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# Rhythms of the Blood

BY C. DEVORA HAMMER

## Sex in an Orthodox marriage

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MARCH 21, 2003

**Tonight is the fourteenth night** of my menstrual cycle and I am going to the mikva. Ever since I first saw blood two weeks ago, I have not touched my husband. We have passed things one to another, nor carried a load together. I sleep in bed alone. If we eat a meal, there must be something extraneous on the table to remind us of our status. We have not poured each other's drinks, nor eaten food from the same plate. My husband has not seen any part of my body that is normally covered in public. This man whom I know more intimately than any other is more forbidden to me than a stranger.

Tonight I will immerse myself in the mikva and I will touch my husband again. In two days my period will come, and we will separate once more. Such is the cycle of our marriage.

I have observed Jewish law all my life, and yet with these laws governing sex in marriage, the *nidda* laws, I am as awkward and unfamiliar as a *ba'alat tshiiva*, a returnee to the faith. Nothing in these rules resonates with any other kind of practice I have experienced, and the discipline required to follow the Code of Jewish Law on *nidda* is almost unendurable. Yet we do endure them, month after month after month.

For many years I have wanted to write about *nidda*, but the words did not come, because the subject has simply been unbearable for me. The frustration, the resentment and anger against a system that constantly separates me from my beloved, the only man I have known and likely will ever know, stops up my tongue. But the meaning of it is starting to come to me now, and I want to write the story of my growing into an understanding of *nidda*, of the truths that I have found.

## II.

On my wedding night, I had my period. Before we were married, we were not permitted to touch; the moment after we were married, because I was menstruating, all the *nidda* rules of separation were heaped on us in addition to no touching. And since our Sages considered a bride and groom who have not yet consummated their marriage to be especially vulnerable to breaching the *nidda* rules, extra barriers were legislated to prevent sexual contact between them. The couple may never be alone, day or night. If they sleep under the same roof, two people must sleep with them. So we drove home from our wedding with a pair of teenagers in the back seat, and if my husband and I wanted to speak privately in our apartment, we had to escape to the stairwell and whisper, as if we were the teenagers. In exchange for my wedding ring, I became more distant from my husband than we had ever been before.

To establish the end of my period for Jewish legal purposes, I had to do an internal examination with a white cloth. For ten days, the cloth kept coming out red. (*Who's ever heard of a day period!* I thought. *Perhaps I'll bleed forever!*) And then, by some miracle, one time

cloth emerged the same color as it had gone in, and I began the seven White Days. When we waited for the *nidda* time to end, we had to find sleeping chaperones. In the end, my in-laws were left to do the job; I felt like a child bride.

In our private time, my husband and I would study the laws of *nidda* together, like prisoners analyzing the terms of their sentencing. Learning was one thing we could share, but it did not make me feel any better. The physical tension of separation between two people newly and deeply in love is indescribable. I thought I would go out of my mind.

The night came when I was permitted my husband's body, and in exchange I was thrown into a manic cycle of activity that governed my sexual life. Soon after our first encounter, my period came again, and my husband was snatched away from me. After the bleed stopped, there were the seven White Days, when I had to check myself twice daily, in the morning and just before sunset. I was constantly looking at the clock to make sure I hadn't missed the crucial minute for checking. Then the day of the mikva came, with its restrictions: no eating meat or kneading dough, nothing that would leave difficult to remove dirt. At the meal I ate before beginning mikva preparations, I was so nervous I gorged as if Yom Kippur were coming. The few hours between this meal and my return from the mikva were a millennium in my mind, and I fueled up in anticipation.

Then I ran the bath, took a book in with me and started the long soak. My husband would walk in ten times as I lay there, but was unable to look at my naked body, so I only saw his back as he nudged me about every nonsense item imaginable, like, "Where's the laundry?" He was nervous, excited. Then I dressed and went to the mikva, where I would take another shower, and mentally go through the whole body: comb hair, pluck eyebrows, blow nose, all the way down. I did it all like an automaton, the thoughtfulness of me excised from this fanatically cleaned body. Part of me was screaming mad. What is all this about? Why all this activity just so that I can touch my husband? Why does he not have to do any of this? And then, even when I came back to my husband, the counting continued. Every single day of the woman's cycle has to be counted, to determine the monthly anniversary of the beginning of her last period, when she either has to do some more internal examinations or temporarily stay away from her husband.

It was like being in a whirlwind, with a constantly changing status having dramatic consequences. Checking, measuring, withdrawing, responding. None of it was on my all imposed by this massive external book of law.

Then I conceived, and for seven years I was pregnant or nursing, or both, and never but except after childbirth. Now we had the time to learn each other's bodies, slowly, at our own pace. I didn't need the separation of *nidda* to come back to my husband with refreshed interest; I enjoyed the constant company of his body.

After the birth of my second child, I was in *nidda* for five months. The normal rules of separation became excruciatingly difficult after childbirth. For example, we couldn't hand each other the baby, and my husband couldn't look at my naked breast while I nursed. When the night of my immersion arrived after almost half a year of waiting, I found the door to the mikva locked. In despair, and disbelief, I just stood there, in full view of the whole community, burning with anger and humiliation. Eventually, the mikva lady sauntered up, eating an ice cream. She was so sorry—she had been out visiting. I cried as I stepped down the stairs to the mikva; it seemed to me at that moment such an impossible system and even more impossible people administering it.

After I stopped nursing, my period started coming regularly again. We were thrown back into the relentless cycle of sudden separation, and just as sudden coming back together again. I steeled myself to it, as part of the package that I am bound by and which binds me to my husband, my family and our God. I looked for nothing good in it.

But as the years go by, I am beginning to understand it more. The rule is not just that a couple may not touch each other during *nidda*, but that they be *exceedingly careful* not to touch. When my husband comes towards me, I give him space, enough to ensure that he won't bump. He does the same for me. And so there is created around me *lebensraum*—a living room, an area he cannot invade. When I am in *nidda*, my bed, too, is my own, and I stretch out on the full queen size of it. He may not lie or sit on it even when I am not around. (He has his own queen-size bed.) At meals, I am not his servant, neither pouring his cup nor serving his plate. And so on, each of these disparate regulations adding up to this: me, alone. The Law has created space for my body and time for me. Not governed by women and nonnegotiable.

A social worker in an ultra-Orthodox community has told me that an abused wife will often become suicidal if raped while in *nidda*. She may be forced to have sex at other times in her cycle, and not recognize the abuse, because she believes her body is her husband's property. But when she is in *nidda*, the Law says her husband must be *exceedingly careful* to keep away; at this time her body does not belong to him. So her husband transgresses the *nidda* rules, with its terrible Heavenly consequences, she realizes he must truly be evil. In defiling her God-granted space, her husband destroys her entire world; she can no longer live with herself in it.

### III.

These things that I tell you, they are secret. In all the "brides" classes I attended, not a teacher told me what sex was really like, or how she lived with *nidda*. We were bound by the Western taboo on sex, and the Jewish mandate of modesty surrounding *nidda*. As a new wife, I was trapped in my struggle to cope with new desire, strict rules, the strangeness of it all. But unlike a woman who had newly become observant, there was no one to talk to. So I turned to books.

The literature disappointed me. One type described how women threw out the primitive and despised mikva rituals with their wigs as they sailed into New York harbor. Rabbis and others exhorted those who clung to the old ways, urging them to abandon a practice leftover from the cult in the Jerusalem Temple two thousand years ago. In the same way, feminists reinterpreted *nidda* as a part of a misogynist taboo against female blood, and in reaction to this onslaught against *nidda*, religiously observant writers wrote texts with titles like *Waters of Eden*, and *Hedge of Roses*. Here I found graphic details on the anatomy of both a woman's body and the mikva, and praise for the beauties of human intimacy and the benefit of Family Purity on a couple's life. *Family Purity?* Neither of these literatures described my experience nor provided comfort in any way. My husband and I were deeply committed to Jewish law, and were not going to give it up despite its primitive origins. But I found no beauty in what we were doing either, no benefit to our marriage, and the mikva was just another burden on my busy life. There was something akin to childbirth in the wholesale lies they fed us: no one tells you the pain is so bad

you may go into a coma, they tell you all about the three stages of labor but nothing the truth. I did not want to be preached at; I wanted to hear the voices of women who lived with this.

In *Tehora*, Anat Zuria's new Israeli documentary on *nidda*, I thought at last I might find voices of real people. The movie brings us Natalie, who used to be observant but whose marriage deteriorated, stopped going to the mikva. Katie is a Modern Orthodox woman who has a condition which causes her to bleed continuously. Shira, newly engaged to be married, is being initiated into the *nidda* laws by her mother. And then there is Anat Zuria herself, a secular woman who keeps *nidda* because her husband made it a condition of their marriage.

*Tehora* (an untranslatable word often incorrectly rendered as "purity") uncovers marriage secrets of the observant world, mainly through Natalie's voice. "The first time I gave [my husband] my hand, that I touched him, was after the *huppa*" she says. "Can a man put himself in the place of a woman who has never been with a man...and in one moment has to go from a state of nothing to everything? It's almost like rape...It's not natural, not right."

The Code of Jewish Law mandates consummation of the marriage the night of the *huppa* but Helen Krohn, a consultant on sexuality to the Jewish Board of Family and Child Services, says up to 25 percent of ultra-Orthodox couples have problems accomplishing this. Would the tradition allow for a gradual learning of the physical part of marriage, so to avoid the kind of crisis described by Natalie? *Tehora* raises an important question here.

After the birth of twins, Natalie went to the rabbi to ask for permission to use birth control, and he gave her two years. When she went back to ask for an extension, pleading exhaustion, he gave her just four months. Here Zuria faces another sacred cow in the Orthodox world: we are not Catholics, yet the right to use contraceptives is controlled by the rabbi. How can a man, a stranger, possibly know whether a woman is ready to have children? What criteria does he use to decide how long she will be pregnancy-free? (A trend in the ultra-Orthodox world is to ever-larger numbers of children, and the role of the fathers, the mothers, and the rabbis in this is something that would be a marvelous topic for another film.)

Natalie eventually stopped going to the mikva, lived a celibate marriage for a while, then divorced. I thought of the women who are raped when in *nidda*, and how the *nidda* laws offered Natalie a strange kind of protection. She was moving away from her husband, and by not going to the mikva, she created a kind of trial separation with the marriage.

Katie is an observant but modern woman who decided with her husband to stop keep the rules forbidding touching. “I had three small children at home. I wanted the comfort and affection. I wanted him to come back from work and...hug me,” she says. “I decided at one point that I’m not willing to give it up. It’s not that, God forbid, we threw out going to the mikva. To be part of the month together and half the month apart is still very important to us.”

I often wondered, in the long dark days after childbirth: who on earth can keep these rules? No one is looking, no one will know, why do people follow the Law in the privacy of their homes? Gluck of Hameln, in her famous twelfth-century autobiography, describes sitting by her adored, dying husband’s bed, wanting to give him a farewell embrace, but she was menstruating, and so could not. Frankly, at such a moment, and many others, women don’t want sex at all, they just want a hug, or to hand off the screaming baby. It is the extra laws of separation— touching, passing—which make the system so difficult.

Finally, we watch as Shoshana, a professional *nidda* counselor, coaxes her daughter Shira into the world of mikva. Shira resists her mother’s sermonizing throughout her engagement, but when we meet her again, right after the wedding, she tells the camera, “It is good to have some separateness after so much closeness.” (I wondered what her first night had been like.)

Throughout the film are images of Zuria dragging herself to the mikva, making the preparations, resentfully being inspected by a mikva lady. She and the other women in the movie have nothing positive thing to say about the practice. We do not see a single healthy, sexual marriage living with *nidda*—we see divorce, abnormal bleeding, immature bride, secular woman and religious husband. And we do not see recent appropriator

the mikva by lesbians keeping nidda, or by women marking important changes in their lives—menopause, onset of labor, conversion. So while Zuria raises vital questions, she too fails to present a nuanced truth.

#### IV.

When I come home from the mikva, my husband always asks me, “Are we permitted to be intimate with each other?” This used to irritate me. Can’t he see I’ve been preparing for hours? That I’ve been out and come back with wet hair? After I ignored the question a few times, he changed his tack. “This is why I do it, sweetheart. The rule is *‘pe sh ‘asar, pe sh ‘hitir.*’ The same mouth that forbade you to me must be the same mouth that allows me to come back to you. If I tell you I am bleeding, and we separate. I can only return to you if you tell me I am permitted to do so.”

My mouth is the decider of my sexual status, our sexual status. If I tell my husband I am bleeding, he must respect that. If I decide, as Natalie did in Tahora, that I never want to be permitted to him again, my husband can divorce me, but he cannot touch me. The woman alone controls the sexual cycle, she is sole witness and judge.

Long before I married, my father discussed the matter of *nidda* with me. “It is good, Devora,” he said. “It creates a rhythm.” I held onto his words throughout the years when I kept these incomprehensible laws, trying to find meaning in what I did, but not finding anything except frustration, resentment, tension. But I have cycled in and out of *nidda* for many moons now, and a pattern is forming, of separation and togetherness, of space and closeness, and I am the one who declares the beginning and end of each cycle. We create the rhythm of our sexual life together. It is the rhythm of my life.

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## The Forbidden Era

by C. Devora Hammer

This streak of a man  
Pressed against the next subway door  
Blessedly tail, so I can lip-talk to him, above the  
mountain-range of heads

He could not come in with me at my subway door  
Lest we be pressed against each other by the throng  
And we would feel each other's warmth and bodies  
In the forbidden *nidda* era

Centuries, it seems, since I last felt him.  
Generations have passed, the world has changed  
its course  
Since I brushed his lips and he encountered my flesh  
It was another incarnation

Today we are lovers of the mind, standing at different  
subway doors  
Pressed by others' bodies  
And across the impenetrable valley of faith, and  
discipline, we lip-say  
I love you

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