

2013

Bathing Women: Ritualized Bodies, Feminism, and Jewish Menstrual Purity

Sara Sandmel
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/reli_honors



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sandmel, Sara, "Bathing Women: Ritualized Bodies, Feminism, and Jewish Menstrual Purity" (2013). *Religious Studies Honors Projects*. Paper 12.
http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/reli_honors/12

This Honors Project - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Religious Studies Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Honors Project

Macalester College

2013

**Title: Bathing Women: Ritualized Bodies,
Feminism, and Jewish Menstrual Purity**

Author: Sara Sandmel

Bathing Women:
Ritualized Bodies, Feminism, and Jewish Menstrual Purity

Sara Sandmel
Advisor: Paula Coeey, Religious Studies
May 6th, 2013

Acknowledgements

None of this research could have been done without the constant support of the people around me. I would first and foremost like to thank my advisor, Paula Coeey, without whom I never would have began, let alone finished this project. Each time she turned my incoherent babble into an extremely coherent direction for further research, I was reminded how truly amazing an advisor she is. I would extend this thanks to all the members of the Religious Studies department, who have influenced me immensely both inside and outside of the classroom these past four years.

I would like to thank Lucy Forester-Smith, for helping me access the Lily Project scholarship, which enabled me to travel to the east coast to complete many of my interviews. She and the CRSL staff have been fundamental in developing the questions I ask myself academically as well as my own personal development.

None of this research would have been possible without the six individuals who agreed to be interviewed. I value their insight and help immensely.

On a different note, I would like to thank Mollie Beebe, Max Edwards, Rebecca Hornstein, my fellow honors students in other departments, my housemates, and my friends. We've gone through a lot together this year, and each destination-study or shared computer charger in Dunn Brothers made a huge impact on my successful completion of this project. I deeply appreciate your unending patience with my need to talk out my struggles and encouragement to keep working.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, for being the first to point me towards this topic, the last to read my paper before submission, and providing an unending source of support, encouragement and love.

To all mentioned here, and anyone else I've missed, I cannot thank you enough.

The gift of feminist criticism, therefore, is a paradoxical one. On the one hand, it prohibits us from being easily at home in any given tradition or text...it does not allow us to ignore dogmatic or rhetorical mechanisms of exclusions...The ongoing challenge, however, is to find a critical balance between commitments, between the commitment to texts that one loves with all their faults... and commitment to make this world a better world, for men and women alike.¹

Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, a biblical scholar and practicing Orthodox Jew, wrote those words in the introduction to her book, *Menstrual Purity*. The paradox Fonrobert describes is exactly the one I plan to explore in this paper: as feminist scholars and activists critically examine social and religious practice in an effort remedy an unjust society, how has Judaism, from the most orthodox to the most progressive movements, changed?² What of traditional practice remains? Like Fonrobert, I look to menstrual purity for answers to these questions. *Niddah* and *mikveh*—menstrual purity rituals—are a central aspect of traditional Jewish women’s ritual observance. It is logical, then, that feminist scholars and theologians continually attack, analyze, and re-envision *niddah* and *mikveh* as part of an attempt to redefine women’s place in a religion that traditionally relegated them to a marginal, private role and labeled their bodily emissions “impure”. At the same time, women who observe these rituals engage with criticism in order to defend or redefine their practice on their own terms. Thus trends in observance of *niddah* and *mikveh* today illuminate feminism’s (or rather, feminisms’) relationship with, and influence on, Jewish practice.

¹ Fonrobert. *Menstrual purity: rabbinic and Christian reconstructions of Biblical gender*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) 6-7.

² This paper only discusses American Judaism. For information on *niddah* in Israel, the other center of Jewish life, see Orit Avishai’s article (“Doing Religion” in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency.” *Gender and Society*. 22.4 (2008): 409-433).

Using Victor Turner's theory of ritual process, as read by Caroline Walker Bynum, together with Amy Hollywood's discussion of ritualization, I identify three elements of the *niddah* and *mikveh* that are changed by, and change, feminist critiques. First, many identify *niddah* as one source of women's perpetual liminality and structural oppression. Exertion of traditional authority, often read as inherently sexist, is another point of criticism. Finally, post-Enlightenment suspicion of embodied ritual lies as an unspoken backdrop to the entire conversation about feminism and ritual, with Enlightenment ideas about freedom and agency also used as an oppressive force.

These three elements—liminality, *communitas*, and embodiment—are at the forefront of feminist rejections, Orthodox apologetics, and progressive re-imaginings of *niddah* and *mikveh* that lie at the center of my study. To structure my analysis, I once again turn to Turner. He identifies three stages of social change: crisis, redress, and either break from or reintegration to society. I look at one example of early feminists arguing against *niddah* to represent the "crisis." Next I analyze current discourse around *niddah* in ultra-Orthodox communities as a complex "redressive" stage. Finally re-imagined and progressive *mikvehs*³ within Reform, Conservative and Modern Orthodox movements form a developing "reintegration" stage.

Through this theoretical framework, I argue that modern practices of *niddah* and *mikveh* across Jewish traditions—including those that claim to reject feminist ideology—enact feminist critiques of Jewish patriarchal hegemony and (re)focus religious practice

³ The grammatically correct plural of *mikveh* is *mikve'ot* but in day-to-day speech my informants referred to more than one *mikveh* in the anglicized "*mikvehs*" so I use this form in my paper.

on embodied ritual. This evolving structure of *niddah* and *mikveh* that enables stronger emphasis on embodied practice in turn strengthens Judaism among practitioners and pushes for more inclusive feminist ideologies. In addition, the changes in implementation of authority over immersions allow progressive Judaism, quietly and practically, to broaden the boundaries of gender established through *mikveh*.

I. Background

Before beginning my analysis I will clarify a few concepts and provide some necessary context. First and foremost, I present a brief overview of laws and scholarship surrounding *niddah* and *mikveh*. Next I will discuss modern Jewish movements. I pay particular attention to their differing relationships with modernity as translated into theological understandings of *torah*, *halakhah* and embodied ritual. Finally, I define what I mean by “feminism.”

Mikveh and Niddah

Although I focus primarily on modern practice and discourse, biblical scholars’ discussion of *niddah*’s origins provides groundwork for modern discussion, as well as actively fueling it. *Mikveh* and *niddah* are actually two separate rituals in Judaism: *mikveh*, the ritual bath, has many uses, only one of which is purification after *niddah*. *Niddah* refers to period of separation from contact with one’s husband during menstruation; it comes from the Hebrew root meaning “separation.”

Modern, *halakhic*⁴ *niddah* dictates that a woman is ritually impure (*t'meah*, or *tummah*, impurity) from the first emission of blood until seven full days after her last ritually impure discharge. The separation lasts a minimum of 12 days, assuming that the woman menstruates for at least five. At the end of these 12 days, she immerses in a *mikveh* with a witness—now usually known as a *mikveh lady*—who ensures she has completely immersed and said the appropriate prayers. After the immersion she is once again considered pure (*t'horah*, or *t'harah*, purity) and can resume regular physical contact with her husband. Ideally, she then has 16 days in which sexual contact is both encouraged and required before she once again menstruates.

The *mikveh* must contain “living” waters (i.e. natural, like a river or collected rain) and today is usually a small pool.⁵ The three main ritual uses of *mikveh* are *kashrut* (kitchen tools are immersed before use in Jewish kitchens, or when used in violating the laws of *kashrut*), conversion (ritually transitioning from gentile to Jewish), and *niddah*. In each ritual, *mikveh* is used to physically enact a transition into ritual purity.

Niddah's form and function today differ notably from its biblical origins. First mentioned in Leviticus 15, menstrual blood is among many impure emissions, including semen. Its polluting power comes from association with seed and the ability to create life or, the other side of the coin, an association with death. Leviticus 15 differentiates between regular menstruation (*niddah*) and abnormal uterine discharge (*zava*). Men can also be impure from discharge (*zav*). Many scholars understand *zav* and *zava* to refer to

⁴ The set of laws stemming from the commandments in the Bible, but interpreted in the Talmud, by the Rabbis, and through traditional practice.

⁵ The construction of *mikveh* itself has numerous *halakhic* regulations, but they are largely irrelevant to this paper.

gonorrhoea and both require a similar period of separation followed by seven clean days before returning to normal contact with society. *Zav* men must immerse in *mikveh* to be *tahor* (masculine of *tahorah*) while women are not explicitly required to. Additionally, all sexual contact—regardless of the woman’s menstrual state—and any ejaculation renders men impure and requires them to immerse in *mikveh*. The impurities in Leviticus 15 come from what biblical scholars call the Priestly Code,⁶ which focuses primarily on maintaining the purity of the Temple. Purity in the context of these laws relates to the ability to enter holy spaces and is not associated with sinfulness.

Only later, in Leviticus 18 and 20, does the question of morality come into play. These chapters, from the Holiness Code, situate sexual contact with *niddah* women among extreme sexual aberrations and idolatry that are punishable by *karet*. What *karet* implies exactly is unclear, but scholars agree that it is severe and still perceived as a relevant threat even after the destruction of the Temple. Some understand *karet* as expulsion from the land, viewing it as the reason other nations lost favor from God and control over the Holy Land. Others see it as personal suffering, or nation-wide suffering.⁷ The connection between menstruation and sin—that is, the extremely negative connotations and extensive additional restrictions around *niddah*—comes from these passages in Leviticus 18 and 20.

⁶ The Priestly Code and the Holiness Code refer to biblical authors. The Priestly code slightly pre-dates the Holiness code, and the authors have slightly different concerns—the latter with perpetuating the nation and encouraging family values, while the former is more concerned with the functioning of the temple and ritual purity. For more information on the biblical sources, I recommend Tirzah Meacham’s article “An Abbreviated History of the Development of Menstrual Law.” In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel R. Wasserfall. (Boston: Brandeis University Press, 1999.)

⁷ “Say unto them: Whosoever he be of all your seed throughout your generations, that approacheth unto the holy things, which the children of Israel hallow unto the LORD, having his uncleanness (*tummah*) upon him, that soul shall be cut off (*v'nikhretah*) from before Me: I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 22:3)

In Biblical times, *niddah* women were only separate while actually menstruating; when menstruation ended they sacrificed two pigeons and were once again pure. According to Tirzah Meacham, although *mikveh* is not explicitly necessary for women (neither *niddah* nor *zava*) it is possible that they used it as well.⁸ But, by the Rabbinic Period (after the destruction of the Second Temple), in an effort to ensure no one would commit sins punishable by *karet*, the rabbis conflated *niddah*'s restrictions with *zava*'s adding the extra seven days of separation to regular menstruation as well. At the same time, the significance of male emissions and impurities became irrelevant and fell largely out of practice—few men continued to use *mikveh* after every ejaculation because they no longer needed to be ritually pure to enter the Temple. But, as Fonrobert points out, *niddah* remained relevant because of the moral implications inferred from *karet*.⁹

Why menstrual blood and semen require such extensive laws, and their similarity and differences from each other and other blood, are still live debates among scholars. These debates in particular inform the modern conversation around ritual practice. Scholars agree that the restrictions have to do with keeping impurity (which I will define more precisely momentarily) out of the Temple (when it stood), and that menstrual blood is of a different category from other blood. Some, like Jacob Milgrom and Mary Douglas, understand blood to represent life; menstrual blood, because it was “out of place” (i.e. outside of the body) therefore represented death and danger. Milgrom interprets Leviticus

⁸ Meacham, Tirzah. “An Abbreviated History of the Development of Jewish Menstrual Law” In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel R. Wasserfall. (Boston: Brandeis University Press, 1999.) 27.

⁹ Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 21.

18 and 20's severe punishment as a reaction to men's intentional interactions with the "blood out of place."¹⁰

David Biale, who takes a very different approach, understands the restrictions around blood—eating, spilling (i.e. sacrifice), and flowing naturally—as the means through which the priests maintained control over the population and established their nation as separate from the neighboring nations.¹¹ He then draws from Douglas and Kathleen O'Grady, who see these laws constructing women as symbolic equivalents to the Temple. Thus, just as impure interactions inside the Temple are sinful, sexual relations with an impure woman are sinful. According to Biale, although the Temple was destroyed women's bodies remain sites to negotiate this relationship with purity and locations for Jewish authorities to exercise power over both men and women.¹²

Finally, Leslie Cook takes a drastically different approach from both Biale and Milgrom. Cook rejects the notion that menstrual blood had different meaning than other animal or human blood otherwise spilled. Instead, she writes,

In the Bible, *niddah*, like other purity regulations, is a symbolic representation of the idea that the world is a harmonious system of differences established through a series of divine acts of separation. To the extent that human beings maintain and mirror this divine action, they exist in the harmony of Eden; conversely, to the extent that they do not, they are in exile.¹³

¹⁰ In Biale *Blood and belief: the circulation of a symbol between Jews and Christians*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 11.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 13.

¹² *Ibid*, 36.

¹³ Cook, "Body Language: Women's Rituals of Purification in the Bible and Mishnah." In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel R. Wasserfall. (Boston: Brandeis University Press, 1999.), 43.

In *niddah*, she argues, periods of purity reflect the ideal of Godliness and periods of impurity reflect the reality that “humans are bound by nature and God is not.”¹⁴ For Cook, all blood (not just female, menstrual blood) is the source of impurity in Levitical laws because it designates humans as different from God. Cook adamantly asserts through her biblical analysis that *niddah* is no different than other restrictions (*kashrut* for example) and not designed to subordinate women to men.

Today, the cycle of *niddah*, *mikveh* and sexual intercourse is called *taharat hamishpacha*, which literally means “family purity.” *Taharat hamishpacha* has roots in the 19th century development of Jewish nationalism which was closely tied to the birth of Zionism and subsequent immigration to what many believed was the historical and mythologized Jewish homeland. This return to biblical roots sparked renewed concern over ritual purity. In particular, the possibility of a rebuilt Temple felt (and to some, still feels) very real. In Israel, many who do not keep other commandments continue to observe *taharat hamishpacha* out of fear of biblically grounded punishment¹⁵ and as part of an extensive industry of marital counseling run by the ultra-Orthodox.¹⁶ “Family Purity” also gained traction as a reaction to Reform Judaism’s rejection of the practice in Germany and then America, which I will explain in much more detail momentarily.

These threads—harmony and difference, ritual purity (as opposed to moral), blood representing life and death, menstruation leading to *karet*—come through in how

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁵ Tirzah Meacham, “An Abbreviated History of the Development of Jewish Menstrual Law,” 32-5.

¹⁶ Orit Avishai. ““Doing Religion” in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency.” *Gender and Society* 22.4 (2008). 420.

niddah is presented and taught, how it is discussed, and why it is critiqued by women who practice it today.

Tummah and T'harah

As I mentioned above, *tummah* and *t'harah* are typically translated as “purity” and “impurity” respectively. These words, particularly their English translations, are dangerously filled with cultural implications that may or may not have been present when the words were originally used. Douglas’s interpretation of impurity as “dirt” or “matter out of place” gives insight into where this misconception arose, although she is not the first to make this association. All of my interviewees¹⁷ stressed that they do not adhere to Douglas’s interpretation of menstrual blood as “unclean.”¹⁸ Nancy said:

They’re terrible translations for us today. Come on, it worked so great when you had a temple. And so not so great now that we don’t. I mean, I can even do little word etymologies with [my classes] and go: ‘ok. Look, if it was *tummah* and *taharah* and then you get pure and impure and then somebody mistranslates pure as clean, now you’ve got dirty. Look, just like that. And it’s a mistranslation. Clean and dirty are terrible translations, are terrible interpretations of even pure and impure. And they need to see that.

Shayna said:

Its not a physical impurity that mikveh changes, it’s a spiritual impurity. And being a spiritual impurity, is something that you can’t put your hands on, it’s a spiritual quality that transcends to future generations.

Eliza put it this way:

I liken it to *Shabbat* [the Sabbath] ...you know *Shabbat* is this special important day of the week, does that make Wednesday bad? No. Wednesday’s Wednesday.

¹⁷ I will discuss my methodology momentarily.

¹⁸ Mary Douglas. *Purity and danger; an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. (New York: Praeger, 1966).

It's not like a dirty, or less holy day. Wednesday is Wednesday. But Wednesday can be Wednesday and *Shabbat* can be special and that's ok.

As Nancy, Shayna and Eliza represent a broad spectrum of beliefs and traditions (the details of which I will discuss momentarily) and agree on this point, I follow their lead and use "purity" and "impurity" as my translations of *taharah* and *tummah*, with the caveat that I do not extend this translation to "clean" and "unclean."

Movements Within Judaism

A woman's relationship with *niddah* generally depends on the movement of Judaism she identifies with: some grow up with it naturalized as part of ritual observance while others have never heard of menstrual purity. The four central movements in Judaism today are Reform, Orthodox¹⁹, Conservative, and Reconstructionist. These movements differ most notably in their interpretation of biblical texts and relationship with *halakhah*. Howard Eilberg-Shwartz²⁰ offers an extensive overview of the differences, specifically focusing on discourse around the body within each movement.

Modern Ashkenazi²¹ Jewish theology developed when European intellectuals, inspired by Enlightenment ideals of equality and universality, opened European society to Jews in the 18th century. Once welcomed, Jews worked to negotiate differences between

¹⁹ Orthodoxy, unlike the other "movements" listed, actually refers to a wide range of institutions and subcultures; Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist, although also heterogeneous within their communities, each have centralized organizational structures such as rabbinic schools and youth groups.

²⁰ Eilberg-Schwartz. "Introduction." In *People of the body: Jews and Judaism from an embodied perspective*, edited by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

²¹ Middle Eastern and Spanish Jewry (Sephardic Judaism) developed quite differently; as early 1000 C.E. Sephardic Jews adhered to different *halakhah*. This paper deals exclusively with Ashkenazi—French, German and Eastern European—Judaism as most American Jews today trace their roots to this tradition.

their theology and practice and those of society around them. Mind-body dualism lies at the center of this negotiation. “Secularism” implies the development of an ethic and a culture entirely based on rational thought (that is, the rational mind), as opposed to religious laws, which appeared to arbitrarily dictate day-to-day life and focus too much on the irrational and uncontrollable body. The “religious” was relegated to isolated times and spaces, if tolerated at all. Whether true “secularism” exists, among the many other debates brought up by this notion, is the subject of another paper; but that many believe it does—and assert that it is more valuable than the religious—effectively sets up modern history of *niddah*.

Negotiating differences between Judaism and secular society had as much to do with preventing anti-Semitism as it did with integrating new ideologies. Eilberg-Shwartz writes,

Definition of savage or primitive religion developed as a contrast for Enlightenment views of ‘Religion of Reason’ or ‘Natural Religion,’ which has in turn been influenced by Protestant views of ritual and law as well as European aesthetic tastes that emerged after the breakdown of feudal society. According to these criteria, much of Judaism appeared to fall into the category of primitive.²²

Eilberg-Shwartz alludes not only to the divide within European society around body and mind, but to the role “primitive religions” played in perpetuating colonialism. Colonial forces often employed discourse of irrationality and images of embodied rituals to denigrate and control colonial communities. Implicit in the study of “primitive” religions was the privileging of secularism, rationality, and the mind over the body. As Jews saw their own practice reflected in the “primitive,” many felt the need to emphasize elements

²² Eilberg-Shwartz, *People of the Body*, 4.

that were more rational and “of the mind” than irrational and within the body, to assert belonging and/or insure continued safety.

The group of Rabbis and lay people working to fit more comfortably within European secularism eventually became Reform Judaism. With roots in 19th century Germany, Reform Jewish theology understands the Bible as a fallible, man-made document not directly written by God, thereby justifying constant reformulation of both practice and law. For example, one step to effectively assimilate was to restructure the architecture of the synagogue and shift the language of prayer from Hebrew to vernacular. Eventually, Reform Jews also moved away from many traditions perceived as archaic (i.e. embodied and irrational) such as *kashrut* and *niddah*. This “reformed” Jewish practice appeared much more similar to the Protestant culture around them and fit more easily into Protestant society.

In response to Reform Judaism’s changes, the potential for anti-Semitism contained in secularism, and many other ideological trends in the Jewish community (such as socialism and Zionism), some developed a counter ideology that aggressively rejects secular thought and aesthetics. This movement became known as ultra-Orthodox Judaism, including both Hassidic and non-Hassidic sects. In spite of other differences, these movements share the belief that the Torah is the direct word of God and that Talmudic and Rabbinic literature carry comparable, God-given authority. They therefore follow *halakhah* to the letter. The ultra-Orthodox move one step further by rejecting many visible signs of modernity, such modern as dress, and often choosing to exist

entirely removed from secular life. These movements do not carry the same ambivalence around embodied ritual as Reform Judaism, but do have a strong aversion to changing in response to secular ideologies—another important difference with Reform Judaism, which actively engages with changes in secular thought.²³

As the conversation over bodies, God, secularity and modernity continues, other movements have developed. Conservative Judaism takes a similar, although more hesitant, approach to reforming and rejecting *halakhah* as Reform: Conservative Jews believe that *Torah* and *halakhah* are inspired by God but written by man, and thus do not hold existing interpretations of *Torah* to the same standards of infallibility as some orthodox movements do. Nonetheless, any changes to *halakhah* must still come from within the text. Modern Orthodoxy believes that *halakhah* and *Torah* are God-given, but Modern Orthodox Jews do not reject or disengage from secular society. They follow *halakhah* to the letter but are open to dialogue with secular social movements, working within *halakhah* to find support to change practice.

Within each movement *niddah* and *mikveh* present a different set of challenges given their relationships with secularism and understandings of the weight *halakhah* holds in dictating action. I will explore these differences in great detail through my interviews.

²³ A third reaction, which I have also briefly spoken about, is the Zionist movement, which attempted to reclaim the power of the Jewish body. For more information see David Biale's Essay "Zionism as an Erotic Revolution." In *People of the body: Jews and Judaism from an embodied perspective*, edited by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

What is feminism?

Finally, my analysis of feminism depends on two elements. First, I look at how my own informants articulate this relationship in terms of their understandings of feminism and how *mikveh* and *niddah* fit into the conversation, including the possibility that they do not associate *niddah*, *mikveh* and feminism at all. That being said, most informants spoke to an image of feminism centered on equality with men and access to public leadership. They positioned themselves either within, against, or beyond what is known as Second Wave Feminism. In their descriptions, though, they emphasized a few other points of tension and contradiction in the broad definition of “feminism”: some focused on feminism as advocating individual fulfillment while others highlighted goals of building community among women; some spoke of feminism as aggressively oppositional to (male) power; finally, some spoke to religious feminism, which has its own nuanced conversation about the role of historic texts and traditional power.²⁴

Throughout my paper I contextualize their experiences and opinions of feminism in larger debates within the academy and in religious feminist activism. I also expand on their talking points to include my own analysis of the female body and its historical

²⁴ Chava, for example, said “[The Orthodox movement] needed good people [to be leaders], people who were not angry and—I put the word feminist on that often...the angry feminist image, the angry bra burning women of the 60s and 70s, that’s not appealing as much as it used to be.” She appreciates the progress made by earlier feminists but sees a need for a less prescriptive, less “angry” feminism, which allows for tradition.²⁴ On the other hand, Raizel sets up Judaism as impervious to feminist critiques of equality: “its like, women are just as equal as men in Judaism. We have our roles and they have their roles. And I’m actualized through fulfilling my role and they’re actualized through fulfilling theirs.” Finally, Nancy told me, “I have a very strong relationship with feminism. I have all of Ms. Magazines first like, 30 magazines all in a bin in my basement. I sat next to Gloria Steinem once at a luncheon. And we talked. It was so cool.” Ms. Magazine, co-founded by Gloria Steinem, is an icon of feminism from the 70s—the so-called Second Wave—which worked to legitimize women’s experiences in public discourse and foster equality and rights. Thus my analysis focuses a good deal on contextualizing these conversations within the broadening discussion of equality and agency in religion.

position within patriarchy as an object to be controlled. While I cannot offer a single definition of feminism that I use throughout this paper, I point to the project of analyzing women's role in society, the distribution of power, and control of bodies as feminist questions that guide my research and inform my interviewees. These questions, specifically related to Judaism and *niddah*, will continue as a thread through the rest of my analysis.

II. Theoretical Framework

How then has Judaism changed in conversation with feminism? To answer this, I look first to Victor Turner's "social drama", as modified by Caroline Bynum's critiques, which provides a framework for reading both how rituals function at a practical level and how society evolves through revolutionary social movements such as feminism. I then look at Amy Hollywood's discussion of ritualization to develop Turner's understanding of ritual by identifying the importance of bodies and their capacity for subversion of social norms.

Liminality, Communitas, and Social Change: Victor Turner

Turner writes, "for individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experiences of high and low, communitas and structure...equality and inequality."²⁵ For Turner—drawing heavily from his teacher Arnold Van Gennep—each ritual includes three stages that the participant passes

²⁵ Turner, *The Ritual Process, Structure and Anti-Structure*. (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co, 1969), 96.

through: a break or separation from society into a “liminal” state which leads directly to “communitas”, where an individual experiences “society as unstructured or rudimentarily structured” and groups “submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.”²⁶ Finally, the individual reenters society, now in a new (or renewed) position.²⁷ The change in position, according to Turner, results from the periodic release from society, blind submission to its powers, and reentry to normative structure.

Niddah can easily be read in this framework. When a woman first bleeds, she becomes *niddah* and therefore separate. *Niddah* is by definition liminal—cut off from normal contact with (male) society. Submission to authority, which fosters communitas, comes most visibly in her immersion in *mikveh*. Just as each married woman before her did, a *niddah* woman submits to the authority of the *mikveh lady*, charged with ensuring the *halakhic* completion of an otherwise private ritual. The *mikveh lady* follows extensive laws drawn out in rabbinic literature, tying her to an official, written legal authority. Another experience of communitas is *b'dikot* (literally, checks). Twice daily the *niddah* woman checks internally for any impure discharge, subjecting her own body to the regulation of traditional authority; if she is unsure whether the discharge causes her to remain *niddah*, she brings it to a rabbi trained in discerning whether the discharge is menstrual or not.²⁸ After immersing, the woman returns, at least according to Turner’s theory, newly (re)elevated to society. Importantly, after immersing, the woman maintains

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*, 95.

²⁸ The Talmudic discussion of which colors of blood make a woman *tumah* [t'mea'ah?] is extensive and quite graphic. I highly recommend reading Tirzah Meacham’s short article “An Abbreviated History of the Development of Jewish Menstrual Laws” or Danielle Stroper Perez and Florence Heyman’s article “Rabbis, Physicians and the Woman’s/Female’s Body,” both of which offer detailed analyses of these discussions.

“something of the sacredness of that transient humility”²⁹ which she experienced in her liminal state and through *communitas*.³⁰

Turner, as I said, expands his analysis of liminality and *communitas* to society at large. The liminal are those outside of central access to power: “structural inferiority, lowermost status and structural outsiderhood.”³¹ When these groups coalesce into a social movement they experience “spontaneous *communitas*”, which empowers them to confront their inferior position.³² This particular liminality is often associated with “peace, harmony between all men...universal justice, [and] equality before God.”³³ Women, the prototypical “liminal” beings who are structurally excluded from public, communal experiences easily fit into this “social drama” in which feminism develops from their “spontaneous *communitas*.” The “social drama,” according to Turner, has four stages: a breach of social norm, crisis, redress, and either reintegration or break from society.³⁴ I will use these four stages to structure my analysis, with some notable modifications.

Liminality, Communitas and Women: Caroline Bynum

²⁹ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 97.

³⁰ From here we see connections with Emile Durkheim’s “effervescence,” which, he explains, is the repeated communal experience that reinforces social norms as True and Real in individuals, allowing them to continue to participate effectively in society. The difference between Durkheim’s effervescence and Turner’s *communitas*, most notably, is that *communitas* allows for differentiation and change, whereas effervescence is only a source of renewal. See Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912).

³¹ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 134.

³² As opposed to “normative *communitas*,” that which is experienced in religious rituals and is a meager attempt to recreate to original experience.

³³ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 134; That Turner uses exclusively male terminology perhaps implies that he too falls prey to the androcentric exclusion of women from his theory, but I see this as no hindrance to including them in the process he outlines.

³⁴ Turner. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

Caroline Bynum offers an important critique of Turner's analysis, thus opening the door to a broader picture of "social dramas" which speaks more directly to women's experiences. She argues that within each ritual the movement from liminality to structure through inequality is a paradigm specific to those in power: men. Bynum urges her readers to stand *with* women in their rituals and analyze them from women's specific position in society. She explains,

Liminality itself—as fully elaborated by Turner—may be less a universal moment of meaning needed by human beings to move through social dramas than an escape for those who bear the burdens and reap the benefits of high place in the social structure.³⁵

Taking this one step further, I argue that Turner's linear progression erases the process that happens in each stage between the breach and the final reintegration. By "standing with" the population at each point, we gain a more nuanced understanding of complex forces at play in the drama of social change. Particularly in the case of *mikveh*, it is vital to view these changes as a multi-faceted conversation happening at all levels of society, without privileging the liberal and progressive result as the only outcome of value. As Bynum writes, "If symbols are, in fact, multivocal, condensing and lived, we will understand them only when we look *with* as well as over and beyond the participants who use them, feeling as well as knowing their dramas in their own context."³⁶

I will work to identify the multivocality of *niddah*—exploring how its significance varies depending on the woman practicing it: I acknowledge forces that

³⁵ Bynum. "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality" in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, ed. Caroline Bynum. (New York: Uzone Inc., 1991), 33.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

shape each woman's perception of the world and her position in it, rather than assume a unified, homogenous conversation across movements.

Dramas and Bodies

The final addendum to Turner that I add explains why *mikveh* and *niddah* are the particular rituals I look at to trace these changes. Amy Hollywood, in her article "Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization," analyzes relationships between individuals, rituals, power, and bodies. She highlights the body as the vessel through which Turner's changes occur and adds an important lens of power to my analysis. Through Hollywood's investigation of ritual, I see that the structure of *niddah* and *mikveh* allows for intentional adherence, and simultaneous resistance, to existing power structures.

Hollywood arrives at the following conclusion: performative rituals create (re)new(ed), stronger members of society; within performative rituals exists the possibility—the likelihood—that there will be a slight alteration or mistake that "opens room for improvisation and resistance within the very authoritarian structures (e.g., of child rearing, education, and religion) in which subjects are constituted."³⁷ Thus, from the perspective of my analysis, which looks at changes that occur within Jewish practice, performative rituals hold within them the capacity to (re)strengthen Judaism among its practitioners while simultaneously evolving with social movements such as feminism.

Drawing on a number of theorists herself, Hollywood begins by identifying the power behind rituals and ultimately weaves each theorist with the next to create a more

³⁷ Hollywood. "Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization". *History of Religions*.42 (2), (2002), 115.

full story of how rituals function. She starts with Jacques Derrida, who shows that, “on the one hand, force is the result of tethering of the mark to the same, its repetition of that which has come before; yet on the other hand... the mark must always also differ and defer from that which it cites.”³⁸ That is, force of ritual comes from its repetition but there is no such thing as a truly identical repetition. He also argues that, “force [lies] within the reiterative structure of the ritual (as repetition and break) and as an effect of ritual, rather than solely outside ritual as that which enables its performance,”³⁹ or, the strength of the ritual lies equally in the structure that requires and supports it and the physical performance of it.

Whereas Derrida theorizes mainly on words and speech acts, Judith Butler adds the body as necessary for any analysis of ritual. In Hollywood’s words, “resistance is grounded in the body insofar as it is irreducible to speech acts...What should be emphasized here is...an account of bodily practices as themselves performative acts subject to the same misfiring and slippages Austin and Derrida locate in speech acts and signification in general.”⁴⁰ That is, just as speech gains meaning and power through repetition, but changes through misfiring, so do embodied rituals. She goes on to address Talal Asad, who draws on notions of “disciplinary” rituals originally stemming from Marcel Mauss and Michel Foucault. Asad contributes that “it is through bodily practices

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 310, quoted in Hollywood, 106.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 110. For more information on Butler, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

that subjectivities are formed, virtues inculcated, and beliefs embodied.”⁴¹ He suggests anthropologists and historians should study rituals and bodies themselves as texts, not just the words they produce.⁴² Asad adds, “[Ritual] is no longer a *script* for regulating practice but a type of practice that is interpretable as standing for some further *verbally definable*, but tacit, event.”⁴³ His assertion that rituals are acts with the same power as words rests on the notion that they create real sociological or psychological change in the practitioner.

Hollywood’s final addition to the conversation is Catherine Bell, who proposes that we look not just at individual, separate, rituals, but also at the process of repetitive rituals which, “[produce] ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies.”⁴⁴ Bell explains that repeated participation in embodied rituals writes the structure instinctively onto/into the body. But, most importantly, bodies engaged in rituals feel active—and empowered to act—through participation in the ritual:

Ritualization involves the (often unequal) *circulation* of power among all the players within the ritual field: ‘Ritual mastery...means not only that ritualization is the appropriation of a social body but that the social body in turn is able to appropriate a field of action structured in great measure by others’...Ritual is productive of the subject and marks the possibility of that subject’s resistance to the very norms and rituals through which it is constituted. Against those theorists who stress the conservative nature of ritual, Bell argues that ritual mastery ‘experiences itself as relatively empowered, not as conditioned or molded’.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 111. For more about Asad, see, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), esp. chaps. 2, 3. Additionally, Marcel Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*, trans. B. Brewster (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

⁴² *Ibid*, 111.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 111.

⁴⁴ See Catherine “Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 22, in Hollywood, 112.

⁴⁵ See Bell, 210, in Hollywood, 114.

Here Hollywood concludes that the strength of ritual lies in its context and repetition: ritual holds the ability to create new subjects and integrate them into existing communities. But she adds to this that misfiring—slight changes in each separate performance—open the door for “improvisations” which, potentially, resist the very authoritarian structures that lend rituals their strength.

I assert that the body is the necessary canvas on which ritual progression that Turner described, occurs: the body mediates experiences of liminality and *communitas*, contributing to their strength and effectiveness at (re)creating members of society and providing the resources for resistance and adaptation to new circumstances. *Niddah* and *mikveh* thus do three things: inscribe Judaism onto the body, integrate each body into Judaism and, most importantly, differ and defer slightly between each immersion and each immersee.

III. Methodology

My research combines various scholarly texts and other published work on *niddah* and *mikveh* with interviews I conducted myself. I spoke with six women who work at four different *mikvehs* across the country: Chava⁴⁶ and Barbara work at *mikvehs* connected to their synagogues; Shayna and Raizel work at the same *mikveh* run by Chabad (an ultra-Orthodox sect, therefore also associated with a particular synagogue) but catering to the entire Jewish community in their city; and Nancy and Eliza work at a

⁴⁶ All of these names are pseudonyms.

free-standing, unaffiliated *mikveh*. Their *mikvehs* are spread across the East Coast and the Midwest and I was able to visit two of them in person. I conducted the rest of my interviews over the phone. In speaking with these women, I hoped to hear perspectives on feminism's relationship with Judaism, as related to *niddah* and *mikveh*, directly from individuals who act as authorities in these rituals.

Each interviewee was given an idea of my research questions and was given a chance to think about them before we spoke, with the exception of Shayna. Raizel introduced me to Shayna, who agreed to speak with me without prior planning. Though this interview was unplanned, it followed the same structure as the other five. It is important to note that these perspectives do not present an exhaustive analysis so much as individual examples and case studies. They should be read as anecdotal and personal, not necessarily representative of the movements with which they are associated. That being said, because all of these women serve as teachers within their own communities and many also lecture to a much wider audience, I have chosen them specifically to offer their perspectives as experts.

The literature I use is of two types: sociological or anthropological, and theological. I integrate the existing academic discussion about feminism, *niddah* and changes in Orthodox practice to my interviews of Shayna and Raizel, relying on them equally in that section. I also use the work of Rachel Adler and Charlotte Elisheva Fronrobert as primary sources, looking at the way each integrates non-Jewish, academic methodology in producing their theological reactions to *niddah*.

I begin my analysis with Rachel Adler, whose writing on *niddah* exemplifies the conflict between feminism and Judaism. Next I discuss Shayna and Raizel's interviews in the context of Orthodoxy's evolving relationship with feminism. Finally I look at Eliza, Nancy, Barbara, and Chava whose *mikvehs* teach and enact different iterations of a re-imagined *niddah* and immersion. In the spirit of Turner, I position Adler as the "breach," Shayna and Raizel as the "redress," and the re-imagined *mikveh* as the "reintegration" although, as I've explained, I do not approach these labels as part of a linear dialectic so much as concurrent, often conflicting elements of a broad conversation.

IV. The Crisis: Rachel Adler, Part I and II

In 1976, Adler published a beautifully crafted article extolling the spiritual benefits of practicing *niddah*. As an addendum to the article, she wrote a brief response to feminist critiques already lobbied against her. She summarizes the critiques for us:

Jewish women experience *niddah* as prejudicial. It seems to express a paradoxical loathing on the part of men for the rich uterine lining which was both food and cradle to them during nine fetal months...Finally, *niddah* exemplifies a halakhic method in which woman is viewed purely as an object with which the truly human (man) may do *mitzvot* or commit *averot* (sins).⁴⁷

Her article, in opposition to these charges, presents *niddah* as a process through which the Jewish woman confronts her mortality, focusing on the value of an embodied practice

⁴⁷ Adler, Rachel. "Tumah and Taharah : Ends and Beginnings." in *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*. ed. by Elizabeth Koltun. (New York: Schocken, 1976),70.

that allows individuals to deal with the contradictory nature of biology and theology.⁴⁸ “To be reborn,” she proposes, “one must reenter this womb and ‘drown’ in living water. We enter the *mikveh* naked, as an infant enters the world...we emerge from the *mikveh tahor* [pure], having confronted and experienced our own death and resurrection.”⁴⁹ She responded to criticism cited above by urging women to reclaim the practice: “All this evidence, damning as it is, does not invalidate the original *mitzvah*...Having so few authentic traditional experiences on which to build, is it worthwhile to reject *niddah* because later generations of men have projected their repugnance for women upon it?”⁵⁰ Thus, in her first article, Adler made peace with her outsider status through reintegration. She translated her social critique into a viable solution within orthodoxy.

By 1993 when she published once again on the subject of *niddah*, Adler had left Orthodox Judaism, become a Reform rabbi and embraced the feminist critique she once rebuffed. In her second article, “In Your Blood, Live: Re-Visions of a Theology of Purity,” Adler explicitly retracts everything she wrote in 1976. She writes that the *halakhic* explanation of, and justifications for, *niddah* work solely to “persuade or terrify women to keep their pollution to themselves”⁵¹ She describes the breach in her own words:

My theology claimed that impurity was universal. The social reality, since the rabbinic period at least, was that impurity was feminine. My theology claimed that

⁴⁸ This modern use of ritual to solve tensions in theology is similar to Eilberg-Shwartz’s view that *niddah* was written into Leviticus by the Priests to conceal confusion and tensions around whether God has a body. These tensions arise from the statement that humans were made in the likeness or image (translating these words are the center of the debate) of God in Genesis (Gen 1:27). (Eilberg-Shwartz, 36-8)

⁴⁹ Adler, “Tumah and Taharah”, 68.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

impurity was normal and morally neutral. Literary and anthropological evidence, as well as that of contemporary social reality, identify impurity as deviant and a source of stigma and exclusion.⁵²

Her earlier analysis, she explains, was inconsistent with Orthodox theology, which believes that God, Torah and *halakhah* are totally True and original. Her justification of *niddah* rested on secular studies that do not hold the same assumption and were therefore contradictory and dishonest. The new interpretation of purity that Adler presents fits more into her view of Reform theology: it embraces the human (read: fallible) nature of Torah and *halakhah*, and therefore refuses the search for holiness (read: wholeness) through this type of ritual. She writes,

If ours is a Torah of and for human beings, it may be perfected in the way that we perfect ourselves. We do not become more God-like by becoming less human, but by becoming more deeply, more broadly, more comprehensively human... Human is not whole. Human is full of holes. Human bleeds... I tear Your Torah verse from verse, until it is broken and bleeding just like me.

In Adler's later article I read another conversation, beyond feminism and Judaism. Her feminist criticisms cannot be separated from the ongoing, post-enlightenment conflict over body and ritual I outlined above. At first Adler writes graphically and poignantly of the body and its power in ritual. She even acknowledges in her second article how persuasive this description was to those outside of Orthodoxy seeking a stronger connection to the body in their Jewish practice. Adler's later critique, though, is comparable to Bynum's critique of Turner: she points out that cyclical periods of equality and inequality—birth and rebirth—are only cyclical from men's idealized perspective, while women experience perpetual liminality without ever fully being allowed rebirth or

⁵² *Ibid.*

reentry. Although she maintains the need for embodied practice, as we hear in the intensely embodied theology quoted above, Adler refuses to remain in a movement where women's bodies are tools for men's practice or metaphors for men's experiences.

I tell Adler's story here, not to subject it to theological critique, but rather as a parable for the changing perception of *niddah* that comes with feminist and non-Orthodox interrogation of religion. Her individual journey is itself a Turnerian social drama—after the “crisis” in which her feminist sensibilities clash with Orthodox ideology, she attempts first to make space for her confusion within Orthodoxy (“redress”), but eventually breaks off entirely from one world to a new one. I argue that Adler's crisis, paired with her resolution, also represents the ongoing crisis for Judaism at large, which remains relevant both in the world she left and the one she entered: Adler highlights the problem feminism presents for Orthodoxy, but also draws attention to the challenge (lack of) embodiment causes for liberal movements. Her article highlights inconsistencies in both redress and rejection, thereby identifying the point where both feminism and Jewish movements must readjust. I turn now to my discussion of how these tensions shape practice and discourse today.

V. The Redress: Ultra-Orthodox *Mikveh*

In the ultra-Orthodox world, some defenders of *niddah* reframe it as an empowering and spiritually freeing ritual, intentionally exploiting the lack of embodied ritual in liberal movements and appealing to feminist sensibilities in their discourse.

Shayna and Raizel, my two ultra-Orthodox informants, are both Lubavitcher Jews (also known as Chabad), a Hassidic movement Bonnie Morris aptly describes as, “a fortress of traditional, orthodox Jewish observance in a secular/Christian West.” She continues, explaining that self-isolated groups of Hassidic Jews in America uphold a standard of Jewish piety against which the “many ‘liberal’ Jews [who] marry Non-Jews and vanish into secular American culture”⁵³ are often found wanting. Chabad, based in Brooklyn, New York, is particularly committed to bringing Jews they perceive as less observant closer to Orthodox practice (that is, adhering more closely to their understanding of *halakhic* Judaism). As opposed to other groups who choose to disengage entirely from outside culture, Chabad most actively engages with feminism and secularism through their outreach work.⁵⁴

Jody Myers and Jane Rachel Litman summarize the trends in ultra-Orthodoxy’s response to feminism very well: Orthodox discourse focuses on “the notion of separate spheres” and “women’s power and physicality” as unique and empowering in an effort to retain adherents in the face of criticism.⁵⁵ Both Shayna and Raizel, when asked about feminism, answered that women and men have different roles and to perform the other’s role would be more detrimental than liberating for women. Raizel said,

It’s like, women are just as equal as men in Judaism. We have our roles and they have their roles. And I’m actualized through fulfilling my role and they’re

⁵³ Morris, *Lubavitcher women in America: identity and activism in the postwar era*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). For a much more detailed exploration of the relationship between Chabad women and feminism, I highly recommend this short book on the subject.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁵ Myers and Litman. “The Secret of Jewish Femininity: Hiddenness, Power, and Physicality in the Theology of Orthodox Women in the Contemporary World.” *Gender and Judaism: The Transformation of Tradition*. ed. Tamar Rudavsky. (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 53.

actualized through fulfilling theirs. And for me to do theirs or for them to do mine isn't going to enhance my spiritual growth, so why should I? I don't wanna do theirs.

Shayna relied on more mystical ideas about the family and childrearing to articulate the benefits *taharat hamishpacha* brings to society:

Shayna: Many of them did [*mikveh*] knowing the spiritual effect it has on children, and many more generations to come.

Sara: Tell me more about that. What do you mean the spiritual affect on children?

Shayna: Well, you know everyone has a body and soul. Jews have a Jewish soul, and the Jewish soul is nourished by the *mitzvot* that we do. And this is one that affects the person, so this is one that actually affects the soul. Bringing a child into the world after the sanctification that happens. It's not a physical impurity that *mikveh* changes; it's a spiritual impurity. And being a spiritual impurity, is something that you can't put your hands on, it's a spiritual quality that transcends to future generations...

Sara: Why do you think women would choose to use the *mikveh* and observe *niddah* if they don't also keep *kosher*, or keep *Shabbat*?

Shayna: Because of the special spiritual quality that it has for the people, for their offspring, for all generations.

In this way both women played on traditional gender roles and woman-specific powers as a means to justify their life-style.

In addition to the religious symbolism, Shayna integrated explicitly feminist language in her explanation, calling women "empowered" and "capable" while she stressed that they run their homes and, therefore, their communities.⁵⁶ Despite explicitly rejecting the call from some feminists for women to abandon their private roles as

⁵⁶ Economically this is quite true in ultra-Orthodox communities where [often?] men are busily immersed in studying *halakhah* while women often do both domestic labor and paid labor outside of the home for their families (Morris, 25). Again, Morris's book provides a much more detailed analysis of women's roles in Chabad and other Hassidic communities that I am able to offer here.

homemakers, or to redistribute the “second shift” of homemaking in addition to paid labor, Shayna emphasized her own public achievements. She spoke of both secular and religious accomplishment, possibly intentionally appealing to my own background as non-Orthodox and interested in feminism. For example, she told me she became a *mikveh lady* because,

Well someone has to do the job. And to me at that time it was something that [unclear] older European women used to do, they didn't have college-educated women there. And I felt this is something that college-educated women should. College educated women, that has to become the norm now... I've since lectured all across the country in different communities on *mikveh*. Became one of the teachers of family purity.⁵⁷

Her husband, who drove me home after the interview, also ensured that I knew Shayna was qualified and empowered by secular standards: he informed me that she graduated from a state college with a degree in mathematics by the age of 19, before entering her current role.

Meyer and Litman add to their discussion about ultra-Orthodoxy and feminism that,

The very process of constructing an apologetic, that is, taking on one's own defense, changes the women. These Orthodox women are affirming their social reality by using new tools: feminist language, mystical symbolism previously known only to men, and their own novel theological exegesis.⁵⁸

As I've shown, Raizel and Shayna employ all three of these tools in discussing why people use *mikveh* and observe *niddah*. Developing theology around women's body in

⁵⁷ It is interesting to note that Shayna's story is part of a larger trend among some rabbis and their wives, as Shayna is, working to revitalize *Taharas haMishpacha*. Its observance rapidly declined in the early and mid 1900s (Joselit, 117). Though Shayna spoke to the ritual's importance, my own research suggests that her enthusiasm developed in the context of this neglect, which stemmed from general ambivalence towards embodied ritual and poor upkeep of the physical *mikvehs* available for immersion (Joselit).

⁵⁸ Myers and Litman, “The Secret of Jewish Fertility,” 53.

women's terms, mystical literacy, and more systematic control over *niddah* by the women implicated in it are notable, structural shifts in Orthodox society and not to be ignored. Although evidence of this type of folk knowledge exists throughout history,⁵⁹ entrance into the centralized knowledge production authorized by religious authorities is novel.

Thus Chabad's response to feminism exemplifies Turner's "redress." The changes are the outcome of an existing culture attempting to make space for the liminal groups so as not to lose them. These alterations in discourse strive to accommodate changing sensibilities, without compromising the basic, preexisting power structure. The shift clearly works: there is a large population of *ba'alot tshuva* [women who become Orthodox], such as Raizel, who abandon secular society in favor of the strict rules of Orthodoxy. Many have theorized why this is appealing but the result remains the same: the women I spoke with who practice *niddah* do not view their experience with the same discomfort as Adler. While the philosophy they continue to develop adds more relevant justification to their practice it also shapes it more in the vision of feminists as a woman-centered, woman-powered ritual.

⁵⁹ Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert's article "Yatla's Ruse: Resistance against Rabbinic Menstrual Authority in Rabbinic Literature" and Chava Weissler's article "Mitzvot Built into the Body: Tkhines for Niddah, Pregnancy, and Childbirth", both in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel R. Wasserfall. (Boston: Brandeis University Press, 1999.), both speak to this history. Fonrobert analyzes evidence of resistance to rabbinic authority so prevalent that the controversy was preserved in the Talmud. Weissler looks at prayers about *niddah* and other woman-centered experiences from the 17th and 18th centuries. The historical precedence for women-authored prayers and explanations for *niddah* and the modern ones I discuss here differ in their relationship to the mainstream: Weissler analyzes folk-texts, far outside the legal structure of *halakhah*, whereas my Shayna's work with *niddah* is among much other work sanctioned by rabbinic authorities.

Reading Feminism within ultra-Orthodoxy

It would be easy to point to these shifts in women's position as proof that ultra-Orthodox women "are feminists too," but I hesitate to do so: both Shaina and Raizel actively reject that notion. I turn to Saba Mahmood to decipher the nuance in discussing ultra-Orthodox practice of *niddah* in this context—to do as Bynum asks and stand with practitioners rather than judge them according to my own ideals. Mahmood criticizes feminism's reliance on the liberal assumption that pursuit of "freedom" is a universal desire. She defines "freedom," in the discourse she criticizes, as either "absence from obstacles to self-guided choice" or "capacity to realize an autonomous will...unencumbered by the weight of custom, transcendental will, and tradition."⁶⁰ In her understanding, women's choices are only considered "feminist" or "empowering" if they fit into the struggle for one such limiting definition of freedom. Instead, Mahmood "argue[s] for uncoupling both the notion of self-realization from that of the autonomous will as well as agency from the progressive goal of emancipatory politics."⁶¹ She urges scholars to step outside of this particularly Western, secular notion of individual liberation.

Ultimately, Mahmood shows that, although these limited definitions of freedom hold true for some, many women do not seek individual freedom and personal empowerment, as Adler did. Rather, they define themselves within a different system which values communal understandings of God's will over secular individualism.

⁶⁰ Mahmood. "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival". *Cultural Anthropology*. 16 (2), (2001). 207.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 208.

Tempting as it is to read Western ideologies into these women's experience, I avoid attempting to fit others into an outside definition of freedom. Though Shayna and Raizel do not choose to "liberate" themselves from patriarchy, as per the call of some secular feminists (particularly, as they perceive the call of secular feminists) their response fits into their own understanding of the world.

When Raizel mentioned that she cannot be actualized through fulfilling men's commandments I, in turn, asked if she is actualized through fulfilling the women's commandments. She responded:

I don't know that I get spiritual fulfillment through practicing *niddah* or taking *challah* or keeping *kosher*, I just do it because that's my commandments and my relationship with God, that's what I do. I mean, its like, its really like a total lifestyle encompassing sort of thing. I don't know if I get spiritual fulfillment from it.

She practices Judaism according to Orthodox tradition and not for any personal, individualistic gain. Rather Raizel understands following the commandments as the "right" way live: "Judaism is not a part of my life, my life has become Jewish...and since I am here to serve God, that is my purpose...so I do the *mitzvahs* because that's what He wants." Some may see Raizel's life—devoted to justifying and expanding a system that upholds women's subservience to constant male authority and dictates their spheres of influence—as antifeminist. But, as K. C. Burke, in the spirit of Mahmood, reminds us, "agency mustn't be equated with classic liberal perception of man's freedom...It is

inappropriate to require autonomy in order to recognize agency, especially for persons living outside a Western context.”⁶²

If Adler’s progression represents the “breach” between Orthodoxy and feminism, Shayna and Raizel live in the “redressive” stage. They present the shift in tradition— itself a deceptive term, as tradition is constantly shifting—to accommodate the alienated groups. Again, Meyers and Litman summarize the “redress” well: “The women’s philosophies of Judaism studied here were designed partly to address women who are or were once caught in this dilemma.”⁶³ But, just as Bynum questioned Turner’s ritual process because it assumed a full participation in dominant society, I do not expect Turner’s social drama to fully encompass or sufficiently acknowledge the range of experiences and reactions to social movements like feminism. Therefore, I stress that Shayna and Raizel are not being duped by an aggressive patriarchy feeding them the words to defend themselves against modernity, nor should this “stage” be read as a mere means to a more feminist end: the women I spoke with and read about actively participate in forming those words and shaping those rituals while continuing to live their lives according to their vision of God’s will.

VI. The Reintegration: Bringing the *Mikveh* Full Circle

Outside of the Orthodox world, Adler’s critique remains the dominant trope about *niddah*. The rest of my analysis focuses on changes in progressive movements

⁶² Burke K.C. 2012. “Women’s agency in gender-traditional religions: A review of four approaches”. *Sociology Compass*. 6 (2): 122-133. (2012),128.

⁶³ Myers and Litman, “Secrets of Jewish Femininity”, 69.

responding to both Chabad apologetics and Reform rejection. Chava, Eliza, Barbara, and Nancy work in innovative *mikvehs* that negotiate *niddah* and ritual immersions in conversation with modernity. They neither fully reject it nor entirely embrace the secular critiques of religious practice. Nancy told me this anecdote about her conversion—her first *mikveh* experience—that exemplifies the challenges she now works to address:

So I had a mikveh experience at the time that I was converted. It was not good. It was, um, the *mikveh lady* spoke almost no English. Yiddish. And when you're a convert you don't have a lot of Yiddish yet. Especially if you've grown up in a town with no Jews. And my *beit din*⁶⁴ was held in—this was all taking place in an Orthodox girls day school—and my *beit din* was held in the cafeteria. And even my boyfriend's family clearly conveyed to me that they thought my having to go the *mikveh* was bizarre and creepy. To which you're kind of like, 'if the Jews think this is weird, now I'm really scared.' Because I thought this was their ritual. But they were Reform.

So I had a very anxiety provoking experience without any spirituality, including my favorite picture is, the *mikveh lady* believed that you should cover your head when you say a blessing. And there are some people who still believe this, and many others who say that the water is your covering and you can sort of, place your hands in a way to make a distinction between this part of your body and that part, but she didn't. So she made me wear a wet washcloth on my head. And it's dripping down into my face. Like, you're naked, with a wet washcloth on my head, and this is supposed to be this transformational moment in which you join the Jewish people forever. It lacked dignity. But you know, I came out Jewish.

First, Nancy noticed what Shayna also criticized: the *mikveh lady* was unapproachable and disconnected.⁶⁵ Next, she mentions that her boyfriend's family, who came to support her conversion, found the whole ritual "weird" because they are Reform—a testament to the skepticism towards embodied rituals among non-Orthodox Jews. Finally, she was

⁶⁴ When converting to Judaism, the convert meets with a "rabbinic court," which decides whether they are eligible to convert.

⁶⁵ It is possible that some *mikvehs*, particularly in New York City where there is an extremely high population of women who practice *niddah*, still resemble this type of *mikveh*, and are staffed by *mikveh ladies* such as this one, though I did not come across any like this in my research.

made to wear a wet washcloth on her head because of the tradition the *mikveh lady* upheld: she had no choice in the matter. Her closing words summarize the whole event, as well as its significance, quite well: “It lacked dignity. But you know, I came out Jewish.” Though the ritual made her uncomfortable, it effectively made the switch in her eyes, and in the eyes of the community, from gentile to Jew. As both Hollywood and Turner remind us, rituals create the circumstances for society’s structure to be written onto a body—in this case even her negative *mikveh* experience nonetheless inscribed her body as Jewish (and, I will argue momentarily, reinscribed it as female).

Nancy and Eliza work at the same *mikveh*, which describes itself online as “a threshold into Jewish life” where “spiritually diverse needs of 21st century Jews are met by reclaiming the ancient tradition of immersing in the *mikveh*.” Further, they work to “[make] *mikveh* accessible for the full diversity of our people.” Barbara and Chava’s *mikvehs* share the same vision of tradition paired with openness and renewal. Each woman offers pedagogy with a different focus and different language than traditional teachings, creating new meaning and reframing old—much as Adler attempted to do at first, and as Shayna and Raizel do indirectly. The re-imagined *mikveh* also restructures the entire *mikveh* experience: physically, the spaces are more intentionally beautiful and welcoming; additionally, *mikveh ladies* are trained to take a very different approach to facilitating the ritual. Through these changes, all three *mikvehs* counteract some of the most salient feminist critiques of *niddah* and *mikveh* but remain connected to traditional Jewish practice. In particular, the restructuring of authority allows for an intentional

implementation of reform, which maintains the authoritative structure—the “Jewishness”—of the ritual but opens space for subversion of normative, potentially oppressive practices.

Educating the Uninformed: Niddah for the (more) Secular Jew

The private, individual nature of *niddah* practice means that an expert has the responsibility of passing the ritual on between generations. In the past, this expert has been the rabbi prior to marriage or other women who teach the folk-traditions, such as Raizel and Shayna. That these traditions have no technical basis in *halakhah* does not mean they are not legitimate theological artifacts. In particular, they are a testament to women’s exclusion from production of mainstream knowledge and I have already noted the significant changes around this type of knowledge production. Chava, Barbara, Nancy and Eliza also take on the position of expert and teacher, wielding influence over their communities’ perception of *niddah* and *mikveh* in a new way. They strive to reframe both as more palatable to feminist and secular ears while promoting them as still valuable and relevant today.⁶⁶ By intervening in existing discourse, these women and their *mikvehs* push Jewish thought to change in conversation with feminism. At the same time, implicitly, they assert that the limited historic understanding of feminism that Adler represents must also expand to make space for Jewish practice.

⁶⁶ This is very different from the type of teaching that Shayna does: Shayna addresses mostly Orthodox audiences, already familiar with *mikveh* and committed to practicing it. Chava, Barbara, Eliza and Nancy address people with varying familiarity and commitment to *mitzvot* and therefore must teach not just to inform but also to—in a way—promote. Shayna’s audiences also probably heard about the *mitzvah* from their mothers and friends, whereas very few mothers or friends in Reform or Conservative communities are aware of, let alone practice, *niddah*.

Barbara, Nancy, and Eliza teach *niddah* and *mikveh* mostly to highly skeptical audiences unfamiliar with the rituals. Nancy and Eliza's *mikveh* was founded specifically with the goal of reaching these audiences. Chava primarily educates through bridal counseling and, though more of her audiences know of *niddah*, they often present the same hesitation and resistance.⁶⁷ In Nancy's experience, echoed in all my interviews, audiences typically "think they know that a woman only does it because her husband makes her do it. That she does it and she feels degraded. That she does it and she feels like the Torah is telling her that she's dirty when she has her period." Responding to the assumption that embodied, sex-specific rituals are by definition oppressive and the often unspoken aversion to *mikveh* and *niddah* as "antiquated" and "primitive" (Barbara's words) sets the tone of my informant's lessons. One easy, rational aspect of *niddah* all my interviewees appeal to is the "honeymoon affect"; after two weeks of abstinence, reconnecting physically with one's partner is often refreshing and exciting. Even Shayna and Raizel addressed this benefit, though more as a positive side-note than the reason to practice it.

Another common tool was to re-contextualize *niddah* with other, still accepted Jewish practice—to present it as no more oppressive than other laws or rituals, which are not subject to the same feminist critiques. Nancy and Barbara both spoke about lighting *shabbat* candles,⁶⁸ which many practicing Reform and Conservative Jews do despite it

⁶⁷ At the time of this interview, Chava said she eventually wanted to have a more developed educational and outreach program, but as she was both a student and a ritual leader at her synagogue, that had yet to take shape.

⁶⁸ Lighting the *shabbat* candles is the first ritual for designating between the Sabbath and all other days of the week. Women traditionally perform this ritual while their husbands are at synagogue. In progressive movements, lighting

being equally inexplicable in rational terms and also a traditionally gendered *mitzvah*. Along the same lines, *niddah* fits well into the widely held understanding that Jewish laws set boundaries and divisions which give meaning to daily life. As Barbara said,

Niddah and the observance of *taharat hamishpacha* is so conscious of making sure that the couple has many avenues for intimacy and communication that aren't only physical ones... whether that time of intimacy is specifically with the idea of possibly creating a new life, or not, you still are intimate with a sense of holiness because you are conscious of God's presence there.

Chava put it frankly,

Um, but, I frame it in terms of the discipline of moderation that exists throughout Judaism. You know, food is awesome. Enjoy it. Just not all food, all the time. And certain foods, never... And this like, rhythm and boundaries and that kind of thing. Its actually beautiful, its pleasurable, this person is permitted to you, but sometimes this person won't be permitted to you.

Or, Eliza combines Barbara's spirituality and Chava's frankness:

And I sort of liken it to keeping kosher or keeping Shabbat, where Judaism is all about boundaries, like we're all about distinctions between things and different boundaries...so I sort of, like the idea of a physical relationship having its own holiness, and a time to be together and a time to be apart.

This justification was always offered with a reminder that *niddah* is not a woman's job exclusively, but the responsibility of both partners. Thus they reframe abstinence during the period of separation as consensual submission to the boundaries that define Judaism, moving the conversation away from whether *niddah* as "feminist" or "feminine," and towards *niddah* as means through which couples embrace Jewish tradition and integrate it into their lives. This type of discourse destabilizes *niddah's* position as a "women's commandment" with restrictions imposed on women's bodies, recognizing agency to

candles often becomes a family-centered (rather than woman-centered) ritual, but the practice remains central to marking the beginning of Sabbath.

shape one's religious observance and the commandments' broader implications beyond the individual observing it.

Another element of Chava, Barbara, Nancy and Eliza's pedagogy emphasized the mystery behind Jewish laws, which lends flexibility to where individuals find meaning in them. As Eliza explains,

If we were saying, what should an ethical, just society look like, we wouldn't say, women should go to the mikveh two weeks after their period ends. We wouldn't come up with this one on our own, but the idea of using a natural body of water to mark a transition from one state to another, that's kind of cool.

She does not pretend to know why the ritual came to be, but knows that it can be meaningful personally, and represents a specifically Jewish way to exist in the world. This ritual, and others like it, creates a reality different from any—implicitly non-Jewish—imagining of the ideal society. Barbara also embraces this unknown, personal moment. She asks her audience to imagine they have never experienced the color red,

And then I step aside and let the audience see this person who is wearing a red sweatshirt and I say, but once you see the red and it becomes your own personal experience, only then can you understand really what it's all about. And *mikveh* is really like that. It is unique to each person, because your perception of *mikveh*, your perception of red will vary from person to person, and your interpretation, your expectation of what *mikveh* will be about are also very personal.

Focusing on the personal, transformational experience allows Barbara's audiences to relate to individualism and "spirituality," which are more acceptable concepts in the Western psyche today than "tradition" and *halakhah*. It also emphasizes that although they may not find *niddah* and *mikveh* spiritually fulfilling, others have a right to. This

shift in discourse creates a more comfortable space for *niddah* within secular society and challenges those who use it as a tool to delegitimize others' practice.

Chava's approach, put simply, is that "people will take meaning where they can find it." She offers the full spectrum of interpretations I've outlined thus far, including biblical, scholarly analyses, mystical rationales, *halakhic* discussions, and the idea of renewing one's relationship. She concluded her explanation saying, "I try and give meaning to the purity concept, but I also try to take away some of the stigma of that." Because she teaches a primarily Orthodox community, Chava can assume that the women she teaches will at least attempt to follow these laws, but nonetheless wishes to give them as many opportunities as possible to find meaning in them. Chava is not troubled, as Adler is, by the "oppressive" nature of the ritual because, at the end of the day, it is required. But nor is she troubled that some of the interpretations which she presents come from outside of the traditional Jewish theoretical frameworks; she allows each person to make peace with the contradictions this may imply.

Chava, Eliza, Barbara and Nancy move away from theology that glorifies woman-as-home metaphors and instead focus on more familiar ideas in American religion today, mostly individual spirituality and fulfillment. All four offer a breadth of existing interpretations for each person to mold into their own meaning. Whether educating brides-to-be, young people approaching bar or bat mitzvah, synagogue sisterhoods, or curious groups of congregants, these women take the opportunity to present a picture quite different from normative perception of *niddah* and what feminism has to say about

it. They construct and teach a theology that combines tropes of feminism, biblical scholarship and individual spirituality with Jewish community. In particular, they utilize their role as educators to address the post-enlightenment alienation from the body, which clashes with ritual practice—attempting to persuade others that embodied rituals are not only modern and non-oppressive, but can be quite meaningful. In this context also, new pedagogies address the tendency in Western secularism and Western feminism to function as their own hegemonic force, dictating for others what their relationship tradition and their bodies should be. In line with Mahmood's critiques of feminism above, Nancy explained:

People have a tendency to say that where there is *halakhah* that we are not doing, people who are doing it are doing it out of a sense of obligation, and often a negative, you know a sense of obligation not taking it on willingly. Unwilling obligation. It's unfair. You know, we have to stop thinking of Jewish observance in this way.

She rightly identifies this sentiment as oppressive in its own way—it can be prescriptive and inflexible in a way similar to how some people experience *halakhic* requirements.⁶⁹ Thus their pedagogies challenge not only a potentially oppressive commandment and historical interpretation of it, but the rigid, post-enlightenment feminism and secularism that facilitated its rejection.

⁶⁹ Many other scholars, most notably Leila Ahmed in the field of religious studies, have noted feminism's role in promoting colonialism: inequality and lack of access to the public sphere is often used as one reason to "liberate" and "enlighten" non-Western countries (for more on this subject, see: Ahmed, Leila 1992. *Women and gender in Islam: historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.) Although the relationship between ultra-Orthodox and progressive Jewish movements is quite different in political terms, the use of women's roles as a reason to disdain and force change within the Orthodox communities is similar.

Mikveh as a Liminal Space

In line with pedagogical changes, the re-imagined *mikvehs* analyzed in this section also restructure the physical experience of coming to *mikveh* and immersing. First among these changes is renewing the physical space—the building itself. Nancy painted me a picture of their vision for how one enters her *mikveh*:

They come and they, they know that it's warm and welcoming, and it's not judgmental, and we're going to speak sweetly to them, and we're going to offer them a glass of water or a cup of tea, and if they want to sit on the couches they can, they can take as long as they want... And so they come and they often seem, once they know us, very relaxed. And I think that's different than other *mikvehs*. I think other *mikvehs* are much more matter of fact. We're here to care for you. And we're going to treat you like we're here to care for you.

The actual building—the only one I visited of the three in this section—is in a free standing house to which Nancy and Eliza's organization added a *mikveh*. Guests enter into a living room with comfortable chairs and a range of feminist and Jewish magazines to peruse. There is also the desk where the *mikveh guide* sits to open doors and answer phones. The employees' offices are in former bedrooms. Dressing rooms for the *mikvehs* are also comfortable, with high quality shower products (shampoo, soap, etc.), and clean towels and robes. Overall, the space feels and smells like a spa.⁷⁰ Raizel and Shayna's *mikveh*, which I also visited, actually looked quite similar and their *mikveh* was newer than Nancy and Eliza's. But Raizel and Shaya made no attempt to enhance the *mikveh*

⁷⁰ This beautiful, spa-like *mikveh* is a drastic turn from those used 60 years prior: according to Jenna Weissman Joselit, one reason *mikveh* use was completely abandoned by American women—even the most Orthodox—was the abysmal state of the *mikvehs* available to them. She describes the *mikvehs* in New York City in the 1940s as “little more than rusty iron tanks located in the basements of immigrant Jewish neighborhoods” whose water was rarely changed (119). Although Joselit mentioned that other, more sanitary *mikvehs* were built to appeal to wealthier practitioners, those they strove to attract were exactly those most likely to abandon practice citing secular disdain, and their efforts to adjust to accommodate changing sensibilities failed (120). See Jenna Weissman Joselit. *New York's Jewish Jews: the orthodox community in the interwar years*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

experience beyond cleanliness, or to add to its spa-like atmosphere through tea or calm music. Nonetheless, the newness of both implied that the need to modernize and sanitize *mikveh* spaces is universal, another testament to growing reexamination of *niddah* across denominations.⁷¹

Overall, changing the *mikveh* space in this way contributes to the idea that liminality—separation from society and release from its structure—need not be as violent and degrading as Turner understood it, or as Adler experienced it. Liminality, as facilitated by the *mikveh* spaces I visited, becomes an indulgent and relaxing release from structure; it becomes an enticing element of the ritual in that each liminal being is treated equally with respect and welcomed to take a break from the stresses of their life whereas other *mikvehs* treat the entire experience as more businesslike and hasty.

Changing Authority—Changing Communitas

Just as the space is now more welcoming, so the *mikveh lady* has assumed a very different role in facilitating each physical immersion. Nancy and Eliza's *mikveh* enlists volunteers from the community to learn laws and traditions of *mikveh* and serve as witnesses for others' immersions, a model which Chava also adopted. Nancy and Eliza both got involved in their *mikveh* through this role, which they've renamed *mikveh guide*. *Guides* work in the *mikveh*, answering phones, keeping the space clean, and doing whatever is needed around the building in addition to witnessing. For Nancy, in her non-

⁷¹ Raizel and I spoke about how they just built a new space because their previous was falling apart and poorly coordinated.

denominational *mikveh*, teaching the traditions and laws is particularly interesting because so few women have any prior familiarity with *mikveh* or *niddah*. They must be taught not only the *halakhah*—which prayers are to be said and how to immerse properly—but also extensive traditions built around the experience. For example, some women expect you to check their backs for loose hair and inspect their fingernails before they enter the pool, as practiced in many orthodox traditions. Performing these checks lends authenticity to “reimagined” *mikvehs* and more legitimacy to them in the Orthodox community.

At the same time, it is the imposition of these traditions that initially incited the need for change. Chava explained the process she went through to navigate this tension:

The biggest question, when we opened our *mikveh*...was in that moment, when the woman is about to get in the mikveh, she's standing there in a robe, or in a towel, you're standing there in the mikveh room with her, there's that moment where, in many traditional mikvehs, they're sort of interrogated. You know, 'did you do this, did you do that, did you comb your hair, did you scrub behind your ears,' whatever. And in some mikvehs they're looking at their fingernails, their toenails, whatever. And the big debate was, what are we going to say in that moment...We settled on, 'would you like me to check anything?' or 'would you like me to go over the checklist with you?' That way someone can say 'nope I'm fine'.

Since Chava's *mikveh* is Orthodox, she adheres to the *halakhah* requiring a witness, whereas Nancy and Eliza do not require one. Otherwise, they have the same approach in training their *mikveh guides* to be as unobtrusive as possible. By offering—but not requiring—a “check list,” *mikveh guides* can be the authority necessary for *communitas* without making it an unpleasant or abusive experience. They thus avoid perpetuating the

interrogation process that contributed to constant policing of women's bodies by religious authorities.

Barbara's *mikveh* is slightly different from the other two at this point. Barbara is the only woman who works in her *mikveh*—in fact, she is known across the Jewish community in her city as “Barbara the *Mikveh Lady*.” She took her training into her own hands, studying *halakhah*, traditions and innovations about *mikveh* on her own while her community raised funds to build her *mikveh*. Although she takes a more traditional approach by working closely with a (male)⁷² rabbi, and turning to him when questions of *halakhah* arise⁷³ she holds the same beliefs about what visiting *mikveh* should feel like when you enter. She explained,

I try to be as minimally inquisitive as possible when someone calls me. If I get a message, ‘Hi this is Susan, this is my phone number, I’m interested in coming to the mikveh’ I have no idea if she’s coming for a conversion, someone whose just received a *get* [Jewish divorce], is she anticipating chemo therapy⁷⁴, did she just get married, looking to come for niddah? I have no clue.

Later, after telling me she worked as a doctor for 35 years before opening her *mikveh* and assuring me she feels extremely comfortable around all bodies, she added:

And that also is something that is extremely, extremely important to me that I explain to the person, both women and men, how their privacy is going to be protected, in terms of their physical privacy...I don't want people to feel, um, exposed either in a physical way nor in a spiritual way.

⁷² Conservative rabbis can be any gender, but the one Barbara works with happens to be male.

⁷³ Chava also works very closely with a rabbi, but she is in the process of completing her ordination as an Orthodox ritual leader, currently the closest equivalent to rabbi available to women.

⁷⁴ One of the newer uses of *mikveh*, growing in popularity with these re-imagined *mikvehs*, is integrating it into recovery from various traumas, such as sexual assault or cancer. Because this type of ritual differs from *niddah* in that it does not have *halakhic* precedent, they are not the focus of this paper.

Thus, although she is still a *mikveh lady*, her approach of openness and non-judgment remains consistent with Chava, Eliza and Nancy's *mikveh guides*.

This shift from *mikveh lady* to *mikveh guide* changes the entire experience of *mikveh*. They primarily facilitate individual choice, self-determination, and comfort, while maintaining continuity with historical practice. In particular, they allow for the structures that lend meaning to the ritual while allowing each individual to define her relationship with those structures. Their relinquishing authority to the immersee reflects the diversity in beliefs and experiences that converge in the wish to perform this particular ritual. As Nancy explains it,

We decided here to give that responsibility to the woman going in the water, or the man going in the water. To say 'the responsibility for the *kashrut* [in this case meaning Jewish legitimacy] of your conversion lies in your hands...which is one of the biggest defining philosophies of the actual emersion experience here.

My analysis of the Turnerian social drama could stop here: I could conclude that by reframing *niddah* to make a space for embodied practice without depending on policing each body for the rituals' effectiveness, and without promoting discourse that stigmatizes others' relationship with the ritual, the reimagined *mikvehs* successfully integrate a feminist critique into mainstream Jewish practice. But I return now to Hollywood's analysis to add one more level.

The Next Level: Reimagined Mikveh, Re-imagined Gender

Niddah's original meaning arose in reference to heterosexual relationships, and in a culture that assumed cisgendered bodies.⁷⁵ In the same way that the *mikveh* reinscribes (or inscribes for the first time, in the case of conversion) Judaism, when performed traditionally it also reinscribes heterosexuality and binary, biologically determined gender on to the bodies participating in it. Thus, when the reimagined *mikvehs* destabilize authority over each ritual, they also functionally destabilize systems of sexuality and gender that work silently around and within the ritual. Actively challenging these structures, which I will presently examine, exemplifies Hollywood's "improvisation."

Nancy told me a story about a trans-identified woman converting to Judaism in her *mikveh* that highlights the slight changes that can be made between each immersion to actively subvert authoritarian structures of sexuality and gender that some experience as oppressive. She explained,

We had a situation a few months ago where one rabbi said, 'I have a convert and I was planning, I live out in western Mass...it's an Orthodox *mikveh*, and she came to me a few days ago and as part of our consultation, right before the, you know the week before the *mikveh* she told me that she's trans. And she's pre op' [has not had sexual reassignment surgery] and he said 'I can't take her where I was gonna take her.' And I asked around and people told me I should call you. And we were like 'oh yeah, we do that all the time.'

And he said 'yeah, I don't know what to do about witnessing.' And we said, 'well, you need to ask her. What gender witness does she want? We have a trans *mikveh guide*. He's female to male, but sometimes people who are trans would

⁷⁵ There actually exists a great deal of *halakhic* and Talmudic discussion about androgyny and sexual ambiguity, but modern discourse of gender variance has little historical precedence. For more information on Jewish perspectives on androgyny and intersex bodies, see Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert's essay "Regulating the Human Body: Rabbinic Legal Discourse and the Making of Jewish Gender" or Beth Oren's article "Judaism and Gender Issues," both in Noach Dzmura's anthology *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010).

prefer a trans *mikveh guide* no matter whether it's the same gender or not, just someone who's had the same experience. She in fact said she wanted a woman, but she needed a woman who was going to be ok with the fact that she was pre-op.

Well, we did a GLBT—no. We did a *trans* sensitivity training for our mikveh guides a few years ago, and we asked our guides to identify whether they were comfortable witnessing a trans person. So we put out an email to those, saying 'we have a situation with a male to female pre-op convert, is anyone out there willing to witness'—because you have to make sure that this is going to be safe for both of the people in the room—and one person raised their hand and said yes.⁷⁶

In this moment, a woman came to convert: a process, as I've shown, through which her body was accepted and translated into a Jewish, pure body. But whether her genitalia matched her gender identity was not policed in the process that otherwise could cause much trauma. Instead, through flexible, informed and nonjudgmental authority structures her body was accepted as Jewish, female and holy in the moment of her immersion. Though I found no evidence that trans-identified people use *mikveh* for *niddah*, many have written about their experience converting in trans-friendly *mikvehs*, or immersing at other traditional times. Furthermore, while conversion does not as directly strengthen heterosexuality as in *niddah*, as similar case could be made for women who sleep with women immersing for *niddah*, which Nancy also spoke about.

⁷⁶ After telling me about this story, Nancy directed me to a blog entry this particular woman wrote about her experience. In it she reflected, "As a transgender person and lesbian, I have gotten used to gatekeepers, people who are trained, authorized and paid to say 'No.' I approached a new spiritual community and asked a woman the age of my eldest daughter to be my spiritual advisor, not knowing what to expect. Much to my surprise the keepers of the *sha'arei* (gates) both at shul [synagogue] and the mikveh were really, truly there to welcome me home." (For confidentiality purposes, I cannot cite this particular quote). In this case, "home" probably refers to both the her gender identity and her religious community.

In addition to the lack of judgment, the authenticity and quiet acceptance of the ritual strikes me as notably different from other, newer attempts⁷⁷ to welcome transbodies into Judaism. Hollywood points out that part of the strength in ritualization is its reference to each act that preceded it. And so with this conversion (and others like it): the rituals are not a function of a new and different Judaism, but attempting seamlessly to continue that which preceded it. Barbara's nonchalance in performing conversions for trans people demonstrates this point:

I've had people who have come after they've had their transgender surgery for conversion...And I always, in talking to the person, ask, if they've gendered into being female, would you be comfortable having me serve as your *shomeret* [Hebrew meaning "guard" or "watcher"]? How would you like to handle it, in terms of witnessing?

In this way Barbara, Chava, Eliza and Nancy's *mikvehs* go beyond empowering an essentialized category of woman through Jewish practice; they enact and allow flexibility in the definition of woman (or man), marriage, and family through *mikveh*. They open the Turnerian dialectic of *communitas* and society that I described above to individuals whose bodies once went unrecognized, ostracized, or for whom body-focused rituals could cause further trauma.⁷⁸ They thus move beyond *niddah* and *mikveh* as questions of

⁷⁷ See for example Catherine Madsen and Joy Ladin's article "Ritual for Gender Transition (Male to Female)" in *Balancing on the Mechitza: Transgender in Jewish Community* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010).

⁷⁸ That being said, Chava and Nancy's *mikveh* also promotes the type of new and invented immersions that do not directly reference traditional practice, such as part of recovery from an abusive relationship, sexual trauma, or chemotherapy. These rituals take the basic concept of *niddah*—the recognition of, and transition into, holiness—and resignify them for other purposes. These are decidedly a minority of immersions at all the *mikvehs*, but certainly still present, particularly in their promotional material. *Mikveh* as recovery from trauma or to signify an end to chemotherapy are the most common ones my interviewees spoke about. It is possible that they derive some legitimacy by being paired with these more traditional practices. It is also possible that they, as they gain prominence, will become a more central part of Jewish tradition. Though these types of immersions were not the focus of my research, I do note that they achieve the same goal as welcoming LGBTQ immersions in traditional *mikveh*: they allow bodies that struggle to be read as legitimate and give them access to the normative *communitas* that (re)makes them as Jewish.

women's role in society and make it a conversation about using *mikveh* to recognize all bodies and relationships as both holy and Jewish.

VIII. Conclusion

I started this paper as an attempt to understand how feminism and feminist discourse influence Jewish practice but I discovered a multifaceted conversation involving different Judaisms, feminisms, modernity, secularism and Orthodoxy, all of which converge—and often clash—around *mikveh* and *niddah*. Turner's social drama, coupled with Bynum's critiques and Hollywood's elaboration, helps show how feminism, secularism and tradition respond to, build off, or react against the other with the body as the canvas on which these critiques are written. I hope to have complicated the conversation about feminism within religious practice by offering multiple lenses of feminist criticism within my own analysis.

Ultimately, I found that the final model of *mikveh* and *niddah* discussed above holds a unique possibility to fill a void in Jewish practice created when post-enlightenment theology, for whatever reason, rejects embodied practices such as *niddah* and *mikveh*. In addition to this, my analysis exemplified a challenge to feminism—or the general perception of feminism—as prescriptive force imposing its values universally. Rather, I have shown that through reintegrating reimagined *mikveh* and *niddah* into progressive Jewish movements, both Judaism and feminism can continue to develop more inclusive, less oppressive, ideologies.

Bibliography and Work Cited

- Adler, Rachel. "In your blood, live: re-visions of a theology of purity". *Tikkun*. 8 (1) (1993).
- Adler, Rachel. "Tumah and Taharah : Ends and Beginnings." *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*. New York: Schocken, 1976.
- Avishai, Orit. "'Doing Religion" in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency." *Gender and Society*. 22.4 (2008): 409-433.
- Biale, David. *Blood and belief: the circulation of a symbol between Jews and Christians*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Burke K.C. "Women's agency in gender-traditional religions: A review of four approaches". *Sociology Compass*. 6 (2) (2012): 122-133.
- Bynum, Caroline. "Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality" in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, ed. Caroline Bynum. New York: Uzone Inc., 1991.
- Cook, Leslie A. "Body Language: Women's Rituals of Purification in the Bible and Mishnah." In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel R. Wasserfall, 40-59. Boston: Brandeis Univeristy Press, 1999.
- Eilberg-Schwartz, Howard. "Introduction." In *People of the body: Jews and Judaism from an embodied perspective*, edited by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, 1-16. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.
- Eilberg-Schwartz, Howard. "The Problem of the Body for the People of th Book." In *People of the body: Jews and Judaism from an embodied perspective*, edited by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, 17-46. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.
- Fonrobert, Charlotte Elisheva. 2000. *Menstrual purity: rabbinic and Christian reconstructions of Biblical gender*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Fonrobert, Elisheva. "Yatla's Ruse: Resistance against Rabbinic Menstrual Authority in Talmudic Literature" In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel R. Wasserfall, 60-81. Boston: Brandeis Univeristy Press, 1999.

- Hollywood, Amy. "Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization". *History of Religions*. 42 (2) (2002): 93-115.
- Joselit, Jenna Weissman. *New York's Jewish Jews: the orthodox community in the interwar years*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Koren, Sharon. "Mystical Rationales for the Laws of *Niddah*". In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel R. Wasserfall, 101-121. Boston: Brandeis University Press, 1999.
- Marmon, Naomi. "Reflections on Contemporary *Miqveh* Practice." In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel R. Wasserfall, 232-254. Boston: Brandeis University Press, 1999.
- Mahmood, Saba. "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival". *Cultural Anthropology*. 16 (2) (2001): 202-236.
- Meacham, Tirzah. "An Abbreviated History of the Development of Jewish Menstrual Law" In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel R. Wasserfall, 23-39. Boston: Brandeis University Press, 1999.
- Morris, Bonnie J. *Lubavitcher women in America: identity and activism in the postwar era*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Myers, Jody and Jane Rachel Litman. "The Secret of Jewish Femininity: Hiddenness, Power, and Physicality in the Theology of Orthodox Women in the Contemporary World." *Gender and Judaism: The Transformation of Tradition*. edited by Tamar Rudavsky, New York: New York University Press, 1995
- Stroper Perez, Danielle and Florence Heymann. "Rabbis, Physicians, and the Woman's/Female Body." In *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel R. Wasserfall, 122-142. Boston: Brandeis University Press, 1999.
- Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co, 1969.
- Turner, Victor W. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.

Wasserfall, Rahel R. "Introduction." In *Women and Water: Mensturation in Jewish Life and Law*, edited by Rahel R. Wasserfall, 1-20. Boston: Brandeis Univeristy Press, 1999.

Weissler, Chava. "Mitzvot Built into the Body: Tkhines for Niddah, Pregnancy, and Childbirth." In *People of the body: Jews and Judaism from an embodied perspective*, edited by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, 101-116. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.