

Tehora-discussion

First I want to thank Anat Zuria, for making this film on a very important topic. I want to thank the women in this film for openly and courageously sharing what typically, literally and figuratively stays behind closed doors. The only subject more difficult to talk about than sex is money. Good for JOFA that they don't shy away from tough topics. Maybe the next discussion will be our relationship with our kesef.

In this film we find three women grappling with the laws of Tehora in the context of who they are and their intimate relationships. I will speak from a psychological perspective as to how some of the significant determinants of the way a woman experiences Halachot Nidah in her life are her individual personality, her interpersonal relationship with her spouse and support from her community.

We meet Natalie, the first woman in the film. She is sad, she is angry and she is bitter. One gets the sense that she and her husband both young and immature were not properly prepared for marriage. She describes a marriage that seems not much of a partnership. He doesn't help with their children, she goes alone to speak to the rabbi and she never makes mention in the film of any talks they had together in regard to her feeling overwhelmed and unhappy. Their first night together she describes as tantamount to rape- yet according to Halacha you are not required to consummate a marriage on your wedding night. So a lot went wrong here - A clear lack of communication, poor or no premarital counseling, an insensitive Rabbi, and a woman whose anger and bitterness gets focused on the laws themselves.

Katie and her husband have a totally different kind of marriage. We see love, caring and mutual respect. There is an obvious comfort level and ease between them –in their joking together, in household chores or davening Berchot Hashacar, the morning prayers in the same room. Katie is struggling with difficult and painful decisions around the Halachot in her marriage yet we feel a sense of confidence that this couple will come to terms with it together.

Shira is introduced to us as the young engaged woman getting Pre Mikvah counseling from her mother (who is also the Mikvah lady.) She seems adolescent – responding a bit like a sullen teenager in her relationship with her mother (I was particularly struck by the footage of her swatting away a fly which appeared to parallel how she was responding to the information and advice being given to her.).

There seems to be a clear delineation of roles between her and her fiancé. When asked about how he feels about all this he says “ it's her business” and when we see her folding laundry his contribution is to tell her “don't do a messy job”. He doesn't strike us as much of a communicator (although this is a difficult topic for anyone to discuss on film)

Still I have some concerns about this couple. She goes from a position of a very reluctant consumer of the laws of Nidah to “eize keff” isn't this fun, after two days of marriage. Now I don't know what went on on their wedding night - but that kind of 180-degree turnaround seems defensive or inauthentic or naïve. Will they both continue to feel this way and what will happen to them when they don't? Do they have the resources both personally, between them and literally in the community to

deal with the inevitable trials and tribulations that marriage, children and adherence to Halachot Nidah bring.

What I'm saying is Mikvah and these Halachot are experienced by different women in different ways. Perfunctorily-as one woman put it like dunking a tea bag, or some experience it almost as exciting preparation, like foreplay for a great date with their husband. A patient of mine claims she never feels as sexual as she does without makeup and with wet hair leaving the Mikva.

A friend who for a while lived down the block from a Mikvah described to me seeing husbands waiting for their wives at the corner arms laden with roses. Some women see it as a place to relax away from a hectic household-with many children. Others with panic or anticipatory excitement. - as it is the night where conception is at its most possible.

How a woman experiences Mikvah to a certain extent speaks to where she is psychologically in her marriage, in terms of if she feels in control of her life, her comfort with intimacy, sexual satisfaction and bearing more children. When there are marital difficulties it often plays out in adherence of the laws of Nidah – it becomes a hot bed so to speak for these psychological dynamics to exhibit themselves. Because these Halachot as opposed to say laws of Kashrut or Shabbat is so much about relationships, children, sex.

Let me give you some not uncommon examples. A woman annoyed with her husband can passively aggressively avoid relations with him by not going to Mikvah. No Mikvah-no sex. A more effective way of letting your spouse know you're unhappy than burning the toast. Some women who are frightened of intimacy or are avoiding sexual contact or don't want to conceive more children – find a way to not go to Mikvah. . In the case of not wanting to conceive they use avoidance of Mikvah as a means of contraception rather than talking to a Rabbi for fear of embarrassment or judgment. A psychiatrist/ colleague of mine says he sees this anxiety around Mikvah so frequently he coined a term for it. P.M.P.D. - Pre Mikvah Panic Disorder. These women aren't afraid of Mikvah but of having more children.

Men can abuse these Halachot as well. Under the guise of “Zera Levatala”- a prohibition against wasting seed – some men have been known to refuse their wives kisses and hugs except when having sexual relations. What they are clearly uncomfortable with is intimacy.

There are women who have conflicts in their personal life and in their marriages who end up in Medical and Psychiatric offices with difficulties disguised as problems with Halacha. An obsessive rumination about whether they are bleeding or clean, a request for antidepressants without real symptoms of depression as a way to get a heter to be on contraception. It is not uncommon for OBGYN's to get requests to prescribe delay in child bearing as a medical necessity. In most of these situations the problems are not directly with the Halacha as much as a woman's inability to find her voice, to know how she feels and to feel confident that she will get support from her husband and sensitive rabbis and advisors.

There have been incredible strides in the Medical profession. And medicine is becoming much more involved in the sexual lives of couples. Some see it as a mixed blessing. It has allowed women who were Halachically infertile to regulate their cycles to be able to conceive.

One can be pretty certain of avoiding Chupat Nidah-by hormonal manipulation with pills. In the film Katie suffers from chronic bleeding and is considering a pretty drastic medical procedure as an answer to her struggle to live a more fulfilled marriage and stay within Halacha.

In a recent science section of the NY times we learnt about a new pill where a woman can regulate her own menstrual cycle to limit it to four times a year. Just think of the ramifications of this medical advancement for the sexual intimacy, and child bearing of the couple who adheres to the laws of Nidah.

The significance of this film is that it and evenings like this can be a wake up call for open discussions and channels of communication.

Several rabbis I spoke to say they felt it was intrusive for them to speak with a woman coming to them with requests to delay child bearing about the satisfaction in their marriage. Clearly the problem is more widespread. Rabbinical schools need to strive for better and more open education about the psychological underpinnings of family relationships, intimacy and the psychology of women. Doctors need to be sensitive and knowledgeable of the gravity of the importance of the questions asked of them. We would be well served if there were improved Kallah AND Chatan classes.

The Jewish feminist movement for the past 30 years has enabled Jewish women to empower themselves and support each other on many Halachic concerns.

Here we are in the 21st century and there is a cluster of new challenges on the Halachic horizon. I hope that our exploration this evening will serve as a beginning to reconciling the rich tradition of Taharat Hamishpacha with the values and needs of observant women.