

the practice of *mikveh* was bound up with having children, and now that our family was not to increase, the ritual seemed meaningless.

How do I feel about *mikveh* today? Possibly, there is a twinge of regret for a time of innocence and idealism that evaporated over the years. Did I actually experience a special, private feeling of "renewal" in my marriage each month, or am I exaggerating a rosy picture of "the good old days?" Perhaps those young women who still observe the practice of *mikveh* are preserving an outdated and mystical ritual. But perhaps they still retain a secret quality of fulfillment in their lives...

Integrating mikveh and modernity

Blu Greenberg

Why do I observe *niddah* and go to the *mikveh*? It would be less than honest of me to say anything other than I do so because I am commanded; because it is a *mitzvah de'oraita*. Were I not so commanded by Jewish law, the primary values that guide my life, 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 unilaterally; such observance of *niddah* in a marriage would be reduced to a contest each month without this mutual understanding and acceptance of *halacha*.

But wait! There is a certain sweetness for me derived precisely from that sense of *mitzvah*. As I go about my business at the *mikveh*, I often savor that feeling that I am doing exactly what Jewish women have done for 20 or 30 centuries; not only a matter of keeping the chain going but also one of self-definition: that is how they defined themselves as Jewish women and as part of the community; that is how I define myself. While we really don't know how *karet* (punishment by cutting off the soul from one's people) manifests itself, I often feel my reward for observing certain *mitzvot* is the opposite of *karet*--a merging of my soul with the eternal soul of the Jewish people. However vague my understanding, however feeble my attempts at its articulation, this emotional pay-off for me is very real.

Acceptance of the *mitzvah*, then, is the base; the attendant sensations of 'community', 'Jewish womanhood', and 'chain of tradition' are the embellishments. There is, however, more to it than that. I also feel that *niddah* serves a function in an

interpersonal relationship, in fact, a whole range of functions appropriate to the ebb and flow of life in its many stages of growth.

Role of niddah in adult life-cycle

Some examples: In early marriage, when passion and romance dominate, *niddah* allows and encourages a man and woman to develop other techniques of communication. Not every peak emotion may be expressed through sex; nor can every newly married spat be settled in bed. One also learns quickly that sex cannot be used as a reward or punishment. If sex is being regulated by a force 'out there', it becomes less a matter of one or the other partner controlling or manipulating.

In the second stage--young children, tired mothers, over-extended, upwardly mobile fathers with well documented discrepancies between male and female sex drives--*niddah* is an arbitrarily imposed refresher period. At the very least, it's less of a rejection than the old 'I have a headache' routine. While sex is not, of course, out of favor during these young family years, statistics do show that it is a period of less frequency and less energy. Thus, shrinking the period of availability reduces the likelihood of "You're never in the mood when I am" recriminations.

Moreover, by regulating the off-times it rather directly synchronizes the on-times. While no law can exactly program desire, there is probably a better chance of the meshing of expectations amongst couples who observe *niddah*. I would guess that middle-aged, long married couples who observe *niddah* have more sex than their counterparts who do not observe. All of this ought not be confused with the widespread problem of routinization of sex. Purity-of-the-family marriage manuals notwithstanding, observance of *niddah* constitutes neither a routinization of sex nor a cure for that condition. In fact, although tradition has legislated sex as an obligation on the night of *t'vilah*, approximately two-thirds of the women I interviewed indicated this was not practiced.

In the third stage, as a woman approaches menopause, *niddah* and *mikveh* bring to her a monthly appreciation of her continuing ability to be fertile. I wonder whether a woman who has observed *mikveh* all her life feels a heightened sense of loss at menopause...

Finally, and in all of these stages, *niddah* generates a different sense of self for a woman, a feeling of self autonomy, of being her own person. 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.

These benefits aside, there are a number of things the community can do in the way of education and refinement.

How to reform these mitzvot

1. *Niddah-mikveh* should be re-appropriated in the context of a woman's *mitzvah*. Now that women are calling for greater inclusion in tradition, the first step is to educate them to those *mitzvot* which already do exist. There's nothing wrong with using feminist categories for that task.

2. Clean up some of the negative language, like unclean, and some of the horrendous and primitive threats I've seen, such as children conceived during a *niddah*'s intercourse will be born leprous, armless, blind, etc. That doesn't impress people who prefer to take on new obligations out of love and not terror. Moreover, while much of the contemporary literature does stress the *kedushah* (holiness) of marriage and family purity, the new literature should emphasize the holiness of sex itself.

3. Perhaps some of the contemporary needs of women such as the often neglected monthly breast examination or the annual Pap smear or gynecological check up, can be grafted onto *niddah*, giving it new meaning and more important, saving lives in the process.

4. Many communities, in an effort to stem the tide of rising divorce, are offering Jewish Marriage Encounter and sex therapy programs. *Niddah* as a technique ought to be an integral part of these programs.

5. At certain stages in life, and for certain people, no sex for almost half the month is just too much. Perhaps there ought to be a *halachic* reconsideration of the Biblical time span appropriate to certain biological stages. I think that many more Jewish couples at this time of return to ritual and tradition would seriously consider the observance of *niddah* were it limited to the seven day period prescribed by Biblical law.

Niddah for brides and singles

6. Particularly where brides are concerned, and on the assumption that we still place value on virginity until marriage, the distinction between menstrual blood and blood of the hymen ought to be made. Starting off with eleven days of abstinence is maybe not the best way to engender healthy attitudes about the joys of sex in marriage--and perhaps it is a trial that too many fail.

7. Regarding pre-marital sex: without going into the complex *halachic*, moral, and social issues, at the very least, one must acknowledge that it is not uncommon in these times. Given that fact, unmarried sexual partners observing *niddah* and *mikveh* could learn the

following:

a) There is more to their relationship than sex, and if there isn't, then perhaps their sex is an abuse.

b) Real relationships mean commitment and sacrifice, and immediate gratification is an unrealistic expectation in enduring human relationships--a good preparation for real marriage.

c) *Niddah* would help single men and women to distinguish between promiscuous and authentic sexual relationships. Even logistically, one cannot 'sleep around'--male or female--if the laws of *niddah* are observed.

An intimate mitzvah, a personal choice

8. One of the interesting things that turned up in my research of modern Orthodox women is that very few couples strictly observe the associated laws of *negiah* which forbids all physical contact. Moreover, each couple seemed to have drawn the line differently, with an enormous range, thus revealing a great deal of 'personal packaging' in this very personal *mitzvah*. As one who respects the *mitzvah* and *niddah*, but also as a student of history who understands that after the *churban* the emphasis quite naturally shifted from *tu mat niddah* (separation for reasons of ritual impurity) to *issur niddah* (proscription of sexual relations), I find the tremendous emphasis on *negiah* excessive and onerous and would suggest that the *halacha* reflect more confidence in its faithful; one who observes *niddah* will not jump into bed the moment flesh of a loved one is pressed.

In conclusion, if I may be permitted a theological indiscretion: my acceptance of a scheme of reward and punishment--this world or next--notwithstanding, I simply cannot drum up the feeling that those Jewish couples who fail to observe *niddah* are sinners. What is more, I feel that my life and my marriage would have been blessed even had I not observed these *mitzvot*, for I see many happy marriages without *niddah* and some horrid ones with; I see the blessings of healthy children from non-*halachic* sexual unions and the children of the pious afflicted.

Yet all things considered, the laws of *niddah* have added a dimension to my life with my husband that has made it a bit more complex, a bit richer, a bit more special. And since it's those small margins that make the real difference in life, I consider the effort to have been worthwhile.