

**To Be a Jewish Woman**  
**Proceedings of the Fourth International**  
**Conference: Woman and Her Judaism, June 2005**  
Edited by Tova Cohen

Kolech — Religious Women's Forum Jerusalem,  
2007

(pp. 53-78)

## **The Voices of *Mikvah* Observance**

Naomi Marmon Grumet

### **Abstract**

*Taharat hamishpacha* (the framework of family purity laws) is one of the three basic *mitzvot* which are entrusted particularly to women. It is a private ritual, touching upon the most intimate aspects of life, while at the same time having communal significance. Its observance is seen as an essential marker of true religious commitment and is considered one of the cornerstones of an Orthodox lifestyle. Because of this unique combination of factors, *taharat hamishpacha* offers an especially meaningful perspective on women's religious experience and can serve as a springboard for discussing the role of women in the religious world. Exploring *taharat hamishpacha* is especially appropriate in order to understand the construction of women's position and status in society, as well as the process of identity formation. This is the case because it touches upon a number of the key elements that help to shape status and identity, namely gender, religion, and sexuality.

This paper gives voice to a range of religious women's experiences with *taharat hamishpacha*. It is based on interviews done with over 70 women who follow the laws of *niddah* in Israel and the United States reflecting the full spectrum of Orthodoxy. It is an attempt to hear the different voices that women express regarding the observance of *taharat hamishpacha*, which run the full gamut from oppression to empowerment, sometimes even within the same individual. The

\* Some of the research in this article has been presented previously in Naomi Marmon, 'Reflections on Contemporary *Miqveh* Practice', Rachel Wasserfall, (ed.), *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, New Hampshire 1999, pp. 232-254; Tova Hartman, and Naomi Marmon, 'Lived Regulations, Systemic Attributions: Menstrual Separation and Ritual Immersion in the Experience of Orthodox Jewish Women', *Gender and Society*, 18 (2004), pp. 389-408.

ability to interface with *taharat hamishpacha* in this multi-layered way occurs within such realms as relationship, sexuality, religious expression and women's relationship with their bodies. This paper will take a candid look at the issues involved, examine the ways in which women think about and deal with them, and attempt to add to the discourse about Orthodox women's status, needs and experiences.

## Introduction

Three *mitzvot* have been popularly identified as the basic markers of Orthodox religious observance — *Shabbat*, *Kashrut*, and *Mikvah*. While *Shabbat* and *Kashrut* are regularly discussed, *Mikvah* is often shrouded in secrecy, despite the fact that it is considered one of the cornerstones of an Orthodox way of life. *Mikvah* is especially meaningful for women, since it is one of the very few obligations specifically assigned to us, and of those, the most involved and far-reaching. This makes it even more important in understanding women's position and status in Jewish thought, and a possible catalyst for wider discussions of women's role in the religious world. It therefore deserves serious discussion. Sharing experiences helps us to create joined meanings, to find comfort in knowing that other people struggle along with us, and can enhance and augment the tradition which has been so faithfully guarded by women over the centuries, allowing for both the difficulties and joys to be heard.

There has been a great increase in discussion of this topic over the last few years — perhaps because Western society in general encourages discussion of intimate topics, maybe because of the more central role that women and women's needs are taking in the (Jewish) religious community. I believe that increased discussion also results from the recognition of *Mikvah* as a framework within which all sorts of social issues come to the fore — as highlighted by artistic expressions such as the play *Mikvah*, and the movie *Tehora*.<sup>2</sup> This paper is an attempt to join and enhance that conversation.

1 Hadar Galron, *Mikvah*, Beit Lessin Theater Production 2005.

2 Anat Tzuria, *Purity*, Ma'alot Film School and Channel 8 television 2(K)2.

## Methodology

Typically, when people speak about *Mikvah*, they mean the actual act of going to the *Mikvah*, or the physical location and rituals which take place in the *Mikvah*. This paper goes further than those limited discussions, by attempting to examine and understand the whole process of observing the laws of *niddah/taharat hamishpacha*, culminating with immersion in the *Mikvah*. This work is based upon formal interviews with more than 70 religious women who are observant of *taharat hamishpacha*, and informal discussions with dozens of others. These women live in both America and in Israel, and are part of every shade of the religious spectrum — *Charedi*, Chassidic (including the "*Toldot Aharon*" sect in Meah Shearim), Modern Orthodox (including women who simply defined themselves as "*Shomer Shabbat*"), wives of *Mercuz Harav* kollel scholars, and every thing in-between. The in-depth, formal interviews focused on women's experiences — how they understand the framework of *taharat hamishpacha*, how it helps them to create meaning in their lives, and its significance to them.

It can certainly be said that not all of the opinions expressed are true for everyone — at least not to the same degree. Nonetheless, they resonate with women's experience when looking at the larger picture. In the context of this paper, when a woman's voice is quoted, it should not be viewed as a voice in isolation but rather as representing other women in the interview sample, and, may therefore, also be relevant to the feelings of the wider *Mikvah-going* population.

## Brief Outline of the Laws

The source of the laws of *niddah* (the set of regulations related to menstruation) can be found in the Torah in *וַיְהִי כִּי אָרָא אֶת דַּם הַיָּסוֹד* (Lev 15, 18, 20). The Torah stipulates that a woman who has a discharge of blood is considered a *niddah*, and prohibits sexual relations between

3 For methodological reasons no interviews were conducted with non-religious women who immerse in the *Mikvah*.

husband and wife until she immerses in a *Mikvah*. The rabbis extended the prohibitions to preclude any behaviors that might lead to sexual intercourse (called *harchakot*) to include things such as not touching, not sleeping in the same bed, not passing from hand to hand, and so on. They also lengthened the period of separation to a minimum of five days of bleeding, followed by seven "clean" days — making the minimum separation twelve days. To ensure that there is no bleeding in the clean days, a woman is required to perform internal examinations (*bedikot*), and after counting seven clean days she may immerse in a *Mikvah* and resume contact with her husband.

### Women's Voices in Different Realms

It is significant that my research has revealed that no two women follow these *halakhot* in exactly the same way — and even if their basic structures are similar, I have yet to hear two people detail identical lists of the things they do or don't do during the period of *niddah*. Furthermore, individual observances may change over time. Despite the differences in observance, there are common feelings about what observance evokes within women.

What I am presenting here is the multilayered nature of people's experience. The interviews I have done indicate that there are a variety of reactions to *taharat hamishpacha* which sometimes seem contradictory, even within the same person. In fact, I would suggest that it is the ability to hold on to different understandings or feelings simultaneously which creates the 3-dimensional quality of life in women's experience.

The women who were interviewed express a range of emotions about their *niddah* observance, from empowerment, authority and validation to oppression, degradation and subjugation. For others, it's a neutral force in their life; something they do but which elicits little feeling. There is no clear demarcation or area where everything is all good, or all bad, but these voices and feelings are intricately connected to make up the many levels of the picture of what *Mikvah* means to, and for women today. Because a single individual can experience this

range of feelings in different aspects of her interaction with the laws, I will not present the voices of oppression and burden separate from the positive, empowering feelings. Rather, I will let these different voices be heard interspersed with each other, based on the context in which they are expressed, and apparently internalized. Thus, the range of the voices of the *Mikvah* will be heard as they relate to sexuality, women's bodies, relationship, religious authority, and personal or meta-personal reflections.

### The Disengaged Stance

At the outset, it is important to stress that there is such a thing as a disengaged or neutral stance, in which *Mikvah* is just another ritual, but holds no special significance one way or another. All of the women stated that they observe these laws because they are the *halakha* — that is their motivation and the reason behind their observance. For some, observance needs no more explanation. They do not find particular meaning or relevance in this ritual, nor does it affect them greatly. They observe it because it is the *halakha*, and because being part of the framework and leading a religious lifestyle, in and of itself has meaning and value for them. One *dati-leumi* woman, I'll call her Deborah<sup>4</sup> articulated this position very clearly:

Why do I wait a certain number of hours between meat and milk, and why do I refrain from turning on the electricity on *Shabbat*, and why do I do lots of other things? From my point of view it all belongs to the same category. It's *halakha* [...] It's the way I live my life...Do I feel a fantastic rush every time I do something? No!

For Deborah, like others who take this position, *niddah* is simply one of the many *halakhic* rituals, internalized as a fact of life, and undistinguished from the other daily rituals and practices. Spiritual meaning and value are not necessarily to be found in *this* observance,

<sup>4</sup> To protect the confidentiality of the interviewees, all the names included in this paper are pseudonyms.

but are drawn from adhering to a system in which she believes, or as Miriam Malka, another interviewee said, "This *halakha*, 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...It only makes sense in the big picture."

As we can see, the disengaged voice can be detected when women verbalize the meaning as stemming from a commitment to *halakha*. It can also be heard when women articulate that a certain element of their practice has no particular meaning. But the neutral voice can also be detected in silence — that is, the absence of something being mentioned can have significance when it is juxtaposed with other elements of an interview. If, for example, a woman complains that the *Mikvah* is far from her house, and that she finds it difficult to organize how she is going to get there and how she is going to take care of the kids, but that the time spent with her husband afterwards creates real closeness, we may understand that the immersion itself, which is absent from her description, is a neutral experience for her.

### **Sexuality**

Sexuality is obviously intimately connected to the laws of *niddah*, since the very regulations circumscribe a couple's sexual experience. But how do women feel that *Mikvah* affects their sexuality? What do these laws provide for them as sexual creatures and how do they impact upon their sexual expression? How are all of these experienced by the observant woman?

Women speak of many levels on which *taharat hamishpacha* touches their sexuality. On the most basic level, they speak of the laws of *niddah* as a framework which creates anticipation and renewal. Vivian, for example, said "*Taharat hamishpacha* gives you a structure in which to continually renew your relationship. It makes you feel that the sexual part of your relationship is precious and you don't get bored." Lilach, who is a member of a Chassidic family, mentioned that on a monthly basis there is "anticipation and excitement as the time to the end gets closer," on which Aliza, the mother of five, expounded further:

You can look forward and anticipate intimacy. As the end of *niddah* approaches... there is a 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 heightened sense of interest, a heightened sense of anticipation, a heightened sense of excitement and desire.

In addition, many women contended that *Mikvah* helps to preserve the excitement and vitality of marriage over time. Florence, a woman married more than 30 years, recounted, "Sexually it brings you to a place that's special and evolving."

Concurrently, women contend with a negative feeling of pressure to have sexual relations because they know the time is near when sex will no longer be permitted. Kimchi, a Modern Orthodox social worker, suggested:

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.

In the cadence of her words one can sense the pressured feeling she undergoes. As Shiffy, a highly educated and articulate woman, lightheartedly put it: "There are times when I feel like, jeez, only 3 days left!? How can I say no?"

Along with this pressure, many women also related a "loss of spontaneity," on which they did not elaborate, but repeatedly indicated exists. This is particularly the case since they know that they will have sex on the night of the *Mikvah*, and because almost half the month they are not able to act on their desires. Not being able to act on their own desires, in fact, can cause much frustration and the feeling that the *halakha* represses the individual's sexual drive. We hear this in a mild version in Rina's understated declaration that, "It's difficult when your own personal rhythm isn't in sync with the *niddah* cycle," and in a much more strident tone in Moriah's words, "you wish you could just do what you wanted, just make love whenever you wanted, instead of on a schedule." These statements point the loss of

autonomy which some women experience, and although observance is a conscious undertaking, they are nevertheless angered that the system forces them to circumvent and ignore their own personal desires.

The laws of *niddah* draw attention to the realm of physical intimacy. For women, who by their own admission are unhappy in their relationships, that focus fosters intensely negative sexual pressure which can be very stressful, to a point of threatening their emotional well-being. Tzipporah, a Modern Orthodox woman in her 40's, described the present state of her marital relationship in 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 I go to the *Mikvah*. Emotionally, I just get really stressed out [...] 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.

Tzipporah does not want to have sexual relations with her husband because of the deterioration in her feelings toward their marriage, and she certainly doesn't want to be pressured into having sex at certain times. Yet the very structure of the *halakhic* framework creates expectations and demands of her. As opposed to the minimal negative feeling of pressure described before, Tzipporah's account evidences the profound ways in which the regulations of *taharat hamshpacha* threaten her personal identity.

Meryl experiences a similar (personal) trauma on a monthly basis, but for very different reasons. During the time of non-separation it is

*she* who anticipates sex because of the expectations of the *halakha*. But her husband, the son of a long line of prominent rabbinic figures, is a homosexual, and therefore, is often not interested in having sexual relations. She declared:

[*Niddah*] can be painful... because it reinforces the fact that you are building up to something that isn't going to happen... 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.

This was a distressing story to hear — and is unfortunately not an isolated one. Meryl's observance is painful because as an attractive, appealing woman, it repeatedly sets her up to be dismissed as a sexual being. As a result, she stopped going to the *Mikvah* for a period of three years, as a way of protecting herself from the personal torture of rejection. The *halakhot* of *niddah* reinforced the misery she had to endure. They also made her angry at the social framework which both encouraged her husband to marry despite his sexual preferences and created the feeling of a "*busha*" (embarrassment) if she were to divorce, in addition to thwarting her personal integrity. The combination of these factors generated much internal grief.

Yet, despite these accounts, women (including those just cited) very often speak about how the *halakha* shows respect for their sexual needs and desires. Their comments reveal this in three distinct ways.

First, *niddah* allows for, and validates, the internal voice that says, "I don't want sex all the time", by building in time when sex is removed from the picture. It thereby also alleviates the pressure of having to be sexually responsive or feeling as though one is rebuffing one's spouse. Women say it shows respect for their biological-emotional needs by imposing an external, impartial, and inherently legitimate separation. Tzipporah's comments alluded to this. "It's good to have the two weeks of imposed separation so that I don't feel pressure for sex all of the time."

The freedom from pressure comes across at many different times.

Sara, who aligns herself with the *Mercaz HaRav* outlook, felt this especially keenly after giving birth.

You know, I think about couples who don't observe [*taharat hamishpacha*], and you have to start saying 'it's good for me now or it's not so comfortable'. It's good in my view that there is time. It's not nice. At that time the woman is so concentrated on herself, and you don't want sex.

Sara experiences the laws as giving legitimacy to a woman's feelings by allowing her time without the pressure of having sex or the need to refuse her husband's advances. They also elevate her need for sexual separation above her husband's desire for sexual closeness, without making her feel bad about doing so. *Taharat hamishpacha* provides her with the time and space she needs while menstruating or recuperating after birth but which, perhaps, her husband would not be sensitive to, or need for himself. In this way the laws of *niddah* recognize and affirm her needs as a woman. Rachel echoed these sentiments. "I usually enjoy sex. But there are times when a woman needs the physical and times when she doesn't want it. It's good that the laws respond to that." She again attests to feeling that the *halakha* understands and respects the needs of women, by including a time within the *halakhic* framework which removes the pressure of physical intimacy, validating them by its very constitution.

On a second level, *niddah* allows for the "no sex" voice to exist even in the time that sex is permitted, by enabling women to decline sex without guilt. This is legitimized because the "no" voice during the time of separation demonstrates that there can be a relationship even without sexuality, giving rise to the possibility of its being expressed at other times as well.

Third, *Mikvah* empowers women in the realm of sexuality, encouraging them to communicate to their husbands when they are Sexually available, and what they need or desire. Women are taught that it is a husband's duty to please his wife,<sup>5</sup> which plays a particular role on the night of immersion, and thus, women not only know that the

5 This is actually the *mitzvah* of *onah*.

onus is on the man to fulfill his wife's needs but feel that the *halakha* sanctions their desires. Yael, a young *Chardali* Israeli who just returned from *shlichut*, said:

A woman can also initiate physical things. It's good to say that I want this or that, especially because the woman is supposed to enjoy. In fact, the husband is not fulfilling his commandment of *onah* if you don't enjoy. So that means that if you want sex, or whatever, then he has to agree and you have the right to ask for it.

Yael's example illustrates that *taharat hamishpacha*, particularly the *Mikvah* night, along with the *mitzvah* of *onah*, allows, and even encourages women to possess a voice in sexuality, a voice which is often said to be missing from Western sexuality (certainly in the Freudian understanding of women as the silent and passive sexual partner). Thus, tradition validates and supports the expression of women's internal desires, something which is often silenced by male desires, while at the same time giving *halakhic* affirmation and legitimacy to the voice which says "I don't want sex now".

### Religious Authority

One of the benefits of *niddah* observance claimed by many of my interviewees was a sense of *halakhic* enfranchisement, on both the personal and collective level. Unlike most other *mitzvot*, women are the sole arbiters of this observance, which is seen as central to Jewish family life. No one can check up on their practice or second-guess their decisions. This level of responsibility and authority gives many of the women whom I interviewed a sense of being valued and appreciated as subjects and agents in the religious world.

Yael noted that Biblical law promises the Divine punishment of *karet* to both partners for non-compliance with any aspect of the laws of *niddah*. The importance of this *mitzvah*, and the fact that the woman is solely entrusted to carry out the many stages of observance and is fully responsible for both her own and her husband's compliance with the laws, gives her a feeling of authority and respect. She asserted:

You are checking, you are doing the checks every time, and only you and הקב"ה know what's going on there — not even your husband. It's all the responsibility of the woman! You can say it came out clean, you can say all these things, and no one will know if it's true or it's not true.

The trust given her, and the awesomeness of the responsibility built into the system by the manner in which the laws are set up, constitute an important locus of religious authority. In Yael's experience, and that of others who echoed these sentiments — stewardship of the vital *mitzvah* of *niddah*, and a latitude of decision-making *vis-a-vis* the application of its attendant statutes, place a critical facet of religious and personal life within a woman's purview, granting her a powerful position within the *halakhic* system. Furthermore, when women decide how to apply a given injunction, when they choose to alter their observance in a way that better suits their psychological makeup or emotional needs, or not to follow something to the letter of the law, they display individual expression and personal control. Women feel inherent in the system, esteemed both as *halakhic* arbiters and actors, thereby re-enforcing faith in their honesty and decision-making ability. Being entrusted with the reigns of observance in this important *mitzvah*, imbues them with a sense of empowerment and *halakhic* consequence, significance and worth.

In striking contrast, some women confided that they find the subject of asking questions of a rabbi particularly degrading, and an intrusive extension of male domination of women's sexuality, aimed at restraining and controlling women. Although this is beginning to change — through the work of innovations such as Nishmat's *Yoatzot Halakha* and *Kav HaPatuach* (*halakhic* hotline), most women still seek the authority of a rabbi when they need to clarify a *halakhic* matter. The degradation is particularly acute when the questions relate to stains and *bedikot*. Thus, in addition to other emotional and physical difficulties presented by *niddah* observance, some women expressed frustration with its authoritarian structure, which requires them to expose to men intimate details of their sexuality, and divests them of

religious authority. Deborah, a *dati-leumi* middle aged Israeli woman, expressed a strong distaste for this aspect of observance, which she felt made her bodily functions become objectified and subject to technical, male scrutiny. As she described her feelings, her voice became increasingly strident:

I spoke to my husband and then I asked a rabbi. I didn't really like that. To tell the truth, that was always something that really put me off in this whole matter because it's very personal and private. And to go take your physiological evidence to someone — I was never comfortable with it.

Both the tone and content of Deborah's words convey her sense of degradation in life's most delicate sphere, as if reduced to the level of a medical exhibit. This humiliation was exacerbated by having to ask a man for validation and sexual permission — indicating that these obligations were part of a system in which men dominate women's sexuality. Deborah maintained her overall observance, but stopped asking questions of a rabbi, deciding that she "had enough sense to make these decisions on [her] own."

Another interviewee had a different response to these matters. Rather than reject the religious authority altogether, she conveyed her hostility towards this aspect of *taharat hamishpacha* by manipulating the system to the point of mockery. Living in Jerusalem, where there is no dearth of rabbis, whenever she would have a stain that required consultation, she would conduct a "blind poll," bringing her stain to a number of different rabbis for their opinion. She would continue to seek an answer until someone offered her a lenient opinion she was willing to comply with, playing the power of the rabbinic authorities against one another. While her story adds a twist to a common frustration, it is noteworthy that at the end of the day she remains within the system — continuing to observe the laws, albeit in the most lenient version possible. I think it is also important to mention that while many women feel degraded by this aspect of the laws, they do maintain some authority, since the manner and frequency with which they ask questions is, ultimately, in their hands, and in fact, in the

natural course of observance, women decide for themselves what is acceptable and what is not.

### Women's Bodies

*Mikvah* is intrinsically a body centered ritual. Bodies are separated and join together. It is a bodily flow that begins the period (no pun intended) and the bodily action of immersion which brings it to an end. The restrictions of the *harchakot* are all about what bodies can and cannot do. Women are commanded to meticulously inspect their bodies, internally during the seven clean days, and externally in preparation for the *Mikvah*. So what are the ways that this awareness of body reflects itself in women's voices about *taharat hamishpacha*? First and foremost, women feel that *taharat hamishpacha* fosters respect and appreciation of their bodies, cycles and moods. It gives validation to the body and its needs, since, in essence, the marital relationship is completely hinged upon a woman's bodily rhythms. Shira, a Modern Orthodox American woman, remarked:

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... 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.

Shira's remarks emphasize the deference a woman's body and its needs are given in the relationship, as a result of upholding the laws of *niddah*. In addition, she stressed that *Mikvah* allows her the right to control over her own body, removing it from the jurisdiction of her husband, at least for the time she is in *niddah*. In her understanding, the *halakha* acknowledges the importance of being in touch with one's body and the way it works, recognizing and highlighting the value of the body by its centrality to this *mitzvah*.

Chava, a librarian and the mother of four teenage children, also articulated how the system provides women with a chance to connect with their bodies, and why that is positive. She said:

When your children are young, you don't have any time for yourself or for caring about your body. *Taharat hamishpacha* makes you stop and concentrate on your body. You have to take a long bath and clean and look at every part of yourself. It gives you the chance to concentrate on yourself, as well as on the relationship and your attitude to one another.

As she sees it, the *halakhic* injunctions mandate that her body be treated with respect and dignity, a feeling that permeates the entire month, and not just the point she is a *niddah*. It creates a pocket of time within the relationship and within family life, in which she can concentrate on herself. By taking this chance to reconnect with her body, she also has the opportunity to reflect on her relationship.

In this vein, a strikingly large number of women commented that the separation implies that women's bodies, and women themselves, are not to be treated as mere sex objects, to be used and exploited for physical benefit alone. Rather, the message is that women have to be interacted with on an emotional, as well as on a physical level. They maintained that the separation provides time to develop the non-sexual side of the relationship, thereby underscoring a need which is often more acutely felt by women. It forces both partners to recognize the importance of other tools of communication, while at the same time accentuating the necessity to respect and appreciate the body, and the closeness which physicality can foster. *Mikvah*, women say, helps both partners to develop an appreciation of the (woman's) physical body and emotional being.

Some women, however, abhor this. They feel that neither they nor their husbands need to spend so much time and energy thinking about the niggling bodily concerns. In their minds, it reduces women to scientifically objectified beings, upon whom a quarantine and controlled experiment are being carried out. Moreover, some women describe an almost obsessive quality to the requirements, including the daily checking, calculation and separation for the *vesset*,<sup>6</sup> and the

<sup>6</sup> The time when one anticipates the onset of menstruation, for which there are additional restrictions on intercourse.



meticulous nature with which one gets ready before the *Mikvah*, so that it is no longer pleasurable but becomes an affront to the self. Serina, a young-hearted and funky woman who had gone through menopause, was relieved to be rid of these burdens:

I always had my hand in my crotch. Every time I turned around I had to check again, and ask is this good, is this not good — and then I would have to do it again. And all day long you are thinking 'when is the right time, do I need to check yet?' It's obsessive. Not to mention getting ready for the *Mikvah*. Who has dirt in their bellybutton?! Honestly. Why do I have to obsess over things that I never looked at and never wanted to look at in my life?

What other women see as an opportunity to concentrate on themselves, Serina experienced as over-the-top, neurotic behavior, forcing her to do things she isn't interested in and which, to her, feel degrading. The preening is so excessive in her mind, that it reduced the significance of her body to absurdum.

The internal checks (of the body) have an annoying or onerous nature for many women. Chana, a successful lawyer, remarked:

Well I can say that it is certainly a burden! And the seven clean days are very difficult because you always feel that you have to be connected to the clock and see if it's time to do another check, and make sure that it doesn't get too late. That is a real pain.

Apparently, it is not only the physical unpleasantness or the intrusion into the most private and intimate parts of the body that aggravates women, but also the demands of time and a constant awareness, which can seem to take over their lives. Perhaps because many women concur that the examinations can be physically irritating, or just because of the inconvenience of checking, a large number of women have dispensed with performing the internal examinations on a daily basis.

Another juncture at which the body is highlighted is at the *Mikvah* itself. Many women report discomfort in having to stand naked before another woman (the *Mikvah* attendant), exposing their bodies to an

outsider. Again, they find it intrusive, invasive and degrading — a violation of personal intimacy — particularly in a cultural environment which emphasizes personal, bodily modesty. Despite the fact that women often remark that, "the *Mikvah* lady doesn't stare at you," or that, "she averts her eyes so as not to make you feel uncomfortable," there remains a sense of deep discomfort in the process. There is an additional level of embarrassment at standing before someone who serves in a religious capacity, as though the body (and soul) must pass the test of religious arbitration. Thus, the *Mikvah* becomes a place where the body and its imperfections are exposed, and women must confront their discomforts on a monthly basis, not only by themselves, but also in front of someone else.

### Relationship

Just as in the other realms I've discussed, women speak about many ways in which their interpersonal-emotional relationships with their husbands are affected by observing the laws of *niddah*. From the data, it seems that what a woman articulates vis-a-vis her relationship, through the prism of *taharat hamishpacha* is not shaped by keeping the laws, but rather, reflective of the general state of the marital relationship. Nonetheless, the framework of *taharat hamishpacha*, with its cycle of off and on periods, certainly has an impact on the couple's interaction in ways that are unique to those who observe the strictures. This can express itself in a variety of realms (e.g. emotional, psychological and interpersonal) above and beyond the affects on the sexuality.

Rivka, who became a *ba'alat teshuva* and undertook a *Charedi* lifestyle shortly before she married, expressed how she experiences the separation period as showing an intrinsic regard for the needs of a woman, by allowing her to remain an individual within the relationship:

I needed the space, from an emotional point of view, because we [are] very much together in a very intensive way...and I need [time to myself]. I think that the *mitzvot* and the world of Torah are built with a lot of contemplation about the nature of people — with a huge amount of wisdom in this realm.

Again, Rivka reiterated the view that the *halakha*, and particularly the laws of *taharat hamishpacha*, are formulated in a way which highlights and responds to a woman's needs, and which help her to strengthen herself as a person, and herself as part of the family/marital team.

This being said, there are certainly times when women want to be close or need the reassurance of a physical connection to get through difficult times. At these times the lack of physical support or comforting can be very difficult. Yosefa expressed a profound sadness at the denial of non-sexual contact during *niddah*, which she experiences as a basic human need. "My problem is not just how hard it is to do the checks twice a day — not just that I can't have intercourse — it's that I can't be touched. My needs for being touched are not just sexual, they're human." Her angst over the lack of physical support was exacerbated after birth when she spotted for over 3 months. She related to the *niddah* laws as dehumanizing because of the manner in which they disregarded what she felt to be legitimate desires, and deprived her of basic emotional needs. A number of women concurred that childbirth is one time when physical distance is extremely emotionally demanding. Hindi described this as, "When I first had my baby 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!" Ayelet, a *Chassidic* woman living in America, spoke of missing the physical support at both happy and sad times in her life:

Let's face it, you talk about your greatest height in terms of happiness in life, the birth of a 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 (at which time she happened to have her period) or I had a 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 all verbally and that's so incredibly difficult sometimes. It's at those times that you need a hug the most and you can't get it.

As we see from Ayelet's examples, it is the lack of physical connection

during charged emotional times — both stressful and joyous — that causes hardship and a feeling of loss.

Sara, however, emphasized the benefits to the emotional side of her relationship as a result of the period of separation:

The whole issue of being apart... This is a time period that really, really helps to build the verbal connection, as you could call it. You have to clarify and discuss things that otherwise don't come up when you are allowed to be close. Generally you push things off.

In a similar vein, Yael, a young *Chardali* woman, commented:

On the days that you are apart, you say to yourself, that this is the time to deal with things in a serious fashion. And also when you are clean, when you are permitted, you can always give a hug or a kiss and it's the answer to 1000 things. But when you are forbidden to do that then you try a lot harder to figure out the problem. You feel that you really want to make things smooth and life is much deeper in the time that you are apart. There is no doubt! Even though there are periods that you don't use. But really I think that this time is intended much more for communication, for talking. With a kiss you can solve a lot of things, but you don't really solve it...in order to really work things out deeply you have to talk about them.

*Mikvah* observance gives Yael, and many other women, the opportunity to communicate in deep ways — ways that do not necessarily take place when she and her husband are permitted to each other. For Yael this is such a central element of how she sees the structure, that she claims that this is what the "time is intended for". Indeed, it is something which many interviewees profess strengthens a marriage. They describe the time of separation as an opportunity to work through problems without resorting to physical reassurance. Rena said, "The two weeks creates a space in your relationship within which you can refocus. And when I go to the *Mikvah*, I can reflect on the month before and the month to come." Thus, the separation and the time set aside allows her to

contemplate in a very concrete way where her relationship is, what has transpired in the month past, and how she wants to move forward. This gives her personal space, time to concentrate on her own needs, and the ability to step out of, and deal with, issues within the framework of marriage. Women use the time, particularly as they get closer to going to the *Mikvah*, to work through disagreements. *Mikvah* then, serves as a catalyst for solving problems in a way that doesn't employ the physical as an integral part of the solution.

While women generally feel that the time free of physical contact allows for a greater level of verbal/non-physical communication, they also contend that this does not automatically mean that they will know how to utilize it. Tehilla, a *Chassidic* woman with twelve children, noted that the availability of time for talking, or a framework within which this is made possible, does not necessarily 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." In fact, the mandated time for physical separation can cause emotional distance. Like Tehilla, many of the women's reflections suggested that although the framework may encourage communication, the restraint needed to abide by it can lead to detachment.<sup>7</sup> Elisheva stated, "our relationship is qualitatively different during the time of *niddah*... there is a distance between us. It's a physical distance which translates into an emotional one." This sentiment was echoed by others. Judith, the wife of an American black-hatter, who sends her children away to Yeshiva, agreed that it takes a lot of effort to sustain emotional closeness without the physical:

There's a tendency, mostly subconscious on the part of both parties, not to make the effort required to maintain closeness when the physical expression 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.

<sup>7</sup> This more often affects couples who refrain from all forms of physical contact, but is not restricted to them.

The physical distance can lead to an emotional distance. Rather than serving as a period of closeness and working through problems, *niddah* can be a time when emotional detachment is at its greatest.

One way in which the emotional gap manifests itself is in the form of increased arguing and tensions. Almost half of the women interviewed said that they feel tensions or argue more during the time of *niddah*, than when they are not in *niddah*. Ofra, who lives in a *yishuv* outside Jerusalem, gave concrete examples of how tensions during the separation 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 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.

Again, the feeling of tension is more pronounced for people who refrain from all physical contact. Chaya Bracha, who now feels more connected to the modern Orthodox community than to the *Chardali* outlook she grew up in, has shifted her practice over the years. This shift has caused a shift in how she feels the laws affect her:

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 [of *niddah*] rather than have to constantly be restraining himself. So it wasn't a happy time... Now that we touch, we don't feel those tensions.

Though *niddah* provides the framework for verbal communication, the cycle does not magically affect the resolution of arguments. Indeed, when other means of restoring harmony have failed, a small number of women actually told me they delay going to the *Mikvah* — an act they know is *halakhically* forbidden — as a means of protecting themselves, and of compelling their husbands to work things out. While she rejected the idea of using sexuality as a weapon, Tehilla did

just that by not going to the *Mikvah* on time when she was angry with her husband:

If we are not getting along, then I don't want to have sex until we work it out...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?

Although she saw this as an extreme sort of solution, Tehilla used this when she saw no other recourse available to her. For her, having to resort to physical intimacy with her husband as a means to pretend that everything was okay and brush over issues that were bothering her was an unacceptable alternative. The necessity to feel that her interpersonal needs and emotional well-being were being protected took on an importance that outweighed her need to follow the *halakha*. While women speak of *Mikvah* as creating the framework for a stronger, deeper relationship that takes into account women's need for emotional closeness, there are also those who feel that *taharat hamishpacha*, through its very structure, may create barriers and highlight disagreements, without giving people the tools to deal with them.

### **Control and Boundaries**

Tehilla's story raises issues that center on the theme of control. As we see in her example, there are women who use the framework of *niddah* to assert or maintain control or authority, and in this way, *Mikvah* serves as a locus of power. Though it is true that women and their expression are regulated by the external voice of rabbinic authority, the women to whom I spoke, clearly perceive themselves as wielding personal and social power as a result of their observance. This manifests itself in several ways — from communities of women banding together and refusing to go to the *Mikvah* until a man gives his wife a *get* (religious divorce), to women like Tehilla, who delay going to the *Mikvah* until they are able to regain emotional equilibrium in their relationships,

and to women who postpone going to the *Mikvah* for a few days as a form of birth control. These are perhaps subversive forms of control, but also *modus operandi* that women are aware of and share with one another to help take command of their lives, and find some degree of maneuverability within an apparently inflexible system.

In addition to asserting control through these means, women use the framework of *taharat hamishpacha* as a time for regaining their boundaries. As busy wives and mothers, the women I interviewed often articulated that observing the laws gives them time to concentrate on themselves, both emotionally and physically. By mandating a period of separation which is external to the couple, they said that *taharat hamishpacha* gives them the space they need within the relationship. Because the laws are set up in a way that provides for distance, a woman can maintain her individuality and sense of self whilst remaining within the context of the family and marital relationship. Nechama 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, it's very healthy." For Nechama, the externally imposed separation allows her to remember and reassert boundaries both within the family and in her marital relationship. This invests her with a sense of control over her own destiny, as well as a feeling of control over the sexual realm (since the *niddah* framework is built around her cycles).

### **Personal and Meta-Personal Reflections**

Beyond the more personal reflections discussed earlier, we can explore what I call personal and meta-personal reflections of *Mikvah*, that is, ways in which the immersion process connects women to community, femininity, and Jewish history.

Women assert that the *Mikvah* in general, and, more specifically, the process of *tevillah* (immersion), associates them with Jewish life in a uniquely female way. They maintain that it furnishes them with a special connection to Judaism and creates a community of women within the larger Jewish population. The *Mikvah* brings the female community together, as Rena elaborated. "The *Mikvah* provides a place

for 'womanhood' among religious women, and allows us to share experiences not understood by men. Feminine things and sensibilities can be expressed". Leba affirmed that "at the *Mikvah* there is a feeling of belonging and being able to share, simply because we are all women and have a certain biology". In this sense, we can understand that the physical space of the *Mikvah*, by virtue of being a place reserved for women, creates the perception of a community or bond between different women, even if they don't share intimate secrets, but only exchange a friendly glance. Tzipi, a young American living with her Israeli husband in Baka, said:

When I go to the *Mikvah* I get such a feeling of connection. Even though I don't talk to these other women, I see *Charedi* women and *Chiloni* women — and we are all there sharing in the same tradition that helped *Am Yisrael* survive throughout centuries. We are upholding something that no one else in the world has a link to — not even the rabbis who write about it. Women are the ones who do this, and I'm proud to be part of something so important.

In her statement, Tzipi alluded to feelings that Revivit spelled out more clearly. She synthesized many different aspects that women commonly refer to in relation to *tevilla*:

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 *Mikvah*. 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.

Three distinct meta-themes of immersion emerge from the women's comments: (1) connection to Jewish women all over the world and the universal nature of our living religion, (2) connection to Jewish history, and (3) creation of a community of women from across the religious spectrum.

Two aspects of *Mikvah* emerge as significant detractors from these generally positive meta-personal ideas — the feeling of intrusion, or lack of privacy, when an outsider looks at a woman's body just before immersion (previously discussed), and the appearance and physical upkeep of the *Mikvah*. Donna had only been married a few months when I spoke with her. She recounted eloquently the extremely positive experience she had before her wedding when she immersed in the *Mikvah* of Alon Shvut.<sup>8</sup> In that *Mikvah* she felt respected and uplifted by the experience, enhanced by the warmth and attitude of the *Mikvah* lady, as well as the physical beauty of the *Mikvah*. However, her local Jerusalem *Mikvah* was quite a different experience:

I'm telling you, I'm not sure I would keep going if I didn't feel obligated by *halakha*. I spend hours cleaning myself, checking and preparing every inch of my body — and then I get to the *Mikvah* and it's disgusting. The last time I went there were clumps of hair in the shower stall and bugs floating on the top of the *Mikvah*. It's very off-putting and it takes away. I would never leave without taking another shower. It just creates repulsion and takes the beauty out, rather than nuking me feel uplifted. Maybe I need to see if there's another place around that's nicer.

## Summary

We have explored a range of voices with regard to women's experiences with *taharat hamishpacha*. We have seen that some are more positive, some more negative, and that there are many shades in between, including the quiet, but ever present, disengaged voice. We have discussed how women's sexuality is enhanced by a feeling of deference for women's needs and desires, and that their desires and "no" voices are sanctioned and validated. We have spoken about how the framework increases excitement and anticipation, while at the same time creating pressure to have sex, and fostering a sense

<sup>8</sup> The real name is included to give credit to the women of the community for their *Mikvah's* design and upkeep.

of the loss of choice and autonomy in this realm. In addition, we have explored how *taharat hamishpacha* can highlight problems or incompatibility both on the sexual and emotional levels, and to which it cannot always offer solutions. We have mentioned a feeling of *halakhic* enfranchisement and worth as a result of women being trusted to carry out this important *mitzvah*, and because it is they who decide what to do with it. Yet they can also feel degraded by having to show stains to a *rav*, thereby experiencing themselves as robbed of religious authority. In terms of women's bodies, we have explored feelings of respect and appreciation for the body and its cycles, and a sense of elevation above mere sex objects. At the same time, we have heard women say that these rituals intrude on their most intimate and private matters, making them feel subjugated as nothing more than physical bodies, who are forced to obsess over the smallest of details. We have looked at ways in which women narrate observance through the lens of relationship, speaking of the fact that it helps them to maintain and reclaim personal boundaries, work out problems and encourage communication, though it seems, at the same time, that it may increase tension and arguing, particularly among those who are most strict about not touching. It is obvious therefore, that *taharat hamishpacha* is not a magical panacea for problem solving entirely on its own accord, although it does give women a voice of control, if they choose to employ it in this way. Lastly, we recounted women's experiences of *Mikvah* as a universal, historical and local link to other women, which by its nature creates a sense of community across these levels.

These are just some of the many voices to *taharat hamishpacha* observance which women carry within their experiences. The multi-varied voices are sometimes in concert, complementing one another, at other times contradictory or in conflict, and at times silently coexisting. These voices not only reflect different individuals within the community, but even different aspects of the same individual's experience, evidence of the complex nature of women's interaction with *Mikvah*.