

Square Synagogue. In an eloquent defense of the opposite view (that, ipso facto, separate is unequal), see Cynthia Ozick, "Notes toward Finding the Right Question," *Lilith* (Fall 1979).

17. See also Arlene Pianko, "Women and Shofar," *Tradition* 17 (Fall 1974): 54-67.

18. See Berakhot 20b, 45b; Arakhin 3a. Tosafot, on Berakhot 20b, offers this basis of interpretation: One verse in the grace refers to "the covenant which Thou hast signed in our flesh (circumcision), the Torah which Thou hast taught us." Since neither of these apply to women, women cannot enable one to whom circumcision and Torah do apply to fulfill his obligation. By arbitrariness, I mean that the rabbis might have ruled just as easily that since women also eat and are sated and bless God, they are obligated equally, even though one verse of the grace does not apply to them. After all, grace is a positive commandment that is not time-bound.

pro - middah - might derive from it explains what it

explains some of the Rabbinic dev. of middah

Blum

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Blm Greenberg. On Women & Judaism. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1981.

In Defense of the "Daughters of Israel": Observations on Niddah and Mikveh

A Very Private Affair

SEVERAL years ago, on a June evening, my husband and I left our children in the care of a baby-sitter and went out for two hours. I had told the baby-sitter and Moshe, the only child still awake at that hour, that we were going shopping. I knew that Moshe would be asleep by the time we returned, so there was no question of having to deal with the natural inquisitiveness of a six-year old. I also knew that Patti, our baby-sitter, the teenage daughter of our Irish Catholic neighbors, was too well bred to inquire why I had come back from shopping with no packages but with a headful of long, wet hair.

It was not that I was ashamed to talk about mikveh, the ritual bath. But because the subject is so fraught with modesty and taboo, I would have preferred to avoid it. What I didn't anticipate upon our return was to find an old friend who had stopped by the house. Carol and I had been in graduate school together for four years. She knew a little about Jewish life; her grandparents had been Orthodox. Unlike some people of their liberal, intellectual background, Carol and her husband were not antagonistic toward Judaism. On the contrary, while they would have none of Shabbat, kashrut, synagogue life, or day-school education for themselves or

their son, they were nevertheless quite respectful of our way of life.

Carol has an incredible mind. Anything she had ever read or heard was tucked away in some crevice of memory, to be recalled instantly at the proper moment. Somewhere in the past, maybe in her brief bout with Hebrew school fifteen years earlier, she had heard about mikveh. Thus, she was able to put it all together immediately—wet hair, street clothes, no packages—and come up with an answer. The moment the baby-sitter closed the door behind her, Carol blurted out, "Do you really practice *that*? Do you actually go to the . . . the mikveh?"

For the first time in my life I had the feeling that someone was seeing me as some kind of aborigine disguised in twentieth-century garb. I found myself at a loss for words. It was a subject that lay very quiet and deep inside of me. I then had been married for ten years. No one had ever asked me why I observed the laws of niddah. (Niddah, it should be noted, has several meanings, depending on the context: the laws pertaining to niddah; the state of being sexually unavailable; that time of month that includes menstrual flow and after-period; a woman in a state of niddah.) I had never even asked myself the question or discussed it with my parents, sisters, or friends, not even with my husband, who observed the practice with me. In fact, the closest I had come to a discussion of the matter was when a high-school friend confided that her mother said she felt like a bride each month after going to the mikveh. It embarrassed me that a mother could make so suggestive and revealing a disclosure to a daughter, and for the rest of my impressionable teen years I could not look at that pious woman without a headful of immodest imaginings.

It wasn't that I didn't know the laws or the ancient and contemporary meanings attached to them. I had read many of the "little books" on the subject; they succeeded in neither frightening me nor inspiring me. Being a good "daughter of Israel"—the phrase is a euphemism for one who observes the laws of niddah and mikveh—it never occurred to me that I would do anything other than keep the particular practice. Just as my mother and mother-in-law went to some vague "meeting" once a month, there was no

doubt that I too would carry on the chain of tradition. But like many such things, I took the whole matter of mikveh for granted. I had managed to appropriate intact its grand claims, but I had no sense of what positive meaning it had for me. Nor could I articulate what I was doing or thinking during those occasional times—and there were such—when it was a hardship or a nuisance for me to observe this mitzvah.

I think I mouthed some clichés to Carol and then quickly changed the subject. In time, Carol went on to become a well-known psychoanalyst, was divorced, remarried, and divorced again. The last I heard, she was making a fortune in private practice in Los Angeles and writing a book. I haven't seen her for fifteen years, but once a month, as I comb out my wet hair in the mikveh, I chuckle inwardly as her astounded expression passes before my eyes. Over the years, I have begun to sort out some of my feelings about this mitzvah, so powerful that it manages to control and make a statement about a human drive that everywhere else no longer seems to be subject to boundaries established by law, culture, or even family values.

The mikveh, as we all know, has come under attack by Jewish feminists, not-so-Jewish feminists, and not-so-feminist Jews. Carol didn't say so, but she probably thought to herself, "Mikveh. Ahah! 'Primitive blood taboo.' Outmoded and demeaning notions of 'unclean and impure!'" Perhaps some of these elements at one time or another were associated with the concept of niddah. Today they hold no weight, however, at least not for me nor, I believe, for most of the women who lovingly or reflexively take upon themselves the obligation. Besides, one just as easily could defend niddah in terms of its function in a prefeminist society. For example, niddah was intended to protect women's selves and sexuality; not bad, considering that society was oriented to the female serving the male, sexually and otherwise. Niddah also provided safeguards against women becoming mere sex objects; even when the law could not change social perceptions, at least it minimized those times when this attitude could be acted upon. Finally, the Talmud gives the most functional view of all, sexist though the language may seem today: "Because a man may become overly familiar with

his wife, and thus repelled by her, the Torah said that she should be a niddah for seven clean days [following menses] so that she will be as beloved [to him after niddah] as on the day of her marriage" (Niddah 31b).

The Law and Its Practice

The Bible lays down the initial principles of physical separation during menses:

When a woman has a discharge, her discharge being blood from her body, she shall remain in her impurity seven days; whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening. (Lev. 15:19)¹

Do not come near a woman during her period of uncleanness to uncover her nakedness. (Lev. 18:19)²

If a man lies with a woman in her infirmity and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow and she has exposed her blood flow; both of them shall be cut off from all the people. (Lev. 20:18)

In the rabbinic explication of biblical tradition, we find that the minimum niddah period increases from seven to twelve days³—that is, a five-day minimum allotted for the flow and seven days for the "whites," the additional days of separation.⁴ (A word about the use of the term "whites": I do not like the term seven "clean" days, which all of the English sources employ, for it evokes its counterpart, "unclean." I therefore prefer "whites," which is the literal translation of the talmudic *levanim*, the white garments that women were required to wear during those seven days in order to facilitate the search for stains.) If the flow or the staining lasts longer than five days,⁵ the seven-day "white" count begins after the last day of flow.⁶ The whole cycle is completed with immersion.⁷ This is known as *tevilah*. Afterward, a woman can resume sex until the next menstruation, some two and a half weeks later. The *tevilah* is also attended by numerous details. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, the immersion takes place in the evening, after dark, at the completion of the twelfth day.

As for the mikveh itself, there are numerous laws concerning the mikveh and its construction. In fact, a whole tractate of the

Mishnah (Mikvaot) is devoted to the subject. Briefly, the mikveh must be nonporous, so that it has no object than can absorb *tum'ah* (impurities). It is to be constructed of two compartments: *bor ha-otzar* (the storage compartment) and *bor ha-tevilah* (the immersion basin that is drained each day). The word *mikveh* simply means a collection (of water). This must be stationary water, not flowing, as from a tap, and its sources must be natural—rain water, wells, natural ice, or ocean or lake water. As the ancient rabbis were of a practical nature, however, and since it would be difficult to collect all that water naturally, they legislated that only a certain percentage of these natural waters is required to constitute a kosher mikveh; the rest may be made up from regular tap or drawn water. A lake or ocean may be used for the purpose, although there is halakhic concern that out of fear of such waters the immersion will not be performed properly.

Since the destruction of the Second Temple, the mikveh has been used primarily for women, but there are other uses for it as well. Some men go to the mikveh to purify themselves before certain holidays, particularly Yom Kippur. Mikveh is also the final step in conversion to Judaism. Many traditional Jews also immerse their new utensils in the mikveh before using them. For these other purposes, the mikveh is used only during the day. You will never see a man about the mikveh at night. The men who accompany their wives to the mikveh—and this is often the case—sit in their cars parked down the street away.

In the Mikveh

If you have never been to a mikveh, this is what to expect. First you are asked whether you want a "private" or a "semiprivate." Private means that the mikveh basin (a small, deep pool) is in the same room where you bathe in a regular tub to prepare for the immersion; semiprivate and shower mean that you bathe or shower in your room but must go into an adjacent room to use the mikveh basin. Depending on the construction of the semiprivate, it can be like playing musical doors—all doors that lead to the mikveh basin are closed before your door is opened—so that you will have com-

plete privacy while immersing. Before the bath, you brush your teeth, rinse your mouth, trim your nails, and remove all makeup, dentures, rings—anything that is not part of the body. After the bath, you rinse off in the shower, or just the latter if you have already bathed at home that evening. (This elaborate ritual of cleansing, incidentally, is further proof that the mikveh has nothing to do with personal hygiene or cleanliness.) You comb out your hair, which you have just shampooed, and wrap yourself in a white sheet or towel. Then you press the buzzer, which summons the "mikveh lady."

Mikveh ladies come in several varieties. I have been to a dozen different mikvehs over the last twenty years, and each mikveh lady has her own style. They are generally sensitive, devout women who are kind but not prying. They have a rather pleasant, quiet, businesslike manner that is exactly called for in so personal a situation. Occasionally, you will run across a mikveh lady who has some idiosyncracies, such as entering your room without knocking to see if you are ready, or one who will fight you over another sixteenth of an inch of your carefully trimmed fingernails, or even one who, without any warning whatsoever, will run a comb through your pubic hair while you stand there in total shock. In all fairness, however, these are the sum total of grievances I've heard concerning mikveh ladies over the years.

The mikveh lady checks to see if you have prepared yourself properly (trimmed nails, etc.). She looks you over to see if there are any loose hairs on your body, which she gently removes. Holding on to the side of the rail, you walk down a few steps to the bottom of the mikveh—the water is about shoulder height. With legs slightly part, lips and eyes closed but not clenched tightly, arms spread a bit at your sides but not touching the side walls, you bend your knees in a crouching position and go completely under. If you have long hair you have to go a little deeper, so that every strand of hair will be under water. You don't have to stay under the water for even an extra second. All you have to do is immerse yourself completely and then come right up. If you've done it right (every bit of you below the water line) your mikveh lady will pronounce it "kosher."

Then, standing there in the water, you recite the blessing:

Barukh ata adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam asher kideshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu al ha-tevilah (Blessed are You O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us by His commandments and commanded us concerning immersion). Other blessings are often added, the most common one being the *yehi ratzon*: "May it be Your will O Lord, our God and God of our fathers, that the Temple be speedily rebuilt in our time; give us our portion in Your Torah, so that we may serve You with awe as we did in days of old. And we shall offer to You the thanks offering of Judea and Jerusalem as was done in years gone by."¹⁸ Many women cover their heads with a terry cloth, which the mikveh lady hands them, before saying the blessing. (It does seem rather incongruous, covering one's head in modesty and respect when all the rest of you is standing there stark naked. But that's how it is often done.)

After the blessings, you dip under two more times; each time, the mikveh lady pronounces it "kosher." Then you come up the steps, and she wraps a white sheet around you and leaves the room for you to dress. Before you leave, you pay a mikveh fee that ranges from three to ten dollars. (In no way does the fee cover the cost of running the mikveh, which is heavily subsidized by the community.)

A bride is brought to the mikveh a day or two before her wedding. There are some slight variations in custom, but the basic procedures are the same. Sephardim make a real celebration of the event, their equivalent to the bride's shower. Among Ashkenazim, it's pretty quiet, strictly a mother-daughter affair.

Most of the mikvehs today are quite pleasant places, especially the newer ones, built with the modern woman's tastes in mind. All mikvehs have hair dryers. Some even have beauticians and cosmeticians in attendance several evenings a week. The next stage will probably be whirlpools, saunas, and exercycles. And why not? It loosely fits the concept of *hiddur mitzvah*, the beautification of a mitzvah. No more the image of the mikveh for middle-aged rebbetzins only. I have seen women leaving the mikveh looking as if they had just stepped out of the pages of *Vogue*. Rabbi Akiba—who believed that women should use cosmetics and make themselves attractive (even during their menstrual period), so that they not become repulsive to their husbands—would have been proud!

The Historical Development of the Laws of Niddah

The laws of niddah provide us not only with an elaborate "how-to" but also with a fascinating lesson of the way in which Halakha develops, for the precepts can be traced from the Bible, through the Mishnah, the Tosephta, the two Talmuds, and medieval and modern rabbinic literature.

The biblical commandment of separation during menses occurs in two different contexts: laws dealing with other forms of defilement, impurity, and death; and laws regulating forbidden sexual relations. Thus, at the outset, we encounter the two themes that are associated with niddah—themes that are reflected in Halakha throughout history—sometimes intertwined, sometimes overshadowed, sometimes parallel.

As for the defilements and impurities mentioned in the Bible, these generally are related to death: contact with a dead body, loss of menstrual blood, loss of semen through nocturnal emission, or leprosy (all symbolic of the rampant forces of death taking over as the life-giving juices that nurture body tissue mysteriously cease). Purification through the living waters, then, symbolizes a renewal, a re-creation, a regeneration of the life forces.⁹ As such, purification was considered a privilege, not a burden. To concretize this, there was a tangible communal reward: access to the sanctuary (and, later, the Temple), where one could bring a sacrifice and find oneself in the presence of God, who gives life. One who did not undergo a purification rite could not reenter the sanctuary.

The second association is that of family purity. (In fact, the laws of niddah are known as *taharat ha-mishpaha*, the laws of family purity.) The ancient, eternal truth is that society will destroy itself if it lacks ethical sexual relationships. Although no explicit reason is given for forbidding relations during menses, clearly this falls into the category of curbing liaisons that are most open to exploitation or that are most typical of animal rather than human behavior: incest, sex with individuals who live under the same roof but who are not each other's partners, sex with animals. For these forbidden liaisons, a punishment of *karat* was meted—a cutting off of the soul of the transgressor from the community.

After the destruction of the Second Temple, the categories of

taharah and *tum'ah* (pure and impure) become almost irrelevant to daily life. In Eretz Israel, certain practices were to be maintained because of the holiness of the land, but gradually even these died out. This does not mean that the rabbis of the Talmud ceased discussing these concepts and their practical implications; it does signify, however, that all other forms of *taharah* and *tum'ah* were essentially inoperative: vessels, tents, hands, liquids, etc. Thus, because there was no longer a Temple where purity had to be preserved, a person who came into contact with a dead body no longer had to undergo ritual immersion. The only vestige of this practice remaining today is the washing of hands after leaving a funeral parlor or cemetery. More germane to our concern, a man who had a bodily discharge no longer had to abstain from sex until he underwent purification. The only person still subject to purification rites is the menstruating woman.

Following the destruction of the Temple, the emphasis shifted from *tum'at niddah* (separation for reasons of defilement, impurity, pollution, and taboo) to *issur niddah* (proscription of a sexual relationship because it is forbidden by Jewish law). Still, the whole area of niddah never completely lost its association with impurity and defilement.¹⁰ Indeed, the rabbis strengthened the "fence" around the original prohibition. Sometimes they built on one base, sometimes on the other, often connecting the two.

The talmudic discussion in Shabbat 13a is a perfect example. The pericope opens with an invitation to "come and see how purity has increased in Israel" (in rabbinic times). The scholars ask: may a niddah sleep in bed with her husband, each fully clothed, thus avoiding bodily contact? Shammai answers in the affirmative—they may sleep together fully clothed, for sleeping together (during the "white" days) is not prohibited, only intercourse. Hillel disagrees—and the law is according to Hillel.

In this discussion, several analogies are drawn as proofs: some evoke defilement, others the restrictions on proper sex relations. One is treated in this passage to a taste of Halakha in process. The discussion takes place after the minimum day count was increased from seven days (biblical) to twelve (five menses plus seven "whites"); initially, only intercourse was forbidden during the seven "whites," but at some point in the rabbinic period, prob-

ably around the time of Hillel and Shammai (first century B.C.E.), the biblical taboo against any and all forms of bodily contact during menses was carried over to the seven "whites" as well. The elusive biblical concept, that impurity could be transmitted by contact by touching, was dropped from every other category, yet increased in the case of niddah.

Similarly, the biblical punishment for infraction of niddah was intensified, and *karet* was extended to include the seven "whites." As we read in Shabbat 13a-b:

[It is taught in the] Tanna de-be Eliyahu: It once happened that a certain scholar who had studied Bible and Mishnah and had unwittingly served scholars, died at middle age. His wife took his tefillin and carried them about in the synagogue and school houses and complained to them [the scholars]: "It is written in the Torah, 'For that is thy life and the length of thy days' (Deut. 30:20). My husband, who read much Bible and studied much Mishnah and served scholars a great deal, why did he die at middle age?" No man could answer. On one occasion I [Eliyahu, the supposed author of the Tanna] was a guest at her house, and she related the whole story to me. I said to her: "My daughter, how was he to you in the days of your menstruation?" "God forbid," she replied, "he did not even touch me with his little finger." "And how was he in the days of your 'whites'?" "He ate with me, drank with me, and slept with me in bodily contact, and it did not occur to him to do otherwise." I said to her: "Blessed be the Omnipresent for slaying him, for He did not condone this behavior. Therefore, even though the man had much merit on account of his love for the Torah, God punished him, for lo, the Torah has said, 'And you shall not approach a woman as long as she is impure by her menses' (Lev. 18:19)."

The Mishnah refers to an institution that undoubtedly grew out of the defilement concept. *Bet ha-tum'ot* (special houses of uncleanness) were set aside so that women could be segregated during menses.¹¹ This isolation was not practiced in Babylonia during the mishnaic period, however.¹² As is written in Ketubbot 61a:

Rabbi Isaac ben Hanania further stated in the name of Rav Huna: All kinds of work which a wife may perform for her husband, a menstruous woman may also perform, except for filling his cup, preparing his bed, washing his face, hands, and feet. Said Rabba: The prohibition for preparing his bed applied only in his presence. If done

in his absence, it doesn't matter. With regard to filling his cup, Samuel's wife made a change [during her "whites"]; she served him with her left hand.

In other words, actions that were circumscribed biblically for reasons of defilement, such as touching the husband's bed, were now, in third-century Babylon, circumscribed for reasons of sexual arousal.

Variations showed up in attitudes as well as practice. The author of the following talmudic statement sounds a negative note: "If a menstruous woman passes between two [men] during the beginning of her menses, she will slay one of them; and if she is at the end of her menses, she will cause strife between them" (Pesahim 111a). Another talmudic passage (Niddah 31b) stresses the romantic element: a niddah is off limits so that she will be more desirable afterward.

And so it goes. The medieval literature largely emphasizes the pollution theme. The Zohar, with its almost palpable sense of purity and impurity in the world, is most explicit:

One who cohabits with a niddah drives the divine presence from the world. There is no stronger impurity in the world than that of niddah. Wherever they go, the divine presence is driven from before them. Furthermore, such a person brings evil sickness upon himself and upon the child born [from such a union]. . . . When a person draws near to a niddah, her impurity passes to him and resides in all of his limbs. . . . for it is written: "and her impurity will be upon him" (Lev. 15:24). The seed which he brings forth at that time is imbued with the spirit of impurity and remains in a state of impurity throughout its existence, for its very creation and foundation stem from profound impurity, which is the strongest of all impurities. (Parshat Shmot)

We find a similar view in Nahmanides:

The glance of a menstruous woman poisons the air. . . . She is like a viper who kills with her glance. How much more harm will she bring to a man who sleeps with her? She is a pariah; men and women will distance themselves from her and she will sit alone and speak to no one. . . . The dust on which she walks is impure like the dust defiled by the bones of the dead. And the rabbis said: "Even her glance brings harm." (Commentary on the Torah, Lev. 12:14)

Maimonides, however, for all that he believed that women be kept under wraps, was of a different mind regarding isolation. The Babylonian tradition of setting women aside to prevent them from their normal household duties, was, in his eyes, inauthentic to rabbinic tradition; it smacked of sectarian extremism, perhaps even the most dreaded sectarianism of all, Karaism. Thus Maimonides permitted women to touch a garment, cook foods, and generally serve their husbands at all times (*Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Issurei Biah 11:6, 7, 15).

In medieval Spain, where Christianity stressed the sinfulness of sex and Islam played up the taboo, there arose some additional prohibitions in Jewish law. One in particular, the interdiction against a niddah entering a synagogue, was widely observed.

With the beginning of the modern period comes a new phenomenon, an attempt to provide a rationale for niddah in terms that would be more appealing to the enlightened mind. Thus, as Samson Raphael Hirsch writes, "in the proper marital relationship, husband and wife must live periodically as sister and brother. This tends to establish rather than curtail intimate family relationships, both morally and spiritually. And just as one gains entry to the holy sanctuary after purification, so one is able to resume sexual relations, which are also of a consecrated nature."¹³

In the contemporary literature on niddah, we see the dual influence. Some authorities stress impurity, defilement, punishment, danger, and various minute details, the neglect of which entails absolute infraction of the law; others emphasize married love, mutual respect, the holiness of sex, and the temptations that are involved when two people live in such close proximity.¹⁴

Often in contemporary literature these themes are meshed. Thus today, for example, strict observance of niddah means that there be absolutely no physical contact between husband and wife, that their beds be separated, that they do not hand any object to each other directly. One prominent halakhic authority states that even a baby is not to be handed directly (from husband to wife) during niddah, unless there is no other way. While it is possible to explain laws of this sort as safeguards against sexual arousal, they seem to be more evocative of biblical concepts of impurity, where, for example, a man who touches the chair or bed or clothing of one who

is *tamei* (unclean) becomes unclean himself. Yet, there is also the other genre of prohibitions: a man should not gaze excessively upon his wife; a woman should not sing in the presence of her husband. In other words, everything must be done to bank all the potential fires of passion.

One Woman's Contemporary View

Relatively few Jews observe the laws of niddah today, not the great mass of assimilated Jews who ignore mitzvot in general, nor Reform Jews who view niddah as a relic of rabbinic Judaism, nor Conservative Jews who default by silence, nor, for that matter, many Jews who consider themselves Orthodox. And yet, the laws of niddah and mikveh are considered *gizfei ha-torah*, the essential laws of the Torah. Mikveh, for instance, takes precedence in communal efforts over building a synagogue or buying a Torah scroll. Moreover, observance of niddah is one of the three primary mitzvot of women, the other two being *zerot* (the kindling-of-candles) and *hallah* (taking off a portion of the bread dough and consecrating it) (Berakhot 20b). Why then has niddah fallen by and large into desuetude?

One explanation is that niddah is simply very difficult to keep. Of all the core mitzvot, it certainly makes the most rigorous demands. Sex is as powerful a drive as hunger, yet we have only five fast days a year compared with approximately one hundred fifty days of niddah. One not trained to observe the law would hardly consider it.

Some would say that niddah and mikveh have fallen afoul of brass plumbing, the arch symbol of modern civilization. Too many people confuse the laws of niddah with hygiene. Indeed, how often have I heard people say, "I can just as easily stay home and take a bath." This kind of thinking is due in part to an inadequate education on the subject, including the simple fact that one is required to take a bath *before* going to the mikveh. It is also probably due to the use of words like "clean" and "unclean," which might not have crept into Jewish tradition had women been part of the process of the rabbinic unfolding of the law during the last

two thousand years. The Torah deals with concepts of spiritual purity and impurity that were amorphous and perhaps logically incomprehensible, even in Temple times. But once the Temple was destroyed and there was no longer a single physical locus of ultimate purity, the human mind transmuted these concepts into terms with which it could deal. Somehow, relative cleanliness became the code association.

A further fact that contributed to the growing disregard of niddah is that all throughout the medieval period the notion of taboo overpowered the element of *kedushah*, the holiness of the physical relationship. Of course, taboo and holiness are tied together intimately—that is, the setting up of limits so that what happens within them becomes very special. The preponderant focus, however, on what not to do during the niddah period—combined with little discussion or appreciation of what takes place during the time when sex is permissible—left the whole area quite vulnerable. Instead of giving post-niddah sex the green light, in the form of positive articulation, the laws, as they developed, continued to give sex the red light. This is seen most clearly in the *Shulhan Arukh*, which prescribes sex to be kept at a minimum. A certain prudishness was generated here, not to be confused with modesty. It is interesting to note that *onah* (the obligation of a husband to satisfy his wife sexually), an equally important concept in the Torah, has found little stress in Jewish tradition. Thus, as modern men and women became increasingly disenfranchised with taboos, niddah suffered accordingly. This falloff is unfortunate, for niddah and mikveh have great meaning today, in a woman's life and in the shared life of a man and woman who love each other.

Why do I observe niddah and mikveh? Because I am so commanded, because it is a mitzvah ordained by the Torah. Were I not so commanded by Jewish law, I surely would not have invented such a rigorous routine. The flesh is weak and no lofty scheme imaginable could have made me tough enough to observe niddah. All of this is true for my husband as well, for neither of us could adhere to the practice unilaterally. Without a mutual understanding and acceptance of Halakhah, observance of niddah in marriage would be reduced to a test of wills each month.

Precisely because it is a mitzvah, it holds a certain sense of

sweetness for me. As I go about my business at the mikveh, I often savor the knowledge that I am doing exactly as Jewish women have done for twenty or thirty centuries. It is a matter not only of keeping the chain going, but also one of self-definition: this is how my forebears defined themselves as Jewish women and as part of the community and this is how I define myself. It is the sense of community with them that pleases me. There is yet another aspect to observing a mitzvah for its own sake. The laws of niddah continually remind me that I am a Jew and niddah reinforces that deep inner contentment with a Jewish way of life.

Acceptance of the mitzvah, then, is the base; attendant sensations of "community," "Jewish womanhood," and "chain of tradition" are the embellishments. There is more to it than that, however. Niddah serves a whole range of functions in an interpersonal relationship, appropriate to its ebb and flow and to its different stages of growth.

In the early married stage, when passion and romance dominate, niddah allows, nay encourages, a man and woman to develop other techniques of communication. In the second stage, that of young children, tired mothers, and hardworking fathers, niddah is an arbitrarily imposed refresher period. Inasmuch as it regulates the off times, it synchronizes the on times. No law can program desire, but there is probably a better chance of the meshing of expectations among couples who observe niddah. In the third stage, as a woman approaches menopause, niddah and mikveh bring her to a monthly appreciation of her continuing ability to be fertile. One may wonder whether a woman who has faithfully observed mikveh all her life feels a heightened sense of loss at menopause.

Finally, in all of these stages, niddah generates a different sense of self for a woman, a feeling of self-autonomy. Some women can generate these feelings out of their own ego strength; for those to whom it is not innate or instinctive, niddah is a catalyst to this consciousness.

Some feminists have challenged the very concept of mikveh. Yet mikveh well could be the prototype of a woman's mitzvah. It is unique to woman; it makes a statement about woman as Jew; it builds human character. Thus we need not rationalize what has been wrong with mikveh but rather affirm what has been right and

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what is doable. Not everything concerning women that has withstood the test of time is good; not everything from biblical tradition has withstood the test of time. But in the cosmic order of things, mikveh seems to be an attempt to attach some measure of holiness to a primal urge. As it was passed on through countless generations, mikveh could not help take on certain nuances, some of them less honorable toward women. It falls to this generation of women, Jewish women with a new sense of self, to restore that element of holiness to our bodies, our selves.

Some Modest Proposals

There are several things regarding niddah and mikveh the community can do in the way of education and even refinement.

1. Niddah and mikveh should be reappropriated in the context of a woman's mitzvah. Uniquely, it is a mitzvah in which women perform the act, with men serving as enablers. Now that women are calling for greater inclusion in tradition, the first step should be to reeducate the community on women's mitzvot that already exist.

2. There should be a clearing up of some of the negative language associated with niddah and mikveh—"unclean" for example—and of some of the horrendous threats that have been bruited about (children conceived during a niddah's intercourse will be born blind, leprous, armless, etc.). That doesn't impress people who prefer to take on new obligations out of love, not terror. While much of the contemporary, English-language literature does stress *kedushah*, the holiness of marriage and family purity, the new literature should emphasize the holiness of sex itself. Indeed, the parallel ought to be drawn: a man who goes to the mikveh before Yom Kippur purifies himself not from a state of defilement but rather in order to be more holy for what he does next (that is, entering holy time). Similarly, menstrual blood is not defilement; rather, after a period of separation a woman purifies herself to be more holy for what follows, sexual relations.

3. Perhaps some of the women's contemporary needs can be grafted onto niddah. For example, doctors advise women to check

their breasts every month for cancer, but most women neglect these self-examinations. If this were somehow tied halakhically to niddah, women would do so routinely. Similarly, an annual Pap smear or gynecological examination that would be tied ritually to, say, the first niddah cycle after Rosh Hashanah may add new meaning to the mitzvah; more than that, it may save thousands of women's lives each year.

4. At certain stages of life, and for certain people, abstinence from sex for almost half a month is too difficult to sustain. Perhaps there ought to be a halakhic reconsideration of the biblical time span. At this time of return to ritual and tradition, many more Jewish couples seriously may consider the observance of niddah were it limited to the seven-day period prescribed by biblical law.

5. Particularly where brides are concerned, and on the assumption that we still place a value on virginity before marriage, the distinction between menstrual blood and blood of the hymen ought to be made. Starting off with eleven days of abstinence is a poor way to engender healthy attitudes about the joys of sex in marriage.

6. One of the interesting things that turned up in the course of my research on modern Orthodox women is the diversity in observance of the associated laws of *negi'ah*, the interdiction against all physical contact. Many couples seem to have drawn the line differently, and the range was enormous. As one who respects the mitzvah of niddah—but also as a student of history who understands that after the destruction of the Temple the emphasis quite naturally shifted from *tum'at niddah* (separation for reasons of ritual impurity) to *issur niddah* (proscription of sexual relations)—I find the emphasis on *negi'ah* excessive and onerous. Today we have somewhat healthier attitudes about physical affection. The Halakhah should reflect a confidence in its faithful. One who observes the mitzvah of niddah will not jump into bed the moment the flesh of a loved one is pressed.

Like many *hukkim* from the Torah (rituals and rules for which we are given no ethical or logical reason), niddah has come down to us through three thousand years of Jewish living. It has been tempered and shaped by successive generations, yet it remains

assumes all women are married

relatively intact, faithful to its original, divine, biblical form. And although we cannot understand it by means of logic, it obviously serves a deep human need.

All things considered, the laws of niddah have added a dimension to our marriage, have made it richer, more special. Since it is these small margins that make the difference in life, I consider the effort worthwhile. All in all, I like being a proper "daughter of Israel."

NOTES

1. "Uncleanness" is a dreadful word, a poor translation and even poorer connotation of the Hebrew *tamei*. I could not find a single English Bible that used a different word, however. *Tamei* is more accurately understood as "impure"—the reverse condition of *tahor* ("pure"); both words take on an entirely different meaning when considered in light of Temple access or worship, to which they are related. Part of the problem in this pericope is that the word *niddatāh* (her state of being niddah) is translated as "her impurity," so another word had to be used for *tum'ah*. More properly, *niddatāh* should have been translated as "in the time of her flow (menses)" or "in the time of her separation (distancing)." Even where the concept of separation is used, some translators use the word "banishment," based on Rashi's commentary of Lev. 15:19. See *Even Shoshan* and Jastrow dictionaries, s.v. *niddah*.
2. This verse seems to be the bridge phrase, interweaving the two themes, impurity and forbidden sexual relationships.
3. This is derived from the laws of a *zarah* (one who has a discharge), who must wait seven additional days after the discharge stops (Niddah 66a on Lev. 15:23).
4. There is a special dispensation for newlyweds: eleven days instead of twelve. The reason for this is that the loss of blood is probably from the breaking of the hymen and not from the womb. Since one could not know for sure, the rabbis set aside four days plus seven "whites." More logically, if it could be determined within four days that it is extraterine blood (i.e., from the hymen), then why the seven "whites" altogether? We know from other cases that it is only menstrual blood that made one a niddah; after a Caesarian birth there was no period of separation.
5. This is determined by a series of self-examinations. Staining is considered part of the flow period. In fact, there are more laws on staining than on any other aspect of niddah. Since the laws were so intricate, there were, by acclaim, certain rabbis in each generation who were specialists in the laws of niddah. Questions would be sent to them from great distances. The details were originally spelled out in Mishnah Niddah: finding color or size,

determining whether it is part of the flow or part of seven additional days, where it originates (vagina or womb), the self-examination procedures, whose testimony counts, when are the tests properly done, etc.

6. Since it is not uncommon for a woman to stain for several days after the menstrual flow, this puts an extra burden on couples trying to observe the laws carefully. For women who have long menses (seven or eight days), it means a period of at least two weeks or more of abstinence from sex.

7. Although the Bible doesn't describe the purification ritual for niddah (other than the passage of seven days), the rabbis taught that the same procedure used by men applied to women: immersion in living waters (Lev. 15:13).

8. I was never sure about the relevance of that particular prayer. The following, however, seems to suggest itself: niddah and mikveh are the only extant rituals of that period when *tum'ah* and *taharah* were taken with utmost gravity and when the Temple was the symbol of purity and closeness to God. Moreover, on the day following the immersion, the mendicant would bring two turtle doves to the sanctuary as sacrifice. This additional prayer symbolizes the longing for that time in our past or for messianic redemption of the future.

9. See Rachel Adler, "Tumah and Taharah—Mikveh," in *The First Jewish Catalog*, ed. Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, and Sharon Strassfeld (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), pp. 167-71.

10. The clearest indication of this was when the Mishnah was codified. Almost two hundred years after the destruction of the Second Temple, the tractate Niddah was classified not in Order Women but in Order Purification. It is also the only one of the twelve *mishnayot* in Order Purification that has a gemara explicating it.

11. Rashi and Bartenura explain this as rooms, not houses (Niddah 7:2).

12. Several centuries later, segregation was indeed practiced in Babylonia (*Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah 11:6, 7, 15).

13. Cf. Sæmson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch* (London: I. Levy, 1962), chap. 15.

14. Some contemporary works of one kind or the other are Kalman Kahana, *Daughter of Israel: Laws of Family Purity* (New York: Feldheim, 1970); Norman Lamm, *The Hedge of Roses* (New York: Feldheim, 1968); Pinchas Stolper, *The Road to Responsible Jewish Adulthood* (New York: Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, 1967); Zev Schostak, *The Purity of the Family: Its Ideology and Its Laws* (New York: Feldheim, 1971).