with a touch of humor.

At one party, while the bride was dipping, a relative of the bride’s mother danced with stuffing inside her blouse, as if she were pregnant. She then lay on the floor while the drums were beating and urged the crowd to chant while she mimicked childbirth. Another woman sat on her legs, the “pregnant” woman screamed and “gave birth” to the doll that she had previously
stuffed inside her shirt. Throughout this performance the intended audience for the skit was her contemporaries, not the young woman. When the bride returned to the party, another skit was performed. The same woman now wore a man’s jalabia and penciled in a beard and mustache on her face. She also placed a cone between her legs as an imitation penis and swaggered around for a moment. Another elder relation put a scarf over her face. The two pretended to get married, standing side by side while a song was sung about an older man marrying a young naive girl. The groom in the song and the skit reassured the bride that everything would be fine. The “groom” then lay on the floor, and the “bride” straddled the groom in an imitation of sexual intercourse. The real bride, during this performance, sat on the outskirts of the room with her friends, being drawn in only at the closing moments.

Although explicitly sexual performances, songs, and conversation did not occur at most of the parties, the theme was ever present as an undercurrent. Thus, for example, at one party the women discussed the significance of the candles that are taken into the miqveh room. One of the relatives told a story about a party at which the candle kept drooping, ending the story by saying that she hoped this was not an indication of the groom’s sexual capabilities.

A subtext of feminist discourse can be discerned in the aunts’ frolicking and jokes. In the context of an all-female setting, the aunts behave in a way contrary to culturally required modes of women’s deportment: they are noisy and overtly sexual, and they play male roles. They take the private act of sexual intercourse and hold it up to the light of public scrutiny. The cardboard penis grasped by the aunt proclaims that men think that what they have between their legs is such a big deal—well, look here, I just made one out of paper. The aunts’ skits take normally unquestioned patterns of female subordination and male dominance and show them to be culturally constructed. Their skit about the old man marrying the young woman converts the private fears and suffering of individual young brides into a public drama that begins by acknowledging the cruelty of child marriage and ends with the empowered bride taking the superior position in sexual intercourse. The fact that the intended audience consists of middle-aged and older women, who are assumed to have seen these and similar skits many times, suggests that the skits are part of an alternative women’s culture that, at least in North Africa and Asia, was relatively free of male control (Sered 1992).

In sum, the aunts’ discourse is similar to that of the mother-in-law; the aunts present marriage as a communal affair in which friends and relatives can appropriately watch and comment. This presentation, as I have said, seems inappropriate to the contemporary bride who sees marriage as an
intimate, individual matter. The aunts’ discourse also opposes that of the balanit, who is concerned with modesty; the aunts’ performances are not in keeping with the modesty expected of Jewish women. Still, the aunts are eager to involve the balanit in the parties, and they often invite or urge her to join them. In the eyes of the aunts, the head balanit is an authority figure (HaRabbanit) whose presence lends an air of legitimacy to the party.

The Head Balanit

The head balanit at the miqveh where our field study was carried out is a well-spoken Ashkenazi woman in her late sixties. She is called HaRabbanit (an honorific term that can mean either “rabbi’s wife” or “learned woman”). The assistant balaniot are of North African or Asian origin. While all of the balaniot are employees of the municipal Religious Authority, only the head balanit is really a representative of that authority. She attends numerous meetings with rabbis and other balaniot, and she is expected to be knowledgeable regarding the laws of niddah and miqveh.

Whereas the discourse of the mother-in-law centers on fertility and that of the aunts on sexuality, the discourse of the balanit centers on purity: removing hartsitsa and counting the halakically correct number of “clean” (postmenstrual) days before immersing in the miqveh. Dipping in the miqveh is the legal process by which a menstruating woman is transformed from ritually impure to ritually pure. Other levels of meaning, in the eyes of the head balanit, are superfluous.

The balanit does not like miqveh parties. I asked her if she sometimes goes to the parties. With an embarrassed laugh she answered, “We are too busy here. Sometimes they really beg me to come in, and then I go in for a second.” It is clear that the balanit finds the parties distasteful. She rarely sticks her head into the party room to congratulate the families, nor does she greet the families with any warmth when they enter the miqveh building. This stance reflects the official position of the Religious Authority. Nevertheless, she is a warm and pleasant person and is never rude to the women who attend the parties. I see the balanit as the key figure in the contemporary cultural construction of miqveh rituals. Even though she scorns the parties, she does not forbid them; rather, she accommodates them.\(^5\)

The head balanit’s discourse, which will now be presented at some length, stands in opposition to two distinct sets of discourses. On the one hand, she sees herself as the representative of the bride vis-à-vis the mother-in-law; like the bride she understands marriage as a matter primarily concerning the bride and groom rather than a matter for the groom’s kin group. In her view, although both sets of in-laws have a legitimate
interest in choice of spouse, wedding arrangements, and the comportment of the bride and groom, she does not interpret marriage as a mechanism for transferring the bride from her natal family to the family of the groom. Her view of marriage is consistent with her Ashkenazi (European) cultural background (Goody 1976). On the other hand, she sees herself as the representative of halakah and, in a sense, of the state, vis-à-vis the bride. This does not mean that the head balanit identifies herself with the goals of the secular state of Israel. Rather, she is an employee of that state and in her interactions with brides carries the aura of authority bestowed on her by the state. Like the halakah and the Religious Authority, she understands marriage as a public act involving God, law, and the state; and thus, like the mother-in-law, she intrudes into what the bride perceives as personal matters. I cite here excerpts from interviews with the head balanit.

[Susan: What are miqveq parties?]

In the old country [North Africa and Asia] the miqvaot weren't like here, with tile walls and warm and clean. There the miqveh was just a hole (bor) in the ground and very dark, in a dark place, and very cold. In the old country they would marry off girls at young ages, twelve, thirteen, fifteen, twelve and a half. They would sell the girls, like—l'havdil l'havdil l'havdil—to differentiate—the Arabs. The girls were frightened to go into the miqveh. They didn't even know what it was about, about taharat mayim. So they made a party to cheer them up so that they would go into the water. . . . Those people were primitive.

I knew a Yemenite woman. She was married when she was twelve years old to a man much older, twenty-three years old, and in a different city far away from her family. She was miserable and ran away to go back to her father's house. She had no water or food or provisions and it was very far away to her father's house, and very hot and mountainous. A friend of her father's was riding on a donkey and saw her and asked her where she was going. She said to her father's house. He said, “But it is so far away. And anyway if you run away, he will kill you.” You know, Susan, they would do that sometimes. He put her on his donkey and returned her to her husband. But he wrote to her father, and her father came and got her. There were no mails or cars; it took a while. He rode a whole day on his donkey to come and get her and take her home.

But her husband refused to give her a get [legal divorce]. She didn't care; she didn't understand anything. Then her family came to Israel, with her, and she didn't have a get. She was an aguna [woman who is legally tied to a man she is no longer living with and so not free to remarry]. Finally, her husband came to Israel with his family. In the meantime he had married another woman and now had children with her, so he finally gave the first wife a get. She got married again when she was twenty-one; that is how long it all took.

[Susan: What do they do at the miqveq parties?]

They sing and dance. The noise is terrible. It used to be worse, they used to walk to the miqveh together. Now they come in cars . . . These parties were to encourage the young brides, because among them the girls were married very young [she makes a face of distaste and shakes her head in sympathy for the young bride] and
the miqvaot weren’t set up well, so it was frightening to go in, so they made this 
batsaqa [show] to distract her from the frightening things. . . . They did this to 
sweeten the bitter pill.

[Susan: Why didn’t Ashkenazi Jews do the parties? In Europe also the 
miqvaot were cold and dark.]

Because we didn’t marry the girls at such a young age. . . . Now there are brides 
who refuse to let their mothers-in-law come in with them. They even cry about it. 
But some of the mothers-in-law insist. I asked one once why she is tormenting the 
bride, why she doesn’t just wait outside. She said that she wants to go in to see if the 
bride is pregnant. That is their mentality. It is those edot [ethnic groups]. So what if 
the bride is pregnant, what can she [the mother-in-law] do about it now? The wed-
ding is tomorrow anyway!

[Susan: Could this maybe have been a kind of virginity test?]

There is no chance for that. Once I went to visit my sister, and outside the apart-
ment house was a sheet with blood. And I told my sister to tell the neighbors [to 
take down the sheet] because that wasn’t nice, but my sister said, “Oh you don’t 
know? This is from a bride. They put the bloody sheet outside to show she is a vir-
gin.” This is what edot ha-mizrach [North African and Asian Jews] do. And some-
times the father or mother stands outside the room and waits [while the marriage is 
consummated]. And sometimes it happens that the groom, from being so nervous, 
can’t do it, and then what a problem!

In these narratives the balanit has forged an association among notions 
that other participants in the miqvez party discourse do not see as linked— 
specifically, between the parties and women’s low status. In contrast, as dis-
cussed earlier, in the aunts’ discourse the miqvez party is at least to some ex-
tent presented as associated with women’s high status.

The head balanit explains the miqvez parties as a function of the “primi-
tiveness” of non-Ashkenazi Jews. In her discourse, primitiveness is a trope 
for a hierarchical stance in which primitive is “low.” In what way is this 
primitiveness expressed? First, she talks at length about the miserable con-
dition of women in these primitive cultures. They are married off at a 
shockingly young age to older men; they are forced to dip into dark, cold 
pits of water; they are ignorant about sex and about Jewish law. Her empa-
thy for the pathetic young woman spills over to the young man, whose in-
ability to carry out the conjugal act (as a result of pressure from relatives) 
can result in his public humiliation (the absence of a bloody sheet). Second, 
she talks about modesty and immodesty: the parties particularly bother her 
when they begin with an outdoor procession; the presence of the mother-
in-law in the miqvez room is abhorrent to her; the bloody sheet outside the 
apartment house is sheer anathema. All of these signs of immodesty are si-
multaneously symbols of primitiveness and, in her eyes, of the low status of 
women. Ironically, the balanit, whose job it is to probe into the menstrual
cycle and bodily hygiene of the bride, speaks a discourse in which the traditional North African marriage practices are cruel to women and immodest.

The balanit sees herself as the ally of the bride in her conflict with the mother-in-law regarding the latter’s presence in the miqveb room. The Ashkenazi balanit, like the bride, holds a view of marriage as a bond between two people rather than between two families. The balanit’s discourse is ostensibly one of the primacy of the individual (rather than of the lineage or extended family) and of woman’s body as belonging to the private rather than the public sphere. However, the bride and the mother-in-law both perceive the balanit as the representative of the religious establishment whose goal it is to move marriage from the domain of the family to the domain of the state.

The balanit’s primary discourse is one of ethnicity. Her reiteration of the words “those edot” is significant. The parties are associated, for her, with “primitive” edot. On one occasion when I discussed the parties with the head balanit and her three assistants, I again asked her who exactly has these parties. Her response was important: “I can’t tell the difference between the different edot ha-mizrach; they all look the same to me. Well, maybe the Yemenites look darker and have some different customs, and they say blessings with the same pronunciation as Ashkenazi Jews.” During this monologue the three assistant balaniot, all of North African or Asian origin, sat quietly. Then one of the assistants, a woman of perhaps fifty years, turned to me and said, “In my edah, Iraqi, they don’t do these parties; one was never done for me.” In this exchange several common elements of hegemonic discourse can be heard: the lower-caste members “all look alike”—they are indistinguishable to the upper-caste speaker; the silence of the lower-caste members, their silence suggesting complicity with the dominant discourse; and the final attempt on the part of the lower-caste speaker to identify herself with the ways of the dominant caste—“my edah doesn’t do those parties.”

The Assistant Balaniot

Like the brides, the assistant balaniot primarily present a discourse of silence. Although they belong to North African and Asian ethnic groups, they identify strongly with the dominant Ashkenazi religious establishment, and they look up to the Ashkenazi head balanit, who, for them, is the most immediate representative of that establishment. The assistant balaniot, unlike the vast majority of North African and Asian women who use the miqveb, cover their hair completely, wear long-sleeved dresses, and identify themselves as Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox. On the numerous occasions
when I spoke to the balanit about miqveh parties, the head balanit dominated the conversation, with the assistant balanit sitting quietly, sometimes looking uncomfortable, sometimes adding a few words. Although the assistant balanit, unlike the head balanit, have participated in miqveh parties, they allow her to present herself to the anthropologist as the expert on the subject.

The assistant balanit spoke up primarily to let the anthropologist know that they themselves are not part of miqveh party cultures. Recall that one of the assistants has been quoted as pointing out that her edot—Moroccans, Tunisians, Iraqi, Kurds. But not Yemenites.” At this point one of the assistants, an elderly Moroccan woman, while looking at the head balanit rather than at me, added, “And not baredim [ultra-Orthodox], not among Moroccan baredim.” This interjection allowed the assistant balanit, once again, to clarify that she herself is not part of miqveh party culture. The reason that Moroccan baredim do not have these parties is, according to the assistant balanit, modesty.

On another occasion this balanit began to reminisce about miqveh parties in Morocco. “In Morocco the women washed the bride, and they carried her to the miqveh on their shoulders so that her feet shouldn’t touch the ground. This was for kavod ha-kalah [the honor of the bride]. Also the week before the wedding the bride stayed in the house, and women friends and kin came to visit her and adorn her.”

In Morocco the miqveh party was embedded within a prolonged series of wedding rituals. These rituals took place for approximately one week before and one week after the actual wedding ceremony. During this time the bride and groom were treated, in certain symbolic ways, like a queen and king. Thus, in this narrative we hear that the “queen’s” serving women would wash her and carry her and adorn her. At the same time, we hear that the bride could not leave her house. By keeping her at home, under constant scrutiny, all could be assured that her family’s honor would be protected during the critical period in which the wedding was already made public but not yet consummated. The emphasis on the “interior-ness”—the bride stays at home, and when she has to leave to go to the miqveh, she is carried—is suggestive of the enclosure of upper-class women in Muslim societies (Schneider 1971).

As much as this assistant balanit consciously identifies with the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox religious establishment, her own childhood and wedding experiences preceded that identification, and her discourse can be seen as, to some extent, coming from the same cultural root as that of the
aunts. The enclosure of the bride, particularly in the context of the bathing and adorning, is also suggestive of the sexual theme of the impending marriage: the female relatives transform the young girl into a woman whom her new husband will find sexually desirable. The assistant balanit, however, unlike the aunts, offers an interpretation of enclosure as modesty rather than as sexual preparation. In the assistant balanit’s discourse, miqveh parties are reinterpreted as representing female modesty, a presentation not consistent with that of the aunts or the head balanit yet one that serves to integrate her new key identity as ultra-Orthodox with her previous key identity as Moroccan.

*The Old Moroccan Rabbi*

I spoke to two North African rabbis who live in the neighborhood of the *miqveh*. These two rabbis, one from Morocco and one from Algeria, represent two different generations and two totally opposing discourses. In this section I present the discourse of the elder of the two rabbis, a very aged man who has no official role in the Israeli religious establishment. He, I believe, is typical of Moroccan rabbis of earlier years. (The discourse of the other rabbi is presented below in “The Religious Establishment.”)

I began by asking him to explain the meaning of *miqveh* parties. After describing how “the family of the groom is invited to the *miqveh*,” he volunteered the following discussion of the meaning of henna (red dye spread on the hands of women throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and India at weddings and other ceremonies).

*HeNnaH* stands for *Hallah* [bread], *Niddah* [laws of menstrual purity], *Hadlaka* [lighting Sabbath candles]. These are the three things that are necessary for the bride. I heard this from an official source. They teach the bride. They put on her hand the color so that she will look beautiful for the groom—the kind of color you buy at the pharmacy to cover gray hair. All of the female relatives, they put it on her hand as a stamp [hotemet] that she has entered the correct Jewish life [yahadut nekhona]. It means that you have entered the burden of keeping the commandments.

Our conversation then turned to the issue of the presence of the mother-in-law when the bride dips.

It is written in the Mishna that they bring the relatives of the groom to check the bride, that she doesn’t have any *mum* [defect]. It isn’t her fault. Some kind of scar, sometimes. They want to know and check the merchandise [*sehora*]. We are not simple. Sometimes there is an argument. But if people understand the halakah [law], they take it in the correct spirit [that the law says the bride should be checked and rejected if she is sick or deformed]. This is an open eye. To see what is going on
with the bride's body. The bride shouldn’t get angry; it is written in the Mishna to check the bride. The groom will only see her face before the wedding [not her entire body, so he can’t know if she is normal and healthy].

Finally, I raised the question of the actual party, the cakes and singing. “That is to say that we [the groom's family] are satisfied with the bride, that we have no objection. Everyone saw and witnessed the truth that there is no problem externally or internally.”

The rabbi's discourse is almost identical to that of the mother-in-law. He treats marriage as a matter of kin group interest rather than individual inclination. As such, it has a clear and legitimate communal dimension. Unlike the mother-in-law, however, he invokes the language of Jewish texts. He explains that he has heard about this from an official source, that it is written in the Mishna. Moreover, he links the discourse of miqveh parties to a wider Jewish discourse of commandments: the parties, according to the rabbi, are part of a total lifestyle of mitzvot, of Jewish law.

The Religious Establishment

In Israeli neighborhoods and towns the Religious Authority assigns Ashkenazi and Sephardi rabbis to serve the local population (for example, by answering questions regarding kashrut or Shabbat observance). The Ashkenazi rabbi of the neighborhood of the field study has no connection with miqveh parties. He does, however, have an official connection with the miqveh. Ashkenazi women and men of the neighborhood come to him with questions regarding niddah and miqveh, and he takes a keen interest in what goes on at the miqveh.

The Ashkenazi rabbi reiterated two points throughout our lengthy conversation about miqveh parties. The first point concerns the difference between minhag (custom) and halakhah (law). He explained that miqveh parties are a custom, not a law; they are done to make the bride feel good, not because they are required or sacralized by Jewish law. “In Jewish law every word is true and relevant, not a single word is superfluous. That is not the case regarding custom.”

The Ashkenazi rabbi spoke about the importance of “feeling good” in several different rhetorical contexts. First, he related a talmudic anecdote about Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, who would sit in front of the entrance to the miqveh so that women who had dipped would see his attractive face, feel sexual desire, and hurry home to engage in conjugal relations with their husbands. Next he talked about a nonreligious young woman from a nearby kibbutz who went to the miqveh before her wedding and afterward told him,
“Ze haya kef, kef” [It was a real blast!]. And finally, he talked about the miqveh party as something potentially positive, although not an Ashkenazi custom, because it gives nonreligious women “sipuk [satisfaction]; it encourages them [to go to the miqveh] . . . it gives the woman a good feeling. . . . The feelings of a person are important, they affect the person’s physical health.”

A second point made repeatedly by the Ashkenazi rabbi was that he did not know the source of the miqveh party custom. The words: “I don’t know the source [makor or shoresh]” were tacked on parenthetically to almost every other remark he made about the parties. For the Ashkenazi rabbi, “source” encompasses two somewhat distinct concepts. The first is the root—where this custom comes from. The second and probably more salient meaning is the textual reference—where in Jewish sacred literature this custom is discussed. In either case his reiteration that he does not know the source serves the same rhetorical function as his emphasizing that the parties give the woman a good feeling. Both sets of comments move miqveh parties out of the domain of serious religious enterprise and into the domain of the trivial, personal, or unauthentic (although not necessarily bad).

This Ashkenazi rabbi is a kind and compassionate man, and he was very helpful during the field study. I do not believe that he made those comments about miqveh parties to hurt women in any way; quite the contrary: even though he does not know the source for the parties, he told me he “would not prohibit them . . . even to an Ashkenazi woman . . . even if the parties are not really modest,” because he thinks it is important that women feel good.

The Ashkenazi rabbi’s discourse is the polar opposite of that of the mother-in-law who describes the party as hova (obligatory), of the Moroccan rabbi who traces the parties to the Mishna, and of the aunts who explain that the miqveh party is held because “it is a mitzvah [commandment].” In the contested discourse of miqveh parties, the Ashkenazi rabbi invokes the language of custom (which, by definition, is changeable and human) rather than of law (which, by definition, is immutable and divine).

I turn now to the second North African rabbi whom I interviewed. He is an educated, youngish man, serves as the leader of a primarily European-born congregation, and sees himself as part of the official religious establishment in Israel. His discourse is similar (not identical) to that of the Ashkenazi rabbi and differs dramatically from that of the older Moroccan rabbi. “The parties are an expression of gladness about the upcoming event [wedding]. Two or even one generation ago the celebrations lasted seven days before and after the wedding. . . . In the miqveh parties there is nothing of religion or even custom. It is an expression of folklore.”

I told him that I had heard rumors that the Religious Authority has tried to limit the miqveh parties and that at many miqvaot in Jerusalem it is
impossible to hold the parties. He replied, “When people turn the act [of dipping in the miqveh], which is lofty, from holiness into something happy [frivolous] without any limits, then it distracts from the principal thing [taharah, purity]. I think that is the reason. I am not an employee of the Religious Authority, but I would think that is the reason, and probably it is justified.”

The young rabbi, then, not only denies that there is anything religious about miqveh parties, he also denies that there is anything even of “custom.” This denial is important because, in Jewish ideology, custom is sanctified by virtue of having been the way that Jews traditionally behaved. The well-known expression of this notion is minbag yisrael din (the custom of Israel is law; cf. Sperber 1989, 20–30; also see Jerusalem Talmud, Baba Metzia 7a; Babylonian Talmud, Baba Kama 116b). It is in this sense that many of the North African women at the miqveh parties use the word minbag. Custom, which for people (women) who are unlearned in Jewish texts is not epistemologically distinct from law, has to do with obligation and sacralized tradition. For the young rabbi, on the other hand, the parties are “folklore” (he uses the word foklor), and thus in the same category as Israeli folk dancing. He concurs with the reason that the Religious Authority disapproves of the parties: they distract attention from the real intention of the bride’s immersion—ritual purity—and turn it into a celebration.

Discourse, Hierarchy, and Hegemony

The contested discourses of the miqveh party revolve around three hierarchical axes: gender, age (or family status), and ethnicity (or social status). The location of each of the speakers on each axis can be mapped. The Ashkenazi rabbi, like the Religious Authority of which he is part, is in a dominant position on all three axes. The head balanit is in a dominant position in terms of age and ethnicity but in a subordinate position on the gender axis. The old Moroccan rabbi is in a dominant position on the gender axis, in a subordinate position on the ethnicity axis, and in an ambiguous position on the age axis (he is too old to be able to grab a position inside the dominant rabbinical circles). The assistant balaniot, like the mother-in-law and the aunts, is in a dominant position on the age axis and in subordinate positions on the gender and ethnicity axes. The bride is in a subordinate position on all three axes.

These axes represent two crucial cultural notions: power and purity. Thus, male is more powerful and purer than bleeding, birthing female; old (postmenopausal) and proven mother of sons is more powerful and purer than menstruating and not-yet-proven-fertile young bride; and Ashkenazi
(wealthier, knowledgeable about the laws of menstrual purity, and “modest”) is more powerful and purer than “primitive” North African and Asian. Knowledge of Jewish law and textual sources links together the attribute of power and that of purity. Knowledge leads to power—the power to make socially recognized judgments regarding halakah, and to purity; without knowledge of Jewish law one cannot attain a proper state of ritual purity.

Where an individual is located on these hierarchical axes is reflected in the kinds of rhetoric heard. In each case, it can be argued, the speaker has selected the strongest discursive mode available to him or her. All three rabbis, dominant on the gender axis, invoke a rhetoric of law and text. As Sered has argued elsewhere (1992; see also El-Or 1994), these are male prerogatives within traditional Jewish cultures, where women are by definition, ignorant of textual sources. But whereas those rabbis who are also located on the dominant pole of the ethnicity axis describe the parties as custom or folklore, invoking pejorative rhetoric drawn from the association of subordinate ethnic groups as “primitive,” the old Moroccan rabbi, himself situated on the subordinate pole of the ethnicity axis, supports miqveh parties. Significantly, his discourse of support is not drawn from the axis of ethnicity (where his position is weak) but from the other axis on which he sits in a somewhat dominant position—that of age, and he comes down strongly on the side of the mother-in-law rather than that of the bride.

The head balanit has selected a discourse of primitiveness and modesty, a discourse that expresses her own role as a member of the dominant ethnic group and of the dominant age group: Ashkenazi women are less primitive and old women are less likely to be immodest. Unlike the rabbis, she cannot invoke a discourse of law—her subordinate gender status prevents her from doing so. The assistant balaniot, the mother-in-law, and the aunts speak about fertility, sexuality, enclosure, modesty, and virginity. These women, subordinate on the axes of gender and ethnicity, can avail themselves of only one axis: that of age or status within the family. Their discourse centers on issues in which age brings dominance: old women, unlike young women, no longer need to worry about modesty, sexuality, and fertility; to the contrary, their role now is to control the modesty, sexuality, and fertility of others (cf. Bledsoe 1980 on West Africa). Finally, the bride, subordinate on all axes, has no strong discursive options and so selects the passive discourse of silence.

This schema, although easy to draw on a chart or table, should not be mistaken for a static representation of power relations. It is crucial to understand that individuals move along the various axes. The young bride will someday become the mother-in-law; the North African woman can become haredi and thus “modest”; the younger North African rabbi
can become part of the dominant Ashkenazi religious establishment; and a woman can become educated in the rules of _miqveh_ and serve as the representative of the male textual tradition. It should not be surprising to find, then, that more than one kind of discourse may be present even within the words of one speaker. The secondary discourses can sometimes reflect memories of an earlier status and sometimes reflect a hopeful anticipation of a future status.

In addition, the historicity of the discussion in this essay should be emphasized. _Miqveh_ parties and their discourses are shaped by social forces that also shape other aspects of religious life and gender relations. In the rhetoric of _miqveh_ parties, women’s traditional and autonomous rituals are redefined as primitive and immodest. This discourse is a contemporary one and similar to that found in many contemporary Muslim cultures. For example, in Nubia, women’s traditional dancing on the sheikh’s birthday has become the target of attacks by educated male Muslims (Kennedy 1978, 92). Among Muslims in Sri Lanka, public observance of female puberty rituals has disappeared in major coastal settlements at the same time that the spread of greater pan-Islamic consciousness has placed more emphasis on “respectability” and the seclusion of women (McGilvray 1982; see also Karim 1992; Bowen 1993). In Iran, women’s _sofreh_ gatherings, at which they share votive meals, have been criticized for being pseudoreligious, non-Orthodox, and unsponsored by official (male) religious leaders (Jamzadeh and Mills 1986).

In all of these cases, criticism and control of women’s traditional rituals have been part of broader processes of political centralization (Leacock 1981), expanded rates of religious literacy and ritual standardization (Sered 1992), and increased state control of both religious and personal life (Stephens 1986). One can talk about competing discourses, but without attention to hegemony this discussion runs the risk of being a cute intellectual exercise. Not all discourses of _miqveh_ or _miqveh_ parties are equal: some of the discourses have the economic and political backing of the powerful state and can therefore lead to control of women’s bodies and rituals; others present, at most, a fleeting critique of that control.

NOTES

1. _Miqveh_ parties, traditionally a North African custom, are spreading among Asian ethnic groups and among some Russian women. This is part of a general pattern of Moroccan culture having become the dominant culture among non-Ashkenazi Jews in Israel. Not only _miqveh_ parties but Moroccan food, Moroccan music, and Moroccan saints have been adopted by other ethnic groups (Cooper 1978).

2. Romi Kaplan carried out most of the observations at the parties; Susan Sered
carried out the majority of the interviews; Samuel Cooper carried out most of the textual research. For ease of reading, first-person pronouns are used throughout this essay.

3. The twice-daily checking directs constant attention to female sexuality and reproductive processes (cf. Boddy’s [1989] argument that infibulation in the Sudan leads to a preoccupation with women’s genitals and the overdetermination of gender). I would argue that the intimacy of the ritual allows a particularly high level of control of women’s bodies and psyches.

4. Some families hold the henna party a day or two before the miqveh ritual.

5. On other occasions I have heard her say that she does not allow unmarried women to use the miqveh; thus, there are some miqveh behaviors that she is not willing to accommodate.

6. In other contexts, primitive can be a trope for authentic, essential, or honest. That is not how the head balanit uses the word.

7. The reference here is to North African Jews who identify themselves with primarily Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox religious movements.

8. In a variety of Jewish sources these three commandments are grouped together as the paradigmatic women’s commandments. It is written in the Talmud that women die in childbirth as a result of neglecting these commandments (Mishna Shabbat 2,6).

9. I thank Nissan Rubin for helping me track down and understand these sources.

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"There’s Blood in the House"
Negotiating Female Rituals of Purity among Ethiopian Jews in Israel

Introduction

This article will endeavor to understand how Ethiopian Jews in Israel adjust to their new environment in regard to the laws of female purity. In Ethiopia the menstruating woman and the woman after childbirth were isolated in a special hut away from the family home. The central part played by these purity rituals in Ethiopia has been an important focus in the literature on this group (Leslau 1957 and Kahana 1977). In addition, “no aspect of traditional Ethiopian behavior pertaining to women has evoked as much comment and controversy in Israel as the purity laws surrounding menstruation and childbirth” (Westheimer and Kaplan 1992, 82). But to this day only a few attempts have been made to analyze the changing patterns of these practices in the Israeli context (Soroff 1995, Trevisan-Semi 1985, and Weil, 1989).

In this study I will examine the set of female purity rituals among Ethiopian Jewish women in their transition to Israeli life by looking at the compromises and negotiations at different levels of social practices, discourse uses, and ideological interpretations. Following a chronological outline, this article will highlight the various steps in the adaptation of Ethiopian Jewish women to their new setting in Israel as well as the dynamics of the migration process. Fieldwork was carried out with a group of immigrants from the Gondar region of northern Ethiopia who arrived in Israel during the mass airlift of 1991, dubbed Operation Solomon. I followed the same

Lisa Anteby
families over a period of four years in three different locations in Israel, which also represent different times and spaces in the stages of their integration. Each can be used here as a locus for narrating the experience of the group concerning rituals of female purity. I begin with an at-first unexplained episode that occurred in a large hotel used as an absorption center to house the immigrants during their first year. The second section looks at the spatial and social compromises set up in a caravan site (i.e., mobile homes) on the outskirts of a large city, where the Ethiopian Jews settled for several months. The last part, at which point families began purchasing apartments, focuses on life in permanent housing; practice, discourse and ideology of the purity rituals will be discussed.

I have chosen to present the data in this manner in order to shed light on the way the experience of menstruation is changing for Ethiopian Jewish women in Israel and is being negotiated on a practical level and reinterpreted on an ideological one. The importance of the communicative dimension, verbal or nonverbal, will be emphasized here as a major component in the adjustment from the Ethiopian context to Israel. Because of the specific group I have worked with, the ethnographical material may present regional differences concerning the customs practiced in Ethiopia as well as regarding the solutions adopted in Israel. It is, moreover, a difficult task to offer an accurate picture of changing practices among a group as heterogeneous as that of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel.¹

I. Women in the Hallway: On the Margins of Compromise

This section focuses on one of the first conflicts encountered by Ethiopian immigrants on their arrival in Israel. They are confronted time and again by the difficulties in continuing the practice of isolating women during menstruation and after childbirth, which is not practiced as such among most Israelis. A certain portion of the Israeli population observes the laws of niddah, but this set of practices differs widely from the female purity laws of the Beta Israel in terms of the length of the impure state, of the way one relates to the menstruant woman, and of the purification rite at the end of the niddah period. These fundamental differences are examined in the course of this article.

In any case, the Jewish Agency employees who were in charge of the absorption center during the immigrants’ first year in Israel did not provide any special arrangements, such as specific rooms for impure women, and this topic became a cause of disagreement between the Ethiopians and the Israeli bureaucrats. This issue recurred in every new place of residence; in fact, at each stage of their adaptation the immigrants continued
to reformulate compromises and strategies that would allow them to pursue, as far as possible, this central practice of Beta Israel life.

Spatial and Verbal Metaphors: Their Implicit Meaning

During my frequent visits to the sixteen-story building housing the newly arrived Ethiopian Jews, I often noticed that a number of women sat in a corner of each floor. They did not go down to have meals in the dining hall and were brought food on plastic plates, usually by their children. On various occasions, I asked why these women, draped in their white cotton shawls, were not going downstairs to eat. The only answer I received was “They are sick, they cannot go to the dining room.” What seemed to me at first like an intriguing situation proved, however, to be a logical response to the spatial patterning of female purity rituals, given the circumstances in the hotel.

Indeed, what went unnoticed by the Israeli employees as well as by myself became clear to me only much later: one corner of the corridor on each floor was being occupied by women deemed impure. Remaining in this area came to express a spatial metaphor signifying the woman’s status of impurity. By staying at the margins of socialized space yet remaining within the walls of the absorption center, the immigrant women re-created in this particular place a symbolic “space of impurity.” Completely symbolic, I should say, for I saw no physical indication of its limits nor boundaries, and at first glance nothing distinguished these individuals from the other women, children, and men who often sat in the hallway (though, I later observed, at a calculated distance from them).

The negotiation of meaning at the level of communication was revealed in the discrepancy between the verbal euphemism used by the immigrants (“she is ill”) and the spatial reality, which did not correspond to this oral statement. Here the idiomatic expression relating to sickness must be understood as a way of communicating metaphorically what belongs to the domain of the unsaid. Indeed, the nonverbal language betrayed the oral claim, since the gestures toward the impure women were still governed by spatial distance and the avoidance of physical contact. This circumlocutionary way of characterizing menstruating women has also been noticed concerning Ethiopian schoolgirls, who did not attend class “because they were sick” (Weil 1989).

These spatial and verbal expressions implicitly maintained the original distinction between impure women and the rest of the group. Because of social and religious changes launched in the Beta Israel villages by contact with Western Jewry, questions had already been raised concerning these practices. The transition period in Addis Ababa only made things worse,
since the living conditions did not enable the group to observe the purity rituals anymore. In Israel the hotel corridors came to symbolize the impure space reserved for menstruating women and fulfilled in the most minimal way the prescriptions of isolation remembered from the Ethiopian villages. The hallway, even though a place of passage, where one was not physically separated from the rest of the community, was still adopted spontaneously as the only uninhabited space outside the household’s domain. In effect, the end of the corridor used by the women was situated at the limits of the public sphere and at the borders of the domesticated space of the hotel rooms. Thus, the context of performance of a traditional practice was being modified by the constraints of Israeli space, resulting in a new configuration of what is known in Amharic as the yä-märgäm gojjo, or “hut of curse.”

The Hut of Malediction in Ethiopia

Beta Israel villages in the Ethiopian highlands possessed special huts set apart for women considered impure or “cursed.” A first hut, referred to as the hut of curse or as yä-däm gojjo (hut of blood), was erected for the menstruating woman, who remained isolated for seven days. Following her seclusion period she immersed herself in the nearby river, washed her clothes, cut her fingernails, fasted all day, and returned to the family hut at sunset. A woman who had a miscarriage also remained isolated for at least seven days—more if the blood continued to flow. If the fetus’s sex could be distinguished, she would observe the laws regarding the birth of a boy or a girl. As for the parturient woman, known as yä-aras set, she often gave birth at home and was helped by several women, who in turn became impure for one day. After giving birth on old rags or on cow’s skin, she then proceeded, accompanied by one or two other women, to the hut of blood.

The new mother entered the yä-aras gojjo (hut of birth) after the seventh day following the birth of a boy and remained thirty-three days in seclusion, after the fourteenth day following the birth of a girl, staying isolated for sixty-six days. This amounts to a total of forty days or eighty days of isolation after the birth of a boy or a girl, respectively, in accordance with the degrees of impurity caused by childbirth stated in Leviticus (12:1–8). At the end of this period, the woman bathed with her infant, shaved her head, washed her garments, fasted all day, and returned at sunset to her home.

The men were the ones to build these huts for their wives, daughters, or sisters. The hut of birth in particular had to be very solid, especially during the rainy season. In some cases one menstrual hut was erected per household if neighboring Beta Israel houses were far away. In other cases, one single hut was shared by neighbors or kinfolk when they lived close enough.
Kahana (1977), for example, mentions that “generally, there is for every four to five families, one menstrual hut” (41). This point is important because it determined with whom the woman spent her isolation period, carrying implications for social networks and neighborhood relationships. Most often, five or six women would be in the menstrual hut at one time; however, from the information gathered it does not appear that the same women met every month, and therefore there is no evidence suggesting any form of menstrual synchrony, as has been discussed for other groups, such as Yurok women, for example (Buckley 1988).

A recurrent motif that runs through all the references to the menstrual hut describes it as being “outside” (bā-watchša). Both the menstrual hut and the hut of birth were usually situated on the margins of the village and surrounded by a circle of stones delimiting the boundary between the pure and the impure space. It would be false, however, to think that the women remained seven days without leaving the hut; in fact, they did go out to perform bodily functions and even fetch water at the river or collect firewood, because, as one woman claimed, “no one brought us wood or water.” Nonetheless, the women did not perform any other work nor household tasks during this time span. Instead, the days were often spent sitting around; the women recalled: “We talked a lot, we slept, we rested, we sat together, drank coffee, and told stories.” This exclusively feminine place stood as a space of communication and a locus for transmission of knowledge; young girls learned techniques such as embroidery. However, other activities, such as basket weaving, an otherwise common activity among women, were not allowed in the menstrual hut. Only later was I to understand how this taboo was inscribed in an implicit logic forbidding certain objects in the hut of blood.

As far as memories concerning the menstrual hut go, the women in Israel had mixed feelings. Some simply said it was good. A mother of seven even remembered: “When I didn’t have any more blood, I didn’t want to go back home! I thought to myself, it’s a shame there’s no more blood. I would have wanted to stay more.” This idealization of the past was in contrast to the opinions of other immigrants, such as a young woman who stated, regarding menstrual isolation, “I didn’t like it! In Israel, it’s good that women do not have to leave the house, do not have to go outside.” In fact, a number of women had negative reminiscences: “We were cold, we were afraid alone, and we heard the cries of the hyenas at night. We didn’t eat when we wanted to and we had to cry out for someone to bring us food.” From this description of the hut of blood, the issue of food, which comes up again and again, became the major focus of the relationship between the impure women and the rest of the group in the new setting of the absorption center in Israel.
Commensalism and Impurity

It is significant that the taboos on sharing food were the most salient feature of impurity status maintained in the hotel and the most obvious to outsiders. In this context, the isolation of impure women came to mean that they could not partake in meals in the common dining hall with the rest of the immigrant group. This was expressed in spatial terms by their physical isolation from the eating area, reflecting the major role of commensalism rules concerning impure women in the Beta Israel community (Anteby 1995a). Indeed, the only manifest expression of the women's impurity was that they ate separately the food brought to them by their children and no longer by other women, whose function it once was in Ethiopia.

In Ethiopia, the women could not cook in the menstrual hut, and food was brought to them by other female kin or neighbors from the village two or three times a day. They deposited the food on the stone wall, being cautious not to touch the impure women. As some women described it, “They threw us the njära bread into a special plate which remained on the other side of the wall.” Even though the women could not cook the traditional staple food, the njära pancakes because they did not have a cooking plate, the menstruating women made a fire in the hut for boiling Ethiopian coffee (bunna), roasting cereal grains (qollo), and keeping warm at night. Despite this, some women recalled that “you were always hungry because there was no food there and sometimes they forgot to bring us something to eat.”

In the hotel converted into an absorption center the immigrants faced a new situation that represented one of the most fundamental spatial transformations in Israel. The preservation of impure space by restricting the common consumption of food reminds us, of course, of the traditional practice of bringing food to the menstruating women. The menstrual hut, once at the edge of the village, was now at the threshold of the hotel rooms, but no stone nor any physical or graphic delimitation indicated where the impure space began and where the pure space ended. This solution allows us to understand which elements remained the most crucial for the immigrants. The preservation of the menstrual practices, even in their most symbolic form, in a space as limited as that of the hotel demonstrated to what extent they played an important role in the Beta Israel village. The foremost component revealing this novel way of spatially practicing the menstrual taboos was reflected in the eating patterns. These rules of commensalism excluding impure women appeared as the last remnants of the demarcation of those known as “the cursed women.”
II. Defiled Caravans and Blurred Boundaries

The Ethiopian Jews, who had moved into mobile homes after being in Israel for one year, were compelled to redefine new spatial and social borders between the pure and the impure in relation to the domestic domain, as well as to the public space, where interactions in the group were increasing with the return to a lifestyle closer to that in Ethiopia. Furthermore, the spatial layout of the caravan site provided new ways to retain the traditional purity rituals, not only in terms of setting up new boundaries and relinquishing old ones but also in respect to the rites that allow bodies, food, and objects to cross these boundaries.

Setting Up New Spatial and Social Borders

A man in his fifties, father of six, constantly complained that the caravan was “dirty” (qoshasha) because “women have no place to go out anymore.” In the caravan site there is no longer a space for this purpose. Here again, the idiom of exteriority is associated with the hut of blood. A young mother also lamented: “It’s hard in Israel to be in the same caravan with my husband when there is blood and when a baby is born; it’s dirty, unclean.” I heard this sentence repeatedly, from women as well as from men.

In addition to confronting a new spatial and social reality, the Ethiopian Jews have had to accommodate to a new biological reality: women menstruate more often in Israel than they had before. In Ethiopia the women actually spent much less time than one might imagine in the hut of blood and rarely experienced recurrent menstrual cycles because they were either pregnant or nursing, which caused lactational amenorrhea. “For at least one year after birth, the woman does not have blood,” most women asserted. An elderly mother added: “Then, once or twice there is blood; after that, you are pregnant again. But in Israel it’s not the same anymore.” And rightly so, since “in preindustrial societies as a rule, lactation is prolonged and intensive, while menstruation is correspondingly uncommon” (Harrell 1981, 796). In Israel, however, even though women still breastfeed their infants, a growing number of them use contraceptives, and most young girls who would have been married in Ethiopia (and thus pregnant) are now pursuing their education and are single. Therefore, the idea of menstruation as a regular monthly occurrence is a phenomenon that women and men must learn to negotiate in Israel. This calls for a ritualization of new menstrual practices.

Usually, when the woman was menstruating, she slept in the main living area of the caravan while her husband remained in the couple’s bedroom.
However, the woman performed all the household tasks during her period and even cooked pancakes. This meant that, as opposed to their importance during the first period in the hotel, commensalism rules became insignificant. After childbirth the woman generally stayed with her infant in a separate room or even in another caravan (if the family owned more than one). The other women (kin or neighbors) would often continue, as they did in Ethiopia, to bring her special food, such as soup and porridge, and prepare the traditional pancakes, *mjära*, for the husband and children. However, isolation from social interaction (during forty or eighty days) was not observed anymore, and the new mother often went out of her room after two or three weeks. She also left the home for the circumcision ceremony, which was performed in the caravan that served as a synagogue. She sometimes even began cooking for her family before the traditional end of the isolation period. This was condemned by the elders who claimed that they would not eat food cooked by an *aras* woman. Nonetheless, she did keep the period of sexual abstinence of forty or eighty days after the birth and returned to sleep with her husband only after the celebration marking the end of this symbolic seclusion. As I witnessed the breakdown of the commensalism taboos in the caravan site, the spatial separation of women became less manifest; it seemed to be restricted only to the private realm of sleeping arrangements. A more subtle negotiation process, however, at the social and public level was being redefined to continue to regulate interactions between women and other members of the group.

We have already mentioned that engaging in tactile contact with the woman transmits her impurity to whomever does so. This was seen in the precautions pertaining to food exchange in Ethiopia. Furthermore, Ethiopian Jews claim that it was forbidden to look at a “cursed” woman. If, for example, a woman went to purify herself on the seventh day of isolation and met someone on the way, “she must hide behind bushes or at least cover herself with her toga so that she cannot be seen.” She should rather go out at night when there was little chance of meeting someone, since the sight of a menstruating woman could contaminate the person who caught a glimpse of her. The ground also could transmit impurity. When a woman noticed the onset of menstruation, she stopped all activities and walked to the hut of blood, “taking an alternative path” so as not to contaminate the village’s pathways. Indeed, the route she used was considered polluted, and anyone who followed it could contract her impurity, especially if “someone walked on her footprints” (as most people walk barefoot in Ethiopia). She might also walk “on the outside of the trail,” and here again, the idea of exteriority is stressed. Today, in Israel, these considerations are, of course, obsolete, but they remain ingrained in people’s minds. An elder confided that if one already “sees” an impure woman (since in Israel they are on the
street or come to visit), what is the use of even separating them? “If you have looked at her, it's too late anyway.”

In addition, there were certain restrictions on the menstruating and aras women regarding the public realm in Ethiopia. Obviously, a menstruating woman did not enter the prayer house “because of blood.” This was still true in Israel. Concerning some of the social gatherings and celebrations, a certain lenience was tolerated. For a wedding, a mourning ceremony, or a commemoration of the deceased, the menstruating woman could participate in the feast yet stayed at a considerable distance from the event. Usually, there were a number of impure women, so they were given food together, separately from the guests. Finally, a menstruating woman could not enter a cemetery, but if a close relative was being buried, she could approach the burial ground without going inside. In Israel these practices are disappearing, and most menstruating women will attend celebrations but may remain at the periphery and not greet people. As a general rule, aras women avoid attending these gatherings.

The River in the Shower: Modifying the Purification Rite

In the absence of the traditional ritual of purification, which entails immersion in a river or stream at the end of the impure period, Ethiopian Jewish women have had to find alternative solutions in Israel. In fact, the entire act of ritual cleansing is modified in their new country since the majority of women do not make use of the miqveh. This also implies changing patterns concerning the washing of clothes and the purification of cooking utensils, an intricate part of Beta Israel purity laws. Thus, it is impossible to maintain menstrual taboos in Israel, and local facilities have not been adopted as substitutes for traditional means of purification (Trevisan-Semi 1985, 108).

In Orthodox Judaism, the woman goes to the miqveh approximately twelve to fifteen days after the onset of her period, since she must count seven “clean days” after the end of menstruation, which is assumed to last at least five days. Ritual purification in Ethiopia, on the contrary, took place on the seventh day following menstruation, when the woman immersed in a river and then returned to the family home. She could then resume sexual relations with her husband. Actually, one woman insisted that “you must have sexual relations with your husband on the night you come back from the menstrual hut because it is on that day that you will get pregnant; but if you don’t, you won’t be able to become pregnant for the entire month.” In the Ethiopian conception, the end of menstruation and the day of purification are thought to be the woman’s most fertile day. This belief is also common among Christians in Ethiopia.

Aside from these temporal considerations, the miqveh has become a
A locus for debate and dissension between the Ethiopian Jews and the Israeli rabbinate. Most Ethiopian Jews in Israel claim that the \textit{miqvei} is “dirty,” and none of the women I know ever make use of it.\footnote{The linguistic terminology must be carefully analyzed here, because it is the source of at least one part of the problem. In Amharic, the Ethiopian Jews make a distinction between flowing water and stagnant water. The implicit meaning of the term “dirty” can therefore be interpreted first as “unclean” in a ritual sense. Both women and men have declared that because the \textit{miqvei} is not “running water” it is not fit to purify; the water “does not move.” In fact, in Leviticus (15:13) it is specified that ritual immersion should be performed in “live water,” \textit{mayim hayyim}, but the \textit{miqvei} has become a suitable body of water for purification according to the rabbis. For the Ethiopian Jews, however, the ritual pool is not considered as such. A second interpretation is linked to political and religious controversies, because the Hebrew term for immersion (\textit{tevila}) was unfortunately mistranslated into Amharic as \textit{temqät}, the Christian immersion in a pool of water for baptism, instead of the term \textit{matallem}, the ritual immersion in a river observed by Beta Israel (Kaplan 1988, 364–65). Therefore, even if there are no menstrual huts in Israel, there do exist purification facilities such as the \textit{miqvei}, but the Ethiopian Jews are reluctant to use them and have accommodated their traditional ways to the modern technology of the shower. As far as the women I talked with are concerned, the shower is unanimously adopted as the alternative for immersion in the river at the end of the menstrual period.\footnote{As far as the women I talked with are concerned, the shower is unanimously adopted as the alternative for immersion in the river at the end of the menstrual period. However, there are various beliefs regarding the contact of the menstruant woman with water. A number of Ethiopian Jewish women asserted that if one showers or washes the body during menstruation, the blood will keep flowing for “many days,” thus causing hemorrhage; bleeding also may stop, as some explained, “but after one or two weeks, there is blood again.” In either case the contact of water while menstruating causes a surplus of blood flow that is no longer restricted in time. This is why, I was told, a menstruating woman always avoided washing her body with water and even protected herself from rain “by not going outside or by covering up with her \textit{shämma} (white cotton toga).” Today some women report that they did not take showers during their period, but younger ones ignored these taboos. In Ethiopia, the purification process entailed not only the immersion of bodies but also the washing of clothes. Some women in the menstrual hut used old pieces of cloth or rags as sanitary devices, but most had no protection for the menstrual flow. The woman had to wash her garments thoroughly at the end of her seclusion period to take out any stains. In Israel the women still discriminate between washing clothes belonging to the rest of the family (in the modern washing machines every household}

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\item [locus for debate and dissension between the Ethiopian Jews and the Israeli rabbinate. Most Ethiopian Jews in Israel claim that the \textit{miqvei} is “dirty,” and none of the women I know ever make use of it.\footnote{The linguistic terminology must be carefully analyzed here, because it is the source of at least one part of the problem. In Amharic, the Ethiopian Jews make a distinction between flowing water and stagnant water. The implicit meaning of the term “dirty” can therefore be interpreted first as “unclean” in a ritual sense. Both women and men have declared that because the \textit{miqvei} is not “running water” it is not fit to purify; the water “does not move.” In fact, in Leviticus (15:13) it is specified that ritual immersion should be performed in “live water,” \textit{mayim hayyim}, but the \textit{miqvei} has become a suitable body of water for purification according to the rabbis. For the Ethiopian Jews, however, the ritual pool is not considered as such. A second interpretation is linked to political and religious controversies, because the Hebrew term for immersion (\textit{tevila}) was unfortunately mistranslated into Amharic as \textit{temqät}, the Christian immersion in a pool of water for baptism, instead of the term \textit{matallem}, the ritual immersion in a river observed by Beta Israel (Kaplan 1988, 364–65). Therefore, even if there are no menstrual huts in Israel, there do exist purification facilities such as the \textit{miqvei}, but the Ethiopian Jews are reluctant to use them and have accommodated their traditional ways to the modern technology of the shower. As far as the women I talked with are concerned, the shower is unanimously adopted as the alternative for immersion in the river at the end of the menstrual period.\footnote{As far as the women I talked with are concerned, the shower is unanimously adopted as the alternative for immersion in the river at the end of the menstrual period. However, there are various beliefs regarding the contact of the menstruant woman with water. A number of Ethiopian Jewish women asserted that if one showers or washes the body during menstruation, the blood will keep flowing for “many days,” thus causing hemorrhage; bleeding also may stop, as some explained, “but after one or two weeks, there is blood again.” In either case the contact of water while menstruating causes a surplus of blood flow that is no longer restricted in time. This is why, I was told, a menstruating woman always avoided washing her body with water and even protected herself from rain “by not going outside or by covering up with her \textit{shämma} (white cotton toga).” Today some women report that they did not take showers during their period, but younger ones ignored these taboos. In Ethiopia, the purification process entailed not only the immersion of bodies but also the washing of clothes. Some women in the menstrual hut used old pieces of cloth or rags as sanitary devices, but most had no protection for the menstrual flow. The woman had to wash her garments thoroughly at the end of her seclusion period to take out any stains. In Israel the women still discriminate between washing clothes belonging to the rest of the family (in the modern washing machines every household}
owns) and washing by hand garments worn during the impure days. These clothes are never washed with the others “because they may be stained with blood.”

I also learned that certain objects deemed to “retain impurity” had to remain in the menstrual hut, whereas others, that could be purified, circulated between pure and impure space. This finally explained why baskets could not be produced in the menstrual hut: it was thought that the dry leaves used to make them could not be purified. On the other hand, embroidery on cotton dresses, which can be washed in water and worn again, was a favorite pastime in the hut of blood. This indigenous taxonomy was also applied to cooking and eating utensils, to the extent that metal or porcelain objects could transit from the menstrual hut to the village if subject to purification, whereas earthenware and wood, which carried impurity, could not.9 In Israel, however, utensils are indifferently used by women before, during, and after their period of impurity, giving way to the rules of circulation on bodies, food, and objects and causing the markers of identity that these borders constituted to disappear in their wake.

Vanishing Markers

The absence of the menstrual hut from the Israeli landscape implies that Ethiopian Jewish women perceive their spatial world differently from when they lived in their villages. Since restrictions on space are no longer relevant, women enjoy an unprecedented mobility, including during impure periods. The extension and even disappearance of spatial and temporal boundaries in Israel, also can be seen as a reduction of the control women had over their environment. In this sense, women today are not only giving up a privileged space for exchanging oral folk knowledge and transmitting craftware techniques, but they are also losing a certain “power” if one considers that they held ritual and social functions through their menstrual practices.

By going to the menstrual hut periodically, the Beta Israel women fulfilled a temporal function of regulating time in the village through their biological cycle. In Israel, however, they claim they do not know how to keep track of time anymore. This is particularly prominent in the case of pregnant women. As one of them told me, “In Ethiopia, you counted the moons when you stopped going to the menstrual hut; but here, I don’t know how many months I am pregnant.” This “loss of touch between the woman and her body” also has been stressed by Doleve-Gandelman (1990, 255). The same issue is raised in Israel for computation of the impure period following childbirth. A young mother, who had just given birth to a boy, recalled that “she counted in her head the aras period,” as
did the elders of her family, who were in charge of inviting a qes (Beta Israel priest) for the ceremony on the fortieth day. What may be surprising to us is that none of them ever makes use of the written dates in the calendar.

Furthermore, in Ethiopia the woman had a spatial role, marking the borders between the impure and pure space through the taboos during menstruation and after childbirth. This allowed her to define the various rules pertaining to the activities allowed in the impurity hut and regulate the contacts between the women and the rest of the group. In Israel, these spatial borders, internal to the group, still exist in terms of sleeping arrangements and limited participation in some domains of the public space. However, the once visible boundaries are now concealed. Even more significant, these distinctions in the Ethiopian context were not situated at the level of verbal discourse (one did not say that one was impure) but belonged to a symbolic use of space. The menstrual hut was a sign (or a nonsign) indicating the woman’s position on the axis of purity and impurity because this spatial metaphor carried more power than words. Without mediating through discourse, the woman thus expressed publicly her condition through the semiotics of the menstrual taboos. In Israel the loss of the public dimension of menstrual isolation prevents nonverbal communication of the woman’s situation in the spatiality of purity and impurity.

Beta Israel women also possessed a social function of communicating their status through their menstrual practices: puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, postpartum, nursing, menopause, or none of these. The capacity the woman had to signal her condition by the use or nonuse of the menstrual hut determined her relations within the community and gave her a certain degree of power over her social network. Her state was known to all in the village. In contrast to Orthodox Judaism, where women go to the miqve for the first time before their wedding, the young girl in Ethiopia observed menstrual isolation and immersed in the river from the time of menarche. Despite this, menstruation often meant that the adolescent girl should be married. As one mother explained, “If you have your period and you are not married yet, it is a shameful thing.” It seems that, because the potential to procreate is not being fulfilled here, the woman’s fertility is closely associated with her marital status. One woman added, jokingly: “The galamotta [divorced woman] goes all the time to the ya-märgäm gojjo!” In fact, the menstrual hut also had a social control purpose, ensuring the proper conduct of the woman. Thus, if a woman’s husband was away from the village for a long time, “all the neighbors knew what was happening” if she stopped going every month to the menstrual hut (Salamon 1993, 124). In Israel, shifting from the public sphere to the private realm blurs not only the spatial and temporal boundaries but also the blueprints of the female life cycle.
When a woman was pregnant in Ethiopia, she usually concealed it from others, even her husband. This was confirmed to me when one of my friends told me, as an outsider, that she was expecting a child, yet she did not reveal this to her mother nor to her spouse. “In Ethiopia,” she explained, “everyone knows right away if I am pregnant because I don’t go to the yà-màrgäm gojjo anymore; the neighbors count three shabbat, four shabbat, then one month, two months, and they ask me, ‘Why don’t you go outside [to the menstrual hut]?’ and I answer that I don’t know, that the blood will come.” This validates the value of the menstrual hut as a nonverbal means of communication and stresses the fact that one never revealed orally what everyone might have suspected.

The ritual function held by Beta Israel women enabled them to participate on the practical level in rites concerning ritual purity, just as men or other individuals sometimes did. One can draw, to some extent, a parallel between the ritual role of the women, who were isolated once a month, and that of the men, who held a religious celebration at the new moon, known as tebaraqa ba’al, which has ceased to be practiced in Israel just as menstrual isolation has. These regular monthly rituals, both associated with the moon (counting the “moons” during seclusion and celebrating the new moon) can be compared to male and female rituals found in other societies (Buckley, 1988). Furthermore, another form of seclusion was applied to men who had touched a corpse; they were to remain isolated for seven days in a special hut, where food was brought to them. The similar treatment of menstruating women can be considered as the ritual counterpart to the functions held by men and therefore confer ritual power to women as well.

One of the major roles in determining group identity and external borders lay in the religious functions the women performed by distinguishing themselves from the non-Jewish Ethiopians who did not observe these menstrual practices. In such cases the Beta Israel women and their bodies played an important function in the religious distinction at the level of intergroup relations.11 Thus, by defining the community’s borders, menstrual blood became a key symbol of group identity, stressing differences with the Christian Ethiopian population (Salamon 1993, 126). This boundary, however, receives a new interpretation in Israel, where the majority of Israelis do not observe any form of female purity rituals either. In Ethiopia a Beta Israel would not enter the house of an Ethiopian woman because, as Salamon reports, “the Christian has blood in the house” (125). This echoes the words I heard from the women I talked to in Israel, who described the reverse situation, where they now live “like the Christians in Ethiopia.”

In sum, the female body in Israel is no longer invested with the role of regulating or organizing social relations; it is not the temporal or spatial
blueprint it used to be for the group; and especially, the woman’s body ceases to be an interface between the space of the pure and the impure. More significantly, the construction of the Beta Israel woman’s identity as a woman and as a Jew is redefined as the ritual and social functions she held in the Ethiopian village disappear in Israel. Finally, the woman’s participation in the symbolic construction of the internal and external borders of the group vanishes in Israel.

III. Blood Inside the House: The Realities of the Israeli Dwelling

This section concludes by looking at the spatial and symbolic negotiations at work in the urban setting of the apartments. This situation has given rise to a ritualization of the various compromises dealing with ritual purity on the level of practice, discourse, and ideology.

Inside-out Practices

Throughout this essay, we have seen that the idiom of “being outside” ran through the descriptions concerning the female purity rituals. The Amharic term bä-wacht or bä-dajj was always used in reference to the woman who sits outside the home, in the menstrual hut. The concept of being outside acts as a metaphor expressing the exteriority of the impure woman from village life and from socialized space. Indeed, she was considered to be outside in spatial relation to the family hut, ceasing to participate in food exchange systems, beyond the boundaries of social networks, and outside the limits of the “pure” space of the community. This dialectic relation between the inside and the outside is manifest in a number of situations, and it is still referred to in respect to the spatial pattern in the Israeli housing. Therefore, being inside the house when the woman should be outside creates a new configuration of spatial, verbal, and gender relations among the Jews of Ethiopia.

In the apartment buildings they settled into, most spatial compromises are identical to those already found in the caravans. However, one noticeable feature concerning domestic space is the separation, when possible, from places where contact with bodily fluids is most likely to occur. In the process of searching for apartments, some families, for example, specifically asked if there were two separate bathrooms. When this was not the case, some families had a second bathroom or toilet built in the new dwelling. This was “for the women,” as they described it. It is significant to note that negotiating the purity rituals on this practical ground corresponded to the very last reminiscence of the separation of women in domains associated
with bodily functions. It also demonstrated that these issues are still unresolved on the symbolic and ideological plane. Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to believe that menstrual practices from now on belong only to the realm of family purity, as in the observant Israeli population. In fact, restrictions in traditional activities still dominate the group’s relations to impure women.

Although the menstruating women still maintain separate sleeping arrangements, another dimension was revealed in the new living environment. There are often thought to be links between menstrual blood and the spirit world. The Ethiopian Jews’ practices in this respect were demonstrated to me by the following experience. A woman I often visited, known to be possessed by a zar spirit, first told me that a menstruating woman does not enter her house and never comes to drink coffee at her ritual bunna ceremonies. Several months later, as my visits were becoming more frequent, she simply announced to me: “Do not come anymore when you are märgäm.” Never having been called “a cursed woman” before, it took me a few minutes to realize that I should not take this as an insult; instead it was a way of saying that I was being accepted as “one of them.” Therefore, I must abide by the rules the other women followed. As I kept pressing for the reason for this prohibition, the old woman finally broke out, whispering: “Blood bothers the spirits (qolle).” This explained why some women were absent from the coffee-drinking rituals and why women were excluded from these gatherings after childbirth. In fact, most women in their aras period, who still sleep in a different room, wander around freely in the house yet will not go drink coffee with their neighbors or kin.

Another sphere where the female rituals of purity are still observed pertains to religion. Since most of the women I knew never went to the synagogue in Israel, the topic never came up. However, the younger generation, educated in religious boarding schools, confided that they would never enter the synagogue if they were menstruating. The majority of women also declared that they would not take part in the yearly Beta Israel festival known as the Segd if they were impure. They claim, furthermore, that they keep until this day the custom of not fasting on Yom Kippur (Astasreyo in Amharic) if they are menstruating, because they are “märgäm in any case” and cannot ask for atonement in a state of impurity. The only homes I have visited where the women are still physically isolated are those of some qesotch, traditional Beta Israel priests. During their menstruation or following childbirth, the female members of those families (daughters, wives, and/or daughters-in-law) retired to a separate part of the apartment or even a special structure for this purpose. Some used another apartment (that belonged to one of the members of the household) for the purpose. The younger women, who did not observe these practices elsewhere (e.g.,
in boarding schools), did it “to respect their father” when they came home on the weekends.

Therefore, this attempt to keep up a bygone practice in the Israeli dwelling is usually reduced to its spatial expression in connection with the private relations between the spouses or with restrictions in areas such as indigenous healing rites or religious ceremonies. Despite the fact that there is no longer a menstrual hut, the public dimension of spatial strategies that isolate impure women from the rest of the community is still maintained. These attempts become more apparent on the level of discourse.

Discourse Strategies

Women’s discourse concerning the situation in Israel is often filled with feelings of guilt and anxiety. Ideas of being impure, soiling the family space and polluting other members of the group may all be contained in the word one woman chose to express how she feels: assäqqagñ, meaning “tormented, distressed, tortured.” Another woman complained that each time she was menstruating, “the sky was looking down at her.” We have already mentioned the use of the term qoshasha (unclean) in the caravans; it was used again to contrast the Israeli home with the family hut in Ethiopia, “which was clean, not like here; there was no blood in the house.”

A “dirty” house is therefore interpreted as having “blood inside,” since impure women were not excluded from it, as was the case in Israel. As anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) argues, “dirt is essentially disorder and offense against order” (2). This parallels the idea expressed by male and female Ethiopian Jews, who sadly observed: “Everyone is mixed; everybody is together in Israel.” Obviously, the disorder of the social organization of the group, caused by the absence of menstrual taboos, results in metaphorical “dirt,” alluded to so many times. In effect, the term condemning the situation in Israel, qælæll, refers to the idea of mixture, confusion, and appropriately expresses the disintegration of borders and statuses. An elder, after explaining once more that impure women do not have a space for isolation in Israel, summarized the situation that husband and wife must confront: “Here there is only one bed and one house.” “Everyone is in the same place,” he reiterated; “there is no separation.” This conforms explicitly to Douglas’s theory that dirt is a kind of compendium category for all events that blur, contradict, or otherwise confuse cherished classifications, the underlying feeling being that the system of values that is habitually expressed in a given arrangement of things has been violated (36–37).

The words of one of the women I often spoke with accurately illustrated the dilemma of the whole community in their new homeland: “In Israel,
there’s blood in the house.” These revealing words express perhaps better than any others the bodily experience of menstruation in Israeli housing and point to the fact that, even though the menstrual hut has disappeared, the biological function of the woman’s body and her feeling of being *mārgām* have not ceased. This readjustment compels the woman to redefine her perception of her body, of her menstrual cycle, and of her female status. I would argue that the restructuration the woman undergoes in regard to her spatial environment and the modification of her place in the domestic sphere results in a new image of her own body and of the very conception of womanhood. The body image associated with practices of ritual purity in Ethiopia was being redefined in Israel in its verbal, physical, and conceptual dimensions.

Negotiating the Ideology of Purity

There exist various domains in Beta Israel life associated with the idea of impurity, especially concerning contact with non–Beta Israel, with corpses, and with animal carcasses. An individual who came into contact with these was subject to isolation for a period varying from one day to seven days and had to follow purification rituals thereafter (Leslau 1957, 72–97). However, Ethiopian Jews discovered in Israel that these practices are not observed in the same way. For example, they strongly condemn the manner of burying corpses in Israel and refuse to carry the body of the deceased because of the state of impurity that follows (Anteby 1995b). Furthermore, the way that kosher meat is slaughtered in Israel is not accepted by most elders, who refuse until this day to eat “Israeli” meat and still slaughter animals themselves (Anteby 1995a). Some of these symbolic patterns of purity and impurity are also linked to matrimonial prohibitions, which exclude marrying less than seven degrees of kinship apart; this is another controversial area Ethiopian Jews encountered in Israel, since Israelis ignore these rules, sometimes even marrying distant cousins (Anteby 1996).

When talking about the Christians, Ethiopian Jews claim that they are “unclean” because they do not observe menstrual isolation. To this extent, “Beta Israel in Ethiopia looked upon the Christians’ refusal to remove menstruating women from their houses not as a mere curiosity, but as a clear indication of the latter’s impurity and lower moral status” (Westheimer and Kaplan 1992, 85). This discursive strategy, moreover, only reinforces their utter disapproval of the Israelis’ ignorance of these purity rituals. In fact, the condemnation of the Christians’ way of life often overlaps with that of the Jews in Israel.

This form of verbal negotiation, at the level of language, develops into a rhetoric on purity that inevitably results in the construction of a discourse...
on the Other. By constantly referring to Ethiopia as an idealized “pure and clean” place and contrasting it with the “impure” present (Trevisan-Semi 1985, 104), the Ethiopian Jews are building an ideology of differentiation, where they appear to be the “real” Jews who observe the biblical commandments on purity. In this sense, we can understand how female impurity is part of a wider category of pollution states that are also being challenged in Israel. What appears to be at stake in all these rituals is the preservation of the group’s identity at the body’s margins, symbolized by taboos on sexual behavior, commensalism rules, and disposing of the dead. However, the issue in Israel does not involve reordering of new experiences in traditional categories of thought but rather negotiating traditional rituals in a new ideological framework. A bodily experience such as menstruation continues to be the same, but the culturally constructed categories of purity and impurity no longer exist in Israel. This conflict is further heightened when Ethiopian Jews recall that they are now in a country they thought would be “holy,” and inhabited only by Jews. Because their purity rituals reflect such important symbolic, religious, and ideological values, the Jews of Ethiopia, unable to maintain them spatially, preserve these laws through discourse.

Conclusion

“Of all the changes that the Ethiopian Jewish immigrants, and the women in particular, have undergone, the most profound seems to be the transformation in spatial terms” (Doleve-Gandelman 1990, 253). Although this is true, we can go a step further and claim that spatial compromises and metaphors have given way, after a few years in Israel, to a discourse that has resulted in the reworking of the ideology of purity. In the first section, ritual impurity was expressed in the hotel hallways as a distinction within the immigrant community in spatial terms, regarding the transfer of food. In the next stage, as the spatial blueprints slowly vanished in the caravan site, one saw how other levels of communication, such as nonverbal language, also modified the manifestation of ritual impurity and conveyed the loss of identity markers both inside and outside the group. In the last part, the disappearance of a graphic and geographic inscription of impure space in the Israeli apartments resulted in the Ethiopian Jews’ use of rhetorical and linguistic means to maintain this practice on an ideological level for purposes of distinguishing the external borders of the ethnic group in Israel. While women no longer physically participate in defining the identity markers of their community, the men use the symbolic dimension of female purity rituals to serve in their discourse strategies legitimizing the
group’s purity against that of the Israelis. Women’s bodies still play a role but only as an element in the elaboration of the rhetorics on the purity of the body and of the group. In fact, a growing language on otherness develops, and the emphasis on a traditional practice is put forth for arguing Beta Israel purity vis-à-vis the perceived impurity of the Israelis. It seems that the most important conflicts and the most vehement discourse about the host population all revolve around practices and beliefs linked to purity. Impurity associated with death, menstruation, and slaughtering are all topics that are being contested in Israel by the elder generation of Ethiopian Jews, for these deeply rooted practices touch on traditional codes of knowledge and constructions of identity. As Douglas (1966) suggests, “rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience,” and “pollution beliefs can be used in a dialogue to claims and counter-claims to status” (2–3).

Nonetheless, these ideological and symbolic compromises do not now arise as major issues among the younger generation. Throughout this essay the female body has been seen as a space of transition and a locus of negotiation. The transformations undergone in Israel have had consequences for the experience of menstruation and for the perception of the body for both male and female Ethiopian Jews. As Gilad (1989) argues, however, concerning the issue of personal choice and belief among Yemeni women who have practiced rituals of niddah most of their lives and suddenly stop, “women who no longer believe in the age-old family purity rituals . . . turn to other areas in which to define themselves as female” (130). One might thus suggest that identity formation in the next generation of women, who have not experienced the “inconsistency of belief and practice, that is, those who have not experienced defilement” (ibid., 131), will be different and that ethnic redefinition will be claimed through other means. This will be decisive in pointing to the intergenerational gap in the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel, where young women have already relinquished the traditional menstrual taboos. This is also changing the gender relations among the youth, a phenomenon apparent in other realms of social life.

NOTES

I wish to thank Frank Álvarez-Péreyre, Steven Kaplan, Don Seeman, and Anthony David-Skinner for their helpful comments on a first draft of this essay.

1. The name Ethiopian Jews is used throughout this essay when referring to the Ethiopian Jewish immigrants in Israel. However, the group also was known as Falasha or Beta Israel (house of Israel) in Ethiopia, and the latter term will be used when referring to the Ethiopian context.

2. Several diverging accounts exist pertaining to the place of birth. Some researchers claim that the woman gave birth in the hut of blood (Leslau 1957, 90; and Trevisan-Semi 1984, 105); whereas other accounts (Kahana 1977, 43), as well as data I gathered in Israel, show that the woman gave birth in the family hut and only later moved to the hut of blood.

3. The soiled clothes or skins were buried with the substances of the afterbirth on the edge of the village. For a description of the Beta Israel ritual of burying the placenta, regarded as impure, cf. L. Anteby (1995b).

4. From the responses I got, it seems that these time spans (of forty or eighty days)—categories Western researchers would like to believe are accurate—often did not correspond to such clear-cut calculations in the oral society the Beta Israel lived in.

5. L. Gilad (1989) emphasizes also the importance of sight on the day the Yemeni Jewish woman goes to the mīqveh: “She did not catch sight of her husband on that day.” And coming home from the ritual bath, she did not look at anyone “until she arrived home” (20). R. Wasserfall (1992) mentions the belief among Moroccan Jews that the woman’s first glance after leaving the mīqveh will affect the conception of a potential child (315).

6. L. Begley Soroff (1995, 165, 193) states in her sample of Ethiopian Jews in Israel that all the veteran (pre-1981) immigrant women use the mīqveh following the period of niddah but that, for political reasons, none of the new (post-1981) immigrants use it. However, S. Weil (1989) shows a more nuanced picture for the first wave of immigrants.

7. L. Gilad (1989, 116–21) also points out that some Yemeni Jewish women do not use the mīqveh in Israel; instead, the woman bathes at home.

8. F. Héritier (1994) mentions the popular belief in France that girls should not bathe nor walk in the rain during menstruation because the contact with water was dangerous, even in the case of washing laundry: “The association of the menstrual flow and the flow of water, cumulating wetness on wetness, could have a double negative effect, either amenorrhea, one (water) pushing away the other (blood), or on the contrary, permanent haemorrhage, one (water) attracting the other (blood)” (237; my translation from the French).

9. For more details on these categories, elicited through discussions on the menstrual hut, see L. Anteby (1996). These distinctions between objects conveying uncleanness or not could be compared to some of the issues in the Talmud, on bodily fluids in Tractate Niddah (54b) and utensils for Temple use in the Mishnah Kelim.

10. J. Phillips-Davids (1998) has found in the course of her fieldwork in Israel that the average age at menarche coincides identically with the average age at marriage among Beta Israel women in Ethiopia. This would strengthen the link between a menstruating woman and her status as a married woman. This also fits into R. Wasserfall’s (1992) claim that, for Moroccan Jewish women, if menstruation is a sign of a woman’s reproductive potential, then “menstruation and sexuality are deeply intertwined” (316).

11. Speaking of Moroccan Jewish women, R. Wasserfall (1992) notes that “niddah observances perform a crucial role in the articulation of Jewish identity” (312), to the extent that “the mīqveh is also what makes a Jewish woman out of a menstruating woman” (316).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


This essay deals with the complex relations between women’s fertility, gender identity, and community formation. Fertility has been linked to women’s differential status in most societies. Their social status has often been explained by their role in the reproduction of human population. Women, the argument runs, are more bound to their infants and so have a tendency to stay closer to their homes. Following this, women have been perceived in most cultures as mediating “nature” or the natural world for men (Ortner 1974). This theory enables some scholars to explain the almost universal subordination of women to men. The feminist movement in the West has struggled to disaggregate fertility and reproduction from personal identity, arguing that a woman need not be a mother to see herself as, and be seen as, a full member of a modern community. I present a case in a traditional setting, where this disaggregation was unthinkable, where a woman was first of all a mother or a potential mother. Infertility, perceived as the ultimate curse, was always blamed on the woman. In Morocco prior to the emigration of much of its Jewish population to Israel in the 1950s, Jewish women’s fertility was closely linked to gender identity, which in turn was shaped through the formation of their collective identity as Jews.

Through the analysis of one ritual, these complex connections between fertility, gender identity, and Jewish identity (i.e., full membership in a Jewish community) will become apparent. The ritual of the green and white ribbons (see below) was widespread in Morocco. (In some places it was called bidian, “the beginning” [Zafrani 1983].) It was a rite of passage for young brides, beginning the week of festivities prior to the bride's
going to the miqveh and to her wedding night. This presentation is based on thirty interviews conducted with Moroccan Jewish women who had emigrated to Israel from Fez and Sefrou. Eighteen older women, aged fifty to seventy-six at the time of the interviews, had married and given birth in Morocco before emigrating. The twelve younger women were between the ages of thirty-five and forty-eight and had been married in Morocco but given birth to their firstborn in Israel.

Description of the Ritual

In Fez and Sefrou, as in all Morocco, it was common to start the week of festivities of the Jewish wedding with a ritual.\(^1\) If the family was wealthy, every day was to be a feast.\(^2\) At the very least, rituals were performed on the first and last days. On the last day the ritual was called “the henna.” Of all the different rituals connected to women’s lives, my women informants emphasized the importance of the green and white ribbons. In the moshav, where my informants had settled, this ritual had merged with that of the henna and become part of an “Oriental” evening, a feast and ritual performed a few days before the wedding. From the evidence gathered, the content and the symbolism attached to the ritual have remained.

At dusk on the day on which the bride’s menstrual blood stopped, she washed at home.\(^3\) Her mother knotted her hair with a green ribbon, bought specially for this occasion. On this same night the counting of the seven clean days, the “seven safety days,” began. According to tradition the bride had to count from the dusk at the end of her last menstruation so that she could, according to the halacha (Jewish law), attend the miqveh (the ritual bath) the night before her wedding. Her future mother-in-law and future sisters-in-law flocked to the bride’s house. No more than ten women gathered there, all of them closely related. The mother-in-law brought with her a platter that included honey, henna, butter (sometimes hidden in the butter was a gold jewel for the bride), an egg, nuts, and sweets. The mother-in-law also bought with her a few meters of white ribbon. In Morocco only women participated, though sometimes a younger brother might sneak in.

In cases where the mother-in-law was divorced or widowed, she could not perform this ritual; another woman, one who was still married to her first husband, would do so—preferably the bridegroom’s maternal aunt. My informants were adamant: only a woman still married to her first husband could perform the ritual; she symbolized in their view the “good life.” The mother-in-law took the green ribbon from the bride’s hair and prepared a mixture of honey, wet henna, and butter, putting the egg in the middle. According to my informants, the egg was half cooked because
there was not time to cook it properly. During the ritual as well as during the recollection of it, this fact had become a joke.

The entire mixture was placed in a piece of cotton, and the whole bundle was knotted onto the bride’s head with the white ribbon that the mother-in-law had brought. At this moment the mother-in-law tried to hurt the bride by pushing the mixture into her head. During this part of the ritual all the assembled women would clamor and shriek the traditional “yu-yu.” Everyone kissed the bride as she was showered with dry henna. At the end of the ritual the guests ate cookies prepared by the bride’s mother and then dispersed. Some of my informants said that the mixture was thrown out right away because the uncooked egg would turn bad. Others claimed that the mother would hide this mixture until at least a month after the wedding day. The bride continued to wear the white ribbon until she went to the **miqveh**. The green ribbon was taken to the bridegroom by the mother-in-law and was knotted around his waist. He had to continue wearing it until the wedding. Some say that the bridegroom kept it until he went to the **hamam**, a day before the wedding. In the pictures I saw from the 1960s in the moshav, both ribbons were taken off just before the **hupah**, the actual wedding ceremony.

*The Informants’ Voices*

My informants explained this ritual as a sign of fertility and as “a good start for the bride,” a way to “better her fate” (**lehativ im gorula**). That is why the woman who performs it must be still married to her first husband—a sign of good luck. White symbolizing purity, the bride is fed white food during the ritual, as well as during that whole week: **zaban**, for example, a kind of sweet made with egg whites and sugar. The green ribbon is intended to bring out the bride’s beauty. Green is an attractive color and a symbol of fertility, according to the women. Both colors should protect the bride from any evil, they added. From the onset of this ritual until the wedding, neither the bride nor bridegroom is allowed to be alone or to wander from their respective houses. The ritual is supposed to protect them from evil creatures and spirits (**sheddim**), which my older informants believed populated the underworld in Morocco. Some of my younger informants translated their parents’ fears of underworld creatures into psychological fears. From the informants’ point of view the ritual’s meanings are twofold: (1) fertility and an auspicious start for the bride and (2) protection for both the bride and the bridegroom from unexplained fears in a dangerous period. (This period was thought to be dangerous because they were the center of attention, which could attract the “evil eye.”)
This ritual can certainly be interpreted from many different angles. Here it is analyzed in the context of personal and collective identity formation. This ritual is one of many that shape the biological and personal element of fertility into a cultural and communal one. As already emphasized, fertility was understood as being the most important feature of a woman’s personal identity, which in turn was shaped through her Jewish identity. It is argued here that the meanings revealed in this ritual are as follows: (1) being a woman, that is, being fertile (capable of having children) and being a Moroccan Jewish woman are inseparable; and (2) the link between these elements of a woman’s identity is made possible through the ways in which fertility is perceived in Jewish terms, hence the importance of the *miqveh*.

This ritual also presents a cultural conflict, between the laws of *tzniut* (modesty) and the publicity involved in actually performing the ritual. Usually, the state of a woman’s fertility cycle (namely, the time of her going to the *miqveh*) is kept secret, but in this case public acknowledgment of her state is necessary. The young bride is actually entering the stage where her fertility is going to be monitored by the community, and she will do what is necessary to become a Jewish woman and mother. The following analysis reveals the main themes and symbols found in this ritual, first by discussing the roles of the actors and the timing of the ritual and then by examining what is actually exchanged in this drama.

*Who Performs This Ritual?*

The mother-in-law is the traditional performer of this ritual. She stands in for her family and for her sons, in a sense representing both the men and the community. For Moroccan Jews the responsibility of teaching the bride the laws of purity, the accepted way through which her fertility may be actualized, fell on the mother-in-law. It was she who taught the young bride what she had to do to become a full member of the Moroccan Jewish community. The bride would be moving in with her in-laws, and her mother-in-law would therefore also supervise the bride in her observance of the laws of purity after her marriage. Furthermore, whenever the young wife came back from the *miqveh* in the subsequent years of her marriage, the mother-in-law would be the one to cook a special dinner for her son and his wife, a kind of reminiscence of their wedding night. In the 1950s in Fez it was not acceptable to have the first sexual encounter in the parents’ home, as it had been in previous generations. The newly married couple would spend their wedding night in a hotel. But their parents would accompany them to the hotel, where the mother-in-law had prepared “a table” of traditional dishes to be left in the room. Among the many dishes,
the women remembered vividly a pair of pigeons, symbolizing the couple itself. My informants said that they could not possibly eat that food, but nevertheless it had to be prepared.

Some scholars argue for a universal cultural link between food and sex. More than once my informants themselves made that connection. Serving food is a way of mediating between the stranger and the in group, between the individual and the community. Pitt-Rivers (1983, 24) suggests a view of women in the Middle East (from the men’s point of view, it should be added) as the ones who provide men with food and sex and thus act as mediators between public and private, between the internal and the external. In this case, the mother-in-law, the one representing the community, served food before the sexual act, before the bride’s potential fertility was tested.

Just as the mother-in-law prepared the nighttime buffet, the bride’s mother prepared the next morning’s breakfast. The nighttime buffet legitimized the sexual act by making it culturally acceptable. The morning breakfast introduced the couple back into the community with a new status.

My informants experienced shame when dealing with sexuality and certainly would never talk of anything sexual with their mothers. Not even menstruation was discussed between mothers and daughters (Wasserfall 1990, 1992). It was not the mother who taught her daughter about sexual matters; this was the mother-in-law’s responsibility. The mother was the keeper of her daughter’s potential fertility only until she passed it on, along with the green ribbon, to the daughter’s mother-in-law to be. The mother-in-law mediated the bride’s potential fertility—the green ribbon—by taking it to her son. The mother is linked to her daughter’s potentiality and as such is the keeper of her virginity and of the family honor. The actualization of this potential, however, becomes the responsibility of the men’s side, represented in this ritual by the mother-in-law.

Both the “table” and the dinner prepared by the mother-in-law when the wife returns from the miqveh symbolized the importance of putting sexuality into a communal mode. Eating kosher food before the sexual act, itself protected by the miqveh, shows the mediation of the Jewish community in constructing gender identity. When fertility is understood as the main venue of female identity, it has to be Jewish fertility.

When Is This Ritual Performed?

As already noted, this ritual is performed at dusk of the day when the bride’s menstruation stopped, as she began to count her seven days of safety before her first visit to the miqveh. The sexual act, which normally took place on the woman’s return from the miqveh, would on this occasion
be postponed until her wedding day, while she remained in a state of sanctity and purity. This was very important, said my informants, to ensure that the future children would be pure and not “bastards” (mamzerim). The mikveh is part of the process that transforms the woman’s fertility into a cultural state so that her fertility itself becomes Jewish.

The period between the ritual of the green and white ribbons and the mikveh is understood as very dangerous because of the ambivalence the women feel toward their menstrual blood. Menstruation is a condition straddling death and life, illness and health. The safety days are generally kept secret, being known only to the wife, her husband, and her mother-in-law when they live together. In fact, younger women were not even aware that their mothers went to the mikveh. In this context of secrecy the ritual of the white and green ribbons is paradoxical, since by definition it publicly acknowledges the physical status of the bride. About ten women gather, with the bride’s mother-in-law representing the community of men and its values. It is the mother-in-law’s responsibility to make sure that the wedding night takes place at the right time, after the bride is purified by the mikveh.

But the publicity involved also called forth danger. The evil underworld of the community was ready to cast a bad spell on the bride and bridegroom, and they therefore had to be protected and never left alone. The element of protection that is found in this ritual can be explained by this ambivalence toward publicity. Publicity invites the jealousy of those evil spirits or of evil-minded people in the community. The belief in the evil eye was widespread in Middle Eastern Jewish communities. Because of the necessary publicity given to the fact that the bride was starting the process that would transform her from a young girl into a Jewish woman, she had to be protected, and for this reason she wore the white ribbon. This ritual began the bride’s preparation for sexuality, which will culminate in the sexual act on her wedding day. Every time the woman comes back from the mikveh in subsequent years, her husband has to perform the sexual act. As explored elsewhere, the act of going to the mikveh thus constitutes an acknowledgment of sexuality, and so becomes part of a bargaining process for power between the spouses (Wasserfall 1992).

Before the wedding, as discussed, the white ribbon protected the bride during her public transformation, which was dangerous because of potential jealousy. Moreover, a ritual is needed at the beginning of the process because the power involved in sexuality had not yet been legitimately channeled. The most delicate and dangerous time for the bride was after she had been to the mikveh, because she was now ready for the sexual act but still had to wait for the wedding night. On this particular night she had to sleep between her father and mother or with a small brother. Sleeping thus protected the bride in her vulnerable state of being ready to actualize her
sexuality but nevertheless having to wait. Sleeping with her parents symbolized sexuality successfully transformed into Jewish fertility. This ritual, which begins the process of transforming sexuality into a cultural resource, belongs to a series of rituals, such as the *miqveh*, in which sexuality becomes fertility and, most important, Jewish fertility. As with the *miqveh*, this ritual presents women’s identity as actualized through and with the help of the community.

Though we have seen how the community exchanges sexuality for Jewish fertility (*beniat beit*, “constructing a Jewish home”), we have yet to examine what is exchanged by the different symbols that are part of the ritual and what their meanings are.

*What Is Exchanged?*

The elements—butter, honey and eggs—brought by the mother-in-law, point to the transformative power of this ritual. The egg was half cooked and so the subject of joking. It was argued that there was not time to cook it; symbolically there was indeed no time, because the bride was just starting her transformation, and her fertility was not yet actualized. What all these elements have in common is that they are raw material used in cooking and as such are transformative elements. Here they are used in the symbolic cooking of the bride: together, they will hasten, quicken, the bride’s readiness to become a bride, a sexual being. The three elements are knotted onto the bride’s head with the white ribbon, the symbol of purity. The bride’s sexual transformation is thus put in the context of a cultural element: purity. The white ribbon is the cultural context in which sexuality is transformed into Jewishness and so legitimizes its consequences: offspring. Also, the mother-in-law breaks the egg onto the bride’s head, emphasizing the ideal relationship between the two. In a situation where the bride moves in with her in-laws, the power rests with the mother-in-law. The ideal bride accepts this, but in daily life struggles were frequent between mothers-in-law and brides. One of the acts of maturity of a wife was to take over the kitchen, but she might have to wait many years. In this ritual of breaking the egg, the mother-in-law tests the bride’s obedience and respect for the traditions.

*The Henna*

Henna appears in many Moroccan Jewish rituals. It was common to throw dry henna on boys and girls attending weddings to hasten their own luck in finding a partner. Dry henna is green; wet henna is dark red. In the ritual
under discussion, green henna symbolizes the potential; red henna, the actual transformation. Henna became red on the bride's head. The mother-in-law helped the transformation, the actualization of the bride's potential, by “cooking” the henna on the bride's head but also by hurting her. Remember, this was done at the onset of the seven days before the bride was ritually purified by the *miqveh*, before she could actually experience sexuality.

Among my older informants from Sifrou, the average bride’s age was fourteen; some brides were as young as twelve or as old as sixteen at the time of their wedding. Out of ten women in this age group, five married before the appearance of their first period. The rabbi of this community in Israel told me that at that time Moroccan rabbis did not countenance marriages of brides younger than sixteen. According to Deshen (1983), it is safe to infer that in previous generations the age of the bride was significantly lower. My informants remembered that it was quite usual to marry off daughters who had not yet experienced their first period.

If we look again at the ritual with this in mind, the use of green henna (potential of fertility) and red henna (transformation, preparation for sexuality) constitutes a kind of symbolic “cooking” of the bride by her future mother-in-law, representing her son. The men are needed here to help prepare the bride's sexuality, all the more so in cases where she is not physically ready to procreate. The henna appears here as a way to hasten the process of bride’s sexualization, so that she will be ready physically and mentally for her wedding night.

**The Ribbons**

As we saw, only the women of both families are present during the ritual, the community of men being represented by the mother-in-law. A marriage between strangers is a way to create a community. The bride's mother, who stands for the women of the community, exchanges her daughter's fertility (green ribbon) for laws of religious purity (white ribbon). She passes the green ribbon (her daughter's potential fertility) to the mother-in-law and hence to the bridegroom, to the community. The mother-in-law, standing for the men’s side, exchanges this fertility for the white ribbon, which represents the Jewish laws of purity. Both genders are supposed to exchange and keep what was actually generated by the other, but only together could they realize the potential of each.

In receiving the white ribbon at the time she first became aware of her own sexuality, the bride agrees to keep the rules of her community: *niddah* and *miqveh*. Let us remember that the mother-in-law, in exchanging fertility
for purity, would hurt the bride as her son would hurt her on her wedding
night. For the women, accepting the laws of purity and the mitzvot is fol-
lowed by pain. Perhaps we have here a slight echo of the curse of Eve.

The bride exchanges fertility (i.e., sexuality) for religious laws. The
bridegroom exchanges religious law for his potential for fertility and is
charged with keeping it until it is realized on the wedding night. In so
doing he also proves his manliness. In the literature there is a tendency to
focus on virginity. For my informants, however, the manliness of the bride-
groom was as much an issue as the bride’s virginity. The question of
whether the bridegroom would be able to actualize the bride’s potential
was on everybody’s mind, at least among my women informants. In this
community it was common to use what were called eddim (literally, wit-
nesses), pieces of cloth used as proof of the bride’s virginity but also indi-
rectly pointing to the bridegroom’s manliness.

Virginity is certainly important as proof of the bride’s mother’s ability to
sustain her family’s honor, but manliness is also important to actualize fer-
tility. The bride and bridegroom each receives cultural recognition for
being able to realize their own identity with each other’s help. In the ritual,
fertility and purity are exchanged so that both bride and bridegroom can be
accepted as full honorable members of the Jewish community.

**Fertility versus Purity, Women versus Men**

Purity, which is central to this ritual, means sexual purity and is con-
nected, in my informants’ view, to their core identity as Jews. As noted
elsewhere, “menstrual blood transforms a girl into a woman; miqveh trans-
forms a woman into a Jewish woman” (Wasserfall, 1992). Keeping the
laws of purity became a way to ensure that the generations of Jews would
be pure. Interestingly enough, this ritual presents many levels of symbolic
exchange.

Women became the guardians of purity (they had to keep the laws of
niddah), which they received from the men (the men’s family bought the
white ribbon), and the men became the guardians of fertility. The ritual ex-
change revealed here seems to contradict the public exchange between the
genders. In public the men are the ones who keep the Jewish laws and rep-
resent purity, and the women are presented as the recipients of fertility. In
this case the bride kept the bridegroom’s purity or, in a more traditional
interpretation, was kept pure by his religious standing. In any case, by re-
ceiving the religious laws, she became the one who actualized his purity. In
this symbolic exchange between men and women, women privately receive
and keep the religious laws.
Each gender thus exchanges what seems to be the core of its identity and has to keep the element that symbolizes the other. Paradoxically, each exchanges his/her core identity with that of the other. This implies that the men become the guardians of women’s sexuality and fertility, and the women become the guardians of male purity. It is interesting to note that this interpretation matches the wishes of some of my male informants, who wanted to present themselves as the providers of women’s fertility. The men said that they are the ones who decide when the woman will have a child, even if the woman disagrees. What the men did not want to acknowledge, however, is that the women became the guardians of their (male) purity. On the public scene, according to this ritual, men are keepers of the women’s fertility through the green ribbon. But this is only one side of the picture. The other side is women’s role in keeping men’s symbols of purity and religious laws, this being done on a secret level and not publicly acknowledged by the men.

Women in the Middle East are presented as lacking public authority, which remains the men’s prerogative. Women, however, have many ways to hold indirect power, and one of them is through their symbolic role of actualizing men’s identity. But care is taken that this symbolic power does not even hint at a real shift of power from men to women. In daily life my female informants presented themselves as powerless. This symbolic assessment shows how women are accommodated in a system where men hold most of the public authority but where women are nevertheless part of the system.

The ritual of the white and green ribbons begins the process in the women’s life cycle in which sexuality becomes an asset when it is culturally transformed into fertility. Realization of sexuality is accomplished through fertility, and fertility becomes identity. In this process of transforming sexuality into fertility, purity has a central role, as it transforms fertility into Jewish fertility. This transformation takes place through the white ribbon, the acceptance of Jewish law, and the bride’s promise to visit the *miqveh* and thereby actualize both the bridegroom’s and her own fertility.

**NOTES**

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1. For descriptions of some of these rituals, see Malka (1946), Benech (1940). For a history of Moroccan Jewry, see Zafrani (1983).
2. Malka (1946) describes some rituals performed by Moroccan Jews during the week before the wedding. Eggs and ties were an important feature (55, 57).

3. In Judaism the precise date of the wedding is determined by the bride’s menstrual cycle. The wedding has to take place a week after the bride finishes menstruating so that she can visit the mizvah at the proper time according to the halakah.

4. Hammam are bathhouses that Moroccan women use once a week; see Mernissi, Growing up in a Harem. The hammam is not only a place where one bathes but also a place of recreation and socialization for Jewish women as well as for Arab women who were segregated from public life and were not allowed in the streets unveiled. Marriages and alliances between families were made in this setting. It can be compared to coffee houses for men. It is still a very important part of women’s life in Middle Eastern cultures. See Valerie Staats. “Ritual, Strategy, or Conventions: Social Meanings in the Traditional Baths in Morocco.” Frontiers 14, 3 (1994): 1–18.

5. My informants used the term mamzer, which in Jewish law refers only to a child born from a union between a married woman and another man. This use is not traditional, but it shows the importance in their minds of the mizvah.

REFERENCES


The Rites of Water for the Jewish Women of Algeria
Representations and Meanings

Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun

Yesterday

The Miqveh, a Place of Ritual Purification

Time of the Sacred. The miqveh, a ritual bath, the construction and functioning of which must meet precise requirements, is the place of implementation of the laws of family purity. In order for the sexual act to be blessed, in order to have a date with procreation, Jewish women must purify themselves each month after their menstruation in the water of the ritual bath. The immersion in the miqveh purifies. It is in no sense a hygiene-related immersion: when bathing in the miqveh, one does not get washed; one has already had a cleansing bath elsewhere just before. Only after this sacred purification is the sexual act permitted; while impure (during the time of the bleeding and for about the following eight days; therefore for about two weeks per month), a woman cannot be touched by her husband. Purified by the immersion in the miqveh, she then can resume sexual relations with her husband.

The first contact of a woman with the miqveh takes place during the week of her marriage. Only on that occasion does the visit give rise to large festivities. It is “public”; that is, not only does everyone know that the bride-to-be “is going to the bath,” but the other female family members also are able to enter the room and watch her during the ceremony of purification.

This first bath of purification, before the marriage ceremony, usually takes place on a Friday at minba time, before nightfall; the young woman has already washed herself and is clean when she arrives at the miqveh. A
qualified female volunteer checks that her fingernails are cut, that no hair remains stuck to her body. She then immerses her whole body in the ritual bath several times in succession. During this time the volunteer pronounces the blessings in Hebrew. The young woman’s head must be under water, her fingers must be widely spread out, and her legs must be slightly spread open in order for the water “to reach every part of her body.”

After the immersion, the young bride-to-be puts on a new bathrobe, new slippers, and covers her hair with a new towel—all of this being “necessarily pink” that day, “for a touch of sweetness and gaiety.”

She is congratulated, embraced, and celebrated with the sound of “youyous”; sugared almonds are given out while waiting for the evening celebration that awaits both families at the bride-to-be’s parents’ home.

“I remember, I was calm, quiet, not ashamed. I undressed in front of the women of my family and family-in-law. I had to go down the stairs to get into the bath and repeat a prayer that a person, responsible for the Mokve, was whispering to me. When everything was over, they scrubbed me and dried me, I put my Arab dress back on: a gandoura made of pink shiny satin and a long white haïk. I returned home, veiled, supported by the mothers, my veil protecting me from outside looks.” And Germaine (74 years old [1983]) adds: “Where we lived, in Constantine, there was a custom: on that night an elderly lady, well respected by the members of the family, had to sing a song in honor of the bride after the ritual bath; then the father of the bride was to read the Torah and bless his daughter. Only after that would the two families gather for a meal.”

Elaine (62 years old [1983]), explains that “in Algeria, when the bride goes to the mokve, we light a candle that can be found on a large copper platter that also contains all sorts of sweets, and handfuls of sugared almonds are thrown into the bath while she immerses herself.” She adds that, in Algiers, after the ritual bath, the night preceding the blessing of the marriage, there was also the “key and honey” ceremony: the mother-in-law-to-be had to set a key that had been dipped in honey on the bride-to-be’s forehead: “That way, she symbolically and sweetly opened the spirit of the future young mother.”

Here, we can see at work the deeply internalized rules and interdicts: one does not ask questions about either the necessity or the meaning of the ritual bath. “That’s the way it is, you must do it.”

Water appears as a source of life (“it must run continuously”) but mainly, through the accounts that we have collected, as a blessing for the future couple, as holding a fertilizing and beneficial power upon conception. As a matter of fact, it is the main representation of the miqveh for the women questioned, whether they accept it without saying a word or show some kind of reluctance.
A Life’s Story. Aline (70 years old [1995]), who married for love at the age of eighteen a “very observant” young man, insists that she had never lived in the Jewish part of her town, had been brought up in a well-off family, and had undergone secondary education. In spite of that her husband was able to convince her of the necessity of the ritual bath, “for the sake of her family-in-law.” She explains her reluctance, “the tremendous efforts” that she had to make to go to the miqveh, especially considering the fact that she “did own a bathroom” (in the 1940s), that “all her friends were Christians,” and that she herself considered “that many Jewish customs were barbarous.” As a shy young woman, she “hated to have to get undressed in public,” but “it was compulsory,” she says; “one could not get married without having gone through the miqveh.”

After her marriage, the miqveh became a monthly routine: “It could not be after less than eight days after the menstruation ended, after the bleeding ended. We could only go on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, at nightfall, at minha time . . . Why on those days? I don’t know; maybe it was linked to when the Sefer Torah ended in the synagogues on those same days? Why at those hours? Probably for the same reasons that explain why all Jewish feasts, Shabbat, begin at that time, when night falls . . . But we did not ask any questions: that’s the way it was.10 My sister-in-law, with whom I had a very close relationship, always came with me. I wouldn’t go by myself. . . . She came with me and would wait for me in the dressing room. She had gone to the miqveh for her marriage but had not returned since. She and her husband were less observant than my husband.”

In this account, different elements can be distinguished. By the 1940s in Algeria all the Jewish women went to the miqveh “to purify” themselves before their marriage, but those who went every month, as required by halakhah, whether totally or partially willing to do so, were those who belonged to more observant circles.

The “considerable effort,” the “constraint” that was felt by our interviewee when she had to go to the ritual bath, are signs of an ambivalence toward this practice.11 Her attitude illustrates how the conflict within an individual between tradition (one has to go because that’s the way it is) and modernity (but I really don’t want to show my intimacy) can occur, as can the confusion that often arises today between dirty and impure, between clean and pure.

In the room where the ritual bath took place, there was only the woman who overlooked the ritual and who said the prayers for the two or three women who came there for the same reason I was there: to purify themselves. The woman who said the prayers was a rather elderly volunteer, who had probably already had her menopause. She usually came from a poor and very faithful family.
The bath itself was in a very clean, small room. As soon as we entered the room, the woman would open the faucets as well as the plug so that the water was running: it was a sign of life, a sign that life goes on.

We, the wives that were through with our menstruations for at least eight days, undressed in a small changing room adjoining the room. I remember that we were quite excited but slightly nervous at the same time because the miqveb meant a lot and we were prudish! Therefore, we wouldn’t even look at each other, nor would we talk to each other. I couldn’t even remember who was with me from one time to another! . . . But anyway, we never talked about the miqveb, even with close relatives, it was much too private a subject. . . . We would go when it was necessary, we would not talk about it, nobody needed to know. . . . We only had one concern: immerse ourselves, bear the prayers, get out. . . . During the immersion, the woman who supervised would push our heads down in the water so that not one hair could be out of the water. She would recommend that we make our wedding bands turn (the only piece of jewelry that we were allowed to keep) so that the water would go through. . . . Then she would say the prayers, and this was to be done seven times in a row:12 immersion, prayers, immersion, prayers. . . .

Even though this was not easy for me, I had no other choice. It was compulsory . . . and I was absolutely sure (my husband kept saying so) that we would not have beautiful children if I didn’t go, that our children would not be pure, that they would not be good children . . . . I was sure that it had to be done for the well-being of the family, and when I saw “devilish” children, in my mind it was linked to the fact that their mother did not go to the miqveb . . . . It was my own faith; the miqveb had all of the family’s moral and physical virtues, and I absolutely wanted to have perfect children.

The symbolic and practical link between the miqveb and sexuality is very strong: if it was quite difficult to talk about it then and still not easy to do so today, that is because the miqveb is synonymous with the fact that the sexual act can resume. Therefore, to talk about the miqveb is, in a way, to talk about sexuality (i.e., “the miqveb meant a lot”). We can say that the miqveb is a metaphor for sexuality: going to the miqveb, a public place (even if there is only one person there, the one who says the prayers), is evidence that one may undergo a private act (the sex act). From a sociological point of view, it is the intrusion into the couple’s life of an external element (the religious community to which one belongs). And it represents the control of the couple’s sexuality by this external collective element (the community).

In Aline’s account, we can easily see the conflict between the desire not to go to the ritual bath (because the notion of sacred no longer has an important meaning and because individuality and intimacy are “modern” values that she has internalized. Also because going to the miqveb appears as the symbol, the nearly public announcement that the sexual act can resume, as well as the strong belief—inculcated by the husband and internalized by the wife—in the salutary virtues of the ritual purification in regard to conceiving children.

The very strong link within the tradition between miqveb and purity, between miqveb and the sacred is lost: “to purify” oneself by means of total
immersion is a way to erase death (or rather to erase the life that did not materialize because of the menstruation). And coming out of the water is a way to give another chance to life, to take on a new lease of life.

In Aline’s case the only element that remains is that of an act that is undergone as a constraint: the immersion is seen as a magic act, invested with a strong, superstitious belief, thanks to which the children who are yet to be conceived will necessarily be beautiful (physically and morally).

Naturally, this belief, reinforced by the birth of the first two beautiful children, is disturbed by the birth of a third child whose health is more fragile:

... from the day of his birth, I never went back to the miqveh! That really hurt my husband. He insisted that I continue to go, but he was not able to persuade me to do so. He would then tell me: “It’s because you went to the miqveh without really believing.” Still, I was not at peace. So we made a compromise: my bathtub would be a good alternative. ... It would be filled with water, the faucets and the plug would be open as long as I was in the bathtub, and after having washed myself, I would plunge into the tub while he said the blessings. I was sure that this was as good a solution as anything else, and I succeeded in convincing him! The only thing that did not comply with the rules was the quantity of water, the rest. ... I really regretted not having thought of this solution sooner.

This “rite of the bathtub” allowed Aline to accomplish what appeared essential to her in the rite of the miqveh—total immersion (even if she is lying, not standing), the running water (faucets and plug open), the prayers (said by her husband who is hidden behind the door)—and to avoid what she cannot bear: that is, to make her sex life something nearly public, to be nude in public.

Aline also explains that

while pregnant, there was something great! We didn’t have to go! But then, we had to go forty days after the birth of a boy, eighty days after the birth of a girl because in this case there was more bleeding and during a longer period of time.

After menopause, women were at peace: no more miqveh. ... I was not forty years old when I came to France, but here I don’t even know what the miqveh is like! I have never gone ... and I stopped practicing the rite of the bathtub: we had evolved ...
of character,” she performs the rite and attributes positive meanings to it in order to accept it. As a matter of fact, the interviewee remembers the slightly mocking contentment expressed by her mother-in-law and sister-in-law when they would see her “submit to the desire” of their son and brother; they would say, “She listens to him.”

But in the second phase, at the first excuse she definitely refuses to go and sets up some kind of accommodation with God and with her husband: the bathtub/miqveh, to which her husband submits, lacking anything better.

There we can see at work the solidarity between women: the sister-in-law, who did not go to the miqveh in spite of her affection for her brother, “was relieved to know that I no longer went . . . because she knew how much of a constraint it was for me. . . . she thought that my idea of using my bathtub instead was wonderful.”

The Hammam, a Place of Social Interaction

Time of the Profane. In Algeria and other countries of the Maghreb, for the majority of Jewish women the time of the miqveh was always linked to that of the hammam, although the time of the hammam was not always linked to that of the miqveh.

If one considers the religious rite of the miqveh a means of mediation with the sacred and expressing the respect of certain values that are the object of faith (the necessary family purity), what we regard as a profane rite in our minds—the bath at the hammam—seems to lead rather to the integration of the individual into a group (Durkheim 1994).

As we listened to our interviewees, these separate and complementary functions of the respective rites appeared particularly clear. The miqveh is a link to the sacred—something serious, the Law. It is the place where evil is erased, and prayers in Hebrew must be said. Even if the ritual bath is a woman’s issue (because of the sense of modesty or decency), women thereby fulfill (as in other domains, e.g., the culinary domain) Moses’ Law, the Law of God, as well as that of men. Not to observe this practice, at the time covered by our study, is equivalent to not observing the Law. It also means separating from the group, which can mean, for example, that one cannot get married.

Therefore, the miqveh appears to us, on a collective level, as the place where women’s bodies and the uses they have for them are controlled.

On the other hand, the Moorish bath, or hammam, is the women’s business, and men have no say in it. It is the place for leisure, the place or opportunity for festive ceremonies, magic ceremonies, for which sometimes only women are permitted to gather. Men have no control over what takes place at the hammam.
This is true for the weekly sessions at the Moorish bath but also for ceremonies such as tabnia or salha. If women are nearly excluded from the religious rites of the synagogue, they in turn exclude men from their “female” rites.

The Weekly Sessions at the Moorish Bath. During the first half of the century the Moorish bath in North Africa was used as a place where women who did not have a bathroom in their home could wash and get clean. Going there held the promise that one would feel better.

One would go as part of a family group: mothers would go with their children (boys up to the age of thirteen, girls no matter how old they were), a custom that allowed these mothers to evaluate the merits of the “young nubile girls” in the community: “It was the moment when one could relax, it was the distraction of the week . . . it was the time when we could chat. . . . It was there that, quite often, mothers would arrange for their daughters’ marriages.” (Germaine, 74 years old [1983]).

The hammam was more than just a place where you could get information on the neighborhood or family members. It was also a place where one could confide (family confidences, sexual confidences), this particular aspect being linked to the physical closeness. So the hammam produces a much more important psychological closeness than the miqveh, “where one does not speak to another, where each woman is closed on herself.”

Here one could also find out about particular events that would not otherwise be suspected: for example, “each time I went to the hammam, I would meet Mrs. B. . . . who had lived in France during the war. Her body was badly deformed by an enormous scar, which was all swollen, that went from her breast to her stomach. . . . She had been to Auschwitz and had also been a victim of Dr Mengele’s experiments . . . she could no longer have any children . . . she had gone crazy . . . we all felt pity for her.” (Zahri, 69 years old [1979]).

At the hammam, too, the Arab other could be discovered. If the miqveh is strictly and exclusively a Jewish place, the hammam, on the other hand, is a place for everyone: Jews mix with Arabs:13

“The Jewish or Arab women would bring pieces of fruit that would be put in large copper receptacles filled with cold water, cakes, drinks. . . . We were all mixed together: the Jewish and the Arab women. The Arab women would take advantage of these sessions to remove all the hair from their bodies, even the sex, with a sort of green ointment made from sulfur. They cannot have sexual relations with their husbands if they haven’t removed the hair from their bodies! . . . Old thin Arab women would keep bringing us buckets of cold and hot water; they would help us scrub our backs. . . . We would talk to each other; we would tell each other stories
while getting washed and massaging our hair... There was a strange atmosphere: it was a bit dark but enervating; there was lots of steam” (Aline, 70 years old [1995]).

The hammam as a place of social interaction appears to be mainly a woman’s place, where women do not have to give any justifications. It is a place that emphasizes rituals to which women seem to be particularly attached: occupying the same place, making it possible to be next to the same people from one week to another, having the same employee bring the buckets of water at the appropriate time, choosing the moment one wants to come, eating fruit and cakes and having something to drink at certain moments. These were all things that they and they alone had settled.

The Hammam Linked to the Miqveh. In all the accounts that we have gathered, the link between the two places of water is consistently underlined, a gay tone being used when referring to the hammam and a serious one when referring to the miqveh. Every time the question of either the prenuptial or the monthly miqveh is raised, a link between hammam and miqveh emerges: “We had to begin with the Moorish bath, it worked together with the miqveh because we had to be clean when we arrived at the miqveh: we didn’t go to the miqveh if we hadn’t first gone to the hammam” (Germaine, 74 years old [1983]).

Therefore, the session at the hammam was seen as the crowning of the tahnia ceremony, which itself is the first of the ceremonies linked to the marriage. The marriage ceremony can be divided into three interconnected stages that take place before the blessing at the synagogue: tahnia (foreshadowing the marriage but especially for protection, calling for beneficial effects, happiness, and fertility for the bride and young couple-to-be), the hammam (necessary time for ablutions, essential for the time of purification), and the miqveh (time of purification, going from impure to pure).

Our interviewees took much pleasure in giving us thousands of details concerning the way the festivities surrounding the marriage, festivities that lasted eight days, took place: a wealth of ritual practices that were all meant to make the union happy and fertile, to set aside any ill omen. After numerous banquets attended by both families, which took place in turn at one or the other’s home, Wednesday would be reserved for tahnia, Thursday for the hammam, and Friday for the miqveh.

The ceremony of tahnia\(^4\) took place in the house of the bride’s parents. The bride was all dressed in pink and wore pink slippers. She was the guest of honor and was accompanied by an orchestra playing Arabian-Andalusian music, consisting mostly, if not entirely, of Jewish musicians.

On the occasion of tahnia, the bride’s trousseau was spread out: “My parents who had made up a very beautiful trousseau because I was their
first daughter, had exposed every item: what a display! There was everything.” (Renée, 67 years old [1984]).

The women were all dressed “as Arabs”: they all wore *gandouras* made of shiny and colorful fabrics; they were covered with bracelets and necklaces that tinkled. The ceremony itself would begin when the bride’s mother-in-law entered the room, in the midst of “you-yous,” carrying in the *teffour* (a gift from the husband-to-be) on which could be found the gold pieces of jewelry that he was offering (in Constantine, the pieces of jewelry were gold, snakelike bracelets that the mother-in-law herself would slip onto the bride-to-be’s arms), a candle wrapped with ribbon, a platter with the henna, and also all sorts of gifts that the husband-to-be *was obliged to give*: embroidered slippers, fineries (matching shoes and purse), perfumes, a great variety of sweets, and of course, pieces of jewelry.

The mother-in-law would come close to the bride-to-be carrying a piece of henna with a gold louis coin (a symbol of prosperity); the two items were tied to the bride’s hand with a piece of red ribbon (which is supposed to counteract any unfavorable omens). As a symbol of happiness, prosperity, and protection, a piece of henna would also be put on the bride-to-be’s head. Then the women of the family would put some henna on the heads and hands of the young unmarried girls who were present “so that they get married quickly.” In Algiers, Eliane (62 years old [1983]) adds that “the young maidens, cousins, and friends on whom henna had been put had to remember to take it off before leaving the bride-to-be’s home so that happiness would stay within her home. . . . And after the ceremony, the bride was to stay home until it was time for her to go to the *hammam*, the following day.”

During the entire ceremony, which was a very cheerful one, drinks and pastries would be offered alternately. Then would come the time to dance: the mother of the bride would “lead off the ball.” To do so, she had to give a pair of scarves to her daughter’s mother-in-law-to-be. And while the orchestra played a well-known tune, the two women (united one to another because now united in life) would swirl around and sway their hips, after having slipped a large paper bill to the orchestra. They would soon be followed by the other women present.

This event would begin during the afternoon and end late in the night. It was the sort of occasion where women would gather within a group of women. Husbands, including the husband-to-be, would meet the women during the afternoon but would not participate in the dancing. Only the husband-to-be was allowed to receive a piece of henna and a red ribbon in his hand.

Afterward, Germaine (Constantine) explained that “we would wash off the henna so that our skin didn’t get too colored, and meals with the entire family would follow.”
The origin of *tabnia* lies in local Arab-Berber custom, and many aspects of the henna ceremony are alike for both Jews and Arabs; in spite of that, for our interviewees the *tabnia* did not seem to be independent of religious practices. They would say: “It’s part of religion... We must do it; it brings good luck; that’s the way it is.” The *tabnia* is an example of a profane rite that has been elevated to a sacred status.

The bride goes to the *hammam* on the day following *tabnia*. “The fiancée, her sisters, their friends, the elder women of the family would go together and spend the entire afternoon at the *hammam*”—it was a sort of bridal shower.

Again, festivities would take place: the “you-yous” would burst forth from both families as well as from the women who happened to be at the Moorish bath on that particular day (Jewish and Arab). Drinks, pastries, jams, and pieces of fruit were given out to all the women. “We would enjoy the sweets, talk, splash ourselves with water, get washed... it was wonderful” (Germaine, Constantine). They would all take turns dancing, between two buckets of water, while specialized female musicians (Constantine) played on bendirs (large tambourines).

This, even more than *tabnia*, was a woman’s celebration that took place among women; in this case, no men were present, physically or symbolically, to be masters of the ceremony.

The young fiancée would come out of the *hammam*, entirely wrapped in a haïk and accompanied by all the women she had invited to the Moorish bath: “I crossed the streets without seeing anything: there was someone on each side to hold me... men were not supposed to see you when you came out of the bath.” (Germaine, Constantine).

The last phase of the time sequence linked to the marriage ceremonies was going to the *miqveh*, where the atmosphere was much more serious: prayers would be said; the Law was to be carried out. But again, on the way to and from the *miqveh*, women took charge of the situation and organized expressions of joy: “The next day, wearing a pink *gandoura* and wrapped in my white haïk that held me away from anyone’s sight, I went to the *miqveh*. The women of both families produced cheerful ‘you-yous’ that could be heard all the way there.” (Germaine, Constantine).

In some families, another henna ceremony would take place on the return to the bride’s house: “This time, it was not the mother-in-law but the *harkassah* [a Jewish woman who specialized in this task] who would come to set the henna. She was paid to do so... She was an artist who would make it look like tattoos so that we would be adorned for the day of the blessing at the synagogue... She would put some on our feet and hands with the help of a net to hold in the paste. On the day of the marriage ceremony, we would take the net off and we would find ourselves with loads of small
checks on our hands. It was lovely! . . . The barkassab had put it on up to my ankles. For their wedding, Arab women would have it put on up to their calves. ¹⁷

Other Rites of Water, Other Places, Other Moments

Rites of water punctuated religious and profane rituals in the same way. Whether rites of purification (collective rites) or rites of protection (superstitious acts to protect a person), they were mostly women’s responsibilities. Women associated water with life.

Thus, for Shavuot, when men, all dressed in white, would come out of the service, it was customary for the men and women who were there to go through water as the men came out. It was a sign of joy, of the rebirth that is linked to the giving of the Torah, which is commemorated by this holiday. One of our informants explained that “water is a source of life, just like the Torah” (Constantine).

On the occasion of any departure for a long period—for example, military service—water would be thrown on the person at the moment he or she went out the door as a symbol that he or she would come back, for water is in continuous movement. Once again it would act as a symbol of the victory of life over death.

Salha ¹⁸ was another female ceremony but a rarer and more mysterious one, where more magic could be found. Only women were involved; not a single man was admitted. Once again, it was a ceremony that found its apogee close to water.

It is noteworthy that the first person (Constantine) who mentioned the ceremony did so with reluctance and much emotion; the other interviewees never mentioned it spontaneously at all but were willing to answer precise questions.

According to the established views of the time (Algeria, at the beginning of the twentieth century), women who were depressed, ill, or constantly in disagreement with their husbands were victims of the Djnoun (evil spirits). Therefore, “it was necessary to exorcise [the spirits] so that [the women would] recover.” For a period of eight days, the “ill” woman would be allowed to eat only unsalted, grilled meat and fish. She would be supported and encouraged by the women around her, relatives and friends, who would take turns in charge of her household (fixing meals, housecleaning, caring for the children). They would also bake cakes made of honey and semolina (tamina), which they would then throw around each outside corner of the house for the Djnoun.

The only beverage allowed was a concoction made with the branches of salba. This concoction had a soothing effect and was supposed to enable
the woman being treated to dance until she went into a trance, to the sounds of rhythms pounded on tambourines. During those eight days the woman was to be well dressed in order to find some well-being.

When the eight days were over, the woman would go to the outskirts of the city dressed in her best “Arab” clothes, along with the women who had helped her, and throw all the carefully preserved branches of salba that had been used to prepare the concoctions into a spring of a running water. She would throw away the branches symbolizing her illness while Black musicians played a highly rhythmic, broken, rough piece of music. These musicians, who were paid for the performance, were dressed in animal skins, and they would not stop swirling around, hammering on their drums with a metal hook: “Only Blacks could take the evil spirits upon themselves” (Constantine).

Once the evil spirits were transplanted, once the illness had drifted away with the stream, the woman could go back home, relieved and ready to take over her household again.

II. Today

Today in France the number of marriages between Jews from diverse origins—Sephardim (from Arab countries), Ashkenazim (from different places in Europe)—has increased: one Jewish couple in two married in France is heterogamous according to geographical origin. New customs are set, resulting from the synthesis of Sephardic and Ashkenazic traditions. Thus, the tahnia and henna ceremonies (Sephardi) will be respected; and on the day of the marriage, the bride and groom will jump and dance while singing Hebrew songs (according to the Ashkenazic tradition) and be carried aloft on chairs by male guests.

While tahnia was progressively abandoned by Jewish families who have settled in France since 1962 (a sign that Arab customs were being abandoned along with their country), a revival of this tradition can be observed over the past ten years. It is no longer rare to witness it in marriages between young people born in France, whose mothers got married “without tahnia” and whose families have assimilated perfectly into the main culture. The young people, who have often been exposed to higher education, are attached to this celebration. What is even more astonishing in these families where the children have become more religious is the fact that tahnia is reintroduced by them as a minhag with a purely religious aspect. Is this linked to the resurgence of the hitherto repressed North African for these young people, born and brought up in France, who do not know their parents’ mother country?
The henna ceremony, which has lost its name (almost no one calls it *tabnia* anymore) has become an important celebration to which many guests are invited in the best Parisian reception rooms. When questioned, the mothers (born in Algeria), their daughters and daughters-in-law say, “It is a beautiful celebration. It is cheerful, nice; it doesn’t commit anyone to anything.”

In the same way, the time for the *hammam* is often respected: it is a duty and pleasure for the women of both families to reserve a room in one of the fashionable *hammams* (Parisian *hammams* being set up like saunas), and they spend the afternoon there celebrating, relaxing, and being massaged while tasting the best sweets.

As for the *miqveh*, it has for the most part disappeared. Even though the arrival in Paris of Jews from Algeria precipitated a growth in the number of kosher butchers and restaurants and the opening of several dozens of synagogues or oratories throughout the country, it did not result in a similar increase in the building of or attendance at *miqvaoth*. Although observing the monthly routine of going to the *miqveh* had already weakened in the final years of living in Algeria, no Jewish women would have gotten married without having observed this rite.

Nowadays, even though the blessing at the synagogue is dependent on whether or not one has gone to the *miqveh*, a growing number of women in the Paris area refuse to go to the *miqveh* but nevertheless get married in a religious ceremony: the rabbis seem to “forget” to ask for the certificate that attests that one has gone to the *miqveh*. Women who belong to a traditional circle, however, practice the rite no matter where their parents came from.

Today it seems as if only the young women who are very observant, those who became *ba’alot teshuva* (returned to the religion), or those who belong to movements such as the Lubavitch really respect the rites of the *miqveh* before marriage and every month thereafter. Those who convert to Judaism also observe the rites of the *miqveh*.

In most cases, the women who belonged to the generation that went regularly to the *miqveh* (those that were interviewed) do not especially want to see their daughters or daughters-in-law go there: “because now, it’s not the same anymore; we have changed; we’re no longer in Algeria.”

While the links within the group are looser than they were thirty years ago in Algeria, it is what can be seen as an object of fear, of mystery (the *miqveh* as the place of the sacred) that is going to be overshadowed, then abandoned; and what can be seen as an object of joy, simplicity, synonymous with celebration (the session at the *hammam* as a moment for the preparatory ablutions and the henna ceremony), will be preserved although these two profane moments really find their meaning through their link to the sacred.
Of course, after thirty years the living conditions have changed. None of the Jewish families from Algeria is unacquainted with at least a minimum of comfort; every family has a bathroom, which was not necessarily the case in Algeria. Therefore, for the families that keep both Jewish tradition and Jewish superstition but are without real knowledge of Jewish culture, the *miqveh* used as a bath appears superfluous. To wash oneself in one’s bathroom, as if it were a celebration like the one at the *hammam*, renders the bath at the *miqveh* outmoded; its purifying and non-hygiene-related aspect has been lost. The *miqveh* as a place of sanctity, and thus mystery, the Judaic necessity of which is no longer understood, as a place that is more than just a place of celebration, has been eclipsed.

Nevertheless, when the daughter-in-law is converted (which is no longer an isolated phenomenon in the Algerian Jewish community), going to the *miqveh* becomes absolutely essential for the family, especially for the mothers-in-law. It is no longer seen as a purifying act but as a sacred one, an act of transformation of one’s identity.

Indeed, the number of mixed marriages in the Western world (in France in this case) has increased. For example, between 1966 and 1975, among the families formed in France in which one partner was Jewish, one couple out of two was heterogamous, based on denominational affiliation. The phenomenon grew very quickly within the Algerian Jewish community, to such an extent that many of our interviewees mentioned mixed couples in their family circle and seemed to be quite upset:

Eliane B. (Algiers, 62 years old [1983]) gave many examples of mixed marriages in her background. She is quite opposed to such marriages: “There are too many. . . . Parents have a hard time coping with them but they put up with them; they no longer repudiate their children, they no longer go into mourning, as they would have done in Algeria . . . but it is our main concern that our children do not enter mixed marriages.”

As a matter of fact, just as anywhere else, it is men rather than women who enter into mixed marriages. And according to halakha, the Jewish identity is transmitted by the mother. The families, as well as the husbands, really wish to see the young woman convert to Judaism because she is the future mother of children yet to come, in spite of the fact that doubts concerning her Jewish identity sometimes remain in the parents’ minds.

It is in this context and in the continuity of our study of the links between memory and identity that we have found an interest (since 1990) in the accounts of Christian women who have converted to Judaism (whether or not in the context of a marriage with a Jew) and have been living as Jews for at least five years.

And in these accounts, going to the *miqveh* is seen as the acme of the act of conversion: it is the symbolic death of what one used to be (immersion).
and the rebirth of the new being (coming out of the water, prayers). A particular form of adoption of the rites of purification by women of different religious backgrounds is set up. The miqveh allows the change of identity.

Our interviewees describe their experience in very similar ways. What prevails is the emotion and the feeling that the miqveh “makes you become someone else,” helps one to change her identity, changes the human being. The Christian is now dead; the person who comes out of the water, saying Hebrew blessings, is now Jewish. The past seems to have been erased thanks to the purifying bath (rite of passage par excellence): it marks the change of affiliation and the person’s new social identity.

The ritual bath seems to seal the change of identity forever. It shows the end of one life and the beginning of another. For these young women, daughters-in-law of Sephardic women (often from Algeria), the act of converting (along with everything that is implied—learning the texts and going to the miqveh, among other things)—is in some sense a revenge on their family-in-law and especially on the mother-in-law. They tell us “that they are Jewish without knowing why. . . . Their religion can be summed up by superstition . . . they don’t know why they do what they do . . . I do . . . I keep on learning; I try to explain the reasons for the law. . . . I went to the miqveh to be 100 percent Jewish; their daughter(s) don’t even know what the miqveh is. They don’t even go before getting married.”

The rite of purification is seen as the possibility of a new birth, a new life, materialized by the adoption of a new first name, a Hebrew one. Once again and to a greater degree, the ritual bath is associated with the dynamics of life, with the passage from a symbolic death (of one’s old identity) to life (adherence to a new identity).

Conclusion

If we keep in mind Professor Claude Riviere’s scheme (1996), we might consider that the rites of water, whether in the case of the miqveh (to erase the impure condition [see note 24] of the woman or the preceding identity of the person who converts to Judaism) or in the case of magic rites accomplish the following:

1. “[R]enew and enliven the adherence to beliefs” because they have a function of mediation with the sacred.
2. Have “a psychologically soothing and intellectually rationalizing function.” According to this aspect, the rite of water weakens the anguish that the individual may feel when facing phenomena that may overtake her (life, death) by putting the emphasis on the victory of life. The rite makes one go from death (impure) to life (pure).
3. “[A]ct on the integration of the individual into the group” by means of the
emotional dimension of “collective fusion,” by means of submission to the institutions that they symbolize.

The rites of purification are real “rites of passage” in the sense given by Van Gennep (1909). He has shown that all the rites of passage can be split up into three steps that are clearly visible in our case. Step 1 consists of separating and parting from the profane world. Step 2 consists of a marginalization in a sacred place. Step 3 consists of a symbolic resurrection accompanied by an integration within the community. The rites of water that we have described represent a memorable transformation in the life of the individual (the woman resumes her sexual ability, the individual executes a change in religion and therefore a change in community).

The rites produce a change in the individual and show adherence to the values of the group, thus allowing integration into the group. In the case of the miqveh, “if this purification remains particular . . . it is aimed at preserving the purity of the group” and its ideal of sanctity (Hidiroglou, 1993).

From this perspective, what can be said about the rite is what Jean-Paul Willaime (1995) says about religion: “It is a symbolic means of communication . . . it is a social activity that makes actors relate one to another in specific situations.”

The rites of water embody the passage from the profane to the sacred, the passage from the “outer” to the “inner,” the passage from the state of nature (undisciplined urges, out of control) to the state of culture (state of sublimated urge or state of the Law). But above all, as we have seen in this essay, the rites of purification by means of water in Judaism seem to express the victory of life over death and therefore seem to be a symbolic way of casting out the existential anguish inherent in the thinking human being.

If this function has lasted for centuries for the majority of Jewish women, it no longer seems to be the case today. Can we then explain today’s closing down of the miqvaoth in the Western world in terms other than those usually used (that are true, nevertheless), explaining that in today’s industrial world there is a loss of the notion of sacred? Apart from the fact that women take a more and more active part in civil society (which is one of the reasons they refuse to be considered as merely procreators), apart from the fact that the notions of pure and impure no longer have any great meaning, can we still explain this closing down as a refusal to contemplate death—even a symbolic death?24

NOTES

In 1962, just before the independence of Algeria, there were between 100,000 and 140,000 Jews. Since then, 95 percent have moved to France. The remaining 5 percent have either stayed in Algeria (mainly the most elderly) or have migrated
The Jews of Algeria have all had French citizenship since the so-called decree of “Cremieux” (1870).

1. A detailed description of the standards of the *miqveh* is given by Arie Kaplan (1976).
2. An entire tractate of the Talmud is dedicated to the rules of purification for women and to the *miqveh*.
3. According to our interviewees (those who came from Algeria), it was eight days, but it could be seven days in other places. When I inquired about this, they answered that “it’s better to count an extra day, just to make sure.”
4. The evening prayer.
5. Hooting that is performed by North African women (Arab and Jewish) when festive ceremonies take place.
6. This is the way Jewish women from Algeria refer to the *miqveh*.
7. The *gandoura* is a long, full dress that is tightened at the waist with a scarf. The *batik* is a large piece of fabric in which the Arab women from Constantine wrap up in order to keep out of men’s sight.
8. The year indicated is that of the recording of the interview.
9. Here we can see at work the confusion between *clean* and *pure*, a confusion that appears quite often when the *miqveh* is refused.
10. In this text we emphasize what seems to be particularly revealing of the social representations of the meanings of the *miqveh*.
11. If we do a more thorough analysis of Aline’s reluctance concerning the *miqveh*, we notice that, in fact, she questions her Jewish identity, which has been perceived as a burden ever since World War II. As a student she witnessed the exclusion of Jewish students, the loss of the French identity for all the Jews from Algeria (one of Petain’s decisions), and the status of “indigenous,” which was perceived as something ignominious for a young girl who “felt deeply and passionately French” but was no longer considered as such by France.
12. According to our interviewees, the immersion could take place seven times, twice, or three times in a row. In fact, according to halakha, the immersion was to be done twice (see Tendler, 1975).
13. It is the term that our interviewees used the most often when referring to Muslims, though they also mentioned Berbers, Kabyles, Muslims, or locals.
14. According to our interviewees, this Judeo-Arab word expresses the idea that there is some sort of relief, a relief that is linked to the fact that a young girl “has now settled down”: “It was necessary for a girl to get married as soon as possible and it was a great relief for the parents when the marriage would come up.”
15. A large copper platter, very finely worked.
16. A paste made from the henna plant that dyes the parts of the body on which it is set a reddish-brown color. The plant is supposed to purify and protect. It is used as a lucky charm by the Jews of North Africa as well as by the Arabs.
17. Of course, one will have noticed the Judeo-Arab-Berber symbiosis between the different traditions we have mentioned: the *hammam*, the henna, the *barkhassa*’s services, the Arabian-Andalusian music. Jewish and Muslim women share many customs in their everyday life and in the important moments of their lives.
18. Term used to designate a medicinal plant known as sarsaparilla. Dictionaries indicate that it is a deputative, that is, a blood cleansing agent.
20. Ibid.
21. Every woman remembers, to this day, the story of the converted woman (an exceptional fact at the time) who missed a step when going down into the bath at the miqveh (Constantine) and exclaimed “Lord Jesus.”

In December 1994, on the occasion of a B’nai Brith symposium in Luxembourg, the chief rabbi of Denmark told the same story: “In spite of her honesty, what is there to do when one of the recently converted wives, frightened by bolts of lightning and thunder, exclaims ‘Oh Jesus-Christ!’?”

23. We emphasize this point.
24. It is interesting that an exhaustive perusal of the Jewish press published in French between 1990 and 1995 reveals no articles at all on the rites of purification and the miqvaoth.

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The Return to the Sacred
Ritual Purification Among Crypto-Jews in the Diaspora

Introduction

This essay examines the significance of ritual purity within a unique religious culture that developed in fifteenth-century Spain. The history of the Jews in Spain spans sixteen centuries, from pre-Roman times to the Inquisition period. During this expansive history the Jews established a thriving Sephardic (Spanish Jewish) tradition, which coexisted alongside Moslem and Christian cultures on the Iberian Peninsula. Throughout the 1,500 years that Jews resided in Spain they experienced intermittent periods of oppression, beginning in the seventh century (Kamen 1985). The end of the fourteenth century, however, saw a marked rise in anti-Semitism within Christian Spain and an increase in violent attacks against the Jews. In 1391, Jewish communities were destroyed in Seville, Toledo, and Cordoba, as well as in other regions of Spain. Jews were given the choice to either convert or face possible death (Kamen 1985; Roth 1932). Over the next century a number of different coping strategies emerged among the persecuted Jewish population.

Some of the Sephardim continued to maintain their faith and their traditions, practicing Judaism to the extent possible under conditions of repression and persecution. Others converted to Christianity and no longer considered themselves Jews. A third segment of the Jewish population responded to the forced conversions by outwardly converting to Christianity while secretly remaining Jewish in spirit and in practice. This last
group—conversos, or New Christians as they were called by the Church—constructed new forms of religious culture that relied on secrecy and hidden aspects of worship.

In the latter part of the fifteenth century, more than seventy years after the wave of forced conversions, the Inquisition was established in Spain to expose and punish converts who were suspected of secretly practicing Judaism. Between 1484 and 1530 over 90 percent of those who were tried in Barcelona and Valencia were conversos of Jewish origin (Kamen 1985). As a result of the severity of the persecutions and the ensuing expulsions of the Jews from Spain, many of the crypto-Jews took refuge in Portugal and the Spanish colonies of the Americas. By the mid-sixteenth century, however, the Inquisition was established in Portugal and Mexico City. Vast numbers of crypto-Jews, as well as traditional Jews, left the Iberian peninsula and settled in the colonized regions of South America (Gerber 1993). Others, who were already living in the territory around Mexico City, moved further north into the areas that now comprise Texas, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico.

Throughout this diaspora, some portion of the crypto-Jews held onto their Jewish roots, transmitting this secretive culture from generation to generation. Over time the traditions became fragmented and their meanings obscured, but the survival of crypto-Judaism into the twentieth century as been well documented (Canelo 1990, Hernandez 1993, Hordes 1991, Nidel 1984, Santos 1983, Tobias 1990). Among the practices that have survived are those that are connected to rituals of personal purification. Originating out of traditions of fasting and family purity, crypto-Jewish rites of purification became the focus for the religious life of the crypto-Jews, especially the women, beginning in the fifteenth century.

In this essay, I explore the relationship between crypto-Jewish culture and the survival of family purity laws. Drawing both on historical material as well as my own ethnographic study of contemporary crypto-Judaism, I bring together the existing literature on ritual purification among crypto-Jews. The data for the analysis is based on an examination of the historical records of the Inquisition trials and on contemporary interviews with female descendants of crypto-Jews living in the Americas. These interviews were gathered over a period of two years (1993–1995) through fieldwork in the American Southwest. The women who participated in this study were from Latino families with crypto-Jewish origins. All of the participants were raised as Christians, mostly Catholic, and each had traced her Sephardic ancestry to the Inquisition period. Because of the significance of the Inquisition to the creation of crypto-Jewish culture, my analysis begins with a discussion of the role of women in the Inquisition.
Women and the Inquisition

A review of Spanish-Jewish history reveals that a primary goal of the Inquisition was to root out and expose those New Christians who were guilty of the act of Judaizing (Fergusson 1899, Greenleaf 1969). In response to the mass conversions the Spanish government established the doctrine of limpieza de sangre (Netanyahu 1972), a decree intended to distinguish between Christians of pure blood and converts who were descendants of Jews. According to this doctrine, only those of pure blood were true Christians and thus entitled to the economic, social, and political privileges of Spanish Christian society. Suspected of bearing impure blood and practicing heresy, large numbers of Spanish citizens were accused of being crypto-Jews. If found guilty of the charge of heresy, these individuals were forced to either renounce their faith or face death by burning at the stake.

During the Inquisition period, ritual practices were used as evidence of heresy, and as such they were codified in the “edicts of faith” developed by the Church. These edicts, which were read at Sunday mass, implored congregants to denounce anyone who engaged in heretical behaviors associated with Jewish traditions (Kamen 1985). The authorities provided lengthy descriptions of rituals which could be used to identify the heretics who lived among the pious:

If you know or have heard of anyone who keeps the Sabbath according to the law of Moses, putting on clean sheets and other new garments, and putting clean clothes on the table and clean sheets on the bed on feast-days in honor of the Sabbath, and using no lights from Friday evening onwards; or if they have purified the meat that they eat by bleeding it in water; or have cut the throats of cattle or birds they are eating, uttering certain words and covering the blood with earth . . . or have fasted the great fast, going barefoot that day; . . . (Kamen 1985, 162)

It was thus through the practice of ritual that neighbors, servants, and others identified the conversos and reported their activities to the Inquisition.

It is significant to note that in B. Netanyahu’s voluminous work, *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth-Century Spain* (1995), he argues that charges of crypto-Judaism by the Spanish authorities were greatly exaggerated. Netanyahu maintains that, rather than practice Judaism secretly, most forced converts and their immediate descendants eventually embraced Christianity, leaving their Jewish faith behind in order to survive. Thus, Netanyahu suggests, the widespread practice of crypto-Judaism was a fiction of the Inquisition, promulgated by the Church to legitimize the persecution of the New Christians. As proof, he offers the following observation:
Inevitably, to induce a Christian to employ them, the converts would reduce the cost of their labor; and this would require them to work longer hours. . . . This meant that during much of the day, as well as in the early hours of the evening, they had to avoid the performance of the Commandments, ignore the Jewish dietary laws, and behave in all other respects as Christians. This also meant they had to work on Sabbath and Jewish holidays . . . .

It is evident that in such circumstances little time and opportunity were left to the converts to observe Jewish law. . . . Thus, Judaism among the converts receded, while attachment to Christianity was on the rise. (208).

It is evident from this discussion that Netanyahu is primarily concerned with the male of the household, the forced convert who must negotiate the world outside the home as a Christian in order to support his family. As such his perspective does not consider the development of a specifically crypto-Jewish culture within the Spanish home, a phenomenon that can be linked to the persistence of Jewish ritual within the domestic sphere of women’s lives. In contrast to Netanyahu’s position, a gendered analysis of medieval Spain suggests that diverse forms of crypto-Judaism did in fact survive among forced female converts, who, partially protected by the privacy of the home, were able to observe the commandments and thus, to some degree, retain their commitment to the Jewish faith.

Such an interpretation is supported by the historian Cecil Roth. In one of the earliest analyses of crypto-Jewish life, Roth acknowledged the importance of women to the survival of Judaism in medieval Spain. In 1932, Roth published what has now become a classic text in converso history, in which he lauded the courage and faithfulness of the crypto-Jewish woman:

. . . At the earliest Inquisitional period in Spain, we are informed how women comprised the vast majority of the few who maintained their Judaism to the end and thus died the deaths of true martyrs. It is significant that women took a prominent part in the initiation to Judaism in several known cases, showed an especial familiarity with the prayers, and were in some instances peculiarly meticulous in their observance. (175)

Roth and more contemporary scholars have relied on Inquisitional records to characterize the survival of crypto-Jewish culture throughout the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. Based on the trials of the Inquisition, previous scholarship has focused on the testimony of the accused to substantiate the persistence of crypto-Judaism and the importance of women in maintaining forbidden traditions within the crypto-Jewish household (R. Levine 1982, Roth 1932). Among the most celebrated cases recorded by the Inquisition were those of Thomas Trebino de Sobremonte and Gabriel de Granada. The confessions of each of these young men, accused of Judaizing, invoke an image of family life in which children, at the
Accused by the Inquisitors of being a Judaizer, Sobremonte averred that when he was about fourteen years old his mother explained to him that Christians adore figures of wood and metal, while Jews adore Adonai who gave the true law to Moses in the desert; that in order to obtain salvation (deliverance from sin and eternal damnation) he would have to believe in Adonai, the God of the Jews. Under this influence he accepted Adonai and the Law of Moses.

His mother had instructed him to keep his Judaism secret in order not to endanger their lives. She taught him several prayers but did not allow him to write them down. . . . Sobremonte then went on to explain that his mother had owned a notebook entitled, “Los Siete Salmos Penitenciales” [the Seven Penitential Psalms] including psalms in her own handwriting. (232–33)

A similar account was given by thirteen-year-old Gabriel de Granada who was first brought before the Inquisition in 1642. The documents of his trial provide the following testimony, as recorded by the tribunal:

He said that he asked it for unburdening his conscience and in all to tell the truth, and that in conformity with which he declares: that about six or seven months ago, more or less, when this confessant was at the age of thirteen years, Doña Maria de Rivera, his mother, called him and when alone with him in the house in which they then lived in the Alcayceria, she told him how the law of our Lord Jesus Christ which he followed was not good, nor true, but that of Moses, that she and her mother Doña Blanca de Rivera and his aunts, Doña Margarita, Doña Catalina, Doña Clara and Doña Isabel de Rivera observed and followed, and because he was her son, and for the love she bore him, she wanted to bring him out of the error of his deception in which he was and teach him the Law of Moses, because it alone is the good, true and necessary law for his salvation. . . . and he answered unto his mother that he would observe it if there were whom would teach it to him; and on this occasion and on many others his said mother told him and taught him how in the month of September the fast of the great day must be kept in observance of the said law, bathing on the eve of the day previous and putting on clean clothing and supping on fish and vegetables, and not flesh (meat) and that wax candles must be lighted and put on a clean cloth. . . . (Fergusson 1899, 12–13)

In both of these accounts, the sons identify their mothers as the source of religious knowledge and as the teachers who initiate them into their ancestral faith. The case of the Carvajal family goes even further in establishing the significant role that women assumed in the survival of a crypto-Jewish tradition (Wiznitzer 1962b). Luis de Carvajal, a Spanish governor in Mexico, was a descendant of crypto-Jewish parents and was married to a woman who, along with other family members, was practicing her faith secretly.
Carvajal, however, believed himself to be a Christian. At his trial he tes-
tified that when his niece insisted that Christ was not God and that he give 
up Christianity to return to the true faith of his forbears, he slapped her 
and threw her to the ground in a fit of rage at her blasphemous behavior. 
His niece, Doña Isabel, was later denounced as a Judaizer and was brought 
before the Inquisition. Although she confessed to her own Jewish beliefs 
and practices, she would not name her uncle as a Judaizer since he refused 
to relinquish his faith in Christianity (Wiznitzer 1962b).

Doña Isabel was then tortured until she named others with whom she 
practiced her religion secretly. Among those she was forced to identify was 
her mother, Doña Francisca. She too was then brought before the tribunal. 
Just prior to her trial, Doña Francisca learned that she, like the other ac-
cused women, would be stripped to the waist in the presence of the inquisi-
tors. The records of Doña Francisca’s trial record that, rather than bear 
this humiliation, she preferred to die: “Strangle me now, but do not strip 
me; do not insult me. I prefer a thousand deaths. Remember that I am a 
woman and an honest widow! I have already told you that I believe in the 
Law of Moses and not in that of Jesus Christ, and I have nothing more to 
say!” (Wiznitzer 1962b, 187). Despite her pleas, she was stripped before 
the court and tortured. Finally, as she neared death, Dona Francisca con-
fessed that she had taught all of her children Jewish prayers, rites, and cer-
emonies (Wiznitzer 1962b). After this confession she was pronounced 
“reconciled” and, like her daughter, was sentenced to four years in prison.

The cases of Sobremonte, de Granada, and the Carvajals illustrate the 
risks that women took to sustain Jewish practices and the zealously with 
which the Inquisition punished the offending Judaizer. Against this back-
drop of religious persecution, we can further interrogate the role of women 
in crypto-Judaism from the perspective of ritual continuity and transforma-
tion. In particular, the historical and contemporary data provide a foun-
dation from which to assess the meaning of ritual purification in the lives of 
crypto-Jewish women and how such meanings were constructed through 
the maintenance of family purity rites under conditions of oppression.

Religious Oppression and the Observance of Ritual Purity

As suggested earlier, the survival of Jewish tradition in medieval Spain 
relied on the privatization of ritual and practice (R. Levine, 1982). As the 
locus of religious life shifted from the public sphere of the synagogue to 
the private sphere of the home, women became increasingly active in the 
preservation and transmission of religious culture. This phenomenon is 
documented by Renee Levine, who examined the Inquisition records of
111 women who were tried between the years 1492 and 1520. In this work, Levine concludes:

Surely, the lack of rabbis, schools and printed matter dramatically affected this situation; the home became the single remaining domain for transmitting knowledge and attempting to observe in secret. Since the woman is traditionally responsible for maintaining the home, in Judaism, for applying those laws relevant to that sphere, one could expect to discover there a more active or significant role on the part of the crypto-Jewish woman. (15)

Levine’s analysis addressed four categories of ritual that were preserved and maintained by women: observance of the Sabbath, fasts and holidays, dietary laws, and life cycle rituals. While all of these traditions contained some elements of purification rites, what is of particular interest is the extent to which the conversas continued to follow family purity laws, as first prescribed in Leviticus, chapters 11–15, and then elaborated in rabbinic law. The testimony of the crypto-Jewish women and their accusers indicates that the women observed the purity laws that applied to the menstruant wife and to her body after the birth of a child. Adhering to the sexual prohibitions that defined the blood of the female body as unclean, the crypto-Jewish women preserved the tradition of the miqveh (ritual immersion in a designated body of natural water following menstruation) and of the separation of husband and wife during menstruation and after childbirth.

The historical accounts record that, at the onset of persecution, women continued to visit the community miqveh secretly until such visits became too dangerous (R. Levine 1982). They then adapted the miqveh to the home, constructing ritual baths that were often shared by female relatives and friends. During the 1486 trial of Maria Garcia of Herrera, she admitted to the Inquisitional authorities “that when I delivered or when my menstrual cycle arrived, I would separate myself from the bed of my husband and would not return to his bed until I had bathed and was clean” (R. Levine 1982, 193). In 1500 another of the accused women described two forms of ritual purity in which she engaged, one after menstruating and the other after the birth of a child: “I observed sometimes when I had menstrual blood or was post-partem [sic] and then at its conclusion I washed myself, sometimes I bathed, this as per ceremony, and sometimes after childbirth, at the termination of seven days, I dressed in clean clothes and had clean sheets put on my bed because I was told that this was a ceremony” (ibid.).

As this testimony reveals, ritual cleanliness following a time of bleeding was associated with three forms of purification: immersion in a ritual bath, the putting on of clean garments, and the preparation of clean bed clothes, all of which could be observed within the privacy of the home. Further,
other women testified that they observed acts of ritual cleanliness that specifically pertained to the cutting of fingernails and toenails, a custom that requires a woman to pare her nails prior to ritual immersion. Here, Maria Alfonso of Herrera confessed that “when I was menstruating or had given birth, I separated myself from the bed of my husband and did not approach him until I was clean and had bathed myself and had cut my nails” (R. Levine 1982, 195). Similarly, Levine reports that in 1513, Ines de Merida told the Inquisition that she had “observed her mother first trim the nails, then gather the trimmings, then make a hole in the ground in which she placed them, and cover them up with dirt or else throw the parings in the fire” (ibid.).

The confessions of the medieval crypto-Jewish women strongly suggest that family purity observance was not entirely abandoned in the aftermath of the forced conversions. Rather, the historical documentation supports the premise that women continued to practice diverse forms of ritual purification that were reminiscent of Jewish traditions. In seeking to understand the persistence of such observance, it might be useful to consider the culture of guilt and despair that informed the lives of the forced converts in the years following the mass conversions.

**Spiritual Despair and the Persistence of Family Purity**

With the onset of the persecutions in Spain, the Sephardim had become a culture under siege. Beginning with the pogroms of 1391, fears for the complete destruction of Sephardic culture existed alongside the danger of family dissolution, as apostasy threatened the stability of Jewish life. Faced with the continued threat of religious oppression, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, each chose different paths toward survival, creating familial strife and, as Yitzhek Baer (1966) suggests, deep despair within the Jewish community. Nowhere is this sense of anguish more apparent than in a letter written by a Jewish physician immediately following the mass conversions of 1391. This letter, addressed to a friend whose fathers and brothers had converted to Christianity, extolled the virtue of the Jewish mother who continued to follow the commandments:

As for your poor regal mother, I can inform you that she is living in bitterness in her husband's house and continues to abide by the Law [of Moses] and act decorously; and although many are her tormenters and would-be converters, her only reply is that she would die before going over. But now, thanks be to God, nothing hinders her from making her way daily to the *juderia*, and she visits the House of God, the women there inquire of one another that she should not have to walk alone, and the good souls among them accompany her to the gate of the quarter. (Baer, 132)
Of those women who did “go over” to Christianity, many were wracked by guilt and a sense of betrayal. This response to forced conversion was especially evident in the observance of the Fast of Esther, a specifically crypto-Jewish holy day that originated out of the celebration of Purim. The crypto-Jewish women of medieval Spain and Portugal found particular significance in the story of Queen Esther (Book of Esther, 200–400 B.C.E.). This apocryphal account of Jewish history tells the story of a young Jewess living in Persia during the reign of King Ahasuerus. When the king’s wife refuses to obey him, she is sent away, and Esther, her Jewish origins concealed, is chosen as the new queen of Persia. Soon after Esther becomes queen, the king’s chief advisor sends out a decree, calling for the death of all the Jews. It is then that Esther’s heroism emerges.

She wishes to reveal herself to the king and to plead for the Jews, but she cannot go to Ahasuerus unless she is summoned. She therefore commands the Jews to fast with her for three days, and on the third day she goes, without permission, to the royal court. When the king sees her standing in the courtyard, he is so taken with her beauty that he offers her half his kingdom. Two days later she reveals that she is a Jew and that she and her people are doomed:

And the king said again unto Esther on the second day of the banquet of wine, What is thy petition, queen Esther? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? and it shall be performed, even to the half of the kingdom.

Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request:

For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. (Esther 7:2–4)

The king responds to Esther’s plea by hanging his advisor and saving the Jews.

The story of Esther parallels that of the crypto-Jews in that she, like the conversos, hid her Jewish origins in order to live safely in a foreign culture. Thus, as other scholars have pointed out (Canelo 1990, Liebman 1970, Roth 1932), her significance grew among the conversos as the emphasis of Purim shifted from revelry and joy to fasting and supplication. Among sixteenth century crypto-Jewish women in Mexico, the Fast of Esther was as important as the observance of the Day of Atonement. At least one young girl was reported to have died because she kept the fast for three days; others memorized prayers, backward as well as forward, that were attributed to Esther in the Apocrypha (Roth 1932). From the historical data it would appear that these young women found solace in the words of this Jewish queen whose pleas to the God of Abraham spoke of betrayal and self-recrimination:
And now we have sinned before thee: therefore hast thou given us into the hands of our enemies, because we worshipped their gods. . . . But deliver us with thine hand, and help me that am desolate, and which have no other help but thee. Thou knowest all things, O Lord: thou knowest that I hate the glory of the unrighteous, and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised, and of all the heathen. Thou knowest my necessity: for I abhor the sign of my high estate, which is upon mine head in the days wherein I shew myself, and that I abhor it as a menstrual rag, and that I wear it not when I am in private by myself. (Apocrypha: Rest of Esther, chap. 14).

With this prayer, crypto-Jewish women acknowledged the pain and self-hatred of the apostate. Through Esther's lamentations they could speak the unspeakable, as they too were forced to have sexual relations with uncircumcised males and to be shamed by a false religion that they were forced to wear like “a menstrual rag.” Such allusions to the unclean body, of both the uncircumcised crypto-Jewish man and the menstruating crypto-Jewish woman, linked spiritual impurity to physical uncleanness, an association that may have informed the continued observance of family purity laws among the forcibly converted.

According to Jewish law, the menstruating woman is characterized as niddah, a term meaning ostracized or excluded (Biale 1984). When considered within the context of forced conversion, the state of niddah may have taken on new meaning for the crypto-Jewish woman who, in falsely accepting the religion of the oppressors, betrayed the God of her ancestors. As a Christian convert, the crypto-Jew was truly one who was ostracized and excluded both from the generation of Jews who came before her and from the God of Abraham against whom she sinned. In the confusion and despair that characterized the crypto-Jewish culture, the continued observance of family purity may have assumed special significance as rituals of cleansing and purification became contextualized by the sin of apostasy. As secret Jews, the crypto-Jewish women were in a constant state of spiritual profanity, a perpetual state of niddah, which momentarily could be transcended through the act of ritual bathing. Under conditions of persecution, ritual immersion, like the Fast of Esther, may therefore have functioned to alleviate the guilt of conversion as the body became the vehicle for the purification of the soul.

The Diaspora and the Survival of Family Purity

In tracing the history of ritual immersion among the Spanish crypto-Jews, it is evident that customs associated with family purity were practiced throughout the century immediately following the forced conversions. In the previous discussion, I have offered one possible explanation for the persistence of these rituals despite the threat of discovery and the potential
for self-incrimination. What is perhaps most compelling about the persistence of ritual purity is the extent to which these customs were maintained (in some form) up through the twentieth century. The ethnographic data on modern descendants of the crypto-Jews indicates that immersion rituals not only survived the medieval persecutions but persisted throughout the Sephardic diaspora and the dispersion of the crypto-Jews into the Americas.

Nearly five hundred years after the Inquisition female descendants of the crypto-Jews report that diverse forms of ritual purification were observed in their families. Among the women that I interviewed, descendants recounted memories of purification rituals and spoke of being immersed in water or of having their fingernails cut and then burned in a ritualized fashion. Although these rites were almost always performed without explanation, the narratives of the descendants are replete with images of unique family customs in which symbolic cleansing assumed a significant role for women in the family. A school administrator living in the U.S. Southwest offers this view into the ritual life that came to characterize the secret ancestry of the crypto-Jews:

I remember these other rituals my grandmother would do. I realize my grandmother would make us burn our nail clippings or our hair if we cut them. As soon as we cut our hair or our nails we had to put them in the fire and when she would sweep she would take the contents of the dust pan out and the ashes from the fire as well and take them out of the house—ridding the house of dirt or the unclean. . . . I can clearly remember my grandmother doing this all of the time; as we stepped into a tin tub for our baths, she would always put the water on top of our forehead.

This respondent believes that these rituals were derived from the Sephardic practices of her crypto-Jewish ancestors. In recalling the unique customs of her grandmother and of her mother, she has reconstructed the memory of a forgotten Jewish past. In a poem written to her sister, she invokes the meaning of these rituals for a contemporary crypto-Jewish consciousness:

. . . Meeting the memories of my mind seems crystallized
Of not mixing meals of meat and dairy products
And watching our parents sip Kosher wine
Gazing into your moist, rich coffee-colored eyes, I
remember our Mamita scooping water
with her hand from the tub and
gently placing the ceremonial unction on our foreheads
as we stepped into the cleansing liquid which was
analogous to our ancestral Miqveh

Another descendant described a similar connection to Judaism through the observance of immersion rituals in her family. Raised in South America,
this respondent’s family emigrated from Portugal during the Inquisition period. The accounts of her childhood reveal the importance of cleansing rituals in her family, especially those that focused on the washing of hands and cleansing of the body. In particular, she spoke of a great-aunt who led her through a rite of immersion after her first menstruation:

One of my great aunts, she kept all these things. She taught us that we needed to wash ourselves with cold water. We need to do fasting four times a year, and she used a lot of herbs and cleansing for the body. . . . Every Friday afternoon we needed to go out and bathe—and remember, this was in the countryside many years ago and we didn’t have running water. Even if we bathed with hot water, we still needed to rinse ourselves with cold water. . . . When I had my first menstruation, my aunt took me to a river where the water was running and she bathed me. It was the first of the year, the first of January. And I say to her, “What are you doing?” And she says, “Well, that’s the way I want to clean you up.” She put me in the water up to my chin and I started feeling different. I saw a teeny drop of blood going in the water. And I will never forget that. Because that was like something that has to do with my feminine inner part. It was very beautiful. I saw that teeny spot of blood flowing through the water and it was like years of water running through our bodies.

It is significant to note that in this woman’s family, a river was chosen as the site for ritual immersion. Other respondents report similar experiences, of having been taken to a nearby river during their teenage years, where they were bathed in running water. This form of ritual immersion may have become common among crypto-Jews, particularly as religious persecution limited access to the \textit{miqveh}. In seeking to maintain the family purity laws it is quite conceivable that rivers and streams became customary ritual sites for crypto-Jewish women who sought other sources of natural water that, undetected, could take the place of the traditional \textit{miqveh}.

\textit{Miqveh and the Symbolic Act of Return}

For some of the modern descendants, the childhood memories of cleansing rituals retain an almost mystical quality, connecting the respondents to a spiritual past that they now seek to reclaim. The women who participated in the current research identified strongly with the persecutions of the Inquisition period. While they do not bear the burden of their ancestors’ sense of guilt and betrayal, they nonetheless feel that they have been deprived of their cultural heritage and ancestral roots. As one woman from Mexico explained,

We have been cheated from that ancestry. We have been cheated from the culture, from the connection. So why do you think we hate Catholicism so much? It is so
ingrained, and that is the fear we have, of the unseen. . . . And you know why we have survived five hundred years? It is because we fought it successfully, haven’t we? We have reclaimed our ancestry and our rightful place in the Jewish community.

In their longing for reconnection a number of women have chosen the miqveh as a symbolic rite of return. This function of ritual purification is exemplified by the experience of a fifty-year-old descendant living in Texas. Originally from Uruguay, this respondent chose the miqveh as her symbolic reentry into Judaism. Here she describes her visit to the ritual bath:

The rabbi asked me, “Why do you want to do this?” And I say, “I want to do this for the old people, for the ones who had to hide, for the last person who could be cleansed and say Shemah Yisrael in public. After that, they had to go underground. Let me do this wonderful thing for them.” I don’t think I even knew what I was doing exactly. But I wanted to do it, to make it official in some way, for the old people. And then I went to the miqveh and they gave me a lady to be with me, and when I was getting undressed, I told the lady, “I have waited five hundred years, I cannot wait one more minute. Let’s do it.” . . . The feeling was indescribable. It was like putting a puzzle of 500 hundred years together, like pieces of all the souls came together. I was looking up at Hashem and I said, “This is not for me. I am doing this for that day that you came to the desert and talked with that man. You were the burning tree. I am Jewish and I want to be part of that story. For me and for all of the Marranos [crypto-Jews], I want to come back.” And that is what I did.

As this moving account so poignantly illustrates, the act of ritual purification for this respondent had a particular meaning, which was informed by a history of persecution and secrecy. For her the miqveh was a place of ancestral connection and spiritual reclamation. Through the act of ritual immersion she sought to cleanse her soul and the souls of her forcibly converted ancestors. As the waters of the miqveh washed over her, this woman could finally proclaim to be a Jew before God.

Similarly, another respondent described her first experience of the miqveh when she formally converted to Judaism after emigrating to the United States from Mexico:

What I found was that conversion was a very very deep experience for me. It was that I was finding my identity totally. I did all of the reading and I knew, to be Jewish and to convert, you have to do it all the way or don’t go through it at all. So when I had the miqveh, they cut my hair very very short. And having a miqveh really strengthens you, it strengthens yourself. It’s water from the rain. They explain to you that it is natural water that they store and fill up with this huge pan and thank God I knew how to swim. . . . You have to immerse yourself and say these prayers under the water, you know. Open your toes, your eyes, your hands, and everything. They gave me dental floss, toothbrush, a clean towel, and this lady was there. She was an orthodox Polish lady, and she didn’t speak English. After all the cleaning, then I was ready. The rabbis were there, orthodox rabbis with beards all the way to
their knees. They stood behind these sheets so they couldn’t see me. They said prayers and chanted. I memorized the prayers, and it was very spiritual at the end. . . . For my identity, for my own spiritual being, I wanted to do it.

In these accounts, the practice of ritual purity contributes to the formation of Jewish identity among the crypto-Jewish descendants. Emerging out of a culture of silence and fear, modern descendants of crypto-Judaism have embraced the miqveh as a sacred space. Although they may not observe regularly, these women have chosen the miqveh as their rite of passage into the Jewish spiritual community. Within the living waters of the ritual bath they have immersed themselves in the forgotten world of their persecuted foremothers and, in so doing, have created a vision of a Jewish future unencumbered by the secrecy and oppression of the past.

**Notes**

1. The crypto-Jews have been known by many names. After the mass conversions in 1391, the rabbis referred to these individuals as the anusim, the forcibly converted. Within Spanish culture they were variously referred to as converso/-as and New Christians. Among Jews in later eras they were given the name Marrano, a term that may have derived from the word for pig or swine. In this analysis, I will use the terms crypto-Jew and converso/-a interchangeably.

2. It should also be noted that not all of the female descendants share this view of the miqveh. At least one respondent would not consider entering a miqveh in order to reclaim her Jewish ancestry. For this descendant, the miqveh is too reminiscent of the baptismal font where the medieval Sephardic Jews were forced to give up their religion.

**Bibliography**


The mitzvah of *taharat hamishpacha*¹ (the laws of family purity) is considered so vital that the rabbis enjoined Jewish communities to erect a *miqveh* (place for ritual immersion) even before a synagogue was built. Because of its contribution to Jewish family life, this mitzvah has enormous consequences for Jewish couples and Jewish continuity. This study investigates the modern-day observance of the laws of *taharat hamishpacha* in an effort to understand the feelings and experiences of women who observe these laws today. It is a self-consciously female perspective on an aspect of Judaism that is traditionally woman-centered but also has a profound effect on Jewish family life and the relationship of a husband and wife.

To assess the impact of this mitzvah on the lives of contemporary Jewish women, a group of forty-six women who practice the laws of *taharat hamishpacha* were interviewed in one-on-one, in-depth, personal interviews.² The vast majority of interviews took place in Boston, Massachusetts, and its suburbs. The five interviews that took place in New Jersey did not differ in any significant fashion from the others, so they have been included in this work without distinction.

The women ranged in age from twenty-two to sixty³ years old and had been married between one and a half years to over forty years. As a group they were highly educated, each one having an educational degree above the high school level, ranging from teaching certificates to Ph.D.s. An extraordinarily high number, nearly 46 percent, had earned academic degrees of Master's or higher, covering the fields of social work, business

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¹ *Taharat Hamishpacha*: Jewish laws of family purity and purity of persons.
² *Miqveh*: A ritual bath used by Jewish women for personal purity before menstruation.
³ Age range is provided for illustrative purposes only and may not reflect the actual ages of the interviewees.

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administration, education, fine arts, mathematics, medicine, and law. Despite the high level of academic achievement, only 24 percent worked full-time. Twenty-eight percent did not work for pay outside their homes; the other 48 percent worked part-time.

All of the women classified themselves as Orthodox, or shomray mitzvot (observant of the commandments), spanning the spectrum of modern Orthodox to Chassidic. However, only seventeen grew up in Orthodox homes; the remainder had become more observant after leaving their childhood homes. To achieve a homogeneous sample, only American-born, Ashkenazic (of Eastern European ancestry) women were interviewed.

This work focuses on the subjective perceptions and experiences of this specific group of women. Their attitudes and experiences are shaped to a varying degree by a number of influencing factors, including religious background, Jewish education, how they learned the laws of taharat ha-mishpacha, their level of commitment to halacha (Jewish law), the community in which they live, feminist ideas, contact with the secular world and modern values, and level of personal comfort. No two women follow the laws in precisely the same manner, and no two women are affected by observance in exactly the same way. Nevertheless, certain trends emerge that are representative of the group as a whole and the great number of commonalities in their feelings create patterns that, despite the broad nature of their experiences, suggest that the findings of this study may extend to other women.

Every woman who was interviewed asserted that she observes the laws of niddah because they are halacha. As members of the Orthodox community, the interviewees expressed their belief that the laws were divinely ordained and that therefore compliance with halacha is not a choice but the only acceptable way to live. Thus, the women contended that they were not concerned with whether the laws appeal to reason or are beneficial. This was illuminated by Mrs. MM: “This halacha [taharat ha-mishpacha], like all others, stems from one’s view of how to see mitzvot. They must be taken as a total picture, and all are self development tools, but in isolation it’s not an easy halacha. It only makes sense in the big picture.” Interestingly, a few women compared observing taharat ha-mishpacha to “brushing your teeth,” saying that “it’s a fact of life.” This was an intriguing analogy because it exhibited a sense of ease and demonstrated that this concept, which is difficult for others to imagine accepting, was taken in stride and made a part of their routine. “This mitzvah,” said Mrs. B, “is symbolic of a behavior of living.”

According to Orthodox doctrine, the halachic lifestyle governs every aspect of people’s lives, including what they eat, how they dress, and when they work. The women who were interviewed demonstrated their commit-
ment to halacha and Judaism in various ways. Every woman attested that she kept a kosher home, observed the Sabbath, and celebrated all of the yearly holidays. Additionally, each and every woman had sent, was sending, or planned to send her children to a Jewish day school or yeshiva at least until the end of high school. As some of the women specified, ensuring that their children have a good education is indicative of their own devotion to Judaism, and they hope that their children will continue in that tradition.

All of the women interviewed reported that *taharat hamishpacha* is important to them by virtue of the fact that it is halacha, and yet no two interviewees complied with the laws in exactly the same way, not even those who claimed to “go by the book.” There was a wide array of practices, especially regarding the *harchakot* (additional restrictions added by the rabbis to ensure that the original law, in this case the injunction forbidding relations between a man and wife when the wife is menstruating, will not be inadvertently violated). Although claiming to follow the halacha, close examination shows that in some cases the women clearly transgressed its strictures but did so in the spirit of tailoring halacha to their needs.

One of the areas in which there is a great divergence of practice among the interviewees is the way in which they relate to their husbands. For example, during *niddah* some couples will not allow passing items from husband to wife, while others allow touching. Some allow touching, including hugging and kissing, but will not kiss on the lips. Some couples separate their beds completely; others put on separate sheets but do not push the beds apart, and others just sleep on opposite sides of their joined bed. Some women used *taharat hamishpacha* as a form of contraception when they purposely delayed going to the *miqveh* during their most fertile days.

There are also differences in the ways that the women execute the *bedikot* (internal checks). Some women make an internal check twice a day, some perform *bedikot* only on the first and last days, and others check only one time (to establish that they are no longer bleeding) because they feel they will be clean after that one check. Some women perform the examination with a special *bedikah* cloth (usually a cotton cloth that is used specifically for the purpose of checking), whereas some use toilet paper to carry out the internal inspection.

Even among those who are very strict in their observance of the laws of *taharat hamishpacha* there is variation. Some women will not sing in their husband’s presence, some will not pass a baby directly, some sleep with their hair covered, some will not wear perfume, but no two women enumerated identical lists.

This diversity of practice also displays the fact that there are different varieties of Orthodoxy, and that the Orthodox community cannot be seen as a monolithic group. Even though Jews speak of the halacha as if there is
only one correct path, it is not uniformly observed even within the Orthodox community. Chassidic, Kollel-style, Agudat Israel, and Modern Orthodox, for example, are all included under the general rubric of Orthodoxy, although they are certainly distinct from each other in outlook and approach. The fact that all of these groups were represented among the women who were interviewed accounts for some of the variation in their practice of *taharat hamishpacha*.

The interview sample broke down into roughly two groups in terms of major differences in practice of the laws of *taharat hamishpacha*—those who touch their husbands during the time of *niddah* and those who do not. This issue was the greatest distinguishing factor in the strictness of observance by the women who were interviewed and, as will be seen later, also affected the women’s perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages to following the laws of *niddah*.

*Women’s Perceptions of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Observing the Laws of Niddah*

All but one of the women who were interviewed enumerated benefits that they perceive to stem from practicing the laws of *niddah*. Though most initially followed the laws of *niddah* because they felt committed to halachic practice, over 40 percent asserted that observance of the laws had since taken on additional meaning. Each one perceived benefits and detriments specific to her individual situation, although common themes emerged. To be sure, these positives and negatives are not all experienced by every woman or couple, certainly not to the same degree.

While proponents of *niddah* accentuate almost exclusively the positive facets of observance, those who condemn it cannot usually discuss it from firsthand knowledge, and therefore the disadvantages the women elaborated are not regularly explicated in printed literature. What is most significant about the advantages and disadvantages described here is that they were mentioned by the interviewees as firsthand aspects of observance.

*Promoting Respect and Consideration for Women versus Not Being Together When They Desire*

It has been vigorously argued by opponents of the laws of *niddah* that the laws “stem from primitive male fear of female bodily functions” and bolster the “rabbinical documentation which projects an image of women as almost totally sex objects.” Contrary to these points of view, almost 40 percent of the interviewees suggested that the laws of *tabarat hamishpacha*
elicit respect for women’s desires and clearly indicate that women are not to be treated as mere sex objects, but have to be interacted with on an emotional level.

Many of the women reported that observing the laws of \textit{tabarat hamishpacha} gives them a better image of themselves and a feeling of empowerment within their marriage. Mrs. Q outlined why she believes this to be the case: \textit{“Tabarat hamishpacha puts the woman in absolute control. She has the responsibility to do this whole mitzvah, which is quite a heavy and important burden. These laws exemplify the idea that the woman is strong and can be respected.”} Similarly, Mrs. S articulated:

This mitzvah fits with my feminist belief that as women we should know our own bodies and cycles and that the relationship should be going along with the rhythm of a woman’s natural cycles. The laws respect that. The fact that you have periods in your relationship without contact, what that allows is for the person to really remain an individual. . . . It allows you to maintain your own space, your own individuality, and you don’t have someone who has sort of a claim to your body all the time—your body is your own for half of the month. I think that all those things are really good.

The women believe that \textit{tabarat hamishpacha} also fosters respect for women’s cycles and moods, as manifested in a number of interviews. Mrs. A pointed out that “Jewish husbands know their wives’ biological clocks very well—sometimes better than their wives, and certainly better than men in other cultures. In society at large, women are taken for granted, but here, men even schedule their business trips around their wives’ cycles. My husband knows before I do when I’ll be going to the \textit{miqveh}. It’s positive and romantic.”

Despite these acclamations, nearly a third of the women complained that \textit{tabarat hamishpacha} artificially differentiates between permissible and forbidden periods of time in a way that does not always mesh with their desires. Most of the women would prefer to be with their husbands more often, and they sometimes crave physical intimacy during the time it is forbidden. “It is difficult,” Mrs. R pointed out, “when your own personal rhythm is not in sync with the \textit{niddah} cycle.” Mrs. B maintained that “the disadvantage to observing the laws of \textit{niddah} is that you can’t make love whenever you want to, and the abstaining from even doing anything that leads to sex is sometimes very difficult.”

“Sometimes you want to sleep with your husband and you can’t,” Mrs. M said with a touch of frustration. “Desires are a strange thing. You often desire someone more when you can’t have them . . . you wish you could just do what you wanted, just make love whenever you wanted, as opposed to on a schedule.”
Creating a Community of Women

Twenty-eight percent of the interviewees commented that practicing the laws of *niddah*, especially going to the *miqveh*, furnishes them with a special connection to Judaism and creates a community of women within the larger Jewish population. The *miqveh* brings the female community together, as Mrs. R elaborated: “The *miqveh* provides a place for ‘womanhood’ among frum [religious] women, and allows us to share experiences not understood by men. Feminine things and sensibilities can be expressed together, across the lines of exactly what one observes or believes religiously.” Hence, “at the *miqveh* there is a feeling of belonging and being able to share simply because we are all women and have a certain biology,” Mrs. L stated.

The feeling that the *miqveh* creates a community of women is enhanced because friends see each other there. It makes going to the *miqveh* a social outing or a “social event,” as a few women put it. “I like going to the *miqveh* because I always see friends who happen to be there on the same night,” Mrs. U said. The social aspect the women described may be partially due to the setup of the Daughters of Israel *miqveh* in Brighton, which has a common front room where the women congregate while they wait for a private *miqveh* room to become available. But as the women attested, since many other *miqvehot* are similarly constructed, this phenomenon is not unique to Boston.

The women asserted that even observing the mitzvah of *tevillah* (immersion) associates them with Jewish life in an expressly female way. Mrs. Q synthesized the women’s sentiments:

I feel part of something above myself which is bigger, stronger, and more everlasting than I am. I feel connected to Jewish women all over the world, and to women who lived two thousand years ago who did this and felt similar. I feel a chain of history and continuation when I go to the *miqveh*. It is a tangible connection to past, present, and future generations in a uniquely woman’s way, as well as a link to other women across space and time today.

Time to Oneself versus Logistical and Practical Inconveniences

As busy wives and mothers, the women interviewed frequently spoke of the fact that observing the laws gave them some time to concentrate on themselves, both emotionally and physically. Many of the women acknowledged that the mandated separation is beneficial because it allows for time apart that is not seen by the partner as a rebuff. As Mrs. A reflected, “There is tremendous benefit on a personal level to having private and alone time that is neither challenged nor felt as a rejection by your partner. It is good to have a time of no expectations and no pressure.”
The private time also provides women with a way to preserve their individuality within the family and their marital relationship. Mrs. N explained why she felt this was so important: “Women have needs for privacy, but usually there are no limits within a family. In some ways this time is a way to regain your borders and control, and it’s very healthy.”

In addition to caring for themselves emotionally, the women are forced to tend to their bodies when they go to the *miqveh*. Many appreciate the regular time to concentrate on their physical needs. Mrs. Y suggested, “I like knowing that I’m totally clean in every nook and cranny of my body. I take a long time getting ready, and it’s nice to have the time to care for myself.”

However, for those women who, because of family or other obligations, do not have much free time, the process of going to the *miqveh* can be very inconvenient. Indeed, it is not only going to the *miqveh* itself but also getting ready on the day and the various internal examinations that must be performed the week before that present difficulty. These practical and logistical hardships were mentioned by 56 percent of women as negative aspects of observing the laws.

The time and inconvenience of going to the *miqveh* is just one of the practical disadvantages to observing the laws. Mrs. U asserted, “It’s time-consuming. . . . You have to *schlep* [drag] out to the *miqveh*. It costs money—I just don’t enjoy doing it!” Because the prescribed time for going to the *miqveh* is in the evening and the *miqveh* is open for only a few hours, the time constraints for getting there can be a problem. Mrs. II submitted the following: “When the time for *tevillah* is twenty-of-nine, and you have two kids to put to bed, and supper to make, and stuff [for work] to prepare, and you have to leave home and you are going to be gone for an hour to go to the *miqveh*, there are definitely disadvantages and you would rather stay at home and do your work.”

Preparing for *tevillah* (immersion) posed problems for some of the other women as well. Mrs. E explained: “Sometimes I get resentful just in terms of preparation for the *miqveh* if I don’t have the time that I need. The kids banging on the door, you know, ‘What are you doing in there?’” Mrs. T also mentioned that, “when you have only one bathroom, there are a lot of physical plant situations that affect the ease with which you can do all this.”

Many women spoke of the troublesomeness of performing the internal examinations. In addition to the general dislike they held for this aspect of the law, a number complained of the hardship of performing the checks at the prescribed time (close to sunset). Mrs. H explained, “It’s not always convenient to do all of the checking. If you happen to be out of your house in the evening and you have to find a bathroom, and then you have to find something to save the cloth in because there’s no window and you can’t check it by daylight till the next day,” that can be a little awkward.”
For those women who do not want their children to be aware of the fact that they are in niddah, there is also the difficulty of disguising actions or differences in their behavior with their husbands, as Mrs. AA reflected: “The hardest thing when you have kids is trying to find a way of doing things without them getting too curious, because it’s none of their business. It’s sort of like when my husband leaves for shul [synagogue] on Friday night and the kids say, ‘Oh give me a kiss. Why don’t you give mummy a kiss?'” Hiding the fact that she’s gone to the miqveh can be awkward, as for Mrs. E: “We’ve had parties in our house and I haven’t been here and had to come in late. The excuses and the reasons [you make up] are funny in retrospect, but during the time it’s very stressful.”

Physical and Health Benefits and Intrusions

Over a quarter of the interviewees disclosed that they saw some physical or health-related benefits for women who observe the laws of niddah. For one thing, they are very familiar with their own biology and physiology. They know the rhythms of their bodies, as pointed out previously in a statement by Mrs. S: “This mitzvah fits with my feminist belief that as women we should know our own bodies and cycles.”

Though they are not completely sure what the health benefits of their observance might be, many of the women are convinced that they exist. Some of the women explicitly named cancer prevention as one benefit. This appears in books about taharat hamishpacha: “Within the limitations imposed by the relative truth of scientific investigation, a clear relationship can be discerned between Jewish family lifestyle and the strikingly low incidence of cervical cancer.”

Another perceived physical benefit, referred to by Mrs. J, is that a couple reunite when the woman is most likely to get pregnant, right after ovulation: “The laws are helpful in conceiving because of timing. You come back together right when there is the greatest chance of getting pregnant.” A number of other women concurred that this is an advantage, particularly those who have had trouble conceiving. Yet a few women, like Mrs. GG, claimed to have trouble getting pregnant because of following the laws. “I was just going at a bad time [to conceive] because I have a short cycle, but that made me angry because I thought these laws were supposed to help you have kids, not make it harder.” Other women have difficulty getting pregnant because checking during the clean days makes them bleed. When they bleed, they have to wait extra days before going to the miqveh, thereby missing their fertile days.

The women feel that obeying the laws of niddah protects their health in other ways, for example, in early detection of physical problems. Mrs. Q
expounded, “You see if something is wrong physically very quickly because you are checking and, believe me, you take notice if you see blood at the wrong time, unlike other women.” In fact, Mrs. P was able to spot a problem before it had time to develop: “I went to my gynecologist, and I explained to him that I would check six different areas inside of me. . . . In one area I would get blood and nowhere else. So he examined me and said, ‘You have a polyp, and when you touch it there’s blood.’”

On the other hand, some women find the examinations physically bothersome and invasive. Mrs. K contended, “The checking is annoying and I think that it may even be bad for the body. . . . I think the checks irritate. I think they dry you out. I think they take out all the natural lubricant that you have inside you.” Perhaps because they concurred that the examinations could be physically irritating or just because of the inconvenience of checking, many of the women had dispensed with performing internal examinations on a daily basis.

Anticipation and Renewal versus Pressure to Have Sex

Because they know that they will have sex on the night when the woman returns from the *miqveh*, couples who observe the laws of *niddah* are able to look forward to renewing relations. Over one-half of the women commented that there is a sense of rejuvenation that husband and wife experience on a monthly basis that is sexually healthy and keeps the couple’s intimate life interesting. Mrs. L explained, “There is anticipation and excitement as the time to the end gets closer.” Mrs. A further expounded: “It strengthens the marriage, and you can look forward and anticipate intimacy. As the end of *niddah* approaches . . . there is the sense of wooing and courtship that goes on, and all of that is really nice—who wouldn’t like that? As the time approaches there is a great heightened sense of interest, a heightened sense of anticipation, a heightened sense of excitement and desire.”

Mrs. X, who had not always observed the laws, attested to the fact that practicing *taharat hamishpacha* adds a spark of excitement that is not always present if sex is available at any time: “The fact that two weeks have passed in which we haven’t had sex means that we are both interested, especially on the first day. We never had that before. It puts our desires in sync, and it makes sex special.”

The renewal that the couples undergo, particularly on the first night of reunion, manifests itself in different ways. Those who enforce a complete physical separation are able to reconnect on a variety of levels, not only a purely sexual basis. “Even a touch is like fire and that’s exciting,” remarked
Mrs. G. “It is as if fireworks are going off, especially the first time you touch after going to the miqveb.” For most of the women interviewed, the night of the wife’s immersion is a special time for the couple. In fact, over four-fifths (83%) of the women attested that there is “particular warmth” in their relationship on the night that they go to the miqveb. Concurrently, many of the women spoke of the fact that “there’s a loss of spontaneity,” a negative phenomenon, which they did not elaborate on but took for granted as part of the package. This comes both from knowing they will have sex on the night that they return from the miqveb and not being able to act on their sexual impulses and desires for almost half of the month.

In addition to the temporal renewal realized every month, the interviewees pointed out that the laws help to sustain the couple’s romantic vivacity over many years. Mrs. I, for example, a woman who has been married almost forty years, commented: “When you observe the laws of taharat hamishpacha, it’s like being on a honeymoon every month. Sex doesn’t have that special meaning if you can have it all the time. . . . Taharat hamishpacha keeps the romance alive.”

This sentiment was shared by a majority of the interviewees. “Taharat hamishpacha gives you a structure in which to continually renew your relationship,” said Mrs. V. “It makes you feel that the sexual part of your relationship is precious, and you don’t get bored.” The interviewees contended that taharat hamishpacha helps to preserve the vitality of a marriage so that, as Mrs. F recounted, “Sexually it brings you to a place that’s special and evolving.” The laws promote the couple’s continued sexual interest in one another and intensify their romantic attachment, as illustrated by Mrs. C: “Taharat hamishpacha encourages fidelity, especially in men. It keeps things from being familiar and makes it nice to just hold hands. . . . Abstaining makes the heart grow fonder.”

In contrast to this positive anticipation, one-fifth of the women interviewed related feeling a negative pressure to have sexual relations because of following the laws of niddah. From their accounts it is clear that the type of pressure varies according to the individual interviewee’s relationship with her husband. Despite its different manifestations, however, the pressure is usually based on the fact that both husband and wife are acutely aware of the limited time span when relations are permitted. It is the endeavor to maximize physical intimacy before relations are prohibited again that causes this pressure. As Mrs. K pointed out, “It’s a pressure. Most of the time [sex] is something I want. But . . . it’s almost as if you feel like you’ve got to do it because you’re not gonna be able to do it. Like you better take advantage of the time period. It’s kind of lousy to have to feel like that.”

Because, as Mrs. K suggested, the women are aware of how much longer
they can be with their husbands, they will sometimes have sexual relations, not out of great personal desire, but in the knowledge that sex will soon be prohibited. Mrs. X, a highly educated and articulate woman, said, “There are times when I feel like, ‘Jeez, only three days left. How can I say no?’”

For women who are, by their own admission, unhappy in their relationships, the concentration of physical intimacy that *taharat hamishpacha* entails fosters intense sexual pressure, which can be very stressful. As Mrs. Z’s narration evidenced, in such cases a rather negative emotional effect can be achieved. Mrs. Z described the present state of her marital relationship as a sharp contrast to her happy and successful professional career:

In the last few years I have felt pretty unhappy in this marriage and just resent the whole [structure of *taharat hamishpacha*]. I feel like it puts pressure to have intercourse at a certain time, especially because the time [together] is so concentrated. . . . [It] is just this pressure and stress, the kind of dread that I feel that we’ll have to be together. . . . I get very upset. To me the low point of the month is the day before and the day that I go to the *miqveh*. Emotionally, I just get really stressed out.

Mrs. M also undergoes stress from following the laws of *niddah* but for a very different reason. During the time of separation she anticipates sex because of the expectation that relations will resume after she goes to the *miqveh*, as specified in the laws. But her husband is often not interested in having sexual relations. She declared:

It can be painful, because if you are not sexually compatible or things aren’t working out well, it just reinforces the fact that you are building up to something that isn’t going to happen. It’s not great. . . . It’s hard to imagine what marriage would be like without *niddah*, but at a particularly pressured point in your life it can get in the way. It might almost be better without it because I wouldn’t have the constant reminder that I’m not having sex.

The anticipation and/or pressure that the women feel does not necessarily translate into increased sexual activity, nor does observance of the laws decrease the frequency of sexual relations. Mrs. F advanced the idea that couples who practice the laws of *niddah* have sex about as often as couples who don’t practice *niddah*:

I was watching “Oprah” last week, and they took a poll nationwide, and the average number of sexual experiences that a married, an average married, couple had is five a month. The average number for single people—they have four a month. That’s pretty similar. But Jews who observe *taharat hamishpacha*, they can only go on a two-week [cycle], you know. So to ask the *miqveh*-observant Jewish community how many times they have sex a month isn’t really fair. . . . But it’s probably the same. It’s probably about five times a month.
Communication versus Emotional Distance or Tensions

When a husband and wife are restricted in their physical interaction, they may positively redirect their affection to other forms of communication. By observing the laws of niddah, Mrs. H found, “You have an increased awareness of relating to your spouse in a nonsexual way. It brings you to a higher level of communication and gives you more than just a sexual relationship.”

“Especially for the weeks you are in niddah,” Mrs. E explained, “your relationship takes on a very different tenor. You are forced to communicate in other ways than usual, and the two weeks off gives you the opportunity to develop different aspects of your relationship.” Because of such qualities, she believed, following the laws helps to strengthen a marriage. Several other women expressed similar ideas, and 54 percent of the interviewees felt that verbal communication in their relationships was heightened as a result of observing taharat hamishpacha. Mrs. D commented, “During niddah we have discussions that we couldn’t have otherwise because they would be interrupted by touching.”

It should be noted, as pointed out by Mrs. T, that the presence of time for talking does not ensure that the couple will use the time constructively: “The time should encourage you to communicate better, but you must take up the opportunity and cultivate it. We tend to think that it will just happen, but it doesn’t work that way.”

The mandated physical separation can cause emotional distance during the time of niddah, according to nearly one-quarter of the women. Their reflections suggest that, although it may encourage communication, the restraint directed by the laws can lead to detachment. It seems that this more often affects couples who refrain from all forms of physical contact. Mrs. EE suggested, “Our relationship is qualitatively different during the time of niddah.... There is a distance between us. It’s the physical distance which translates into an emotional one.”

Mrs. J agreed that it takes a lot of effort to sustain emotional closeness when the physical aspects of a relationship are removed: “There’s a tendency, mostly subconscious on the part of both parties, to not make the effort required to maintain closeness when the physical expression thereof is banned. That takes a certain amount of effort, and sometimes people are too busy or tired, and that can get kind of swept under the rug... which is a negative tendency I think one has to counterbalance.” Mrs. W also noted, “We are definitely more emotionally distant from each other. Definitely we feel more vulnerable, and you have to work on your relationship more than when you’re not in niddah.”
One way in which the emotional gap displays itself is in the form of arguing. Nearly a quarter of the women interviewed said that they argue more during the time of niddah than when they are not in niddah. When asked if, during the time of niddah, there is more, less, or about the same amount of tension between them and their husbands as when they are not in niddah, 52 percent of the interviewees responded that there is more tension, 9 percent said that there is less tension, and 39 percent contended that they do not notice any difference. The women were not asked to specify whether they were referring to sexual or emotional tensions, although some did explicate their opinions.

Mrs. O gave concrete examples of how tensions during niddah affect her relationship with her husband: “I think if we are ever going to snap at each other it’s during that time . . . There’s both [more sexual and more emotional tension]. I think it’s the tension from refraining and that spills over into how you interact, and maybe there’s a little bit more resentment sometimes—not against the person, but against the situation—on both sides.”

As Mrs. O indicated, much of the tension comes from having to be constantly aware of their actions, a pressure particularly acute for those who do not touch their husbands. This idea was developed further by Mrs. W. She alleged that during niddah “there’s definitely more tension”:

> It’s the tension of not being able to touch. It’s like turning the switch off that says don’t touch, and what ends up happening is that when you go to the miqveh you forget to turn the switch on . . . . At the beginning also, you do forget when you first get your period [and sometimes you end up touching]. . . . The initial going from one to the other, you have to be so disciplined that it produces some tension, definitely.

In these insights a trend was found and was correlated in response to a statement that “we touched so we didn’t have the tension.” It seems that ta-barat hamishpacha more often creates tension for couples who refrain from all physical contact than for those who allow touching. While only 28 percent of women who do touch their husbands report increased tension, 61 percent of women who do not touch their husbands report such a rise—more than double the proportion. In fact, over three-quarters of all of the women who reported feeling an increase in tension during the time of niddah do not touch their husbands.

The idea that tension is more often present for couples who refrain from all contact but not for those who touch was stated by Mrs. CC, who initially followed the restrictions against touching but later changed her practice: “Before we made the decision to touch each other, our relationship was more strained and there was more tension . . . . He felt like it was easier to completely separate himself from me during the time rather than
have to constantly be restraining himself. So it wasn’t a happy time then. . . . Now that we touch we don’t feel those tensions.”

No Physical Support and Comfort

Women who follow the laws of *taharat hamishpacha* strictly and do not engage in any type of physical contact during the time of *niddah* (61 percent of the interviewed population) encounter another disadvantage not present for couples who touch, namely, that they cannot get physical reassurance or support from their husbands for almost half of every month. “There are times when it would be helpful to touch your spouse,” Mrs. MM declared. “I think that there are times when it becomes difficult in a relationship when you can’t communicate physically.” Mrs. GG similarly remarked, “The disadvantage is if something happens and you need comfort, not necessarily even sex, but just if you are sick, it’s very hard to distance yourself. Or even like when you give birth. . . . It’s very difficult.”

A number of the women concurred that childbirth is one time when physical distance can be extremely emotionally demanding. Mrs. HH further expounded: “When I first had [my baby] and I was really freaking out, I wanted my husband to be able to hug me—not necessarily to have sex, but you need the support.”

Mrs. AA spoke of missing the physical support of her spouse at both emotionally happy and sad times in her life. “Let’s face it,” she said, “you talk about your greatest height in terms of happiness in life, the birth of your child—you’re right away *niddah*. You want to give your husband a hug, and forget it. . . . Or you have the other extreme, when you have your greatest lows, like when my husband lost his mother or I had my miscarriage, we were in *niddah* for that also. You can’t give hugs to each other for reassurance, you can’t give a pat on the back; you have to do it verbally.”

Elevating Sex and Demonstrating Self-Control

The laws of *taharat hamishpacha* regulate sexual, interpersonal relationships, one of the basic components of human existence. By doing so, the interviewees maintained, the laws instill in those who follow them a unique understanding of restraint that extends to other things. Their intimate lives, they claim, take on a tenor of holiness and sanctity, diametrically opposed to the promiscuity they perceive in American culture at large.

Observing the laws of *taharat hamishpacha* “teaches patience and discipline,” according to Mrs. G. “In this, as in other aspects of life, you can’t always have what you want.” Mrs. T argued that *taharat hamishpacha* promotes “self-control in a positive sense because you direct your drives and energies.”
The control that is conferred by observing these laws is especially important in light of how the interviewees see sexuality in the nonreligious world. The women reported that they are proud that they are able to exercise restraint in an area treated so freely by people around them. Mrs. K remarked, “Taharat hamishpacha gives you much more of a sense of control and ensures that you have a less animalistic physical relationship. . . . Putting bounds on behavior is positive.”

A large number of the women noted that observing the laws elevates the sexual act from simple gratification of the basest carnal desires to a hallowed event with spiritual significance. For Mrs. B, observing the laws of niddah “lifts even sex to a higher plane, and if you control that, it makes you a special person. It’s not a common thing. Because you are doing what’s proper, it puts you on a higher level and gives you a better image of who you are.” Likewise, Mrs. M stated that “marriage is a sanctified part of Jewish life. Because of these laws, kedushah [holiness] is put into sexual relations.” Thus, for these women, following the laws of niddah symbolizes that they dedicate every aspect of their lives to God’s wishes, and therefore sex is elevated from mere indulgence of physical needs to a level of holiness.

Time to Work Things Out versus Using the Framework as a Sexual Weapon

By giving the couple a time when they must relate without sex, the structure of taharat hamishpacha provides the opportunity to work through problems in a nonphysical way. Mrs. E explained why this is so: “When you are in niddah, if things are bad, it smacks you in the face. These issues are brought to the fore, and that helps you deal with them.” The thought was continued by Mrs. M: “Taharat hamishpacha reminds you on a monthly basis to deal with your problems. . . . It gives you the time when you must work things out verbally.”

The separation mandated by the laws of taharat hamishpacha can serve as a catalyst for a couple to work out problems before they reunite physically. “When things are bad it’s almost a reason to get them worked out,” Mrs. J alleged. “You don’t want to start relations again while you are still upset about something because then you are just covering it up with the physical, and that’s not the right way to use sex.”

Nonetheless, it is difficult for a couple to resolve disagreements simply because it is time for the wife to go to the miqveh. Though it provides the framework within the relationship for verbal communication, the niddah cycle does not magically effect the resolution of arguments. Indeed, when other means of restoring harmony have failed, a small number of the women actually delay going to the miqveh, an act explicitly forbidden by
the halacha, as a means of compelling their husbands to work out problems. While rejecting the idea of using sexuality as a weapon, Mrs. T did just that by not going to the miqveh on time when she was angry with her husband:

When you are fighting, it is good that there are two weeks when you can’t use the physical as a weapon. . . . If we are not getting along, then I don’t want to have sex until we work it out. But that sometimes means that we’ll only have a few days left to have sex, or we might miss the chance altogether. . . . This may be my mitzvah, but it’s his job to help make it easier and more pleasant for me to keep the mitzvah. If I feel that it’s a total burden because he won’t help with the kids, then why should I bother to make it easier, or possible, to have sex, especially if we are fighting anyway?

Refaining from going to the miqveh can also serve as a way to maintain distance. So as not to be available to her husband’s sexual desires, Mrs. FF would create many excuses for not going to the miqveh: “When you have a bad relationship which is mutual, it doesn’t matter when you go to the miqveh. This month I was supposed to go last Sunday, but I won’t be able to go until at least next Saturday. Sunday we had a bar-mitzvah to go to, and last night I had a meeting at work. Tomorrow I have something at my daughter’s school. . . . At least it keeps him off my back!”

Stage and State of a Relationship

As has been seen, the feelings of the women who were interviewed regarding observance of the laws of taharat hamishpacha are varied and complex. Although all of the women uphold the laws because they are part of halacha, their attitudes and emotions toward the laws are diverse and multifaceted. No two women are affected by the laws in precisely the same manner, nor did they detail identical lists of positive and negative aspects of observance. Nonetheless, there are common elements in the ways in which the interviewees relate to the laws of niddah.

Often the disadvantages the women mentioned directly oppose what they reported as the benefits of observance. This phenomenon may reflect the fact that women at different stages of marriage, as well as women in both happy and unhappy marriages, were interviewed. On the other hand, since contradictions arose within the responses of individual women, the discrepancies may suggest that since this mitzvah affects such a large part of life and human interaction, there is a wide range of feelings that a person has at any given time and over the course of her life.

From the data, we can discern three major stages of a healthy relationship from the woman’s perspective. The first stage is when the couple are
newlyweds. This is the stage of sexual exploration, a time when the desire for sexual relations is high and sex is exciting. The second stage is when husband and wife are familiar with each other and they have young children, who often make many demands on the mother’s time. For these reasons the second stage is marked by a decrease in sexual relations and an increase in the wife’s need for time to herself. This is consistent with the findings of Enrique Lopez in *Eros and Ethos* (1979), in which he claims that “a high percentage of Jews tend to have much less intercourse with their wives after they bear children. . . . my data showing an abrupt 46 percent drop off rate” (70). The third stage is when children are older and the couple rediscover each other and their sexuality.

Many of the women alluded to the correlation between their feelings toward observing the laws of *niddah* and the stage of their marriage. Mrs. R verbalized this general pattern:

I have felt differently about the laws at different times. Sometimes the logistics were challenging. I have resented it in the past when the rhythms of *miqvei* were not in sync with our emotions. But life patterns change, and overall you learn to have respect for the need for separation. The sexuality of a couple is different over time from the beginning to when the kids are older—it takes years to understand that. One’s attitude is shaped by their relationship and reflects it.

The stages implied by Mrs. R were more explicitly delineated by other women. Feelings of frustration toward the laws at the beginning of a marriage, brought about by the desire for relations, were expressed by many women who had grown more positive about the laws at a later stage in their marriage. Mrs. O was one of these women: “Now I am comfortable, though at the beginning I really wasn’t. At first it seemed like a long time to be apart, and we cheated a lot at the beginning. Sometimes we came pretty close to having sex when I was in *niddah*, but that never happens now. . . . Now I welcome the times we are separate because it keeps sex from getting boring and routine.”

A change in attitude, which many women described, often resulted from new demands on their time. The birth of children was the example most commonly cited as the key factor in a shift in their sexual activity and a change in attitude. Mrs. GG underscored the idea: “It is nice to be apart, but I may have felt resentful at being apart for so long before I had kids. Once you have kids you have less time to yourself, and sex is just another pressure.” Mrs. V, whose three children demanded much of her time, explained her increased comfort this way: “When I was first married, observing the laws was a pain and an inconvenience, but now it’s nice to have time for myself. It’s also hard to remember to take time with your husband, and this reminds you to do that.” Similar sentiments were elaborated by Mrs. N:
When I was first married, I had more sex hunger and depended on the physical for reassurance, so that made it hard to be apart. But having kids is so much physical work, and there is a physical relationship, especially if you are nursing, that precludes the need for other physical contact. I appreciate the space and then coming together. I am very comfortable now because I look at our intimate life as a long-term investment, and this maximizes it instead of trivializing it.

A shift in outlook about taharat hamishpacha was also exhibited by women whose children were older. Mrs. A related: “Taharat hamishpacha has become easier and more meaningful now that the kids are older. It has also become more spiritual—a real cleansing of the soul.” Other women spoke of a change in outlook as they and their husbands had gotten older and developed their relationship. Mrs. BB remarked, “I see it (taharat hamishpacha) in a different light now that we are older, and it brings us closer together during the time we have. At the beginning it was difficult, but I am comfortable with it now. It is an emotional pillar, and you know that it is there for you every month.”

These aspects, as well as the resurgence of sexual desire later in marriage, were discussed by Mrs. P, one of the postmenopausal women. She clarified the point:

My attitude probably has changed, especially now that I go to the miqveh because of hormone replacement therapy. I used to be comfortable observing the laws, but now going into niddah is just an inconvenience, because after five years of not having to go to the miqveh it means less time with my husband. I feel resentment directed at the physical aspects—like why can’t I stop staining or why can’t we hug—not the halacha. We have a very nice sexual relationship, so when we do have to stop being with each other now, I feel a self-imposed pressure that I’m missing out.

The women’s feelings regarding observance of the laws of taharat hamishpacha reveals more than just their stage of life; it also reflects the state of their marital relationships. Since both women who were happy and women who were unhappy in their marriages were interviewed, it seems that observance of the laws does not “make or break” a relationship. As is related in the Talmud, “When love is strong, a man and woman can make their bed on a sword’s blade. When love grows weak, a bed of sixty cubits is not large enough.” The women’s statements reflect this idea, indicating that the state of an interviewee’s relationship affects her feelings toward taharat hamishpacha.

The sentiments of each of the women whose marriage was troubled most poignantly suggest that one’s attitude toward the laws of niddah mirrors other elements in the relationship. “My attitude has changed over the course of our marriage depending on how I felt about the relationship,” said Mrs. Z. She continued:
We slept together before we were married, so it seemed stupid to start observing these laws just because we were married. Then I got to the point where, even though I didn’t like the separation, there was a renewal in emotions, and I was careful in my observance. When I became unhappy in my marriage, I began to resent observing the laws. All the checking and everything is a nuisance and getting to the miqveh is a hassle, even though once I get there it gives me an island of quiet. Although I do have space to myself for two weeks, which is good, the sex time is concentrated and it puts pressure on me to have sex. . . . In a close relationship the laws can add new excitement, but when things aren’t good, it adds a lot of pressure, especially if your husband doesn’t feel the same way and expects you to have sex during the weeks that it is permitted. Of course, it’s good to have the two weeks of imposed separation so that I don’t feel pressure for sex all of the time.

Mrs. M substantiated what Mrs. Z articulated by attesting that “one’s feelings reflect the sexual functioning of their marriage. Although I’m happy to be shomer mitzvot, at times it can be painful because I build up emotionally to something that doesn’t happen. I used to feel pressure, but now I’m not as tense and am willing to go to the miqveh on a different night. To make it more positive, I center the time on myself and focus on my body.”

Interestingly, Mrs. T spoke of this mitzvah as a burden as well, when describing the factors that shaped her shifting sentiments toward observance: “My attitude toward taharat hamishpacha is a function of the help he is giving and what else is going on in my life and the family. . . . It just takes me the time to go to the miqveh—not him. Why should I spend the time and then feel pressured to have sex when I don’t want to? Sometimes I’m just not interested in spending time with my husband.”

Though all of these women were in troubled marriages, none felt that taharat hamishpacha was the cause of her troubles. While some of the women thought that there might be less pressure if the laws were not a part of their routine, some praised the separation. Their attitude toward complying with the laws of taharat hamishpacha illustrated and replicated the pattern of their feelings toward their husbands but was not the cause of the strain in the marital relationships.

Another manifestation of the fact that taharat hamishpacha portrays the existing quality of the relationship but is not the origin of difficulty is the example of interviewees who had been married previously. Four of the women had previously experienced unhappy marriages, and three of them spoke of the differences in their outlooks now that they are in healthy relationships. One commented, “It’s hard to be apart, especially during the days that I am clean. In my first marriage it wasn’t hard because I didn’t love him and the separation was nice.” The very fact that they still complied with the laws in their second marriages indicates that these women did not believe the laws to be the impetus for their previous marital problems.
Some of the women felt that following the laws of *taharat hamishpacha* may in fact strengthen a marriage, as in Mrs. TT’s case: “We had a crisis in our relationship, and my sister-in-law told me about the laws. I wanted to work out the problems in our marriage, so I thought it might be worth trying. At first my husband didn’t want to have anything to do with it. I didn’t think he’d ever like it—but he does. I feel very positive about the laws. I have been on the other side. . . . Following the laws makes our marriage better.”

Most of the women were content in their relationships, and therefore, on the whole, they were comfortable practicing the laws of *niddah* despite the difficulties they perceived. Mrs. PP contended that “it feels good to know that we can subsume the physical world to the emotional, but at times it can be hard. I feel different every month, and when I have the space I realize again how much I love him.”

Only one woman who was satisfied in her marriage had completely negative feelings about this mitzvah. When asked how she felt about observing the laws of *taharat hamishpacha*, Mrs. U replied, “I don’t like to do this mitzvah; it’s my least favorite thing in Judaism. At first it made my life miserable, and I thought that it was detracting. Now that I am familiar with my husband, it is just annoying.” Despite the acknowledged difficulties, however, the overwhelming majority of the interviewed women found that observance of *taharat hamishpacha* had an overall positive influence on their lives. Mrs. R summarized best how *taharat hamishpacha* touches their lives in many ways: “The two weeks creates a space in your relationship within which you can refocus. And when I go to the *miqveh*, I can reflect on the month before and the month to come. . . . I have gone to the *miqveh* . . . the world over. It reinforces the universality of this mitzvah among Jewish women and is a powerful link between generations of Jews and Jews all around the world. I believe it is an essential mitzvah.”

The women’s attitudes toward observing the laws of *niddah*, though initially shaped by their background, upbringing, and learning, changed according to the state and stage of their marriages. Therefore, the attitudes of all the women fluctuated, sometimes affecting their observance. In general, the majority were comfortable with the laws, though they expressed negative feelings about them. As we have seen, the specific positive and negative aspects that each woman saw in observance reflects her personal needs, the nature of her relationship with her husband, and her stage in the life cycle.

NOTES

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1. The phrase *taharat hamishpacha* will be used interchangeably with “the laws of *niddah*” to signify the period when husband and wife are not allowed to have intimate relations. *Niddah* literally means a state of separation, referring to the time a couple must separate, but the word also can be used to refer to a woman in the state of *niddah*.

2. Among other topics, the interviews covered family history, secular and religious education, overall religious observance, feelings about observing *taharat hamishpacha*, exact practices, changes in observance, positive and negative aspects of practicing the laws of *niddah*, the effect of *taharat hamishpacha* on the family and one’s relationship with a spouse, experiences with different *miqvehot*, and how one deals with the notions of purity and impurity. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see my thesis: “The Culture of Ritual Immersion: A Sociological Study of Women Who Observe Taharat Hamishpacha” Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass., 1993.

3. Three women were postmenopausal, and though they no longer regularly went to the *miqveh*, each had over thirty years of experience observing this mitzvah.

4. The interviewees were ensured confidentiality and anonymity. Therefore, their real names have been replaced by an alphabetical coding throughout this work.

5. Women check themselves internally to ensure that their menstrual flow has stopped completely. Then they may begin counting the seven clean days that lead up to immersion in the *miqveh*. Rabbi Zev Schostak explains in his book *A Guide to Understanding and Observance of the Jewish Family Laws* (1974, 52–53):

   The completion of a satisfactory examination signifies the beginning of the seven clean days. . . . A woman should examine herself twice daily by daylight during the seven clean days. If, for some reason, she was unable to examine herself each day, then she must examine herself on both the first and seventh days. . . . if a woman has a flow or sees a stain during the seven clean days she must repeat the interim of purity examination (*hefsek taharah*) and count the seven clean days anew.


8. Because of the injunction that every part of her body must come into contact with the *miqveh* waters, women clean their bodies thoroughly before immersion. This may include, among other things, cleaning one’s ears, the navel, and between teeth; cutting fingernails and toenails; and removing any stray or unwanted hairs on the body. See Schostak (1974, 56).

9. “The examination cloth should be inspected by daylight to ascertain that no blood or stains are present.” Shimon Eider (1981, 68).


11. A woman does not become a *niddah* because of the death of a parent, but Mrs. AA happened to be in *niddah* at the time.


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Appendix

Tirzah Meacham (LeBeit Yoreh)

A. The Elimination of Niddah in Favor of Ziva

Babylonian Talmud Tractate Niddah 66a gives us Rabbi Yehuda haNasi’s statement: “Rav Yosef said [that] Rav Yehuda said [that] Rav said: Rabbi [Yehuda ha-Nasi] decreed in Sadot: [If] she saw [uterine blood] one day she will sit six and that one [day]; two days, she will sit six and those [days]; three days she will sit seven clean days.”

This statement by Rabbi Yehuda haNasi essentially removed all menstruating women from the regular menstrual category and placed them in the abnormal status of zava because most normal periods last at least three days. His concern was that, given the complex clarifications needed to decide when one is niddah and when one may be a zava, one might come to make a mistake with grievous consequences. Initially, the decree had limited effect; it seems to have been local and may have been limited to situations where doubt was involved and the local population was not sufficiently learned to decide in such situations. That, at least, is the understanding of Rashi, R. Shlomo Yitzhaqi, the most famous talmudic commentator (1040–1104, France). Certainly, it was not a general decree for all of Israel but it was the first step in that direction. In the first two examples, Rabbi’s statement deals with a woman who may be a minor zava or may be a niddah. She is treated in the first case as a niddah, with a seven-day period of impurity, rather than one day of impurity for the day of bleeding, which is the rule for a minor zava. In the second example she is treated as a niddah and a minor zava in case the first day was actually in her ziva period (the eleven days between menstrual periods). In the third situation, she is treated as a complete zava. Subsequent statements by other sages make it absolutely certain that it was understood to be a general decree.

The remaining statements on this development are from the amoraim, the sages who created the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmudim. These sages use the Mishnah as the starting point of their legal discussions. They quote freely from that and other tannaitic material. The general rule is that an ama may not argue with a tanna’s position except by bringing another tannaitic source to support his argument. Amoraim may, however, create fences around the Torah to prevent inadvertent sins.

We find a decisive statement made by the ama Rav Huna in PT Berakhot (5:1). The statement was made as an example of an undisputed law from which one could then turn to prayer. Such a law would clear one’s mind because there were no arguments about it, thereby allowing one to focus totally on prayer. The Talmud states: “Rav Huna said: One who sees a drop of blood like [the size of a] mustard seed sits and keeps [because of it] seven clean days. After he stood to pray.” Rav Huna’s statement is much more radical than the tannaitic version quoted above. According to
him, all women who see uterine blood are in the category of the complete zava, re-
gardless of the size of the bloodstain and despite the normality of menstruation or
having seen such blood only one or two days.
This statement is found in a different formulation in the BT Niddah 66a:
“Rabbi Zera said: The daughters of Israel became strict with themselves so that
even if they see [a drop of] blood like a mustard [seed in size] they sit because of it
seven clean days.” R. Zera’s statement totally eliminated the category of niddah and
placed all uterine bleeding in the category of abnormal bleeding, ziva. This is the
only halakhic statement in the entire talmudic corpus made in the name of the
daughters of Israel. It should be noted that Rav Huna, a generation older than R.
Zera, did not make his version of the statement in their name.
In the following generation, Rav Papa quotes this statement in a discussion on
abortion, in which he disagrees with another sage, Rava, about a woman who la-
bored for two days and then aborted. Was she to be considered a woman who gave
birth as a zava? This category, the one who gives birth as a zava, was also a tannaitic
extension of the birth impurity laws. Such a woman had to wait seven clean days in
addition to the actual birth impurity. Rava, in another discussion (BT Berakhot
31a, which parallels the Rav Huna section mentioned above), did not accept the
universality of the decree, while his colleague, Abaye, quotes it as an example of es-
tablished halakha about which there is no dispute. These sages, Rav Huna, Abaye,
R. Zera, and Rav Papa all lived within two generations of one another.

B. Retroactive and Internal Impurity and the Varieties of Blood

A basic difference of opinion exists between the famous rabbinic sages Shammai
and Hillel in reference to the beginning of a woman’s menstrual impurity. In Mish-
nah Niddah 1:1, Shammai claims that a woman becomes ritually impure only when
she sees blood. Hillel, in a reversal of his normal lenient legal position, claims that
when the woman sees menstrual blood she is ritually impure retroactively to the
time when she last made an internal examination in which she ascertained that she
was not menstruating. The sages rejected his stringent view and compromised
between Hillel and Shammai. They limited retroactive impurity to twenty-four
hours, but it could be shortened if the woman did an internal examination within
the twenty-four-hour period. Women were enjoined to examine themselves inter-
ially before they had sexual relations. This activity may have caused concern to the
man that she might be impure, the doubt causing him to forgo sexual connection.
The sages, therefore, decided that if the woman had a regular, established period,
both the man and woman examine themselves after coitus. The man wiped his
penis with a checking cloth and the woman made an internal examination. It was
unlikely that the set period would deviate, but if there was blood they would have to
bring a sin offering. Women, who did not have a set period continued to be obli-
gated to examine themselves before coitus. Women dealing with ritually pure ob-
jects and foodstuffs, such as tithes, were obligated to examine themselves both in
the morning, to make certain that the objects and foodstuffs touched in the previ-
ous evening and night were indeed pure, and again in the evening to ensure the
purity of what was touched during the day. Women of the priestly families were allowed to eat certain sacrifices and gifts to the priests, but, in addition to the times mentioned above, they had to examine themselves internally before and after eating tithes and sacrifices in order that they ate in purity and that the leftovers could be consumed by others.¹

We may well ask how such a process of internal examinations came about. The basis lies in rabbinic interpretations of Lev. 15:19. The sages interpreted the verse, “A woman who has a discharge, blood will be her discharge in her flesh.” The word bivsarah, “in her flesh,” creates the difficulty: if the blood makes her impure while it is still within her, that is, from when it leaves the uterus and before it leaves the vagina, then internal examinations are needed to verify the presence or absence of blood. It seems, however, that the simple meaning of the word is to emphasize the difference of a woman’s discharge, blood, from a man’s discharge, semen, rather than the location of the blood in her body. In fact, the word basar (flesh) is the euphemism for genitals used at the beginning of Leviticus, chapter 15. The word could, therefore, mean external genitals, the vulva. The fact that the verse could have been read in those contexts, which would not necessitate internal examinations but was not interpreted that way, says much about the asceticism of the culture.² Once the halakhic midrash Sifra understood the verse to mean that uterine blood found in the vagina is impure, then the repercussion of internal examinations or some other mode of distancing oneself from impurity had to be put into place.

Women who had regular, established periods were not subject to the retroactive impurity but they were obligated to separate from their spouses for twelve hours before their periods were due to begin. This was to ensure that, if the blood had left the uterus but was still in the vagina, the couple would not inadvertently transgress the law stated in Lev. 20:18, incurring the punishment for having coitus during the niddah period, karet, which was understood by the sages as equivalent to a divine decree of death.

Connected to the idea of women’s retroactive impurity is the rabbinic innovation of categorizing bloodstains. Fresh blood that was seen constituted a “sighting,” or re’iah. It was clear that it was just issuing from the woman if she saw the blood. If, however, a woman saw dry bloodstains on her garments, the time when the blood issued from her body was not clear. Consequently, objects or foodstuffs with which the woman had been in contact would have been contaminated.

Virginal Blood

Concern for possible transgression of the menstrual laws finds expression in the laws governing hymeneal blood. Chapter 10 of Tractate Niddah deals with questions about the possibility that hymeneal blood may actually be menstrual blood or contaminated with menstrual blood. Despite the fact that Tosefta Niddah and the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmudim have statements that differentiate between hymeneal blood, which comes from the side, is red, resembles the blood of a wound, and is ritually pure, and menstrual blood, which is from the uterus, is less red, and is contaminated and ritually impure, these distinctions were not sufficient to be acted on.
The sages made three different categories of women who were virgins: those who had not reached the stage of physiological development where they could be expected to begin to menstruate, those who had attained sufficient physiological development but had not yet begun to menstruate, and those who had already begun to menstruate. Laws governing coitus were most lenient for the first category because there was the least chance that there would be contamination of the hymeneal blood with menstrual blood. According to the Mishnah Niddah 10:1, Shammai gave such a girl four nights in which there is no suspicion that she would menstruate; whereas Hillel, in a more lenient position, allowed her until the wound heals. After that, any blood might actually be from the uterus. Women in the second category were allowed the first night without any suspicion of contamination with menstrual blood according to Shammai, while Hillel allowed four nights. Women who had already begun to menstruate were allowed only the first act of intercourse according to Shammai; Hillel allowed the first night.

The tanna R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus expanded the restriction of Shammai for the mature bride to all brides and put them in the category of niddah. The reason given in PT Berakhot 2:6 for his version is that there can be no hymeneal blood without menstrual blood mixed with it. In the amoraitic period both Rav and Shmuel stated that the bridegroom “completes the first act of intercourse and separates” for seven clean days (BT Niddah 65b). This position was connected to an anonymous rabbinic statement in which the rabbis voted and concluded with that position. The original idea was stated in reference to a bridegroom who was mourning and therefore was restricted also in sexual enjoyment (BT Ketubot 4a), but this was expanded to all situations. There were differences between Babylonia and Israel in regard to this law. In Israel the hymen was apparently removed manually, and therefore the sages did not legislate general rules. Individual sages made personal restrictions in Israel, whereas in Babylonia the restrictions were legislated for all.

In the geonic period (ca 750–1050), the notion that hymeneal blood may be mixed with ziva blood arose. Medieval authorities accepted the separation as halakha, but there were different customs as to when the counting of the seven clean days could begin. Spanish authorities allowed the count to begin as soon as the flow of hymeneal blood ceased. French, Provencal, and Ashkenazi authorities required an additional three days until the semen was expelled. This was in order that the seven clean days be clean from semen impurity as well as suspected blood impurity. Normative halakha in the Shulhan Arukh (Code of Law) accepted the more stringent position and added yet another day before the counting could start. Despite the various customs, the fact remains that the category of virginal blood, which was originally considered pure, disappeared. Hymeneal bleeding was transferred into the category of impure menstrual blood, which had an entirely different and much more stringent set of rules.

Blood of Desire

The sages created a new category of blood that did not exist in the biblical corpus. It was called dam himud, “the blood of desire,” and it was thought that such uterine blood might appear if a woman thought of her husband in sexual terms or if the
wedding date were set. The discussions concerning this blood are found in BT Niddah 66a and 20b and BT Yevamot 18b. Not only was a mature woman who had already menstruated included in this category, but also the minor girl who had never menstruated. This stringent law enjoined that the bride-to-be must keep seven clean days from the time the wedding date was set lest she be stimulated by the marriage arrangements and thereby discharge a small amount of blood. It is quite clear that the Talmud constructed this category from a male paradigm. It would not be unusual for a male to be sexually excited in anticipation of his forthcoming marriage and perhaps have a nocturnal emission or an erection in which there was a slight discharge of semen, or even masturbate to ejaculation. It is far less likely that the excitement of setting a wedding date would yield an hormonal imbalance that would suddenly cause the woman to discharge a bit of uterine blood. The reference is not to a period but to a slight discharge of blood, and hence it is particularly unlikely in a prepubescent girl. It is possible that the case of the mature woman mentioned in the Talmud, however, was at the time of ovulation, when there is often a rise in sexual interest in women. Occasionally, there is a small discharge of blood at ovulation in some women, which is generally attributed to a slight hormonal imbalance. It is, however, very unlikely that a girl prior to menarche would experience such a discharge, but the sages motivated by a desire for simplification of rules and their universal application, expanded this new category to include her as well.

Blood of Purification after Childbirth

Chapter 12 of Leviticus describes a category of blood found after birth that is considered ritually pure. Immediately after birth, the woman is impure for seven days for a boy and fourteen days for a girl as in her menstrual impurity. That blood is compared to niddah, menstrual impurity. For thirty-three days after the seven days of impurity after the birth of a male, any blood the woman sees is considered dam tohar, blood of purification. The woman is forbidden to come to the Temple during this time, but she is considered pure by the rabbinic sages in reference to sexual relations. Karaites, Samaritans, and other sectarianists considered blood seen during that time as impure as well. After the fourteen days of niddah impurity after the birth of a female child, any blood the woman sees is considered blood of purification. She is forbidden to go to the Temple but is pure for her spouse. It is possible that the doubling of days is due to the fact that the infant girl may have a discharge of uterine blood as a result of the hormone withdrawal at birth from her mother’s pregnant state. This occurs in a certain percentage of infants, and the discharge of blood—or more commonly, bloodstained mucus—is nearly always for three days: on the fifth, sixth, and seventh days after birth. In that case the infant would be seeing uterine blood at a time that is not her period because menarche is due some twelve years hence. As a result, the infant is considered a zava, a female with abnormal uterine bleeding. Her mother then would be subject to the laws of one who has birth impurity for the first seven days but also one who has contact with the discharges of a zava. She could not become pure until the baby girl counted seven clean days (days 8–14), after which her saliva while nursing would not transfer zava impurity.
This is the biblical situation, and it continued through the *tannaitic* and *amonic* periods. During those periods several situations of doubt were clarified in a stringent direction. An example is the miscarriage of a fetus prior to a stage of development where its sex can be determined. In such a case the stringencies of a male birth (i.e. thirty-three days of blood of purification) and the stringencies of a female birth (fourteen days of impurity) are imposed upon the woman. She then has fourteen days of *niddab* impurity and only twenty-six days of blood of purification.\(^7\)

The issue of blood of purification became problematic in the talmudic period. Some sages were uncomfortable with the idea that a couple could resume sexual relations while the woman was still seeing uterine blood. How could she be certain that the blood after seven days was not really an accumulation of menstrual blood? We find a discussion of this issue in BT Niddah 35b, where one sage claims that there are two different chambers in the uterus, one for menstrual blood and one for blood of purification. The other sage says it is simply a matter of time, but there is no essential difference in the blood itself. It came down to a matter of cessation of the *niddab* aspect of the birth impurity. If the woman actually stopped bleeding after the seven or fourteen days and then saw blood with the thirty-three or sixty-six days, the latter could be considered blood of purification. This may be based on the male model of clearing out the urethra by urinating after an ejaculation in order for immersion to be effective.

This issue found expression in different ways. Some communities (e.g., in France) allowed sexual contact during the period of *dam tohar*. Other communities waited seven clean days after the seven or fourteen days of birth impurity, as if the woman were a complete *zava*. Still others instituted a new custom: waiting the entire forty or eighty days before immersion and resumption of sexual relations. That would, of course, constitute an expansion of the seven clean days after birth, which itself was an expansion of the biblical restrictions in Leviticus, chapter 12.

NOTES

1. For the priestly families there were sound economic reasons for maintaining a high level of ritual purity. Only in such a state could they take advantage of the tithes and sacrificial food. When members of the family were impure they had to eat unconsecrated food, *hullin*, which had to be purchased.

2. The text in *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia 1985) reads as follows: “When a woman has a discharge, her discharge being blood from her body . . .” (179; emphasis mine).


5. For a more thorough discussion of this phenomenon see Meacham (1995), and Gruzman (1981, chap. 2).

6. For an extended discussion of the difference between the period of impurity and blood of purification for the birth of a male or female child, see Meacham (1996).

7. This is the subject of Mishnah Niddah chap. 3 and the parallel discussions in the Talmudim.


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Glossary

Amharic Language spoken by the Beta-Israel, the Jews from Ethiopia.
Amoraim Rabbinic scholars of the post-Mishna generations of the third to the sixth centuries C.E.
Anusim Term used by the rabbis after 1391 to refer to Jews forcibly converted to Christianity.
Ba’aleh Teshuva (fem., ba’alat Teshuva) Jews who return to an Orthodox lifestyle.
Balanit Female miqveh attendant in charge of the physical miquveb. She checks the woman for loose hair on her body before immersion. Nothing should come between the woman and the water of the miquveb for the dipping to be “kosher.”
Baraita-di-Niddah A baraita is a text that is outside the legal tradition of the Mishna, in this case a text dealing with the laws, meanings, and representations of laws of niddah.
Basar Hehad Literally, one flesh; refers to intercourse between a man and a woman.
Bendir Large tambourine used in orchestras that perform Arabian-Andalusian music.
Beta-Israel Ethiopian Jewry
Crypto-Jews/Conversos Jews who were forcibly converted to Christianity.
After 1391 the church used to refer to them as New Christians.
Dam Tahor Blood of purification. In the Bible, this refers to the blood after giving birth, which was not understood as impure. With the destruction of the Temple and the collapse of that system, this kind of blood was incorporated by the rabbis into the system of purification, which meant that a postpartum woman was deemed to be in need of a waiting period and miquveb.
Djin (pl., djnoun) Bad spirit, devil.
Edot Ethnic groups. In Israel it refers to Jews from North Africa and Asia but does not include Ashkenazi Jews, who are not seen as ethnic.
Gandoura Long traditional dress.
Geonim Heads of rabbinic academies in Babylonia.
Haïk Long veil that totally covers “Arab” or Jewish women when they come out of the miquveb.
Halacha (halakah, halakhah) Jewish Law. It refers to the Pentateuch, the Mishna, the Talmuds, and other legal works accepted by rabbis as being part of the canon. A reference to the halacha implies that there is no choice, “this is the way to behave.”
Halacha le Moshe Mi Sinai A law whose source is not biblical but whose legal status is nearly equivalent to such a law.
Hametz What cannot be consumed during Pesah.
Hammam Moorish bath, bathhouses that Moroccan and other Middle Eastern women (Jewish and Muslim) would use once a week. Hammam are places of recreation and socialization. Because the sexes were (and still are) quite segregated in most Mediterranean societies, hammam played and still play the role of meeting places for women, as coffee houses are for men.
Haredim Ultra-orthodox; generally refers to Ashkenazi, a very religious move-
ment in Israel and in the Diaspora. There is a growing population of Jews of Moroccan origin in Israel who adhere to an ultra-Orthodox lifestyle.

**Harkassa** Women who specialize in tattooing with henna.

**Hatsitsa** Anything that may separate the skin of a woman from the water of the *miqveb* (dirt, loose hair, nail polish, makeup, etc.).

**Henna** A plant whose dried leaves are used in rituals and in cosmetics. Henna is supposed to purify and protect and is also a symbol of maturation. Dry henna is green, and wet henna is red.

**Kabbalah** Thirteenth-century mystical text (see Koren).

**Karaites** A splinter sect of Jews who have not accepted rabbinic authority and thus the Mishna, Talmud, or Tosefot. They follow the law as it is written in the Bible without rabbinic interpretation. They have been called heretics by the rabbis, including Maimonides.

**Karet** Excision from the people of Israel. In Leviticus 18:19 it is stated that this is the punishment for intercourse during menstruation.

**Kashrut** Dietary laws. Kosher is used also to mean that the action described is the correct behavior in that setting.

**Living waters** A spring or running water. Legally, such waters can be and have been used instead of a *miqveb* when a *miqveb* is not available. Ethiopian Jews in Israel today do not want to use a *miqveb* because in their view it is not running water.

**Makor-shoresh** The source, the root. Halachic ruling is legitimized by tracing the law to the Pentateuch.

**Mamzer** (pl., *mamzerim*) A bastard, a child of a married woman conceived with a man not her husband. It is a very difficult status because a *mamzer* was not allowed to marry another Jew. Some Tosafists linked this concept to conception with a *niddah*, but this was clearly an exaggeration. In the Talmud it is explicitly stated that the child of a *niddah* is not a *mamzer* (see Cohen).

**Marranos** Term used for Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity in Spain and Portugal in the Middle Ages. It is the term generally used by the Jews themselves.

**Midrash** A story related to the Bible.

**Midrashei Halacha** Legal midrashim based on the last four books of the Pentateuch.

**Miqveh** *mikvah, mikveh* Ritual bath used mainly by women after their menstrual period as purification. Immersion is at night. Men also use the *miqveb* but generally have their own. Some men use them once a week before the Shabbat; others use them before the High Holidays (Yom Kippur). Some rabbis were said to have dipped daily. *Miqvot* are built according to special requirements, using “natural” water (water not drawn by human artifacts). They are generally communal, organized and built by the community. Users pay a fee. In some rural areas, Jewish families have built their own. In some Muslim societies *miqvaot* have been built inside the *bammam*; for example, in Sarajevo until two hundred years ago the *miqveb* was in the *bammam* (personal communication of the present Gabai of the synagogue, Moric Albahari). In Jerusalem in the 1970s, R. Wasserfall saw a *miqveb* inside the *bammam*, located in a very Orthodox area but used by many non-Orthodox women, mostly of North African origin. This hammam has since closed. *Miqvot* may also be used to purify dishes for Pesah. During times of repression *miqvaot* have been built in secret places (e.g., inside closets in Russia). In the 1930s in the United States, proposals were made to construct family *miqvaot*
to enhance privacy. Bathing in rivers is mentioned in the Talmud. Jewish women also have used oceans as miqvaot. Remains of the first attested miqveh have been found at the Hasmonean palace of Jericho, dating from the second century B.C.E.

**Mishna, mishnah** Oral law redacted by Judas the Nasi in 215 C.E. The Mishna is composed of six books of tractates: Nashim, Taharot, Kedushim, Nezikin, Zra'aim, Moed.

**Musar literature** Works on morality, written in Yiddish during the eighteenth century in Europe.

**Niddah** From the root *ndd*, which means separation. During menstrual flow and five (the timing has been a contentious topic) days after the flow has completely ceased, a woman is considered a *niddab* until she uses the *miqveh*. Women in that state used to stay away from the temple until they stopped bleeding and then brought an offering, but bathing in a *miqveh* was not mandatory. Nowadays most of the separation concerns husband-wife relations and is sexually loaded. The level of separation varies from parting the beds and not passing any object to the husband to only refraining from sexual penetration.

**Pesah** Easter Feast.

**Responsa** (sing. responsum) Collections of answers of prominent rabbis to local rabbis on questions about how to apply and understand different laws. These texts form a collective memory, constantly reorganized. The responsa literature fills more than three thousand volumes (see Storper Perez and Heymann).

**Rosh Hodesh** First day of the new lunar month, a holiday meant specifically for women; it has been observed in many periods and places. Women would refrain from working and come together. Many Rosh Hodesh groups have been formed by women in the United States. These groups can be affiliated through synagogues or mynianim (nonaffiliated prayer groups).

**Salha** Sarsaparilla plant; also refers to a ceremony of exorcism.

**Shavuot** Important pilgrimage feast that takes place forty days after Pesah.

**Taharat hamishpacha** Purity of the family. A term first used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, designating menstrual laws. It comes from German to Yiddish (see Meacham).

**Tahnia** Ceremony during which henna is put on the bride. These ceremonies had different names in various towns across Morocco and Algeria. Another name was *bidian* (beginning) or the “white and green ribbons.” Henna was a main ingredient in these ceremonies. Such rituals marked (began or ended) the week of festivities before the Jewish wedding. In Israel henna ceremonies are held before the wedding by Jews from Asia and Africa, with an “oriental” evening, including traditional food, music, dancing, and clothing.

**Talmud** Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds are commentaries on the Mishna.

**Tamina** Cake made of honey and semolina.

**Tannaim** Rabbinic sages of the Roman period, the era of the Mishna.

**Tazriah** A woman who seminates. In the Mishna it was understood that for conception to occur a woman had to have a kind of “inside ejaculation.” Wasserfall found this belief also during fieldwork with Moroccan Jews.

**Teffour** Copper platter.

**Teshuva** Repentance, return to religion.

**Torah** The five books of Moses, the Pentateuch, which includes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

**Tosafists** Rabbis who commented on the Mishna in medieval times such as the famous Rashi (Rav Salomon ben Isaac, 1040–1105).
Tosefta  A legal document redacted later than the Mishna.

Yavneh  A town west-northwest of Jerusalem. It was famous in ancient times, for it was there that a learning academy (yeshivah) was built by Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans. It started the new era of rabbinical Judaism.

Zava, zav  A woman or a man who has abnormal bodily emissions.
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