

Introductory Comments for “Tahora”

I’m delighted to be here with you this evening to engage in an important, perhaps historic conversation. One of the shaping constellations of mitzvot in the lives of Orthodox married women are the observances of *taharat hamishpacha* culminating in the mitzvah of *tevila*, immersion in the living waters of the mikvah. Although this constellation of mitzvot has a constant and profound effect on the lives of Orthodox women, it is seldom discussed in a public forum. Our purpose for coming together this evening is to open a respectful, thoughtful, and one might even say sacred conversation about these mitzvot and the roles that they play in the lives of diverse Orthodox women.

Several years ago one of my students conducted a fascinating research study on the experiences of 50 Orthodox women who used the Boston/Brighton mikvah. The women ranged in age from 22 to 60 years old and had been married between 1 _ years to over 40 years. As a group they were highly educated, and most of them worked outside the home at least part-time. All of the women classified themselves as *shomrei mitzvot*, spanning the spectrum of modern Orthodox to Hassidic. All of the women were sending their children to Jewish day schools. This study was facilitated by a wonderful young mikvah lady. After the study was concluded, the

mikvah lady kept a copy of the study at the mikvah, where it was read and commented on by scores of women. I mention this study because the way it was received by the Boston community shows that it is possible, and I think desirable, to enable women to talk about a mitzvah that has so much importance to them.

Tonight we are going to watch together a documentary film called “Tahora,” or “Purity,” which was created in Israel by first-time filmmaker Anat Zuria. This film is, I believe, like the study done by my Brandeis student, a respectful attempt to open up discussion about this very important group of mitzvot and their impact on the lives of Orthodox women. After the film we are going to have a panel discussion with Dr. Amy Fox Griffel, a physician, Katie Green, who directed the film, Dr. Nechama Liss-Levisohn, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, and Devorah Zlochower, a scholar of halakhah at the Drisha Institute in New York. I’ll introduce our panelists more properly after the film. In addition, I’ll chat for a few minutes with Anat Zuria. You also will have an opportunity to direct questions to our panelists. We ask you to please write your questions on index cards after the film is completed and we will be coming up and down the aisles to collect these questions.

Some of you may have been following a fascinating email conversation on the Women's Tefillah Network over the past few weeks. If so, you already know that many Orthodox women are longing to have a conversation about this very important aspect of their lives. And you already know that women's experiences are very diverse, because they are so tied into other aspects of their personalities and their married lives.

As you watch this film, you will see that "Tahora" follows three women grappling with their experiences and their feelings about the laws:

* Natalie is young woman who had a troubled relationship with her not very empathetic and pious young husband. They are in emotional trouble starting with their wedding night, and attitudes about sexuality that sometimes accompany strict observance of *tahrat hamishpacha* play a role in their marriage's decline and dissolution.

* Katie is a very happily married woman who is experiencing unusual cycles of bleeding. With the empathetic support of her husband, who is very much an emotional partner in her life, Katie struggles to make sense of and to maintain her observance.

* Shira is a bride to be, whose mother counsels young brides to be on the beauty and significance of the mikvah. Shira finds it hard to relate to her

mother's enthusiasm for the mikvah. We get to see Shira undergo a kind of psychological journey from girlhood to married womanhood.

The film makes a point of the fact that traditional Judaism's strong emphasis on privacy and modesty, that observance of *taharat hamishpacha* should be *tsanuah*, has led to a kind of silence and darkness surrounding the important mitzvah. That silence and darkness may not be the healthiest thing for the women whose lives are shaped by the mitzvah.

I want to emphasize that Anat Zuria, the filmmaker, is an Orthodox woman with five daughters. All of us connected with the film showing here tonight are deeply committed to *taharat hamishpachah* and mikvah usage. We show this film, and we open up this conversation, with the hope that enabling women to talk about their own religious lives will play a role in making their observances more meaningful on a personal level. I have to say that two of my warmest memories are of my mother taking me to the mikvah before I was married, and of my taking my own daughter to the mikvah before she was married. I also have a warm glow when I think of the night the Boston mikvah lady hid me in a room because my daughter was using the mikvah the same night I was. We believe in mikvah as an important link between women, as well as a cornerstone in Jewish family life.

In this spirit, let us watch the film, and let the conversation begin.