

Et Lirchok

A pamphlet by women, for women

**Designed to provide assistance
in dealing with the emotional aspects
of keeping Taharat Hamishpachah**

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Introduction

Taharat Hamishpachah is a *mitzvah* that encompasses a very private, intimate, and emotional aspect of our lives. As such, it can be uniquely rewarding – but also uniquely challenging.

In addition to imbuing every aspect of our lives with *kedusha* and *avodat Hashem*, keeping *taharat hamishpachah* is reported by many to bring concrete benefits as well. Many women find it overall to be beneficial. However, some women find aspects of *taharat hamishpachah* to be extremely challenging, sometimes almost unbearably so. Because women do not start keeping *taharat hamishpachah* until they are married, and because it is seen as a private *mitzvah*, there is currently a lack of available resources to help women deal successfully with these challenges.

In this pamphlet, we have tried to select those aspects of the *mitzvah* that seem to be difficult for a large number of women and to suggest possible solutions or methods of alleviating the problems. It is our hope that for women who do suffer from these difficulties, the practical advice we can offer, in addition to the knowledge that they are not alone, will greatly minimize the pain that they experience.

Many women find that none of these issues bother them, and very few will find all of them problematic. However, if you do find yourself struggling with any of them, this pamphlet may help you. It is a collection of various techniques that a number of women have found helpful in making this *mitzvah* easier and/or more meaningful for them. This pamphlet obviously doesn't exhaust the possible solutions, and each individual woman will have to tailor the solutions, and possibly discover new ones, to fit her unique personality and situation.

In addition to reading this pamphlet, it is often helpful to talk individually to a *rav* or *yoetzet* who may be able to help you. Your local *rav*, or a *yoetzet halacha* (a woman trained and certified to answer *niddah* questions under rabbinical supervision; see www.yoatzot.com), may be able to provide you with halachic as well as emotional support. Another useful resource for emotional support and practical suggestions is www.mayimrabin.com, an online community on which women can anonymously discuss their experiences with *taharat hamishpachah* as well as with other aspects of being a Jewish woman.

We are always interested in updating the *Et Lirchok* pamphlet with further advice and suggestions. If you have found that there are ideas that work for you, but that are not included in the pamphlet, please email them to EtLirchok@gmail.com. All contributions will be inserted anonymously, and the identities of all contributors will be considered confidential.

As in many areas of halacha, there are differences in halachic opinions and local customs. The material in this pamphlet has been reviewed for halachic accuracy by Dr. Deena Zimmerman, a *yoetzet halacha* and director of Nishmat's women's health and

halacha website (www.yoatzot.org). However, in cases of doubt, please consult your own posek.

Tizki LiMitzvot!

I. EMOTIONAL DISTANCE DURING NIDDAH

THE PROBLEM:

The *yimei tumah* are a difficult time emotionally for many women, who find that keeping the rules of *niddah* can cause them to feel lonely and emotionally distant from their husbands. There is evidence to suggest that many women find being *niddah* a painful experience that can negatively impact their emotional well-being, their relationships with their husbands, and their ability to find meaning in the *mitzvah*.

Addressing this problem can take a lot of work and commitment from both husband *and* wife, but it can be done. Below are general types of solutions, including some specific examples, that women say have worked for them.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

I. Work On Other Methods of Fostering Closeness

This is the most obvious solution, but it can be easier said than done!

One important approach is to work on having more verbal communication. This doesn't just mean making sure you don't talk less than you do when you're *tehorah*, but making sure you talk *more*. Explain to your husband that he needs to treat you with *extra* warmth and attention during *niddah*, not just to not treat you aloofly. You need more verbal expressions of warmth during this time, to make up for the lack of physical expression. Your husband might feel (correctly) that he is treating you exactly the same, and showing as much love and affection, except for not touching – but since you experience lack of touching as a lack of affection, it is important to try to compensate with even more non-physical expressions of affection.

Remember, no couple is “on” in terms of affection all the time; there will be times when you feel more neutral to each other, when each of you is focusing on his/her own concerns and not really paying attention to the other. This is normal and healthy, and probably won't bother you at all when you're *tehorah*, but it may feel like “distance” when you're *niddah*. So this is a time when it's important to act with warmth even if you're not feeling it at that precise moment.

One aspect of this that some women find helpful is what one woman termed “the roommate schmooze.” Going to sleep alone can be a very painful part of *niddah*. A good way to foster emotional closeness is to lie awake and talk for a while before falling asleep. As one woman put it: “Lying in our separate beds talking in the dark late at night is very emotionally satisfying (for me). There is still a very strong level of intimacy there. Using a physical method of comfort is 'easier' than verbal/emotional methods. It's more of

a challenge to elicit a 'verbal' hug or kiss. But it is possible. And can even be more satisfying.”

Another idea, if you find it hard to be in the same room and not touch, is: if you have a cell phone with free nights and weekends – use it! Go into a different room, call each other, and talk for hours, just as you may have done while dating.

Some couples find it helpful to develop little hand signals or gestures that mean “mental hug” or “I would hug you if I could.” Find out what kind of gesture will work for you. One woman said: “I realized that part of what I needed were the loving words that usually accompany a hug from [my husband]. So, I asked him to pretend he was hugging me, and say what he would say during that embrace - while I hugged my new son's biggest stuffed animal. And it worked. I still miss the hug, and it's frustrating that we have to concoct such elaborate scenes, but I feel very committed to Taharas Hamishpacha.”

If such gestures feel too artificial to you, or if you don't feel up to the effort of coming up with them while you are *niddah*, it may be helpful to start implementing them while you are *tehorah* so that they will become a more natural part of your interaction. For example, when you need comfort while *tehorah*, you might want to ask your husband to “verbally” hug you before or after a physical hug, or you may want to get into the practice of occasionally comforting each other by talking while sitting next to each other but not touching. This may make such gestures easier and more effective during the time when you are *niddah*.

Also, remember that your husband is not a mind-reader; it may take both of you time to figure out how to do this, and what kinds of things he can say to make you feel loved. Keep in mind that he is putting a lot of effort into this too, and don't assume that because he hasn't figured out yet how to comfort you, he doesn't care.

There are also non-verbal ways to make yourselves feel closer to each other. While there are certain boundaries you shouldn't cross while *niddah*, there is nothing wrong – and everything right – with doing small things for each other to show you still care. And this goes both ways; by doing things for your husband, you will foster a feeling of closeness to him, just as when he does things for you. Defer to each other's tastes in music, prepare the other's favorite food for dinner, etc. Buying flowers for Shabbat is permitted, and you can discuss with your *posek* what other gifts he feels would be appropriate.

This is also a good time to engage in projects you can do together that do not require physical contact. One example, suggested by a yoetzet, is to “[s]ave the house painting for the first two weeks of marriage - it is a fun project to do together and does not require physical contact. Engage yourselves in joint activity which is not romantic. This way you can enjoy each other's company and get work done as well!” House painting is just one example, but you can probably think of numerous others.

Another helpful technique is to spend time together in public rather than in private. Take a walk in a public place, go out to dinner, invite people over for *Shabbat* meals. Go on “dates” to a museum or park. Because most couples don’t touch each other as often (or at all) in public, this will enable you to talk without feeling conscious of the need to refrain from touching.

There are other things you can do even without your husband’s participation to feel closer to him. One technique that might help is to write down a list of things or events that made you feel especially connected to your husband during the *yimei tehorah* (things he said or did, things you did together, etc.) and read them over whenever you’re feeling lonely.

Hopefully, these efforts will help to bring you closer together. *Taharat hamishpachah* can strengthen a marriage, but it is not necessarily a “given”; it takes work to make it happen.

II. Distract Yourself

Another method that many women find helps them get through *niddah* is simply to distract themselves with other activities until it is over. Keeping busy during this time is a good way to lessen the loneliness you may feel. When you have a school or work related project, for example, take advantage of the time you are in *niddah* for late nights and busy hours. Get together with your friends. This is also a good time to pamper yourself: Take a bath, listen to music, etc. Save books that you’ve been looking forward to for *niddah*; engrossing books are especially good to read before falling asleep, if you find going to sleep alone painful. If you read until you’re exhausted, you may find nighntimes much easier. According to one woman, this is especially useful after the “roommate schmooze” mentioned above, if your husband falls asleep before you do. Other women may find it easier to just go to sleep early on those nights – when possible, even before their husband come home. Obviously, your own preferences and your own schedules will determine what works for you.

This is a great time to spend with other people, especially on *Shabbat*. Invite friends over for meals, or go elsewhere for meals. For women who find it comforting to be with their families, it can be especially helpful to arrange to spend these *Shabbats* (especially the first *Shabbat* of *niddah*) with the woman’s family, since in addition to being distracted she will feel supported and comforted. Women who are on hormonal birth control can even, if they find this very helpful, specifically arrange it so that they become *niddah* while they are with their family. That way the first brunt of sudden “aloneness” can be blunted.

Another thing to do is to go out and have a good time with your husband. As mentioned above, spending time together during *niddah* can feel more natural in public than in private. Dinners at restaurants, fun activities, etc. can be ways in which you can distract yourself while simultaneously spending time with your husband.

III. Understand the Problem and Learn to Think About It Differently

(1) It's Not You, It's the Situation

When a woman in *niddah* feels lonely and unloved, it is easy for her to think that this is her husband's fault – that because the sexual aspect of their relationship is off limits, he is not paying as much attention to her, or even does not love her as much. This is usually not the case. Understand that because touching is part of the daily interaction of a couple, it sends spontaneous and frequent signs of affection and love, which is very reassuring especially for people in the earlier stages of marriage. Your husband cannot send you those signs during this time, but that doesn't mean his feelings have changed. He just can't express them in the way that you are both used to; and no matter how much verbal communication you manage to foster, it may be impossible for him to send those messages as frequently as he can when the two of you can touch. Understanding that the cause of your feelings is lack of touch, rather than lack of affection, can in itself help alleviate your loneliness. Try to remind yourself of this frequently.

In addition, keeping the rules against touching and the *harchakot* can be a constant strain on anyone, men included. Many men suffer from sexual frustration during the *niddah* period, and may feel the need to create some additional distance to keep from getting aroused. It can be a struggle – and may take some time – for your husband to find a way to be on his guard to keep all the *harchakot* during *niddah* while simultaneously expressing warmth and closeness to you. The fact that it is taking him a while to figure it out is not a sign that he is not trying. And of course, if you don't explain to him how you feel, he won't even know to try. Try not to accuse him of treating you differently; instead, explain that during *niddah* you need him to make extra efforts to compensate for the lack of touch.

Another factor to keep in mind is that you are probably somewhat oversensitive to suggestions of aloofness while you are in *niddah*. Try to keep this in mind before getting angry or hurt over how you feel your husband is treating you. Think to yourself: If I weren't in *niddah* – if this happened last week/two weeks ago – would I read so much into it, or would I not think about it twice? Am I blowing this out of proportion?

(2) The Reason for This Is Not to Make You Miserable!

Some women, even those who have not had much difficulty in following *halachah* before marriage, find themselves growing resentful of the laws they are required to keep while they are *niddah*. As one woman put it, "These are called *harchakot* for a reason. I found myself thinking – these are evil laws designed to make couples feel distant from each other."

It is important to understand that the reason for the *harchakot* and prohibitions against touching are not to make your married life difficult. It is to place barriers and reminders around the central prohibition, that of having marital relations during *niddah* – an extremely serious prohibition that carries with it an *issur* of *karet*. If you analogize to

other areas of *halachah* that are punishable by *karet*, i.e. eating *chametz* on *Pesach*, and think of how many barriers and restrictions we place around those *issurim*, you will see that *niddah* is not all that unusual in that respect. It is harder, of course, since it touches on a very intimate part of your life. But it is not aimed at you or at your marriage; it is aimed at preventing you and your husband from violating the *issur*. And, as many couples who have “slipped up” on *niddah* can attest, the laws are not all that unreasonable: you will not know how easily you can slip up, or how strong you are, until you’ve reached that point (which hopefully you never will). These rules are in place to make it easier to avoid the actual sin, not to make you miserable.

You should also keep in mind that the rules may be more helpful to your husband than to you – not just in terms of keeping from having relations, but in terms of surviving the long period of abstinence. One woman who was not fully religious but decided with her husband to keep the core “no marital relations” practice of *niddah*, reports that after a year her husband requested that they also adhere to not touching, because it made it much easier for him to get through the days until she was *tehorah* again.

Of course, at base we keep the *harchakot* because they are *halachah*; however, understanding the reasons for them may help your resent them less. And while it is important to keep all the *harchakot*, you should also make sure that you are not being unnecessarily stringent with regard to what you are keeping. Those *chumrot* that you nonchalantly decided to take on before you were married, when you didn’t know how keeping *niddah* would affect you emotionally, may not be such a good idea while you are trying to work through this. Even if you think you are keeping only the baseline *halachah*, you may not be. It may be a good idea to talk to a rav or yoetzet, explain your feeling, and have them help give you clarity about what is a *chumra* and what is required. If you find that something you are keeping is a *chumra* or a custom, you can consult with a rav about the possibility of changing your practice. This can sometimes be done simply by deciding to change, and may sometimes require *hatarat nedarim* (a formal release of vows).

Keep in mind that there are two great areas of danger surrounding *niddah*. The first is that you will come to violate *halachah* during *niddah*. The second is that this period can become a wedge driving you and your husband apart. Your choices about which *chumrot* to keep, and how to decide within *halachic* gray areas, should depend on which of those dangers is more imminent for you. This will be different for different people, and may even be different for you at different stages in your married life.

Another thing to remember is that, as one kallah teacher put it, “Maybe it’s okay for a mitzvah to be hard.” Many (though certainly not all!) of the *mitzvot* we keep today are relatively easy for us, given the society in which we live; and while there is no reason to deliberately make things difficult for ourselves, she suggested that perhaps it is okay to have a *mitzvah* that actually tests your spirit and resolve. It may help you to consider *niddah* as a challenge in *Avodat Hashem*, and as a way to build up your own inner strength. Consider it part of learning to trust cycles in life, to deal with anxiety and pain in general, and even the painful parts of it may be somewhat beneficial to you.

(3) There's Hope on the Horizon

If you are newly married, you should be aware that for many people (though not all), keeping *taharat hamishpachah* gets easier with time. Especially if you are at the beginning of your marriage, you will likely become more emotionally confident and secure in your relationship as time goes on, which will make it easier not to feel emotionally distant.

So if your first few *niddah* cycles were marked by tears and misery, do not think you are doomed to go through periods of suffering for the rest of your life. Hopefully, the ideas and suggestions in this pamphlet will help you work on the problem to make it better; in addition, the mere passage of time, as you grow into your marriage, may help alleviate the problem.

For many couples, having children is a great turning point in their ability to withstand *niddah*, both because of the near-constant distraction and because of the close relationships they have with their children. In the words of one woman, “[G]enerally I have found being *niddah* after birth is much easier than before as you have another person in your life to love.” In addition, when parents share in caring for and loving them, children themselves can foster emotional closeness. As one woman put it, “When my husband comes home and kisses and hugs our baby, I feel like he is hugging me too. It’s weird but true.” Many women, ironically, find the approximately two-month *niddah* period after childbirth to be their easiest *niddah* period to date. (Of course, some women find the post-partum period to be especially difficult in many ways, including *niddah*; there is nothing wrong with you if you are one of them.)

(For other couples, however, the challenges are greater at a later stage of life. Juggling a growing family and busy schedules, together with the not uncommon menstrual changes that accompany growing older, may limit the time that a couple is physically available to each other. At this stage as well, working on possible solutions can make dealing with the situation easier. Even if years have gone by since you have spoken to your kallah teacher, consider calling her or another woman with whom you feel comfortable discussing these issues.)

Even within a *niddah* cycle, many women find that certain time periods are more difficult for them than others. For example, some women find that the first two or three days are the most difficult for them, and that it gradually gets easier over the course of the weeks. If this is the case for you, and if you find that nothing helps during the first few days, it may be that attempting to implement solutions during those days will only make you feel worse. If that is the case, it may be better to push off such attempts until those first few days have passed – at least the first time you try them. Once you have incorporated some suggestions into your lifestyle for one cycle, they may help you during even the hardest days of the next cycle as well.

Other women find that the end of the *niddah* period is more difficult for them, in which case it may help to focus on actively implementing solutions during the first few days, so that they will be in place by the time things become more difficult.

IV. Other Solutions

(1) Don't Prolong the *Niddah* Period

Make sure you are not unnecessarily prolonging the time that you spend in *niddah*. Unless it is point-blank red, never assume that a *hefsek*, *moch*, or *bedikah* is *tamei* on your own – always show it to a rav or yoetzet. And try to find a rav who is an expert in dealing with these questions; in general, the more knowledgeable a rav is, the less likely it is that he will be unnecessarily *machmir*. Also make sure to mention any extenuating circumstances when you show the cloth – i.e. if you have been in *niddah* for a very long time, if you are trying to conceive, etc.

It is also important to know that not all stains make a woman *niddah*. If you discover a stain at an unexpected time, you should consult with a rav or yoetzet prior to assuming you are *niddah*; and while you should act like you are *niddah* until you get an answer, you should not consider yourself *niddah* until you know for sure.

If you are taking hormonal birth control, considering asking your doctor if it safe for you to skip one week of placebo pills and take six straight weeks of active pills. Many women can do this safely and effectively, resulting in much longer cycles and relatively less time spent in *niddah*. (It may help to build up gradually, by adding an extra week of active pills at a time over the course of several months.) The cycles, being less frequent, will have less of a cumulative emotional toll on you. In addition, this will enable you to go into each *niddah* cycle in a state of full emotional strength, rather than still partly recovering from the last time. (However, the chances of breakthrough bleeding do increase at the beginning of extended use, so make sure you understand what types of stains will make you a *niddah* before you begin.)

Under extenuating circumstances, a couple that has fulfilled the mitzvah of *peru u'revu* may get a *heter* to use hormonal birth control specifically to extend the woman's cycle. In all such cases, a rav should be consulted.

In addition, even if you are not on hormonal birth control, other medications can be used to extend the cycle somewhat. This should be discussed with your physician.

(2) Make Going into *Niddah* as Stress-free as Possible

When you find that you have gotten your period and you know you are going into a difficult two weeks, that is not the time that you want to have to change all your linen. (If you are from a community that keeps to the tradition of using white linen during *niddah*, this may be unavoidable.) For example: if you have two twins that you cover with a king-size sheet, you may want to make the twin beds first and then cover them

with the king-size sheet – so that when you become niddah, all you have to do is pull off the king rather than make up the twins.

Another thing that some women find helpful is to sleep with their husbands in “her” bed for the week before *niddah*, so that she will not feel like she is being “banished” from “their” bed. If you have one large bed and one small one, and switch off when you are in *niddah*, it may help you to always sleep in the big bed the first few nights. Bed arrangements should be checked with a rav (some will allow “switching” beds each *niddah* period, for example, while others will not).

(3) Share Your Feelings

While *taharat hamishpachah* is by its nature a private mitzvah, there are ways to talk to other women who are going through similar things and can empathize with you. One great place for this is www.mayimrabim.com, an online community where women can anonymously discuss their experiences with *taharat hamishpachah* as well as with other aspects of being a Jewish woman. (Much of the current discussion takes place on Mayim Rabim’s message boards.)

II. CONFLICT DURING *NIDDAH*

THE PROBLEM:

Many couples find themselves fighting frequently during the *yimei tumah*. As stated on the Yoatzot website: “Stress between a couple while the wife is *niddah* is not unusual. While in theory it should be a time when the couple can concentrate on the non-physical side of their marriage, in reality the lack of physical contact can be hard. This is especially true for newlyweds.”

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

There are many reasons why a couple might fight when the wife is in *niddah*. Often it is due to a feeling of emotional distance, discussed in the previous section – if that is the case, the suggestions there may help.

At other times, the tension is caused by the stress of keeping the *harchakot* and the need to be constantly aware of one’s actions, which spills over into everyday actions. The stress of pulling back physically may also play a role. For some, the fights may be a subconscious way of making it easier to not touch during *niddah*. And for a number of women, the regular hormonal factors of their monthly cycle may be a contributing factor. Figuring out the underlying reasons you fight so often during *niddah*, and addressing those, are often the key to reducing fights. Simple awareness can help.

In addition, more general techniques to avoid fighting should be focused on at this time. “Count to ten,” cliché though it is, can work well in many situations. Force yourself to consider rationally whatever it is that is getting you upset. If it is not an immediate issue, try to push off the discussion of what is bothering you until you are *tehorah*.

You can also try to prevent the tension by sitting down together while you are *tehorah*, at a time when both you and your husband are feeling rested and calm, to discuss what seems to be leading you to fights while you are *niddah*. If you are unable to work through it on your own, it may be a good idea to include a rav, kallah teacher, or marital therapist in the discussion.

III. MIKVAH PREPARATION ANXIETY

THE PROBLEM:

We all know and are taught how important it is to be careful about removing all *chatzitzot* and noticing possible questions when preparing for the *mikvah*. However, in some cases the anxiety associated with this process can spiral out of control. The idea that a mistake could lead to an *issur karet* can, for some women, lead to an almost obsessive fear of missing something. This fear, if extreme, can turn preparation for *mikvah* into a monthly rite of extreme tension.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

One of the most important things you can do, if you have this problem, is to talk to a rav or yoetzet about it. A rav or yoetzet may also be able to reduce your anxiety by explaining which aspects of your preparation are truly required and which are *chumrot*. Many books on *Taharat Hamishpachah*, and many *kallah* classes, differ in their discussions of requirements for *mikvah* preparation; obtaining a clear understanding of the baseline requirements vs. extra stringencies will enable you to worry less about those aspects of your preparation that are not *halachically* required.

In addition, many rabbanim, once they understand the extent of the problem and the character of the woman involved, will give “*psak*” based on the chance that something is really wrong vs. the chance that the woman is worrying about something insubstantial. They may also suggest that a woman take certain actions post-mikvah that will provide halachic help in giving such *psak*.

Another thing that will help is, when possible, to give yourself plenty of time to prepare – twice as much time as you think it should really take. Rushing, in addition to being tension-inducing, will make you physically feel like you’re nervous even if you’re not. It may also help to put on soothing music while you prepare. Also, getting to the *mikvah* as early as is reasonably possible will result in less of a stressful wait (and sometimes none) if you’re one of the first ones there.

It may also help you to start preparing as early as that morning, by making sure you have fewer *chatzitzot* to remove. If you are comfortable doing so, consider not wearing any makeup that day so you won’t have to worry about getting it off. It is also a good idea to cut your nails and to shave (if you generally remove your leg hairs) a day or two in advance, so that by the time you are preparing for *mikvah* you won’t have to worry about stray hairs and rough edges.

You can also make arrangements in advance to make the logistics of the day easier – hiring a babysitter, having you or your husband (or both) leave work early, even making sure to get a good night’s sleep the night before. It may help to put together a

little “kit” with all the items you use at the *mikvah* (including money), so that you do not have to pack anew each month. It might make you feel more positive to splurge on the “*mikvah* kit” – have it in a nice bag, with spa-quality materials inside.

Focus on the process, not the results. Prepare a list of things to check (this will often have been provided to you by your kallah teacher; if not, most *mikvaot* have a list you can copy) and pay careful attention to each item *once* before moving on. Do not check and recheck – you are not *halachically* required to. It may help you to develop a routine, so that you do things in the exact same order every time and focus on only one thing at a time.

Also, if your *mikvah* attendant is willing, and you are comfortable with it, it is a good idea to ask her to check you carefully. Remember, she has more experience than you do. If she checked your nails, for example, then even if on your way home you start worrying that they’re too rough, you can just remind yourself that the *mikvah* attendant checked them and thought they were okay. You can rely on her opinion.

(On the other hand, some (fortunately not many) *mikvah* attendants are somewhat obsessive themselves, and if they spend 15 minutes filing your already-filed nails, will only make you feel even more anxious. In this case, it is important to get a second opinion. Perhaps you can attend another *mikvah* (if one is available), or try to get a different attendant. If not, you can ask her to just check your back for hairs and rely on yourself for the rest of the exam.)

If you find the problem to be ongoing and severe, you may want to consider discussing it with a physician. There is a condition known as obsessive compulsive disorder that affects approximately 2% of the population and that can often come out in the area of *mikvah* preparation. If it is diagnosed, there many avenues that can help treat it, including behavioral therapy and/or medications.

Remember, going to the *mikvah* is not supposed to cause stress and anxiety. While *mikvah* preparations should be approached as a serious *mitzvah*, they should not be associated with fear and tension. You are not being “less *frum*” if you reduce your anxiety. *Halachah* specifies that we take a certain level of care, and you are required to take that level of care only. You want to be meticulous, but not to drive yourself crazy. With time, and with the help of these suggestions, we hope that you work out a balance you can feel comfortable with.

IV. MIKVAH NIGHT ISSUES

THE PROBLEM:

Mikvah night is the long-anticipated end of niddah, and a night that many women look forward to with excitement and anticipation. However, some women have difficulty with the sudden “switch” from niddah status to tehorah status, and find that – even if they otherwise have a good physical relationship with their husband – they do not look forward to mikvah night. Some women dread that first touch or kiss, or feel unduly pressured to have relations on that night. Others, even though they have been anticipating the night eagerly, find themselves becoming irritable and tense, and often spend the night picking fights with their husbands rather than reconnecting with them.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

I. Take It Slow

If your relationship with your husband is good, and you normally enjoy the physical aspect of it, it is likely that you are having trouble with the abrupt switchover from a non-physical relationship to a full-fledged physical relationship. As one woman put it, “A relationship that does not have even minor physical contact is suddenly transformed into a sexual one, and I don't think I handle the transition well.”

If this is the cause of the problem, then the obvious answer is to take it slow. Don't start off the night with immediate physical affection. If necessary, you can even put things off until the next night (there is no halachic obligation to have relations on mikvah night, although most people will want to). Perhaps have a “date” – watch a movie, go for a walk, have a nice dinner with wine. Wait until things feel natural, rather than “jumping into bed” as soon as you get home. And when things do get started, you may need more foreplay than usual to help you get back into things.

One yoetzet comments that, “It is not uncommon for a woman to not be in the mood for intercourse on mikveh night, as a two week period of separation requires a certain readjustment to the physical relationship. I suggest you try to explain how you feel to your husband, and see if you could come to a mutual agreement that on mikveh night you will enjoy an intimate evening together without intercourse, allowing you to ease your way comfortably back into things.”

If this is necessary for you, it is important to be sensitive in explaining it to your husband. Many men will, for obvious reasons, feel rejected if their wives don't want their touch, especially on *mikvah* night when men too feel an obligation to be “on.” Make sure to explain this in advance, including the reasons and the fact that you are not the only woman to feel this way. (It's probably a good idea to explain this while you are *tehorah*, and not wait until you are in *niddah*.) Keep in mind also that, at the end of a

niddah period, your husband may be feeling more sexual frustration than you are, and that the difficulties he is undergoing should form a part of your mutual decision about whether to delay relations. While you should never have relations in circumstances where you don't want to, it may be necessary to work out some sort of compromise so that you can both enjoy the night.

Some women find that it helps to have their husbands drive them to the *mikvah* and wait nearby. That way the evening automatically starts out slow, without the awkwardness of the woman walking into the home and everything being permitted. If this is not practical, you may want to call your husband five minutes before you're finished, so that you can meet somewhere neutral (not your home) and spend some time together before going home.

(Many *mikvaot* will not allow husbands to wait in the mikvah parking lot, out of consideration for the privacy of other women using the *mikvah*; for the same reason, it is best if your husband doesn't park down the block where he may see other women walking home. The best solution is for him to wait around the corner, and have you call him when you're done so he can come pick you up.)

II. Prepare the Atmosphere

One thing that can help drastically is the atmosphere of the house when you arrive home. If your husband cleans the house, sets up candles and wine, etc., this can make you feel more comfortable from the moment you walk through the door.

For some women, it helps to feel that their husbands are participating in the *mitzvah* with them, rather than feeling like they are the only ones bearing any responsibility. Having your husband set up the house to prepare for your arrival will also accomplish this goal. So can your husband buying you flowers or preparing dinner that night. Having him pick you up from the *mikvah*, if practical, might also help make you feel that he is putting effort into the night.

You may find that it bothers you to walk in and find your husband busy with something else; in that case, it is a good idea to call him before you leave so he can be prepared to greet you.

Also, keep in mind that your husband may not have the same anxiety about *mikvah* night that you do, and thus it may not occur to him on his own that he should be making special efforts to prepare for it. If you feel that his efforts will help you, you should not hesitate to ask him directly to do specific things that will make you more comfortable, and you should not feel that he is somehow lacking in not thinking of them on his own. His efforts won't count any less because the request came from you!

III. Avoid Unrealistic Expectations

After two weeks of looking forward to *mikvah* night, you may have built up an expectation that it be perfect: that your husband read your mind to know exactly what you want, that the physical aspect be incredible from the first second, that your husband be completely in sync with you. This can set you up for disappointment if things don't work out that way, which they often will not.

As one woman put it: “[H]igh expectations are the death of any special moment... I have also learned from being married for a few years now that the most special moments are not the ones that are planned or include grand gestures, but are the ones that emerge organically from the moment.”

If this is an issue for you, you may have to work on developing a more low-key and realistic attitude in terms of your expectations for *mikvah* night. If you find this difficult, it may help to switch your expectations to some other night – i.e. arrange to have the big romantic dinner or special event a few nights *after mikvah* night, when the tension of transitioning from *niddah* to *tehorah* is behind you.

V. PRESSURE WHILE *TEHORAH*

THE PROBLEM:

A large number of religious women feel, at one time or another, pressure to have relations during the time that they are *tehorah*. The pressure does not necessarily come directly from their husbands; rather, it is due to the knowledge – on both their parts – that the time during which they can be together is limited. This pressure can be more intense toward the end of a *tehorah* period, when many couples have a sense that time is running out.

Sometimes, the problem can be intermittent and caused by specific circumstances – i.e. a woman is not feeling well or is under a lot of stress, and is not in the mood for relations, but on the other hand she knows she’s going to get her period soon. For other women, the problem can be more consistent and serious.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

Like most other things in marriage, sexual relations tend to be a matter of compromise. While the sexual union between husband and wife should most often be a matter of their coming together in mutual desire, in most marriages there will be times when one partner is interested and the other is not. And, in most marriages, there will be a series of compromises where one partner goes without despite strong desire or one partner agrees to have relations even though he or she is not particularly in the mood. It is important to realize that this is normal and healthy and not necessarily a sign of a problem in marriage.

The issue should be discussed with your husband in a sensitive way, remembering that many men are particularly sensitive about apparent rejection by their wives in this area. Good communication is crucial to make sure your husband does not feel that you are never interested in him physically, or that he should be uncomfortable approaching you sexually. Rather, he should be made to understand that the pressure you feel during the *tehorah* period is having a negative effect on your response, and that it is important to relieve or eliminate this pressure.

If the problem is especially acute, and/or if you are already on hormonal birth control, lengthening your cycle by taking six straight weeks of active pills can be helpful. (You should consult with your physician before you do this.) As for expending sexual energy when one partner is not interested – one age-old solution is: exercise!

Another important thing to realize is that, although much of this pamphlet has focused on ways in which women find niddah difficult – there are many women who like *niddah*, and that’s perfectly okay! It doesn’t mean that you don’t love your husband or enjoy your physical relationship; many women enjoy having the space to themselves and

the “time off” from any even implied pressure to have relations. However, there is a difference between liking *niddah* and *disliking* being *tehorah*. If a woman is constantly made to have relations when she does not want to, or finds that the pressure of the *tehorah* time consistently decreases her desire to have relations in the first place, the problem should be addressed.

NOTE: PAIN DURING INTERCOURSE

The pressure discussed in this section can be a problem for women who are experiencing normal, enjoyable sexual experiences with their husbands, and is certainly not a sign of sexual dysfunction. However, if you are not enjoying sexual relations, or if you are still finding them uncomfortable or painful after the first month or so of marriage, you should be aware that pain during intercourse is experienced by an estimated 15-20% of women, and that in most cases it is treatable. Your gynecologist may be able to recommend a specialist or treatment; however, not all gynecologists are trained in, or even aware of, treatments for painful intercourse. If your gynecologist can't help, it is best to find a doctor who specializes in vulvar-vaginal conditions and/or an endometriosis specialist. Listed below are a few resources that may help you get started:

Resources for finding a specialist:

- Yoatzot have contacts with many professionals who specialize in sexual issues, including sex therapists and doctors. They can be contacted at www.yoatzot.com or via Nishmat's Women's Halachic Hotline at 1-877-YOETZET.
- The American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors & Therapists has an online directory at <http://www.aasect.org/directory.asp>.
- There is a healthcare provider directory at <http://www.vulvarhealth.org/directory.html>.

Resources for finding more information:

- Talli Rosenbaum, an Orthodox physical therapist with offices in Tel Aviv and Bet Shemesh, has a website (<http://www.physioforwomen.com>) with links to useful articles, including “A Woman's Guide to Alleviating Painful Intercourse,” <http://loveandhealth.ifriends.net/Article.cfm?Topic=2&SubTopic=6&Article=233>
- There is a forum for discussing this problem at the online support group www.frumssupport.com; the forums are called “Pelvic Pain” and “Vulvar-Vaginal Pain/Pelvic Floor Dysfunctions,” and are located in the Women's Only-Gynecology section. You will have to register (a free and anonymous process) to be allowed access to the Women's-Only areas.
- There is a thread on the topic of painful intercourse on the message boards of www.mayimrabim.com, under the “Being Tehorah” section.

VI. FEAR OF WATER

THE PROBLEM:

Some women (and men) have a strong fear of water (*aquaphobia*), which can cause them great difficulty in going to the *mikvah*. It has been suggested that as many as 1 in 50 people in the general population suffer from aquaphobia. For women who suffer from this condition, going to the *mikvah* can be a monthly rite of torture, coloring the entire *mitzvah* of *taharat hamishpachah*. As one woman put it: “I would spend the sheva neki'im in subsequent months trying not to think about what exactly I was counting up to... I had panic attacks and an adrenaline rush that left me weak and shaky every time I thought of my upcoming 'trial by water.' ”

General techniques for dealing with this fear may be helpful, and can be learned through books, therapists, or psychologists; but below are some suggestions that may specifically make it easier to go to the *mikvah*.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

First, talk to a rav. We surround our *tevilah* with a lot of *chumrot*, many of which are of negligible import to women who are not afraid of water, but which can be removed under extenuating circumstances. For example: In a non-natural *mikvah* (where the ground is not muddy), it is permitted to immerse without taking your feet off the floor; you can hold on to the railing or wall (the section of it that is underwater); you may be able to wear a hairnet to prevent having to repeat a *tevilah* due to hair floating to the top; and you may be told to dunk fewer than your traditional number of times. If you do get these *heterim* make sure you explain them in advance to any new *mikvah* attendant.

Even if you are not using *heterim*, explain your fear to the *mikvah* attendant, and explain that you need time. The last thing you need is to feel rushed. You may also want to face the *mikvah* attendant, as seeing that another person is there watching you might make you feel more confident.

It may be a good idea to do a “practice run” before your first time – find out if there is a *mikvah* attendant who would be willing to watch as you went into the *mikvah* in a bathing suit, perhaps even holding onto you or showing you what to do. (On the other hand, putting your head under water even one extra time, just for practice, might be something you are unwilling to do – in which case, this is probably not a good option for you. As one woman said: “Simply put, I wasn't willing to submit myself to water torture for anything less than a divine commandment.”)

If necessary, and if you are comfortable with the idea, you could immerse with one or two women accompanying you into the water and holding you. (Both you and anyone assisting you must wet their hands in the *mikvah* prior to the immersion.)

It may help to talk about your fears with other women who share them, and who will understand just how difficult they make this *mitzvah* for you. Once again, Mayim Rabim (www.mayimrabim.com) is an excellent resource for discussions of this and any other aspect of *taharat hamispacha*. In particular, one of the regular contributors to Mayim Rabim has a number of posts explaining her fear of water, how she dealt with it, and how ultimately (after many years) she was able to overcome it. Her story can be found at <http://home.mayimrabim.com:443/desde.html>.

GLOSSARY OF HEBREW TERMS

(terms specific to taharat hamishpachah are in bold)

Avodat Hashem = service of God

Bedikah = an internal examination

Chametz = leavened bread

Chatzitzah/chatzitzot = physical barrier(s) to immersion

Chumrah/chumrot = stringency/stringencies

Frum (Yiddish) = religious

Halacha/halachic = (relating to) Jewish law

Harchakot = the laws limiting physical contact and other interactions between a husband and wife during the niddah period. While in reality the laws against physical contact are a separate (and more serious) prohibition, all the rules regulating the niddah period are often colloquially lumped together as “harchakot.”

Hefsek = the internal examination that establishes that a woman’s bleeding has ceased

Heter = special permission

Karet/issur karet = “cutting off,” or a transgression punishable by “cutting off”; this punishment is spiritual rather than legal, and while its exact meaning is subject to various interpretations, it is considered one of the severest punishments in the Jewish tradition.

Kedusha = holiness

Machmir = stringent

Mikvah = a ritual bath

Mitzvah/Mitzvot = commandment(s)

Moch = a bedikah cloth customarily inserted for a specified amount of time after a woman has performed a hefsek

Niddah = the halachic status of a woman who has experienced uterine bleeding

Peru U'revu = the commandment to procreate

Pesach = Passover

Posek = a decisor of Jewish law

Psak = a legal decision

Taharat Hamishpachah = the laws of family purity

Tehorah = the halachic status of a woman who is not in niddah, having followed the correct procedures and immersed in a mikvah.

Tevilah = immersion

Yimei Taharah = the period of time during which a woman does not have the status of niddah

Yimei Tumah = the period of time during which a woman has the status of niddah

Yoetzet = a woman trained in the laws of taharat hamishpacha