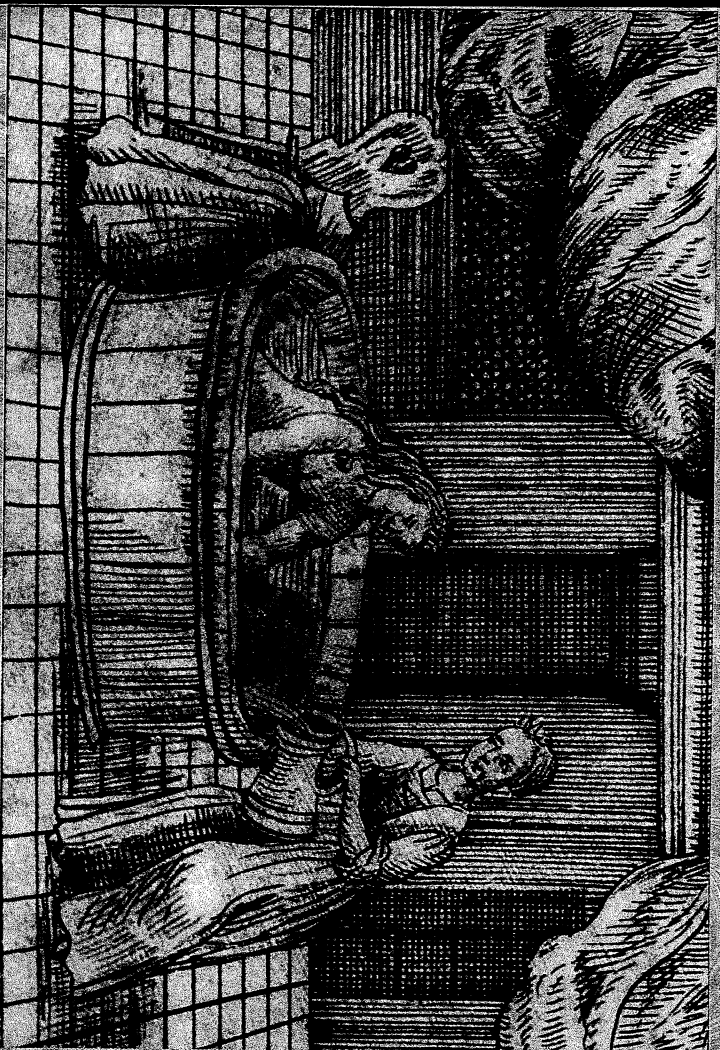


Women and Water

Menstruation
in Jewish
Life and Law



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Reflections on Contemporary Mitzvah Practice

The mitzvah of *tabarnt hamishpacha*¹ (the laws of family purity) is considered so vital that the rabbis enjoined Jewish communities to erect a *mitzveh* (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 *tabarnt 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 *tabarnt 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

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 *tabarnt hamishpacha*, 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:⁴ "This halacha [*tabarnt hamishpacha*], 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 *tabarnt hamishpacha* 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."⁵

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 *tabarant 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 *harrikat* (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 *tabarant 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).⁵ 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 *tabarant 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 *tabarant hamishpacha*.

The interview sample broke down into roughly two groups in terms of major differences in practice of the laws of *tabarant 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"⁶ and bolster the "rabbinical documentation which projects an image of women as almost totally sex objects."⁷ Contrary to these points of view, almost 40 percent of the interviewees suggested that the laws of *tabarant 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 *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: "*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—you body is your own for half of the month. I think that all those things are really good.

The women believe that *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 *mitzveh*. It's positive and romantic."

Despite these acclamations, nearly a third of the women complained that *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 *niddah* cycle." Mrs. B maintained that "the disadvantage to observing the laws of *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 *mitzveh*, furnishes them with a special connection to Judaism and creates a community of women within the larger Jewish population. The *mitzveh* brings the female community together, as Mrs. R elaborated: "The *mitzveh* 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 *mitzveh* 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 *mitzveh* creates a community of women is enhanced because friends see each other there. It makes going to the *mitzveh* a social outing or a "social event," as a few women put it. "I like going to the *mitzveh* 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 *mitzveh* in Brighton, which has a common front room where the women congregate while they wait for a private *mitzveh* room to become available. But as the women attested, since many other *mitzvehot* are similarly constructed, this phenomenon is not unique to Boston.

The women asserted that even observing the mitzvah of *terillah* (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 *mitzveh*. 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 *mikveh*.⁸ 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 *mikveh* can be very inconvenient. Indeed, it is not only going to the *mikveh* 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 *mikveh* 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 *mikveh*. It costs money—I just don't enjoy doing it!" Because the prescribed time for going to the *mikveh* is in the evening and the *mikveh* 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 *tevilah* 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 *mikveh*, there are definitely disadvantages and you would rather stay at home and do your work."

Preparing for *tevilah* (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 *mikveh* 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 *midlah*, 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 *mikveh* 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 *midlah*. 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 *tahavat hamishpacha*: "Within the limitations imposed by the relative truth of scientific investigation, a clear relationship can be discerned between Jewish family life style and the strikingly low incidence of cervical cancer."¹⁰

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 *mikveh*, thereby missing their fertile days.

The women feel that obeying the laws of *midlah* 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 in-timacy. 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 *tabarrat 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 *miqveh*." 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 *miqveh*. 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 *miqveh* 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 vitality over many years. Mrs. I, for example, a woman who has been married almost forty years, commented: "When you observe the laws of *tabarrat 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. . . . *Tabarrat hamishpacha* keeps the romance alive."

This sentiment was shared by a majority of the interviewees. "*Tabarrat 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 *tabarrat 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: "*Tabarrat 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, geez, 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 *tabarut 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 *tabarut hamishpacha*]. I feel like it puts pressure to have intercourse at a certain time, especially because the time [together] is so concentrated. . . . [I]s 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 *mikveh*. 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 *mikveh*, 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 *tabarut hamishpacha*, they can only go on a two-week [cycle], you know. So to ask the *mikveh*-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 *tabarut 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, their 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 *mivqeh* 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 *tabarnt 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 *tabarnt 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 *tabarnt 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 *tabarnt 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 *tabarnt 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, "*Tabarant 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 hal- lowed 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 *tabarant 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: "*Tabarant 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 *tabarant 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?

Refraining 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 *tabarant 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 *miqveh* 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 *tabarat barmishpacha* was also exhibited by women whose children were older. Mrs. A related: "*Tabarat barmishpacha* 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 (*tabarat barmishpacha*) 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 *tabarat barmishpacha* 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."¹² The women's statements reflect this idea, indicating that the state of an interviewee's relationship affects her feelings toward *tabarat barmishpacha*.

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 *mitzveh* 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 *mitzveh* 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 *tabarat 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 *mitzveh*—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 *tabarat 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 *tabarat 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 *tabarat 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 *tabarat 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 *tabarat 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 *tabarat hamishpacha* had an overall positive influence on their lives. Mrs. R summarized best how *tabarat 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 *mitzveh*, I can reflect on the month before and the month to come. . . . I have gone to the *mitzveh* . . . 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 *tabarnit 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 *tabarnit hamishpacha*, exact practices, changes in observance, positive and negative aspects of practicing the laws of *niddah*, the effect of *tabarnit hamishpacha* on the family and one's relationship with a spouse, experiences with different *mitzvot*, 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 *Tabarnit 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 (*be'efsek tabarnit*) and count the seven clean days anew.

6. Susan Wiedeman Schneider (1984, 207).
7. Leonard Swindler (1976, 126).
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).
10. Moshe David Tendler (1977, 13). *Paras Rimoinim*. The Judaica Press.
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.
12. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, p. 7a, as quoted by Francis Klagenbrun in *Voices of Wisdom* (1980, 123).

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