

# *Gender Relationships In Marriage and Out*

EDITED BY  
Rivkah Blau

Robert S. Hirt, Series Editor

THE MICHAEL SCHARF PUBLICATION TRUST  
OF THE YESHIVA UNIVERSITY PRESS  
NEW YORK



## THE ORTHODOX FORUM

The Orthodox Forum, initially convened by Dr. Norman Lamm, Chancellor of Yeshiva University, meets each year to consider major issues of concern to the Jewish community. Forum participants from throughout the world, including academicians in both Jewish and secular fields, rabbis, *rashei yeshivah*, Jewish educators, and Jewish communal professionals, gather in conference as a think tank to discuss and critique each other's original papers, examining different aspects of a central theme. The purpose of the Forum is to create and disseminate a new and vibrant Torah literature addressing the critical issues facing Jewry today.

The Orthodox Forum  
gratefully acknowledges the support  
of the Joseph J. and Bertha K. Green Memorial Fund  
at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary  
established by Morris L. Green, of blessed memory.

The Orthodox Forum Series  
is a project of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary,  
an affiliate of Yeshiva University

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Orthodox Forum (17<sup>th</sup> : 2004 : New York, NY)

Gender relationships in marriage and out / edited by Rivkah Blau.

p. cm. – (Orthodox Forum series)

ISBN 978-0-88125-971-1

1. Marriage. 2. Marriage – Religious aspects – Judaism. 3. Marriage (Jewish law)

4. Man-woman relationships – Religious aspects – Judaism. I. Blau, Rivkah Teitz, 1941– II. Title.

HQ525.J4O78 2005

296.7'409 – dc22

2007026007

\* \* \*

*Distributed by*

**KTAV Publishing House, Inc.**

930 Newark Avenue

Jersey City, NJ 07306

Tel. (201) 963-9524

Fax. (201) 963-0102

[www.ktav.com](http://www.ktav.com)

[bernie@ktav.com](mailto:bernie@ktav.com)

Copyright © 2007 Yeshiva University Press

This book was typeset by Jerusalem Typesetting, [www.jerusalemtype.com](http://www.jerusalemtype.com)

---

---

# Contents

Contributors	viii
Series Editor's Preface <i>Robert S. Hirt</i>	xi
Preface <i>Rivkah Blau</i>	xiii
Introduction: The Past and the Future of the Forum on "Gender Relations" <i>Jennie Rosenfeld</i>	xv
1. Of Marriage: Relationship and Relations <i>Aharon Lichtenstein</i>	1
2. Marriage, Sexuality, and Holiness: The Anti-Ascetic Legacy of Talmudic Judaism <i>Adiel Schremer</i>	35
3. How Jewish Society Adapted to Change in Male/Female Relationships in 19 <sup>th</sup> / early 20 <sup>th</sup> Century Eastern Europe <i>Shaul Stampfer</i>	65
4. Sanctity, Sanity and Connectedness: Struggles For Commitment Among Orthodox Jewish Singles <i>Daniel Rothenberg</i>	85
5. Perfect Person Singular: Unmarried Adults in Contemporary Orthodox American Jewish Communities <i>Sylvia Barack Fishman</i>	91

6. Observations on <i>Perfect Person Singular</i> <i>Shmuel Goldin</i>	115
7. Excerpts from Interviews with Orthodox Singles <i>Koby Frances and Jennie Rosenfeld</i>	121
8. Premarital Guidance Literature in the Internet Age <i>Yuval Cherlow</i>	131
9. Thoughts on Teaching Taharat HaMishpahah: The Role of the Teacher Today <i>Abby Lerner</i>	173
10. Preparing Modern Orthodox <i>Kallot</i> and <i>Hatanim</i> for Marriage <i>Devorah Zlochower</i>	207
11. “So She Can Be as Dear to Him as on Their Wedding Day”? Modern Concerns with <i>Hilkhos Niddah</i> as Demonstrated by Anonymous Email Questions <i>Deena R. Zimmerman</i>	225
12. Life Values and Intimacy Education: Methods and Messages <i>Yocheved Debow and Anna C. Woloski-Wruble</i>	243
Orthodox Forum Seventeenth Conference <i>List of Participants</i>	293
Index	297

**OTHER VOLUMES IN THE ORTHODOX FORUM SERIES**

---

**Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy**

*edited by Moshe Z. Sokol*

**Jewish Tradition and the Non-Traditional Jew**

*edited by Jacob J. Schacter*

**Israel as a Religious Reality**

*edited by Chaim I. Waxman*

**Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah:**

***Contributions and Limitations***

*edited by Shalom Carmy*

**Tikkun Olam: Social Responsibility in Jewish Thought and Law**

*edited by David Shatz, Chaim I. Waxman, and Nathan J. Diamant*

**Engaging Modernity:**

**Rabbinic Leaders and the Challenge of the *Twentieth Century***

*edited by Moshe Z. Sokol*

**Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering**

*edited by Shalom Carmy*

**Jewish Business Ethics: The Firm and Its Stakeholders**

*edited by Aaron Levine and Moses Pava*

**Tolerance, Dissent, and Democracy:**

**Philosophical, Historical, and Halakhic Perspectives**

*edited by Moshe Z. Sokol*

**Jewish Spirituality and Divine Law**

*edited by Adam Mintz and Lawrence Schiffman*

**Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age**

*edited by Marc D. Stern*

**Judaism, Science, and Moral Responsibility**

*edited by Yitzhak Berger and David Shatz*

**למודות The Conceptual Approach to Jewish Learning**

*edited by Yosef Blau*

**Rabbinic and Lay Communal Authority**

*edited by Suzanne Last Stone*

**War and Peace in the Jewish Tradition**

*edited by Lawrence Schiffman and Joel B. Wolowelsky*

---

---

# 9

## Thoughts on Teaching Taharat HaMishpahah: The Role of the Teacher Today

*Abby Lerner*

I begin by stating that I am simply a teacher of the laws of family purity to young (and sometimes not so young) brides. However, when I look back on over two decades of experiences in this area, I realize there is very little that is simple about what I do, and that the role of teacher encompasses a lot more than formal face-to-face transmission of knowledge. What is true of me can be said of almost anyone engaged in this endeavor. The subject of *taharat hamishpahah* touches on the most sensitive of issues: our relationship to our spouses, our relationship to our own bodies. It touches on our physical self-image, and because these sometimes difficult laws test our

commitment to our faith, this subject affects our sense of ourselves as observant Jews. It is no wonder, then, that those of us who teach this subject often find ourselves not only in the role of teachers but also in the role of advisers, psychologists, researchers, relationship counselors, liaisons to doctors and rabbis. Sometimes we play the role of experienced mothers or older sisters, and sometimes we are just shoulders to cry on.

There are four aspects in teaching *taharat hamishpahah* that I consider crucial, and I hope to demonstrate throughout this essay how these four aspects manifest themselves in teaching this sensitive topic.

1. Provide as much *halakhic* and background information as possible so that the student understands what the parameters of the *halakhah* are and the situations in which asking a question may result in a more lenient *psak* than the student might otherwise have anticipated.
2. Regarding intimacy and other personal aspects of married life: provide enough information so that the student has an understanding of the very broad range of what is “normal.”
3. Keep up with medical knowledge and medical developments that affect the laws of *taharat hamishpahah*. Keep up with *halakhic* applications to changing medical developments and with the range of approaches to different problems.
4. Be available and accessible. Listen carefully to the questions that come in. Read between the lines. What is being said and what is not being said? Maintain relationships with the people you have taught. Serve as an active liaison between the questioner and *poskim* as well as with medical practitioners.

It is not difficult to obtain a teacher’s course outline for *taharat hamishpahah* and therefore it is not my intent here to publish such an outline. What I would like to do is discuss the issues and points of emphasis that go beyond *halakhah* or that elaborate on *halakhah*, which I consider important to cover in a course on this topic. Occasionally I will mention cases that shed light on the teacher’s role – times when a teacher can help a student find a solution to



a problem or when a teacher can ease the way during a difficult period.

I usually meet with students individually. When this is not possible because of time constraints, I will meet with up to four or five students at a time, but I insist that the final two-hour session regarding our rabbis' attitudes toward sexuality and issues of intimacy, "the first night" and other such issues be held on a one-to-one basis. If I am meeting with a group, individual appointments are made with each student for the final session. In addition, if I am meeting with more than one woman at a time, I always remind them that I am available before our session begins and after our session ends for personal questions that cannot be discussed in front of others. Often women take me up on my offer. In this way I am able to develop a personal relationship with each student.

#### **SESSION ONE – INTRODUCTION TO TAHARAT HAMISHPAHAH, HEFSEK TAHARAH EXAMINATION**

At our first session, I begin slowly by introducing the students to a wide array of books available in English on the subject. It is important for couples to have a small library of sources on *taharat hamishpahah*. More information and different approaches give a couple a sense of control over this difficult area of *halakhah*. The text that I am most comfortable with for day-to-day reference is *Shoshanat Ha'Amakim, Rose of the Valley*, compiled by Rahamim Shaul Sultan (Brooklyn: Sephardic Legacy Press, 1996). Although the work is subtitled "A Compilation of Laws of Family Purity According to Sephardic Custom,"<sup>1</sup> it contains letters of approbation (*haskamot*) from the entire rabbinic leadership of Beth Medrash Govoha of Lakewood, New Jersey. The book is written clearly and is filled with advice about how to work with these laws more easily. It is courageous in suggesting in the main text leniencies to discuss with a rabbi in difficult situations. A number of these leniencies, though certainly known, have never been published so openly. The author demonstrates great respect for the reader in this and in other ways. In addition, this text is generously footnoted, with many references in Hebrew, and it features an outstanding index.

I also suggest Rabbi Shimon Eider's two-volume work on the *Halachos of Niddah*, now available in one volume (NY: Feldheim, 1999). Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's many *teshuvot* on the topic are reprinted here. Tehillah Abramov's *The Secret of Jewish Femininity* (Southfield, Michigan: Targum Press, 1988) is an excellent first book on the topic and also offers helpful suggestions. It includes many anecdotes that offer pleasant reading for those new to observance or for those who are somewhat skittish about the topic. Abramov approaches *taharat hamishpahah* with *halakhic* meticulousness but in a light conversational tone.

This discussion of books creates a calm, informal atmosphere and makes it easier to begin talking about the more practical next step, which is to help make sure that the wedding date will take place when the bride is not a *niddah*. This is an area of much tension for all brides. I begin with this in order to quickly deal with the most pressing issue, and above all, to set the date of the *hefsek taharah* examination on the calendar. I have watched busy young women mark the date they are to go to the *mikvah* and then forget to do the *hefsek taharah*! No one forgets to go to the *mikvah*, but the *hefsek taharah* date must be marked *prominently*. I usually specify a *hefsek taharah* date earlier than is necessary in case there are problems and *she'elot* that need to be responded to.

There are different chemical ways of manipulating the menstrual cycle. When using a birth control pill for this purpose, it is best to begin three to four months before the wedding, since it is not uncommon to experience staining during the first one or two cycles on the pill. Although a skilled doctor almost always knows how to deal with this, the tension and fear that this staining induces in young women is significant. Young women must also note that these pills are very time-sensitive. Not taking them at the exact prescribed time each day can create staining problems. Because of this some of the pills even come with little alarms to remind patients when to take them. After several successful months of taking them one of my students missed one pill in the two weeks before her wedding. Sensitive *poskim* helped to avert a *hupat niddah*.

Another form of chemical manipulation is to take pure pro-

gesterone without the estrogen that is part of the birth control pills. This system is recommended by some *poskim* since there is hardly any staining associated with it. Also, progesterone is not nearly as time-sensitive as the birth control pill. For weddings that are scheduled within a short time after the engagement, this system is most favored. Progesterone simply maintains the lining of the uterus and the doctor can recommend dosages that will easily override the bride's menstrual cycle. Many doctors are not accustomed to using progesterone for this purpose. If the teacher is aware of it, as she should be, she can discuss this with her student who can then discuss it with her doctor. It is an elegant solution to what can be a difficult problem.

I am careful at the first session to share the philosophy and *hashkafah* behind two concepts that defy translation – *tumah* and *taharah*. Students who understand that *tumah* is related to death and loss of potential life, come to appreciate how the laws of *taharat hamishpahah* fit into the larger system of *tumah* and *taharah*. They can understand why a man who experiences a loss of seminal fluid also becomes *tamei* and why a woman after relations (*poletet shikhvat zera*) also experiences a mild form of *tumah*. All this has relevance to our study and broadens a woman's understanding of the complex laws of *niddah* and their internal logic.<sup>2</sup>

My approach to teaching *taharat hamishpahah* is practical rather than textual. Nevertheless, I find it very important to look into the Biblical text in *Sefer Vayikra* 15:19, 25, 28. These verses describe two cases of *niddah* in the Torah: the menstruant, and the woman who experiences mid-cycle bleeding or bleeding beyond the normal period. Waiting an additional seven days without bleeding after the initial flow has ceased is prescribed only in the second case. It is important to explain how and why it came about that Jewish women took upon themselves to wait these seven extra days in all cases of uterine bleeding. It is also important to explain why we wait a minimum of five days before counting the seven “clean” days. Most women understand that “five” is simply the normal standard for a period, when in actuality the initial minimum of five days stems not from menstruation at all, but from the concept of *poletet shikhvat*

*zera*, a woman's status for seventy-two hours after relations. This status stems from the fact that she experiences a "flow" of seminal fluid which contains viable sperm cells. The expulsion of this fluid results in her status as a *poletet shikhvat zera*, a mild form of *tumah* which prevents the counting of the seven "clean" days. The five-day wait before the beginning of the seven clean days stems from a *lo plug* (no *halakhic* exceptions) based on two cases where a woman experiences a menstrual period shortly after relations. In these cases, even if all her bleeding were to cease within a two or three-day time span, according to *halakhah* the woman would not be able to begin her count of the seven "clean" days until a minimum of four to five days had elapsed, depending on the case, since her status as a *poletet shikhvat zera* precludes the beginning of this count.

Why all this information? Armed with this knowledge, a woman would be able to approach a *posek* if, for example, she knows that she ovulates early in the cycle, perhaps by day eleven. By waiting the standard five and seven days to immerse in the *mikvah* she consistently misses ovulation, making pregnancy impossible. Knowledge of the concept of *poletet shikhvat zera* enables her to confidently approach a *posek* and inquire about being able to begin the count of the seven days earlier than usual, if relations did not immediately precede the onset of menstruation. There may be other applications of this concept as well. Even at this early stage, facts of this sort help to calm the lurking fears of women who are concerned that the new life of *halakhic* practice that they are about to start may at times collide with their own biological makeup.

The first session also includes a description of how to perform the *hefsek taharah* examination. It is most important to include the earliest and latest times for this pivotal examination. Many women are balancing family and career and even educational pursuits. I have received calls from women married many years who forgot to perform the examination, or who remembered too late, and performed the examination past sunset. I advise women if they are able to, to perform a *hefsek taharah* examination early in the morning on the day that they would perform this examination before sunset. Of course they must then be fully prepared to perform the

examination at the optimal time: before sunset. If they then honestly forget to perform the examination on time a *posek* may decide that the earlier examination can be counted as the *hefsek taharah*. Some *poskim* have a more liberal understanding of exactly when sunset takes place and may be willing to discuss a *hefsek taharah* performed immediately after the sunset time listed in our calendars and newspapers (Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Mosheh* OH IV: #62, p. 96). Few books available in English contain this sort of advice, which at this point is best obtained through personal instruction. Married women at review courses, as well as the young bride, appreciate this kind of information that enables them to gain a sense of control over their already hectic lives.

## SESSION TWO – SEVEN CLEAN DAYS, KETAMIM

At this point we begin to study the details of performing two *bedikot* a day during the seven clean days. The description of the seven clean days invariably leads to a discussion of “what if things go wrong; what if I find a stain during these days?” It is important to lay the groundwork for an understanding of stains found on undergarments (*ketamim*). Women sometimes feel that they are “cheating” if they receive a *psak* that a *ketem* in a specific case does not invalidate the count of the seven clean days, or that somehow the entire system is flawed or arbitrary. Explaining carefully what defines *dam niddah* from a Biblical perspective (a flow accompanied by a sense of the opening of the womb, *hargashah*) is the beginning of the resolution of this problem. When women fully comprehend that a stain discovered on underwear does not create the status of *niddah* from a Biblical perspective, but does create a rabbinic concern, it helps them. It also helps them to understand why we recommend that women wear dark underwear after they have immersed in the *mikvah*. This knowledge allows them to move forward psychologically, religiously and intellectually when a *posek* determines that the *ketem* found in a particular case is *not* what the rabbis were concerned about. Many years ago I sat in the study of a prominent *posek* on matters of *taharat hamishpahah* with my own vexing problem. A call came through for him and the words he said to the caller stirred me. “I know the doctor

said it's blood, but not all blood is *dam niddah*." How many times have I repeated this quote to my students as I have watched their faces relax with the knowledge that maybe there is some internal logic to this system we call *halakhah*.

It is during the discussion of *ketamim* that I bring up the issue of *always* asking a *she'elah*. I am rarely concerned that the women I teach will be too lenient if they don't consult a *posek*. Often, especially among young yeshivah-educated women, the opposite is the case. They find a questionable color on underwear or on an examination cloth and assume the worst. The awkwardness of approaching a *posek* with such a personal matter exacerbates the problem. They therefore decide for themselves that they must begin counting the seven clean days again. Deena Zimmerman, in *A Lifetime Companion to the Laws of Jewish Family Life* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2005, 87, note 1), articulates the issue: "Some women feel they are being 'more careful' by not asking and waiting, but in this area of *halakha* this is not true. There is no obligation to be a niddah longer than necessary, and a couple's being separated limits their opportunities to perform other commandments such as procreation and marital relations (*onah*)." I encourage women to ask about all colors that arouse concern, even those on a *bedikah* cloth. I share my personal experiences with *psak* in order to encourage asking, and I tell the women I teach that one of my own children would not have been conceived had I not asked a *she'elah*. Along the lines of Deena Zimmerman, I remind women that our marriages are important in and of themselves, and that every *she'elah* that has the potential to bring a couple together sooner is of utmost importance. I encourage women to find *poskim* with whom they can develop a comfortable relationship; this is true for men as well. A *posek* must be accessible. If he does not have calling hours then he must be meticulous about returning messages. The tension around these *she'elot* is often very aggravating, and the inability to locate a *posek* in a timely fashion adds to that tension in ways that can be detrimental to a marriage relationship. Some women need *poskim* who explain why they are rendering a certain *psak*; some women simply need a sympathetic tone of voice. In any case the *posek* must treat each *she'elah* with the utmost care and importance. A woman

who is married for many years told me about a disturbing experience. Her husband had approached their *posek* concerning a question, and the *posek* determined that the stain he saw required that the woman wait several more days before immersing in the *mikvah*. When the husband looked disappointed, the *posek* reacted negatively, implying that after all the husband was not a young newlywed who could not wait. Rightfully, the husband and wife were upset. No one knows what an added day or a particular moment means to a couple; no one knows what the internal dynamic is of a specific marriage. It is therefore important to find a *posek* who is both knowledgeable and sensitive to one's needs.

How does one go about asking a *she'elah*? Many *she'elot* can be answered on the telephone with a description of circumstances and even of colors. This call can be made anonymously. No woman needs to give her name to the *posek* or to any of his family members who may answer the phone. When they are asked for their name, they need only respond that they have a personal question for the rabbi. If the *posek* feels that a stain needs to be seen, a woman should not hesitate to bring a *bedikah* cloth or an item of clothing to the rabbi. If she is embarrassed to do this, she can call in advance without giving her name and state that she will be dropping off an envelope at the rabbi's home, perhaps through the mail slot. The envelope should include the item and a sheet of paper describing the circumstances under which the stain was found. If the stain was found during the seven clean days, she should state which day it was. Her phone number should be included so that the *posek* can call her, or she can call him back at a set time.

A woman can also leave an item that needs to be seen by a rabbi with his wife, with the *mikvah* attendant, with her teacher or with any teacher of *taharat hamishpahah* in her community. A woman's husband can also assist her by bringing an item with a stain on it to the couple's *posek*. If the woman has presented a similar problem or stain to a rabbi several times and has consistently received a *psak* that the stain is not problematic, she may want to ask her rabbi if she must continue to show him similar stains. Is there any point at which she can now, on her own, understand that this particular stain



is not a problem? Each rabbi will respond in the way that he is most comfortable, but it is an important question to ask.

Asking a *she'elah* often brings with it the advantage of being able to immerse in the *mikvah* earlier than one had assumed, but there is another hidden advantage that in the long term may be even more important. When women encounter stains that they assume will prevent them from going to the *mikvah*, they sometimes become very angry at a *halakhic* system which seems to be working against them. The most meticulously observant woman can occasionally feel upset. But so many *she'elot* are answered favorably. The favorable answer restores one's faith in the system, an incalculable benefit to developing a relationship with a *posek*.

It is not uncommon for women to be extremely uncomfortable about asking their own synagogue rabbi a question. The role of a community *rav* is not solely professional. He is someone that we know on a social level. Women may be friendly with his wife; they may have eaten at his home; carpooled his children; attended weddings and bar/bat mitzvahs together. Rabbis urge women to think of them as professionals – as they would their doctor – but the relationship with one's community rabbi is so different. Few people socialize with their doctors! A teacher of *taharat hamishpahah* can often serve as a liaison between a woman and her community *rav* or even a *posek* from outside the community. Unquestionably, it is better for each member of the community to develop her own relationship with the *posek*, but it goes without saying that it is better for her to go through her teacher than not to ask at all. As a teacher I have worked hard to develop my own relationship with *poskim* in our New York metropolitan area, to great advantage to myself and to the women I encounter. I have grown tremendously in my own knowledge and I have been able to serve the women I teach by acting as a go-between in difficult and embarrassing situations. It is incumbent upon teachers to learn how to ask many questions of the women who come to them in this capacity, so that they can give a more accurate picture to the *posek*. I have found that because of the comfort level between two women, I will often ask questions that even the *posek* does not ask the women, and that I can often elicit



information that will provide more factors for a *posek* to consider as he renders his *psak*.

The role of liaison must be treated with tremendous care and responsibility. Sometimes a simple question is a façade, really an excuse or an opportunity to discuss other things. Those of us who listen to other women must listen very carefully. Years ago a young newly married woman whom I had taught, called with a relatively simple question. I had suggested that her husband speak to his *rosh yeshivah* and I predicted that the answer would be a lenient one. I was unhappy to hear that her husband refused to approach his *rosh yeshivah*, despite the fact that this woman was experiencing considerable pain when performing the *mokh dahuk* examination. He had told her that in his yeshivah they are stringent about this examination. I was very concerned about his insensitive and (given the *halakhic* nature of the *mokh dahuk*) most probably misinformed response. As we quietly continued our discussion (“Anything else?” I asked calmly) a story of serious abuse started to unfold. What was it in her tone of voice that prompted me to keep asking her if there was anything else? I was shaken by the amount of responsibility placed in the hands of a person listening to what was, after all, the simplest of questions. I referred the woman to counseling. As it turned out, this was a very difficult and troubling situation where both parties were carrying a lot of baggage from the past. I stayed in touch on and off. Not long ago she called and said, “Wish me *mazal tov* – I finally received my *get*.”

### SESSION THREE – PREPARATION FOR THE MIKVAH

We begin by discussing preparation for the *mikvah* with a thorough understanding of the definition of *hatzitzah*. Teachers need to be familiar with an array of grooming and cosmetic procedures that can conflict with the *halakhot* of immersion. For example, body waxing to remove hair is a procedure that can leave little pieces of unnoticeable wax on the body and should preferably be done several days before immersing in the *mikvah* to allow residual wax to be washed away through showering and bathing. We discuss when visits to the gynecologist should be made (sometimes an exam

results in *dam makkah* during the seven clean days – easy enough to deal with but a complication nevertheless), visits to the dentist (the status of temporary fillings), elective surgery (stitches that need to be removed and the doctor’s warning not to wet an incision site for a period of time), in addition to the *halakhically* prescribed warnings about certain practices to avoid before going to the *mikvah*. An important area for *poskim* to deal with definitively is the area of manicures. Many women unthinkingly have artificial nails applied with “permanent” epoxy glue. We teach women that this practice conflicts with *halakhah*, nevertheless the practice is becoming widespread. In addition to my role as a teacher, my husband is a rabbi in our community and the phone continues to ring with the voice of the very responsible *mikvah* attendant questioning whether to allow a woman to immerse with her artificial nails. *Mikvah* use has gone up considerably, thank G-d, but this often means that women who are not fully knowledgeable about the *halakhot* are at the *mikvah*, or women are knowledgeable and sincere about wanting to practice *taharat hamishpahah*, but don’t want to give up their nails. We certainly don’t want to send this woman home without immersing. Women who are more sophisticated with regard to *halakhah* may be satisfied with a *bdi’aved* standard if that is how we couch the response. It is important for us as teachers and for the rabbis to respond to what seems to be a frivolous issue, but which for some women is crucial to their self-image and self-esteem.

I spend a significant amount of time discussing unusual circumstances for immersion. Friday night immersion poses *halakhic* challenges but also practical challenges. How does one go about immersing on a Friday night without others knowing? Discretion is a serious issue in the practice of *taharat hamishpahah* which I will discuss. When I teach young brides, I recommend that they plan their schedules in advance so that they do not have company that Friday night and that they themselves are not invited out. I recommend that they not be at the home of their parents where questions about their whereabouts may come up. Sometimes the situation is unavoidable and we discuss strategies for dealing with

this difficulty. A two or three day *yom tov* often poses the same set of issues and a couple cannot avoid spending a holiday with family. Regarding *yom tov*, many *poskim* recommend that if one is able to perform a successful *hefsek taharah* examination after only four days of bleeding, which would enable one to immerse on the first night of *yom tov* immediately after *hafifah* (preparations for the *mikvah*), then that is preferable. Under some conditions a *posek* might allow a woman to immerse on the eighth day during the day to avoid an awkward situation on a *yom tov* evening. It is common nowadays to spend a two or three day *yom tov* at a resort where no *mikvah* is available during the holiday itself. Perhaps it might be appropriate to ask a *posek* about an unusual situation: immersing on the seventh day itself, before nightfall, if waiting until the proper time for one's immersion that night would mean waiting through three days of a holiday before one could immerse. Admittedly, this may be a very difficult question, but my rule is: always ask!

For those on vacation in areas without a *mikvah* one would want to ask how one immerses properly and *safely* in the ocean. What other bodies of water can serve as *mikvaot*?

An issue that I try to be very sensitive to, is a young woman's awkwardness concerning the immersion itself. Going to the *mikvah* requires that the attendant see you unclothed. After years of going to the *mikvah* and losing that sense of awkwardness, a teacher may forget that for some young women this issue is the biggest challenge of all of *hilkhot niddah*. While for some women this issue is not a problem at all, it is important to broach the topic for the sake of those women who are bothered by it and may not have the courage to share their concern.

The *mikvah* attendant tries not to be invasive while she is checking each woman. Just about everything she needs to check can be done while the woman is fully covered in her robe. I encourage women to speak to the *mikvah* attendant, or in the case of young brides, to have the mothers speak with the attendant, about their concerns. This is each woman's *mitzvah* and she has a right to perform it in the way that is most comfortable to her. If the *mikvah*

attendant does not already do so, one may suggest that she hold up the woman's robe as she walks down the stairs into the water. A woman may face the back wall of the *mikvah*. She need not turn around to see or be seen by the attendant. In extreme cases, the attendant can hold the woman's robe up even as the woman immerses, enabling the attendant to see only head and arms – knowing that if the woman's head and arms are submerged, the rest of her body is also submerged. While attendants may not be accustomed to this level of care, and while the overwhelming majority of even very young women may not require this level of sensitivity, it is important to inform women of what is possible so that they will feel comfortable at the *mikvah* and be calm even while they anticipate the moment of immersion. Women should be reminded that just about every *mikvah* attendant in the world will hold a robe or sheet in front of her as the woman who just immersed emerges from the water and climbs up the *mikvah* steps. All women can certainly expect this level of modesty and sensitivity at every *mikvah*.

In a culture that is so open about sexual activity, and where discussion of sexual behavior is on every radio news report and in every newspaper, it is important to instruct young women about discretion when it comes to *mikvah* use. Only husband and wife should know when the woman is using the *mikvah*. Marriage is between these two parties only. Her sister, her friend and her mother should not know when she is going to the *mikvah*. Some young women have very close relationships with the women in their family. This is praiseworthy. But a young woman's openness in this regard now infringes on her husband's right to privacy. Apart from this, assuming a particular husband does not care if his wife shares the date of her immersion with someone else, I believe that we need to educate young women about the sanctity and the privacy of marriage and about the importance of cultivating an exclusive relationship with one's husband. Certainly, women should be taught to seek advice when they need it, and often it may be the kind of advice that only a mother or sister can provide. I believe, though, that this should be avoided or at the very least, the date of the immersion should not

be shared. Of course, if one needs information about *mikvah* hours or location in a strange community, a woman may have to consult a friend or family member, but except in rare cases, I believe it is possible to do this discreetly, without being too specific.

It is obvious to me, but not to everyone apparently, that children should never know when their mother is going to the *mikvah*. A friend once suggested that unless children knew when their mother was going to the *mikvah*, at least sometimes, their children would never learn about the importance of *taharat hamishpahah*. Telling them where she was going was her way of providing *hinukh*! No child wants to know when his or her mother is going to the *mikvah*. Parents are always free to discuss *mikvah* and *taharat hamishpahah* with their children and should do so at the proper time. However, that does not mean telling children the specifics of one's own life. The fact that a child does not know when the mother is going to the *mikvah* is an education in itself. Even if children think they know where their mother went that evening, what a lesson in discretion and *darkhei tzniut* when that fact is never discussed. A woman told me that when her children were still living at home, she always kept a spare bag of non-perishable grocery items in the trunk of the car. In this way, if she had to tell the children that she was going to the supermarket in order to mask her trip to the *mikvah*, she always had a bag of real groceries to remove from the car. Sharing these kinds of precious little tricks, not found in any books, are part of the *mesorah* that teachers of *taharat hamishpahah* lovingly pass on to their students.

A corollary of all this is that no one should ever discuss with *anyone* who they happened to see at the *mikvah*. This is so obvious to us that we may neglect to mention it to our students. Part of this ethic dictates that we not share news heard in the *mikvah* waiting room, because sometimes the very nature of the news reveals who the speaker was. If a woman wants to share, for example, a joyous piece of news heard at the *mikvah* with her husband, she may have to wait several days until it will not be associated with the trip to the *mikvah*.

### SESSION FOUR – VESET

After discussing all the practical issues that the bride will encounter the first time she goes to the *mikvah* I am prepared to discuss the more technical aspects of *veset*: calculating the onset of the following month's menstruation when husband and wife must abstain from relations. I do my best to de-mystify this topic. It is not nearly as complicated as it sounds and it is much easier to live it than to learn about it. I try to give as many different examples as I can and I distribute a perpetual *veset* calendar that can help the couple visualize and calculate the *veset*.

Many years ago one of my husband's teachers suggested that the husband, rather than the wife, keep the *veset* calendar, since he is equally obligated in the laws to abstain from sexual relations during this time. Since the wife has to inform her husband, anyway, when she becomes a *niddah*, he is in a position to keep the calendar. In this way the entire responsibility for the laws of *taharat hamishpahah* does not fall on the woman. If this concept is attractive to the woman I am teaching, I ask her to broach the subject very gently with her *hattan*. For many men the laws of *taharat hamishpahah* are even more intimidating than for women, and some men do not take well to a request to manage the *veset* calendar. A young man who is not enthusiastic about this task may be more willing after the couple is married for a few months or he may never find it to his liking. Nevertheless, this is an interesting concept and in a world where egalitarianism is increasingly popular, it is certainly worth mentioning.

Many young women today use birth control pills to regulate their cycles before marriage, as mentioned earlier. Some have been on birth control for a while before their marriage to handle skin problems or to deal with hormonal irregularities. Others will consult *poskim* in the course of their married lives and be advised for a host of reasons to use the pill. Many *poskim* maintain that when taking the pill the *veset* that one establishes is calculated from the day one begins taking the placebo pill. At what point after taking the placebo does a particular woman begin to bleed? That interval is what has been recommended as the *veset* calculation by many *poskim*.

Since *veset* calculation is somewhat intricate, I do allude to concerns that may come up after childbirth and nursing, and subsequent to stopping a birth control pill that had been recommended medically and *halakhically*. But I think this discussion is best put off until it is a practical consideration. It is definitely worthwhile to discuss pregnancy, when a woman is considered *misuleket damim*, free from being concerned about *veset* calculations.

Many works on *taharat hamishpahah* state that during the time that a period is anticipated the couple should not hug or kiss. Although the *Shulhan Arukh* (YD 184:2) states the opposite, many works on *taharat hamishpahah* remind the couple in accordance with *Ashkenazic psak* that if they are stringent in this area *tavo aleihem brakhah*, they deserve to be blessed. As a teacher of young women, I am concerned about the stresses that our young people face. Some stress comes from their intense family, work and school schedules; some stress develops from the very nature of the permissive society they are living in. Couples feel they never have enough time together, and now another stringency comes along. Building new relationships in this climate is not easy. The *Pit-hei Teshuvah* comments on *Yoreh Dei'ah* 184:2 of *Shulhan Arukh* cited above, by quoting the Responsa of the *Ridbaz* who allows hugging and kissing on the day of the *veset* since the *Bet Yosef* allows it (as is obvious from the *Shulhan Arukh*). He continues quoting the *Ridbaz*: “*d'ein l'hadesh humrot al Yisrael v'halvai she'yishmiru mah she'mutal aleihem*” – “for we should not create new stringencies for the Jewish people; would that they observe that which is required of them.” Although the works available in English do not cite the *Pit-hei Teshuvah*, I study this text with my students and I encourage young couples to speak with their *poskim* regarding it.

## SESSION FIVE – HARHAKOT

This session is dedicated to the study of proper behavior of the couple while the woman is a *niddah*. I introduce the text from *Vayikra* 18:19 and 29, where we learn that it is forbidden from the Torah to have relations with a woman who is a *niddah* and that the prohibition is a strict one, carrying with it the punishment of *karet*. The language



of the prohibition is famous: rather than state *lo tigaleh ervat ishah b'niddat tumatah* (Do not expose the *ervah*, the nakedness of a menstruant woman, i.e., do not have relations with her), it states *v'el isha b'niddat tumatah lo tikrav l'galot ervatah* (to a menstruant woman do not *draw near* to expose her nakedness). The commentaries on “draw near” teach us that it is forbidden to touch a woman, even one’s wife, if she is a *niddah*. Maimonides maintains that this prohibition is Torah Law (*Mishneh Torah, Isurei Bi'ah*, 21:1) while Nahmanides posits that this prohibition is only rabbinic and that our verse is an *asmakhtah*, a source for the rabbinic injunction, rather than a Torah Law (*Hasagot on Sefer HaMitzvot L'haRambam*, Negative Mitzvah 353). All this indicates that touching a menstruant woman is forbidden either from the Torah or rabbinically. The important question here concerns the *harhakot*: the rabbinically ordained additional distancing a couple must observe during the time the wife is a *niddah*. If we follow Nahmanides, we would not be able to suggest that the *harhakot* are a “fence around the law,” a *geder*, because those fences are only built around Torah Law and not around rabbinic law. In addition, it is hard to explain that the *harhakot* prevent us from engaging in sexual relations during *niddah* which is punishable by *karet*. No one really thinks that by directly handing something to one’s spouse rather than placing it down first on a surface, a well-known *harhakah*, one is going to lose control of one’s impulses.

What I try to explain is that the *harhakot* are not a *geder* in the classic sense, rather they seem to replace another *halakhah* that is not observed at all between spouses – *yihud*. The laws of *yihud*, which prevent men and women who are unmarried from being secluded together, are in effect replaced by the laws of *harhakot*, and the *harhakot* are not observed by people who are not married to one another.

What is the purpose of *harhakot*? I explain that the *harhakot* are a reminder system for the couple during the two weeks of *niddah*. During this time husband and wife are not permitted to one another physically, even though they are living secluded and alone (*b'yihud*) under one roof. *Halakhah*, therefore, has built an elaborate alternative structure for a couple to “reside” in during the time that



the woman is a *niddah*. Every component of the system is a part of that structure. I have found that in this context students can appreciate better the minutiae of the *harhakot* system, and they can continue to maintain respect for this *halakhah*. It is no small thing to do away with cynicism in our permissive times, especially when our own students, without our careful explanations, may assume the concept of *harhakot* is wildly anachronistic.

I work hard, therefore, during the study of the *harhakot* to make them as relevant as possible. For example, there are many *harhakot* rulings surrounding meals. Even today when no physical gesture seems to carry with it anything more than the most casual of commitments, meals are still fraught with meaning. Eating with another person can have several purposes: function (I need to eat because I'm hungry), companionship or romance. An invitation to dinner by a member of the opposite sex evokes romance even in our day. Our goal is to keep meals during the time of *niddah* at the companionship level, and the strictures around the meals are designed to do just that.

I find it important to help students navigate the written works on *taharat hamishpahah* particularly when it comes to *harhakot*. For example, there is a range of opinions regarding hearing one's own wife sing when she is a *niddah*. I distinctly remember one very observant young woman crying bitterly and telling me that "there's no way I'm not singing *Shabbos zemiros* two weeks out of the month." Discussions with her *posek* helped to resolve her issue.

Is it really forbidden to say the words "I love you" as almost every work states? What about taking trips together during the two weeks of *niddah*? What about various sports games that a couple may want to play for sheer recreation and exercise? What role, if any, do changing times play on the way we define *kalut rosh*, frivolous behavior between a man and wife? What happens in the presence of company, when observing certain *harhakot*, such as not directly passing to another, becomes a source of embarrassment to the couple? More than in many areas, a teacher is required here to explain how to manage this time in a marriage comfortably and properly within the parameters of *halakhah*. Rabbi Shimon Eider's *Halachos of*

*Niddah* is particularly helpful on this topic. He offers many *halakhic* alternatives, and his copious footnotes add further information and nuances to this sensitive area of *halakhah*.

Of course, this two-week time does not need to be merely “managed.” I, along with many other teachers, encourage students to get the most out of this time. It is important to do things together, to talk and to discuss. Sometimes, when a couple abstains from sexual activity, discussions flourish and they do better at developing the companionship aspect of the relationship. On the other hand, it is a mistake not to validate the difficulties that couples often endure during this period. Just knowing that a teacher is sympathetic to one’s emotions is enough to help a young woman who often feels guilty and “less religious” for entertaining negative thoughts about the restrictions during the two weeks she is a *niddah*. Husbands also experience a sense of isolation during this time. Often they feel more comfortable expressing themselves physically rather than verbally and so these two weeks are a particular challenge – the husband feeling he can’t properly express himself, the wife feeling somewhat alone and unloved. Somehow, I find women take the situation more personally thinking that it is their bodies that “caused” this. A simple reminder to a young woman that her husband would have been married to *someone* and that that person also would have become a *niddah*, cuts the tension and can add some much-needed humor. I remind young couples that it is a serious mistake to sit home and brood over their “situation.” If they are feeling depressed, isolated from one another or feeling that they can’t hold out, they should get out of the house, do some physical activity, attend to a chore, visit with friends, play a game.

### SESSION SIX, PART ONE – RABBINIC ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUALITY

In this session we study rabbinic attitudes toward sexuality. We also discuss the specifics of intimacy and the issues that arise during the first night of marriage. Even when I am teaching a group of women, I schedule individual appointments for this session. While the first five sessions are about one and a half hours each, for this session I

set aside at least two hours. In addition to the material that I want to present, I want to make sure that there is enough time for each woman to discuss any personal concerns she might have without feeling rushed.

For the most part, young women are happily anticipating the sexual aspect of their marriages. If this was true in the past, one would expect this to be an even more common sentiment in today's sexually open environment. Nevertheless, I still encounter a measure of inner conflict regarding sexuality, even among modern Orthodox women. The words of a young woman who probably articulated the thoughts of many still ring in my ears: "How could all have this been so forbidden our entire lives and now we are told it is filled with *kedushah*?" Are these words reflective of an individual woman's personal concerns and issues or perhaps of an educational system where teachers have justifiably outlined proscribed physical behavior between men and women but where the same outstanding role-model teachers have not taught about the beauty and the *kedushah* of the physical relationship in the proper setting of marriage? Have young people heard only the frightening "no's" without hearing the beautiful and validating "yes's"?

For this session I find it very valuable, regardless of the textual skills of my student, to read with her in the original Hebrew several paragraphs from the second part of *Igeret Hakodesh* attributed to the *Ramban*. Although I have taught these words hundreds of times, I never fail to be moved as I introduce them to each new student. We read from Rav Elyakim Ellinson's quotation of the *Igeret* in the third volume of his work, *Ha'Isha V'Hamitzvot*:

Let no one think that in proper relations there is anything shameful or ugly.

G-d forbid! (*'halilah mi-zeh'*). For relations are termed 'knowledge' as in 'Elkanah knew Hannah his wife' (1 Samuel, 1: 19) and not without reason. When the seed is drawn forth in holiness and purity it comes from the source of knowledge and understanding which is the brain. Were it not for the sacred dimension of this act it would not have been called 'knowledge.'

*Rambam* was wrong in *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*, when he praised

Aristotle for defining the sense of touch as shameful to us. Heaven forbid! (*'halilah, halilah!'*) The Greek's statement was untrue, containing a veiled trace of unbelief (*'minut'*). Had the Greek *Aher* believed that the world was created as an act of (Divine) will he would not have spoken the way he did.

We, however, who possess the holy Torah, believe that G-d created everything as His wisdom decreed and that nothing He created was shameful or unseemly. If we say intercourse is shameful, then the reproductive organs are shameful too. Yet G-d 'made them and established them' (Devarim 32:6) and He did not create anything with a blemish or short-coming. Otherwise His actions would be less than perfect, whereas the greatest of Prophets (Moses) declared, 'The Rock, His work is perfect' (verse 4).

(Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, English edition., 1998, III.185–187; Hebrew edition, 1990, III.155–156 [translation partially mine]).

As beautiful as these words are in English, the original Hebrew carries with it a unique power. Our *rabbis* wrote these words – in the thirteenth century!! I spend a lot of time elaborating on the word "knowledge," *yedi'ah*, using a definition I learned from Tzipporah Heller ("Our Bodies Our Souls," 2-volume audio cassette, Jerusalem: *Aish Hatorah*, 1988). *Yedi'ah* means understanding the significance of something. Through the act of sexual relations we are meant to come to an appreciation of the full significance of the other. *Yedi'ah* is an intellectual act of intention and not just a physical act of pleasure.

This introduction leads to a discussion of the inherent *kedushah* in sexual relations in marriage. With a brief reminder that marriage itself is called *Kiddushin*, we proceed to explore why it is that we associate relations with *kedushah*. Many years ago I had the privilege of hearing Yirmiyahu Abramov lecture at a conference of the Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals. He had been asked by young yeshivah men how one should go about bringing *kedushah* into this act. At the time, he was concerned that these young men thought that bringing *kedushah* into sexual relations

could be accomplished by thinking about Torah, G-d or some other spiritual matter. Abramov remarked that nothing could be further from the truth. *Kedushah* is achieved by concerning oneself with the physical pleasure of the other person. *Kedushah* is defined by some as the ability to go beyond one's self. Worrying about the other person's physical pleasure is the ultimate act of giving since no one else can provide that pleasure for them. Along the lines of the *Igeret HaKodesh* I remind my students that it is not by accident that the sex organs were designed to bring pleasure to a couple. This is what G-d wants – albeit in the proper *halakhic* setting. *Talmud Bavli* in *Ketubot* 62b weighs the sexual needs of the wife against the financial and spiritual preoccupations of the husband, and attempts to legislate how often men of varying professions need to focus on their wives' fulfillment, her *onah*. "When does the Torah scholar have to fulfill his wife's needs? Rabbi *Yehudah* said that Rabbi *Shmuel* said from one Friday night (*erev Shabbat*) to the next." *Rashi* explains the significance of Friday night: "*She'hu leil ta'anug u'shevifah v'hana'at haguf*," "For it is a night of enjoyment, rest and pleasure for the body." I emphasize to my students that the very point of sexual relations is pleasure. Pleasure we give one another creates the closest bonds, the glue of marriage, *devek*. This seems so obvious. It is not to the young bride. She cannot believe that this is what Judaism actually teaches. How reassuring to be told that what you wanted to hear is just what *Hazal* and our tradition have been saying all along!

Extremely helpful with regard to this topic is the book *Marital Intimacy* by Avraham Peretz Friedman (Jason Aronson: New Jersey, 1996; a new edition has been published by Compass Books). The chapter on "The Mitzvah of *Onah*" is filled with statements from the Talmud and quite a number of lengthy quotes from the *Steipler Gaon*, HaRav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky. Rabbi Friedman's description of the different needs of men and women on page 81 is nothing less than exquisite. It should be required reading for every bride and groom. I actually copy pages 81–85 of this book (and provide them here as an appendix after the footnotes) to give to my students because I believe the ideas presented so sensitively here are crucial to a healthy sexual relationship.

At this point I interject an important *halakhah* from the *Rambam Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah*, 21:12, with a specific point in mind. The *Rambam* articulates several *halakhot*, among them that a man may not have relations with his wife while he is thinking of another woman, that he may not have relations while he is drunk or while the couple is arguing, and that he may not have relations with her against her will while she is frightened of him. If we understand relations as being *yedi'ah*, as mentioned earlier, we realize that one is hardly attaining full appreciation of a spouse if one's mind is on someone else. The same is true if one is in a drunken stupor. Sex which is about overpowering one's partner, such as the case might be in an argument or out of hatred, is contradictory to everything a couple is trying to achieve through sexual relations. The *Rambam's* warning about having relations against the wife's will while she is frightened is nothing less than a description of rape in marriage.

In as sensitive a way as I am able to, I utilize this *Rambam* to discuss violence and other forms of abuse in marriage. I am addressing young women with no experience and no context for sexual behavior. My concern is that they may encounter deviant behavior and think, due to their inexperience, that this is "normal." It is painful for me to raise this issue, but I feel obligated to protect the young women in my care. I try to reassure them that it has been my experience that relationships that have been conducted up until this point with *hesed* and kindness will also be conducted in the same way in the sexual realm. Perhaps a statement such as this will enable them to think through any troubling issues they might be experiencing during their engagement, and that too is part of my trouble-shooting plan. I remind my students that sometimes a friend might call and allude to a problem of abuse. The friend might describe some strange behavior of her husband. The correct response to that hint is to gently guide the friend to get some help and not to reassure her that it's "probably nothing" and won't happen again. I do mean for this advice to apply to friends, but I know that my students know that I am also telling *them* that problems of this sort should never be ignored or swept under the rug.

Finally, we study an excerpt from *Rabad's Ba'alei Hanefesh*.

(This excerpt is also available in Rav Ellinson's work in Hebrew and English [Hebrew, III.162–164; English, III.195–198].) Two points are studied here. First, the *mitzvah* of *onah* is about more than mere sexual gratification; it requires that a husband pay attention to his wife's moods, body language and psychological needs since these are all part of how a woman expresses her complex sexual needs.

*Rabad* also tells us that a man receives reward not only for fulfilling his wife's needs, but even if he engages in sexual relations with his wife to "stifle his longing to sin." *Rabad* continues: "Yet he merits reward for his intention to ward off [a] forbidden union and save himself from sin." I'm quite sure that our blessedly inexperienced young women are not fully aware of the intensity of the male sexual urge. *Rabad* and others who wrote regarding this topic were writing at a time before printing was invented. There were no photographs, magazines, radios and televisions. There was no Internet. Men and women did not work in close proximity as they do today. In short, men were not subjected to the inappropriate sights and sounds of the modern era. What temptations was *Rabad* writing about? And yet the temptations are so great that a man receives reward merely for coming home to his wife. Even some of my intellectually sophisticated students are ignorant of the differences in the way men and women operate in the sexual realm. It is incumbent upon them to be sensitive to their husbands' needs, stresses and tensions in this area just as their husbands must be sensitive to them.

There is a broad spectrum of opinion regarding what is and what is not permitted during sexual relations. The *Rambam Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 21:9,10 seems to contradict himself, citing that just about everything is permitted with one's wife with the exception of *hash-hatat shikhvat zera l'vatalah*, ejaculation outside of regular intercourse, while also listing a host of forbidden behaviors (relations during the day or in the light). I spend considerable time discussing the *Ramban's* (Nachmanides') concept of *Kedoshim ti'hiyu* (*Vayikra* 19:1), the importance of observing the spirit of the law. *Ramban* is famous for his observation that one can be a "naval b'reshut haTorah," despicable even within the parameters of *halakhah*. Regardless of what different *poskim* view as bottom-line *halakhah*



with regard to permissible sexual behavior, we must be mindful of the struggle of *Hazal* in this area. How do we best focus on one another in the midst of physical pleasure that can be overwhelming? How do we hold on to our own noble souls even as we partake in the delights of this world that the Master of the universe intended for us to enjoy? How do we demonstrate respect for the personhood of our spouses even during the most intimate physical acts? This is the balance that *Hazal* were striving for, and that as teachers we must try to transmit.

Part of the challenge here is that the combination of the “forbidden” feeling that attends sexual behavior along with the many *halakhic* rulings and recommendations becomes a minefield strewn with guilt for anyone inclined toward obsessive compulsive behavior. I have received some upsetting phone calls from young women that lead me to believe that there are plenty of young couples who at the moment they should be focusing on one another are worrying about whether or not they are in violation of *halakhah*.

It seriously understates the case to say that we are living in challenging times when it comes to sexuality. Young, modern Orthodox couples are trying very hard to observe *halakhah* meticulously. Yet they are exposed to all kinds of behaviors that make them yearn for what’s out there. On the other hand their only context for sexual behavior is all the forbidden activities they see around them. They are justifiably confused. Striking the right balance is difficult, but despite the sensitive nature of this issue, those of us who are teaching on the front lines must continue to strike that balance in a way that is healthy, respects *halakhah* and yet does not induce guilt.

## **SESSION SIX, PART TWO: WEDDING NIGHT AND THE EARLIEST SEXUAL ENCOUNTERS**

It is of utmost importance to walk a student through as many situations for the wedding night as one can conjure up. Assume no knowledge on her part. I share with my students that although sexual feelings come naturally, sex itself has to be learned. As with all things, some are better at this activity than others, but everyone can learn, and sooner or later everyone does. Through no fault of



their own the marriage may not be fully consummated on the first night. This is normal. Evening weddings end late and the couple may be exhausted from the fasting, the dancing and all the pre-wedding tension. Some *poskim* suggest that a couple may wish not to consummate their marriage the first night because if they do succeed, they will immediately become forbidden to one another. Three hundred and sixty degrees in one night! Observant couples go from not touching to intense sexual behavior and back to not touching at all in a very short period. On the other hand, I warn young women that it may not be possible to follow this well-intended advice because of the level of arousal of their husbands.

I spend a lot of time going through many scenarios, along with advice and several suggestions for making the first night as successful as possible. I recommend that if a young woman is taking medication to prevent the onset of her period, that she stay on it and have available as many pills as necessary so that the couple can continue to try, if they are not successful in consummating the marriage immediately. This takes the pressure off of them and actually makes consummating the marriage early more likely.

It is also important to discuss the issue of *dam betulim* (the bleeding from the ruptured hymen that renders a woman a *niddah*) and at what point a marriage is consummated regardless of whether the woman experienced bleeding. It is not uncommon for teachers to hear from their students during the first week of marriage as they seek *halakhic* guidance on this issue. All the *poskim* I have turned to have been helpful and very sensitive.

Although this is not the correct forum for me to discuss in detail exactly what I teach my students, suffice it say that I try to leave no stone unturned. We look at diagrams of the anatomy carefully and I send them home with printed materials that describe even more explicitly than our discussions what they can expect. I remind my students that regardless of the results of their earliest sexual encounters they should view the experience as the positive and exciting first steps on the way to a profound and fulfilling relationship. It is my goal to provide as much information as possible in order to help ease the way of these young women into this next, all-important phase

of their lives. In materials that I received in May 2001 at a Shalom Task Force conference, Bella Gottesman, who teaches *kallot* in Los Angeles wrote, “*daven* for your *kallah*.” I do.

### CONCLUSION

Over many years as a teacher of *kallot* and as a *rebbetzin* in my community, I have spoken with many young women. Some as yet unmarried women were fearful of what lay ahead, some were suffering the *halakhic* consequences of difficult medical situations, and some were trapped by their own compulsive behavior. In one case a couple did not consummate their marriage for a year. They could not believe this was “allowed” and their *taharat hamishpahah* teachers had only discussed *halakhah* with them and nothing else. Several young women were concerned whether they had made the right choice of a husband. Our role as teachers goes far beyond imparting the laws of *taharat hamishpahah*.

When I was getting married, few of us went for private lessons in *taharat hamishpahah*. We carefully read all the material that was out there. We spoke with our mothers and our sisters. I’m not sure that the women who were teaching thirty years ago had more information than we did, and I remember feeling that those women who were teaching were sorely out of touch with who I was as a young woman. I think that we suffered unnecessarily as a result of the ignorance of our time. My belief was confirmed when I spoke with some *rebbetzins* a generation ahead of me at a recent conference. A young teacher of *kallot* was addressing the group, and the older women were astounded upon hearing information and well-known leniencies that were common knowledge among the younger women in attendance.

I am happy that young women today are receiving a far better Jewish education than I did at their age and I am happy that they are more comfortable calling their teachers and sometimes even their rabbis with a host of *halakhic* questions. I am thrilled that things are changing for the better in this regard, but there is an enormous amount of work yet to be done. Those of us who teach *taharat hamishpahah* take our responsibilities very seriously. We continue

to study and to learn how to do better. We welcome the more sophisticated texts that are being published on this subject, and we look forward to helping young women successfully make their way into marriage in the complicated times we live in.

### NOTES

1. Feldheim Publishers is about to reissue this book. It is currently available at [www.feldheim.com](http://www.feldheim.com).
2. Aryeh Kaplan's *Waters of Eden* (New York: NCSY, 1982) is a beautiful, thought-provoking treatment of the concepts of *tumah* and *taharah*.
3. Even if the stain were to be seen, of course without any *hargashah*, it would create only a rabbinic level concern. After immersion in the *mikvah* the woman is assumed to be *tehorah* and there is no need to check for stains.
4. Cynthia Ozick wrote an essay, "Hannah and Elkanah: Torah as the Matrix for Feminism" (published in *Out of the Garden*, ed. C. Buchmann and C. Spiegel, Columbine, New York: Fawcett, 1994), in which she poignantly describes Elkanah's response to Hannah's distress at not being able to conceive. We understand Elkanah's statement, "Am I not better to you than ten children?" (1 Samuel 1:8), as insensitivity and indeed Elkanah does not seem to fully empathize with his wife's pain. Yet, Ozick posits that in Elkanah's statement we find another emotion. Elkanah was stating, perhaps, that he valued Hannah even if she could not bear him any children. Their marriage had intrinsic value. He hoped that Hannah felt as he did.

Having read Ozick's thoughts years ago, I wonder now if it is by accident that with regard to Elkanah and Hannah the Torah states, "*va'yeidah Elkanah et Hannah ishto*," and Elkanah knew Hannah his wife. This is one of the few places in *Tanakh* where this elevated term for sexual relations is used – perhaps because Elkanah really *knew* the true significance of Hannah as a person.

5. I am very impressed with the Hebrew text *Ish/Isha* by Rabbi Elayshiv Knohl (*Makhon Shiluvim: Ein Tzurim*, 5763) He includes explicit information regarding sexual relations, complete with anatomical diagrams, but he does so with great modesty. The explicit portion of the book is found in a small pamphlet tucked into a pocket in the back cover. This is the appropriate way for these matters to be published.

### APPENDIX

#### ***Marital Intimacy by Avraham Peretz Friedman, Pages 81–85***

The primary enjoyment by a man of intimacy is the activity of physical intimacy and intercourse. The same, perhaps, cannot be said for a woman. While a woman also derives enjoyment from the physical experience, her primary enjoyment is the emotional intimacy she

shares with her husband. Without the emotional component, her physical experience is not optimal. A man does not tend to need the emotional buildup that is the essential feature of foreplay. A woman does. The two processes – emotional and physical – are inextricably bound up for a woman. A husband satisfies his wife's desire initially by focusing on her emotional needs. The physical consummation follows inevitably as a natural corollary. A man can become sexually aroused in an instant and be fully prepared for intercourse without preliminaries or preparation; similarly, when intercourse is complete, a man can just as quickly lose all sexual desire. Not so a woman. A woman, slowly and steadily, "climbs an emotional mountain" before she reaches the summit and fully desires physical consummation of intimacy. So, too, on the "way down," after physical intimacy has ended – the woman must make the slow steady descent back down from the heights of sexual excitement and passion. If intercourse occurs before the wife is ready, then intimacy is, for her, an experience of exploitation and resentment rather than a pleasurable expression of her husband's love. Similarly, if a husband, his needs satisfied, selfishly turns away from his wife, and neglects to escort her gently and lovingly down the emotional mountain, then marital intimacy is, for her, an experience of frustration and rage.

It was taught, R. Meir used to say: Whoever marries his daughter to a boor is as though he bound and laid her before a lion; just as a lion tears [his prey] and devours it and has no shame, so a boor strikes and cohabits and has no shame.

*(Pesachim 49b)*

Tosafot: Rabbenu Tam explained: Just as a lion tears and eats and does not wait for its prey to die, so, too, a boor does not wait until she is appeased.

According to Torah law, it is forbidden to be intimate in such a way that she will not be pleased, and he is obligated

to appease her with closeness, kissing, and hugging until she desires to consummate the intimacy: for otherwise she is like one bound and laid before a lion who tears and devours, as is explained in *Pesachim* and it is a criminal sin to do that which causes anguish to his wife...

(Y.Y. Kanievsky)

When a man grabs and has intercourse immediately without any closeness, after which [his needs satisfied] he separates immediately and distances himself from her – the husband [mistakenly] thinks that, through this practice, he ascends to great spiritual heights. In reality, his desires have in no way been diminished, and his drive is completely appeased with complete satisfaction; but his wife has not received any pleasure at all from this type of behavior – on the contrary, she is hurt and shamed, and she cries in secrecy and her tears do not go unanswered, for the “Gates of Heaven” were never locked.

(Y.Y. Kanievsky)

The Torah wants neither exploitation and resentment nor frustration and rage, so it legislated a formal Torah obligation (the *mitzvah* of *Onah*) on a husband to slowly, gently, and lovingly escort his wife up the mountain, and to continue the act of emotional intimacy long after intercourse is ended until the emotional descent is complete. The halakhic elements of *Onah* are essential in successfully accomplishing both tasks.

R. Chiyya said: What is meant by the scriptural text (Job 35:11) “Who teaches us by the beasts of the earth and makes us wise by the fowls of the heaven”?... This refers to the rooster which first coaxes and then mates. R. Yochanan observed: If the Torah had not been given, we could have learned... proper conduct (“*derech erez*”) from the rooster who first coaxes and then mates.

(*Eruvin* 100b)

It is [a demonstration of] his love for her that he spreads his wings over her, just like a chicken spreads her wings over her chicks.

(Maharal, *Netivot Olam*, vol. 2,  
*Netiv Hatziniyut*, end of ch. 1)

He should draw her heart with seductive, graceful words of love and desire until he binds her thoughts to his and she desires to have intercourse.

(*Menorat HaMaor* 185)

Also *after intercourse* he should continue to chat lightly and lovingly with her in order that she not think that his whole intent in speaking this way earlier was for the sake of his own pleasure. Therefore, to counter this mistaken notion, he should continue to appease her even after intercourse.

(*Damesek Eliezer*)

When he tries to make her happy during intimacy, as well as before and after, there is nothing improper, God forbid; there is only *Mitzvah*...and he is required to do so according to Torah law.

(Y.Y. Kanievsky)

In sum, we presented two reasons to explain why the Torah's *mitzvah* of *Onah* is addressed only to a husband, and with these two reasons we were able to account for many of the halakhic elements of the *Mitzvah*:

1. A husband will, easily and without reservation or hesitation, express his desire for intimacy; a woman, in contrast, who tends to be more reserved and modest, will not. To ensure that a wife's needs will not be forgotten, the Torah legislated a formal obligation on a husband to be alert to any indication from his wife that she desires intimacy and to provide her with that intimacy.

And

2. A husband does not tend to need the same emotional preparation for intimacy that a wife does. The *mitzvah* of *Onah* (through its elements of, for example, loving words, hugging and kissing, and physical closeness) ensures that a husband will create the atmosphere that will satisfy his wife's emotional, as well as her physical, needs.

What should a man do in order to have prosperous children blessed with longevity? He should perform the desires of Heaven and the desires of his wife. ...these are "the desires of his wife": R. Eliezer says: he should seduce her during intimacy... R. Yehudah says: he should gladden her with intimacy...

(Tractate *Kallah*, ch. 1)

