

The History of *Niddah* in America as Social Drama:

Genealogy of a Ritual Practice

by

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1960's and 1970's, ethnographic research on Jewish menstrual rituals known as *niddah*, *Taharat HaMishpacha*, or Family Purity has associated their practices with religious behavior. Much of this research organizes around questions of women's agency within ostensibly patriarchally constructed religious practices that carry the potential to oppress its women practitioners. This premise is built upon a number of implicit assumptions about the history of today's *niddah* practices: that *niddah* is observed exclusively by Orthodox Jews; that increasing rates of *niddah* observance correlate exclusively with the trend toward stricter observance levels among the Orthodox since the 1960s; and that this increasingly strict observance itself reflects a reactionary trend among the Orthodox community (a.k.a. tradition versus modernity). All these assumptions currently circulate, in various degrees, among the American Jewish lay community and are shared by a significant number of congregational rabbis. Until the 1990s, no history of *niddah* existed to either support or refute these assumptions. I initially intended that this project would provide future ethnographers with a comprehensive history of *niddah* in America during the past one and a half centuries. I engaged Victor Turner's theory of Social Drama as a framework for understanding this history as a socio-cultural process, rather than as a series of less than related events. However, this study has resulted in the identification of many more specific assumptions about the decline and revival of *niddah* observance in the twentieth century, which are not supported by the scant evidence available. These challenged assumptions beg new directions for research; a thorough reworking of the history of *niddah* in America; and a fresh look at the literature advocating *niddah* produced in the 1990's and early 2000's. This genealogy as Social Drama presents *niddah* in twentieth century America as undergoing periods of crisis, negotiation, and reintegration. This drama was triggered by late nineteenth century concepts of religion, body, and ritual that undermined and ruptured the integrity of *niddah* as a bodily religious ritual practice. *Niddah's* twentieth century social drama culminated in fresh articulations of a unique Jewish sexuality and Jewish marital ethic.

This thesis reflects the dedication to me and my vision from...

...my husband, Marcus Johnston:

He urged me to seek wider self-fulfillment and supported
without question every measure I needed to achieve this vision;

...my young children, Asher and Elizabeth:

Their impatience with the demands of my work was thoroughly understandable
and the patience they gave went beyond the call of childhood;

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LIST OF TERMS

Due to the variability in transliterating from Hebrew into English, my sources use different spellings. I have retained these alternate spellings in quotations from these sources. I have attempted to include all alternate spellings in this glossary.

bedika / bedikot (s./pl.): Translates as “checking”. A process in which a cloth or tampon is inserted into the vagina to verify that menstruation has completely ended or has not resumed.

kashrut / kashruth: Refers to either the Jewish dietary laws or a product produced in compliance with these laws.

mikvah / mikveh / mikvaot (pl.): A small pool constructed for the purpose of ritual immersion in the Jewish religion and containing a specific amount of naturally sourced water.

niddah or **Hilchot Niddah**: The Jewish legal term for the collection of laws (*Hilchot*) pertaining to menstrual purity rituals. The term can also refer to the time of menstrual impurity or to the menstruant herself.

Taharah: Generally translated as pure or clean, like *tum'ah*, the original meaning of this word has become obscured. It describes the opposite of *tum'ah* thereby shifts in the meanings of one term usually shifts meanings of the other term. This term will receive more full treatment in Chapter 4.

Taharat HaMishpacha (alt. **Taharas** or **Tohorat**; **haMishpaha**): Translates literally as “Purity of the Family”; and alternate term for *niddah*.

Tevillah: Jewish ritual immersion of people or objects in a *mikvah*.

t'shuva/t'shuvot: Literally translates as 'return', often used in the context of repentance; most commonly associated with the Jewish Holy Days of Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur, also with the recent phenomenon of Jews who return to a strictly Orthodox lifestyle.

tum'ah: Generally translated as impurity or unclean. The original meaning of this word is obscured by time and cultural change. This complex term will receive more full treatment in Chapter 4.

PREFACE

Observance of Jewish menstrual ritual practices, known as *niddah*¹ *Taharat HaMishpacha*, or Family Purity (see note i), has unarguably undergone a revival since the 1970's. Rabbi Hillel Goldberg has observed that from "1999-2008, thirty major works were published on the laws of *mikvah*."² The topic of *mikvah* is a lengthy subject; constituting its own halakhic category. *Niddah* "is not synonymous with *mikveh* use;"³ in fact, it "is a subcategory of *mikveh* use that is purposely designed for women as part of a couple."⁴ Despite this important distinction, women's *mikvah* has been taken as a measure of *niddah* observance since at least the nineteenth century, if not earlier. The primary gauge of *niddah*'s decline and revival depend on numbers of mikvaot and publications on *niddah*.⁵ Since the 1970s, several organizations have been established whose missions include promoting education about *niddah* and sponsoring the construction and renovation of mikvaot, such as Mikvah USA and The Taharas Hamishpacha Organization, Inc.. This latter organization reported that "Between 1970 and 2014, approximately 470 *mikvaos* were either built or renovated globally"⁶ through their support. On a local level, from my own observations and casual conversations as a *mikvah* attendee in Ohio, two mikvaot were newly constructed in Cincinnati and a *mikvah* renovated in nearby Dayton, Ohio between 2006 and 2013. A *mikvah* attendant in Phoenix, Arizona said in conversation with me that when that

¹ *Niddah*: literally "separate" but used in Biblical Hebrew to designate the event of menstruation or the menstruant herself. I use this term to indicate the set of ritual practices surrounding *niddah*. This term is roundly rejected in contemporary discourse, in favor of *Taharat HaMishpacha* literally "Family Purity". I use the term *Taharat HaMishpacha* to indicate a specific contemporary formulation about the role of *niddah* within the family and religious community.

² Goldberg, "The Efflorescence of *Mikvah* Studies," 73. These publications address *mikvah* as a wider category beyond use for *niddah*, including new publications of traditional commentary on laws of *mikvah* and contemporary construction issues.

³ Berkowitz, "Reshaping the Laws of Family Purity," 9.

⁴ *Ibid.* Other uses for *mikvah* include conversion; koshering of cooking implements, cutlery, silverware, dishes; purification prior to major holy days, including –among the Hasidic and Haredi Jews– the Sabbath. See also Slonim, "Introduction" in *Total Immersion*; and Kaplan, *Waters of Eden*.

⁵ I will explain later in this work possible cause for this situation and problems which arise from this measure.

⁶ Klein, Chaya to Isobel Johnston. E-mail correspondence, 2014.

particular *mikvah* was first constructed, approximately three to four women used the *mikvah* in an average week 912-16 per month. She estimated that number now (in 2015) stood around at three to four per night, or 72-96 per month. Additionally in Arizona, I have become aware that several non-Orthodox Jewish women in their 30's and 40's are presently observing *niddah*, indicating that its observance currently extends beyond Orthodox communities, at least in this one location. Orit Avishai has observed the development of what she terms a "*niddah* culture industry" in Israel and the United States.⁷ A significant part of this *niddah* culture has since 1990 included a publishing spike in both print and electronic media. Additionally, the first few academic monographs on *niddah* have appeared in this same time frame. Clearly, something significant has been occurring since the 1960's and its pace appears to have accelerated since the 1990's. This thesis sets out to examine, genealogically, the social, historical, and religious forces which have impacted the development of this literature, the revival of *niddah*, and possibly shed light on the wider phenomenon of academic interest in menstrual topics.

⁷ Avishai, Orit. "Doing Religion' in a Secular World," 419.

1 –INTRODUCTION

As I write this study, I have observed *niddah* for ten of my almost eleven years of marriage with its inevitable growing pains including two live-births, two miscarriages, a failed fertilization, post-partum complications, extended family crises, a miracle healing in the *mikvah*, and the return to college in my late thirties. Throughout these events, I have found *niddah* observance to be a personally grounding ritual practice as I have navigated events occurring both within my body and outside it. The prohibitions of the *niddah* period itself provided me psychic space to catch my breath from caring for everyone in my life except myself. My *mikvah* nights became a long moment in my usually hectic month to take stock of myself and my life. As I set on this research as a *niddah* observant Conservative Jew, I did see myself to be part of my own *niddah* observant community. My desire to feel myself part of such a community was a significant part of my choice to study *niddah* academically. But I also feel that the profound impact that my ups and downs observing *niddah* have had in my life speak to issues larger than myself and larger than Jewish communities. The cyclic nature of menstrual rituals suggest that any practice that a woman centers around her cycle may have a similar effect upon her experience of her life in addition to any valences ascribed by her religio-cultural community to either menstruation or menstruants. In this respect, this thesis represents the barest beginning to a much longer, comparative project.

A short methodological note. Some readers of draft versions have commented on the richness of my ethnographic detail. Thus, I must make clear that this project does not involve any formal ethnographic research at all. My years as a practitioner have provided a wealth of detail which would be hard to come by any other way. I have included details from informal, personal conversations, observations, and experiences. In this respect, those details which may appear ethnographic, are better understood as reflexive analysis of my experiences observing *niddah*.

In this particular project, I set out to accomplish the primary goal of reorienting the history of *niddah* in America. Such a reorientation suggests new directions for research on *niddah* specifically and menstruation generally. The body of ethnographic scholarship which may be called an anthropology of menstruation predominantly studies women's participation in menstrual

rituals in terms of power dynamics between women and their religio-cultural traditions, with the exception of Orit Avishai who asserts that participation in *niddah* reflects processes of self-formation and self-identification. All these studies focus on the women's engagement of the ritual, rather than examining the ritual itself. I will introduce the possibility of studying *niddah* as an independent entity that is engaged by individuals across communities. In this respect, the history of communities' relationship with *niddah* becomes the history of the ritual itself. I will present here a genealogy of *niddah* in the twentieth century United States.

Commonly *niddah*'s revival and decline has been situated in either the rise of Reform Judaism, or the decline of traditional Orthodox Judaism through the first half of the twentieth century. Both these theories are driven by tensions over acculturation, assimilation, and the degree to which American Jews are willing to change Judaism to conform to American culture. This position presents the revival of Orthodoxy (and *niddah*) as historical anomalies which break sharply from the direction of the development of American Judaism "established" in the first half of the twentieth century. This sharp break is also read as a backward turn, returning to the alleged patriarchy of the past in which *niddah* oppressed women. I will present an alternative framework for organizing the history of *niddah* in the United States. Victor Turner's theory of social drama⁸ accommodates a wider range of social factors and relationships impacting the development of *niddah*, on both the broad conceptual and practical day-to-day levels. Applying the lens of social drama to the history of *niddah* in America will unsettle several common assumptions about that history and suggest new possible factors in *niddah*'s demise and revival.

This alternative historicization, for all the many ambiguities it reveals, provides a richer contextualization of late twentieth century articulations of *niddah*. This culminating period will be examined through three primary texts which describe and prescribe today's ritual practices of *niddah*: the monograph *Hedge of Roses* (1966) by Rabbi Norman Lamm (Modern Orthodox),

⁸ Turner's concept of social drama involved a four-stage process: an initial rupture in society leads to a crisis of behavior to which the dominant members of the group exert redressive actions to stem and reverse the crisis behaviors. This process of crisis and redressive action continues until some form of reconciliation or resolution is achieved.

Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology edited by Rivkah Slonim (1996) (Chabad-Lubovitch Orthodox); and a set of three responsa on *niddah* by the Rabbinical Assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (2006).

When presented as the culmination of a set of dramatic social processes spanning barely a century, these texts will reveal that fundamental conceptual constructions of religion, body, and ritual impacted the observance of *niddah* throughout this period. Nineteenth century constructions of these three concepts problematized the practice of *niddah* sufficiently that many American Jews abandoned many –if not all— its precepts. In this respect, the theory that *niddah* was a natural consequence of generational assimilation is both accurate and imprecise. Which aspects of American culture most impacted the observance of *niddah*? The 1960's post-modern challenge to the by then established nineteenth century constructions of religion and body, in particular, created an environment in which *niddah*'s bodily practices regained their religious legitimacy. Additionally, the major social movements of the 1960s and 1970s generated discourses about women, bodies, and spirituality that enabled the development of more explicit articulations of *niddah*'s role in married life.

What is *Niddah*?⁹

Before defining *niddah* in any detail, I must first clarify that alternate names for this ritual practice exist. I have chosen to use the term *niddah* rather than the more common alternatives: *Taharat HaMishpacha* or Family Purity. *Niddah* is the biblical and rabbinic term for Jewish menstrual rituals. The word itself translates literally as “separation” or “put aside”¹⁰. This meaning evokes images of lonely, isolated women, shunned due to the impurity of menstrual blood, connotations present even in the *Ketuvim* (Writings) such as Ezra 9:11 and Lamentations 1:8¹¹ of the Jewish

⁹ This section excerpted and substantially revised from Johnston “What Difference Do Jewish Menstrual Rituals Make?” 1-2.

¹⁰ Berkowitz, Miriam, “Reshaping the Laws of Family purity for the Modern World,” 7. Berkowitz specifically identifies the root of *Niddah*, נדה, as a form of the verb root נ.ד.ד.

¹¹ Ibid.,--both references are cited on this page.

*Tanak*¹². In late nineteenth century Germany,¹³ the new term *Taharat HaMishpacha*, literally *Purity of the Family*, emerged. R. Miriam Berkowitz traces the usage of the new phrase,

“The term תהרת טהרה [Taharat Hamishpacha] was coined in the early 1900s, originally concerning the desirable lineage for a marriage partner, and then about the laws of *Niddah* specifically. It was not used when the Temple was standing. Rather it was introduced by poskim [deciders of Jewish law] like Rabbi Haim Ozer Grodzinski (1863-1940) in a *teshuvah* [legal response] in 1907 and Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook (1865-1935) to evoke a myriad of associations.”¹⁴

Both Hebrew and English versions of this term are prevalent in today's literature on *niddah* and have been criticized for placing undue responsibility for the purity of the whole family on the wife and mother.¹⁵ This emphasis on women obscures the fact that *niddah* is observed by both men and women. Albeit, women manage and direct the observance informing their male partner when his behavior proscriptions begin and end; however, in the Jewish tradition *niddah* observance is always observed by both men and women.¹⁶ I have not found a historicization of the term *Taharat HaMishpacha* that describes the socio-cultural context in which the phrase was coined. However, my sense from the time and location of its origin, and that of its American reception, places this term, at least coterminous with the nineteenth century Western European and American Cult of Domesticity, which polarized and gendered the religious (feminine) and secular (masculine) domains. However, Grodzinski lived in Poland, Eastern Europe. More research is necessary to determine if Grodzinski engaged this term in the same sense that R. Kook received it in. For that matter, did R. Kook engage the term along the lines of the Cult of Domesticity or was that a latter engagement of the term? Given that the writings from both rabbis is available, this topic might be among the easier lines of research proposed in this work to pursue.

¹² TaNaK is an acronym for Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim, literally, Instructions, Prophets, and Writings. These three sets of compiled chapters constitute the Hebrew Bible.

¹³ Berkowitz, “Mikveh and the Sanctity of Family Relations.”

¹⁴ Berkowitz, “Reshaping the Laws of Family Purity,” 8.

¹⁵ Grossman, “Mikveh and Sanctity of Family Relations,” 19.

¹⁶ Halakha (Jewish Law) only requires *niddah* observance in the context of a married relationship, assumed to be heterosexual. It is not required of unmarried or otherwise single women.

My discomfort with the polarized and gendered associations of the religious feminine and secular masculine inherent in the Cult of Domesticity, and—for me—conveyed to this terminology, drives my aversion to the terms *Taharat HaMishpacha* and Family Purity. Additionally, my study of *niddah* as a ritual entity focuses on the proscribed ritual behaviors which create a real physical distance between the observant couple. In this regard, the meaning separation is more precise for my purposes, historically and descriptively.

Niddah, as observed by the global majority of Jews, is a set of biblically derived ritual practices surrounding menstruation that were developed into their current form by the rabbis of the early Talmudic period.¹⁷ The term *niddah* can refer to this body of ritual law, to the practice of these rituals, to the general state of menstruation, or to the menstruant herself. The rabbinic *niddah* period is generally described in both academic literature and general Jewish literature as a three-stage process: the days of menstruation, seven post-menstrual “white” days, and immersion in a *mikvah*. During this *niddah* period, prior to *mikvah* immersion, both wife and husband are required to proscribe their sexual activity, including increased verbal and physical modesty around each other and curtailing any behaviors which may cause arousal.¹⁸ During the ‘white’ (non-bleeding) days, observant women are required to check for bleeding both externally and internally, at a minimum, once daily but ideally twice daily. After the sunset that concludes the seventh consecutive ‘white’ day, observant women transition out of the *niddah* state by immersing in a *mikvah*, a ritual pool.

However, this common three-stage description tends to leave out or deemphasize four other important aspects of rabbinic *niddah* ritual practice. These additional points extend *niddah*

¹⁷ Rabbinic Judaism is a specific form of Judaism which is distinct from Biblical Judaism. The distinction arises in interpretations of Jewish Biblical documents based on a belief in an Oral Torah/Teachings, or interpretive tradition, which informs reading the Written Torah/Teachings and produces a unique approach to enacting Biblical commandments. Time frame for the development of rabbinic Judaism is a subject of great debate among scholars; but it is safe to place it somewhere in the centuries around the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Its first solid documentation is the Mishnah, whose date is also uncertain but generally attributed to late second century CE. Mishnah refers to a body of writing which articulates the earliest expression of Rabbinic Jewish thought practice. which Talmud is commentary on Mishnah

¹⁸ Note that this requires couple to remain cognizant of what arouses themselves and their partners, suggesting a heightened awareness of their sexual triggers.

to a six-stage process: *veset* (anticipation), *niddah* of menstrual days, *niddah* of “white days”, preparation for *mikvah* immersion, immersion in *mikvah*, and post-*mikvah* sex. Foregrounding these six stages is the fact that *niddah* is exclusive to menstruation within marriage. *Niddah* observance begins with the menstrual cycle immediately preceding marriage and ends with either menopause, divorce, or widowhood. The first step of the monthly ritual begins with the observance of *veset*, that is, day(s) of anticipated start of bleeding, during which the ritual proscriptions are observed for either a full twenty-four hours, or the day or night portions thereof, depending on a woman’s community custom and her own established pattern of flow start, as defined by the three consecutive months immediately preceding the current month. Second, preparation for *mikvah* is often conflated with immersion itself. However, preparations involve a set of details distinct from the details of immersion, and may be conducted in different locations with significant time-lapses between initial preparation at home and final preparations in the *mikvah* immediately preceding immersion, as in the case of immersions scheduled for nights following *Shabbat* and Holy Days. Thus, *mikvah* preparations qualify as a separate stage in the process. Third, the resumption of marital relations is generally presented in both academic literature and in the religious literature for general-readership as a return to normalcy after *mikvah* immersion concludes the *niddah* period. However, in the case of a delay in resuming relations after immersion, women are required not to bathe until after intercourse and, according to some, it is advisable to sleep with a knife under her pillow¹⁹ until after relations resume. These additional strictures reinforce that sexual relations, rather than *mikvah* immersion, concludes the ritual period. Framing of *niddah* within the context of heterosexual marriage and its proscription of only

¹⁹ While the proscription of bathing between immersion and sex is not, to my knowledge, debated; sleeping with a knife under the pillow is contested. Through conversation with two *mikvah* ladies from the same Hasidic community, I have heard two opposing views on this detail. One stated this is an outdated custom based on the need for freshly immersed women to protect themselves from men who might want to rape them because their elevated status conferred by immersion conveys a measure spiritual benefit to her post-immersion male sexual partner. According to this view, the practical need for self-defense is no longer relevant as the odds of post-*mikvah* intruder rape are nonexistent. Another *mikvah* lady asserted that the post-immersion spiritual elevation renders women spiritually vulnerable and the metal blade is necessary to provide protection from malevolent spiritual forces. Both of these explanations reflect an elevated spiritual status resulting from immersion which can be read a liminal state. Thus post-*mikvah* sex can be understood as spiritually grounding or as reintegration from the liminal state.

sexually related activities²⁰ reinforce reading *niddah*'s structures as a sexual practice, with an emphasis on sex's reproductive potential. I will later argue that this structural emphasis on marital sexuality accounts for both the decline and revival of *niddah* observance as twentieth-century Jews first accommodated, then challenged concepts of religion, body, family and sex which were promoted by the dominant Euro-American culture of Modernity.

Categories of *Niddah* Literature

The literature relevant to an analysis of today's *niddah* ritual practices encompasses three main categories: analytic, prescriptive, and descriptive. Prescriptive writing such as halakhic texts (religious legal writing), responsa literature, and non-legal how-to guides for following the ritual law, appear exclusively in the domain of religious literature. One of the texts considered herein, the Conservative Jewish responsa, is such a text. Analytic literature consists mainly of historical analysis or otherwise explicit analysis of *niddah* in terms of current critical categories such as feminism²¹ or post-modern religious studies,²² and sociological ethnography²³. Analytic work is primarily published within the academic press and in anthologies on *niddah* or related topics²⁴. In so far as the ethnographic literature records and analyzes the personal experiences reported by *niddah* observant women, it overlaps with descriptive literature. Descriptive literature, expressing practitioners' personal experiences of *niddah* observance, represents the personal side of the ostensibly impersonal prescriptive literature. The majority of the descriptive *niddah* literature is promotional in character and found in both print and internet media. Moreover, *niddah*

²⁰ Menstrual practices in other religions proscribe different activities, often in addition to sexual proscriptions. For example, entering holy places such as temples (Hinduism) or the Kaaba (Islam), preparing food (Hinduism and some traditions within Islam), and formal prayer (Islam).

²¹ Such as Rachel Adler's renunciation of *niddah* in Adler, "In Your Blood, Live."1993; Fonrobert's *Menstrual Purity*; Sharon Koren's *Forsaken*.

²² Such as the work of Elisheva Fonrobert, Mira Balberg, and Sharon Koren.

²³ Such as the work of Tova Hartman, Yaakov Yadgar, and Orit Avishai.

²⁴ Such as Rivkah Slonim's *Total Immersion* or Rachel Wasserfall's *Women and Water*.

promotional literature includes analytical works²⁵. My thesis will engage the analytic literature to inform examinations of the compact body of descriptive religious literature that promotes *niddah* observance. This body of *niddah* literature consists of analytical and descriptive works including historical literature, personal narratives, and explanatory essays which frame traditional ritual practice for today's audiences. In addition to its obvious context in the Jewish religion, descriptive religious literature can also be read, as I will do, within the context of academic literature on both menstruation generally and *niddah* specifically.

Analytic Readings of *Niddah* within Anthropology

While the academic literature on menstruation and *niddah* encompasses the fields of history, religious studies, women's studies, sociology, psychology, medicine, and anthropology, the majority of research relevant to an examination of *niddah* occurs in the fields of sociology and anthropology in the informal subcategories of cultural anthropology of menstruation and ethnography of *niddah*. Numerous works on both topics have been produced, but such research appears sporadically due, in my opinion, to the challenges of constructing sustainable theories of menstrual ritual practices. Most recent ethnographic research on *niddah* has been done by sociologically trained scholars²⁶ but draws on conceptions of culture and menstruation developed in cultural anthropology, on which I will elaborate after a short overview of the aspiring subfield on the anthropology of menstruation. The body of scholarship which can be termed an Anthropology of Menstruation appears in three major branches: Cultural Anthropology, Medical Anthropology, and Critical Medical Anthropology²⁷.

Cultural anthropological research on menstrual attitudes and ritual practices discusses women's negotiations within the meanings of menstruation within one set of culturally specific of

²⁵ Such as Hoffman, "The Institution of the Mikvah in America"; Weissler, "Tkines and Techinot: Ancient Prayers"; and Harris, "The Mikvah."

²⁶ Orit Avishai, Lynn Davidman, Faye Ginsberg, Debra Kaufman, Yaakov Yadgar, and Tamar Rapoport.

²⁷ Substantial portions of this section on anthropology is excerpted and revised from Johnston "Untitled", 2013.

parameters.²⁸ Medical Anthropology views menstruation in terms of biomedical models of body, illness, and health. Often this research includes a discussion of historical attitudes, ritual practices, and medical models which predate the biomedical models, reflecting various changes as the biomedical models themselves evolved. Medical Anthropological methodology includes a significant body of cultural history prior to the fieldwork, which then often includes multiple sets of cultural influences, primarily religious-cultural and medical models, thus focusing on patterns in women's negotiations of these multiple sets of options for practices and attitudes toward menstruation. Critical medical anthropology expands medical anthropology's range of influences to include political, economic, class, religious, and alternative medical models.²⁹

Each of these anthropological schools engage concepts of agency to some degree. Cultural anthropology views agency in terms of women's manipulation of ostensibly negative and limiting beliefs and practices regarding menstruation to effect socially positive outcomes for themselves. The degree to which medical anthropology addresses issues of agency reflects the degree of medicalization which the individual scholar has taken on. Strongly medicalized researchers are more likely to limit their search for agency by the degree of agency their biomedical clients are willing to consider.³⁰ Critical medical anthropology embraces patterns of cultural transformation and individual negotiations of competing cultural frameworks and practices with wider scope than either cultural anthropology or medical anthropology. Cultural medical anthropology considers multiple patterns of negotiation in a social group, rather than representing groups as having cohesively negotiated solutions. My scholarship of late twentieth and early twenty-first century literature on *niddah* attempts to model this approach in critically considering cultural texts.

²⁸ See *Blood Magic; Ethnology* (2002) 41:4; part II of *Women and Water*; Cicurel and Sharaby; and Tsoffar.

²⁹ For articles illustrating the critical medical anthropological approach: Furth and Ch'en "Chinese Medicine and the Anthropology of Menstruation in Contemporary Taiwan" *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 6:1 (1996); and Baer et al. "A Dialogue between Naturopathy and Critical Medical Anthropology: What Constitutes Holistic Health?" *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 26:2 (2012) 241–256.

³⁰ Browner, "On the Medicalization of Medical Anthropology."

Cultural anthropology has most impacted the ethnography of *niddah* through the work of Mary Douglas, and Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb. These three cultural anthropologists have attempted to push forward theorization of menstrual practices. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas situates menstrual taboos within her theory of purity as a social ordering mechanism. Specifically, Douglas states that “Female pollution in a society of this type [highly acquisitive, competitive culture] is largely related to the attempt to treat women simultaneously as persons and as the currency of male transactions.”³¹ Douglas further drew the analogy that “in a commercial culture [wherein] money is the root of all evil, the feeling that women are the root of all evil to Lele men is more justified.”³² These statements, taken within the context of Douglas’s concepts of purity as a means of social structuring along the lines of order and disorder, have been translated into subsequent anthropological and feminist criticisms of menstrual taboos as generally reflecting patriarchic control of women.³³

This view of menstrual rituals as oppressive as derived from Douglas’s work was challenged within cultural anthropology by Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb in their 1988 anthology *Blood Magic*. This collection of anthropological essays on menstrual practices and attitudes reveals multiple valences within women’s experience of menstrual taboos, many of which directly challenge the negative patriarchic valences of Douglas’s work. In 2002, *Ethnology’s* fourth issue showcased anthropology on menstruation. In the “Afterward”, Gottlieb attempted to push the anthropology of menstruation beyond a dialectics of oppression, resistance, and subversive agency. She argued that the richness of menstrual valences across cultures called for further research and nuancing of frameworks for understanding menstrual ritual practices.

³¹ Douglas. *Purity and Danger*, 188.

³² *Ibid.*, 188.

³³ This interpretation of menstrual rituals applied to pre-industrial cultures accounts for Norman Lamm’s effort to distance Jewish menstrual practices from all other menstrual practices in other cultures, “It is not the kind of superstition that, in other cultures, has stigmatized the menstruant as repulsive, placed upon her mysterious and stringent taboos, and banished her from the community for the duration of her menses” (Lamm, *Hedge of Roses*, 40).

The compact body of recent ethnographic research on *niddah*, conducted primarily among Israeli Orthodox women, attempts to answer Gottlieb's call by presenting the voices of *niddah* observant women.³⁴ While this scholarship brings attention to the voices and experiences of *niddah* observant women, it has struggled to escape this dialectic of oppression-resistance-subversion.³⁵ Orit Avishai³⁶ has most successfully pushed beyond this dialectic by contextualizing *niddah* within the larger body of Orthodox practices as the agentic performance within a wider ritual practice of cultivating a specific religious identity defined in opposition to Secularism. This emphasis reflects Israeli cultural politics and translates less directly into the American *niddah* revival. While American religious literature, as I shall elaborate later, also defines *niddah* and its outcomes in opposition to the perceived faults of certain lines of feminist thought and secular values, it places more emphasis on *niddah* as an individual religious practice rather than as an expression of a religious-political identity per se.

Both anthropological and sociological ethnographic writing focus on women's proscribed behaviors or their experiences of those proscriptions. This narrow focus has limited theorizations of menstrual practices in general. As my examination of the *niddah*'s descriptive religious literature will demonstrate (and ethnographic respondents allude to) three aspects of *niddah* have not been incorporated into analysis of menstrual rituals. First, *niddah* is not a single gendered experience; its proscriptions apply to both husband and wife³⁷. Second, the experience of *niddah* extends beyond a woman's experience of her menses to encompass the couple's reproductive life, and their experience of their relationship as a whole. Thirdly, rather than a series of separate

³⁴ Yadgar's "Gender, Religion, and Feminism: The Case of Jewish Israeli Traditionalists" includes the responses on one Conservative male observer of *niddah*.

³⁵ One striking exception to this pattern is Faye Ginsburg's "When the Subject Is Women: Encounters with Syrian Jewish Women" which predates *Blood Magic* by one year. In this article, Ginsberg presents sexual and moral control over men as a central motivator for adopting the practice in an American Syrian Jewish community.

³⁶ Avishai. "Doing Religion' in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency" and "Modesty, Purity and Jewish Women's Bodies: Pedagogical Objects, Performative Subjects, and the Problem of Feminism."

³⁷ Yadgar, "Gender, Religion, and Feminism." Includes the reflections of one conservative Israeli man.

events, *niddah* is generally a monthly practice occurring throughout an observant Jewish marriage; as such, it is woven into the fabric of daily life and impacts both *niddah* periods and non-*niddah* periods. Widening the lens on *niddah* ritual practices, can support reading it within the intersections of gender, body, sexuality, reproduction and religion.

Analytic Readings of *Niddah* within Religious Studies

While cultural anthropology contains the oldest and most extensive scholarship on menstrual practices, it has been joined since the early 1990's by Religious Studies scholarship specifically on *niddah* and related concepts within Jewish body studies.³⁸ The portions of this body of literature that address topics of sexuality, menstruation, and the body focus entirely on the early rabbinic and medieval periods. To the best of my knowledge, there have not been any religious studies monographs on contemporary *niddah* ritual practice. Scholarly articles on *niddah* in a religious context, while more numerous, also focus on the past.³⁹ This emphasis on the past may be viewed either as a quest for origins aimed at enriching the analysis, criticisms, and defenses of *niddah* today or a reconfiguring of contemporary conceptualizations of Judaism's development since the rabbinic period.

In the early 1990s, three scholars opened the topic of body studies in Judaism. In the anthology *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (1992), editor Howard Eilberg-Schwartz's identifies a tension within Judaism between its bookish attention to knowledge and the bodily content of that book knowledge as lived by Jews through their history.⁴⁰ The body, he asserts, becomes more problematic than texts because "the human body was the

³⁸ Cohen, "Menstruants and the sacred in Judaism and Christianity" (1991) and "Purity and piety : the separation of menstruants from the sancta" (1992); Wasserfall, *Women and Water* (1999) containing articles by Fonrobert, Cohen, and Koren; Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity* (2000); Koren, *Forsaken* (2011) and several articles; Secunda, dissertation "Dashtana—Ke-Derekh Nashim Li: A Study of the Babylonian Rabbinic Laws of Menstruation in Relation to Corresponding Zoroastrian Texts" (2008) and articles on Sasanian-Jewish concepts of women's bodies and menstruation(2012, 2014); *Balberg Purity, Body, and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature* (2014);

³⁹ Such articles may be found in Baskin; *The Jewish Woman in Historical Perspective*, Koltun, *The Jewish Woman*; Slonim, *Total Immersion*; and Wasserfall, *Women and Water*.

⁴⁰ Eilberg-Schwartz, *People of the Body*, 2.

objet around which conflicting cultural representations met and clashed...Each culture has its own set of conflicting impulses that struggle against one another for hegemony.”⁴¹ This struggle of cultural impulses intensifies as cultures come in contact with one another. The collection of essays in *People of the Book* demonstrate the diversity of directions available to scholarship by considering the Jewish body as a space of competing cultural impulses.

David Biale’s monograph *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (1992) outlines a general cultural history of Jewish sexuality from the biblical to contemporary periods. His primary argument is that Jewish concepts of sexuality have been greatly impacted by the concepts of sexuality found in their dominant cultural contexts. In so far as I argue that different dominant concepts of religion and body impact the ritualized sexuality found in *niddah* observant marriages, my work can situate itself within Biale’s thesis. The morsel of Jewish sexual history which I understand to bear most heavily on Jewish attitudes toward *niddah* resides in the Ashkenazic (Northern European) Jewish practice of child marriages involving boys thirteen and younger to girls twelve and younger.⁴² He argues that the sexual traumas experienced through these forced marriage resulted in several issues when eighteenth century reform movements challenged traditional authority.⁴³ Hasidic reform movements encouraged extended education for young men at Hasidic courts and yeshivot (schools of Jewish learning). “In eighteenth century Poland the connection was close indeed between sexual anxiety and the search for new forms of authority.”⁴⁴ The response from the Haskalah movement (nineteenth century Jewish Enlightenment), was to work to end child-marriages specifically and arranged marriages generally,⁴⁵ not the rejection of *niddah* as is commonly assumed. The likely impact of traditions of sexual trauma dating to the early Middle Ages upon *niddah* is enormous.

⁴¹ Ibid., 17.

⁴² Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 127.

⁴³ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 129.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 154-55.

Niddah's ritualized sex on *mikvah* night, timed for most women near the peak of ovulation, means that only one sexual encounter per month was absolutely unavoidable, with maximum possible conception rate. This means that the very real possibility exists with Ashkenazi sexual history that there was a large number of births for very little sex. In such a context of sexual aversion, *niddah* may well have been more welcome than resented. However, it also means that late nineteenth and possibly early twentieth century Jews were among the first few generations of untraumatized marriages. These children may well have been raised within an environment of sexual discomfort into which their older, sexually mature marriages did not synchronize. Evidence of the experiences and consequences resulting from sexual trauma of people long dead is exceedingly hard to sleuth out. My reading of the consequences of centuries of child marriage may have to remain in the category of speculation. However, the possible impacts of widespread sexual trauma upon cultural attitudes toward sexuality are striking and should at least be born in mind with any scholarship on sexuality through the ages.

The third book on Jewish body studies released in the early 1990s was Daniel Boyarin's *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (1993). Scholarship on the body in the early rabbinic period deconstructs major texts from that era in order to understand how the founding rabbis understood the human body, gender, sexuality, women, and menstruation. Though Boyarin's *Carnal Israel* was not the first monograph publication of Jewish body scholarship, or even Jewish sexuality studies, Charlotte Fonrobert credits *Carnal Israel* with theoretically innovating body studies within rabbinics.⁴⁶ Specifically, he made the cross-disciplinary leap to incorporate literary and cultural theories into his examination of rabbinic texts and wrote the text for an audience beyond rabbinic textual studies.⁴⁷ This innovation is critical for scholarship on *niddah*. The wide range of fields that write about *niddah*, listed earlier in this introduction, speak to *niddah's* complexity and the multiple aspects of daily life which are impacted by its practice. Religious Studies scholarship on *niddah* since *Carnal Israel* reflects these interdisciplinary

⁴⁶ Fonrobert, "On Carnal Israel and the Consequences," 465.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

innovations. The result has been a compact body of scholarship that presents a rich set of complementary perspectives into the longer history of *niddah*.

Boyarin establishes that rabbinic constructions of *niddah* reflect negotiations among multiple cultural options available to the redactors of the Talmud, specifically ascetic tendencies in the larger culture of Hellenized Judaism which separated, gendered, and desexualized the physical (feminine) from the spiritual (masculine). Boyarin also argues against misogynistic readings of the Talmud. He argues that those anti-woman and anti-sexuality statements which are present in the Talmud, function on two levels. First, Boyarin argues, for the redactors of the Talmud, such statements are in the Talmud in order that they may be disputed and in some cases rejected. Statements not countered in the Palestinian Talmud often faced scrutiny or full revision in the Babylonian Talmud. He further interprets the presence of these negative statements as indicative of an active undercurrent of misogyny and asceticism in the wider culture within which the formative rabbinic reconfigured Judaism. He further observes that because the Talmuds do not present unequivocal rulings one way or another, these undercurrents were available to later generations of Jews, specifically the medieval period. By identifying and recovering such marginalized voices from within the Talmud, Boyarin makes the diversity of early rabbinic opinion available to today's Jews who work to engage Jewish tradition in addressing the issues facing the Jewish community today.⁴⁸

Shai Secunda⁴⁹ and Sharon Koren⁵⁰ both have studied the misogynistic statements of *niddah* in the Babylonian Talmud and Medieval mysticism, respectively. Secunda asserts that those negative statements which appear only in the Babylonian Talmud, which constitute the majority of such statements, reflect concepts of menstruation from the then dominant Zoroastrian Sassanian culture. Similarly, Koren identifies the confluence of a text called *Baraita de Niddah*

⁴⁸ My thanks to Joel Gereboff for this point which emphasizes Boyarin's work as a model of "engaged scholarship".

⁴⁹ Secunda, Secunda, "Dashtana - 'Ki Derekh Nashim Li.'" and "The Construction, Composition and Idealization of the Female Body in Rabbinic Literature and Parallel Iranian Texts."

⁵⁰ Koren, *Forsaken: The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*.

and the *Merkavah* (lit. chariot) mystical tradition. She identifies *Baraita de Niddah* as a non-rabbinic text whose specific authorship is unknown. In fact, no copies of the text are known to survive; however, the text is referenced frequently in medieval Kabbalistic literature. Koren presents *Baraita*, or those parts of it which appear in Spanish and French medieval mystical literature, as highly misogynistic. This text appears to originate many of the negative, non-rabbinic beliefs about the menstruant and her effects on the world she inhabits. *Merkavah* mysticism maintained a purpose for ritual purity outside of Temple worship because ritual purity was necessary for safe and successful mystical experiences. Because the *niddah* was a source of ritual impurity, the *Baraita* was engaged to extend the perimeter of purity around mystics. Both Secunda's and Koren's work assert that negative attitudes about menstruation reflect engagement with cultural concepts not supported by earlier rabbinic texts. Secunda identifies an origin outside Judaism entirely in Persian Zoroastrian menstrual beliefs. Koren identifies two points of origin within Judaism, but outside rabbinic sources. Both of these arguments support deconstruction of contemporary attitudes about *niddah*, both inside and outside Jewish communities. Radical feminists tend to focus on the misogynistic traditions of *niddah*, and these negative attitudes are cited both in women's refusal to observe *niddah*; and in the non-rabbinic proscriptions which I have personally observed among women who do not officially observe *niddah*, such as not touching a torah scroll during menstruation. To identify such negative attitudes as originating outside the official religious authority structure, hence inauthentic, makes it much easier to remove these elements from current thought and practice.

Charlotte Fonrobert's overarching feminist critical goal in *Menstrual Purity* is to identify how authority and gender are constructed in *Tractate Niddah* and thereupon to tease out its implications within the terms of the Talmud itself. Fonrobert observes that Talmudic descriptions of women's bodies as embodying a wholly different gender from men reflect Hippocratic Greek medical models, rather than Aristotelean concepts of the 'underdeveloped' male.⁵¹ This is a critical distinction to make when assessing both Western feminist criticism of rabbinic law and

⁵¹ Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 62.

contemporary Orthodox Jewish gender essentialism. The Hippocratic medical model places both sexes on par with each other as two different types of human. This model does not support hierarchic categories of gender such as those that result from Aristotelean model of the sexes which posits that females are underdeveloped males, therefore inferior and subordinate. It is important when assessing the gender politics of the Orthodox Judaism and its founding texts to accurately identify which model of the sexes is operative. If the rabbis operated within the Hippocratic model but feminist criticism assumes the Aristotelian one, interpretive errors can result.

Likewise, Fonrobert's examination of the rabbinic innovation of categorizing stains for uterine or non-uterine origin speaks directly to the most consistently challenged aspect of *niddah* ritual practice in the ethnographic scholarship.⁵² When *niddah* observant women find stains are neither clearly red, pink, clear or white either on their clothing or on small checking cloths (*bedikah/ot* s./pl.) used for personal self-examination to confirm the absence of bleeding, they are technically required to submit the cloths to a rabbi for inspection and a ruling as to her status, *niddah* or non-*niddah*. Fonrobert hypothesizes that:

The rabbis, who had no direct access to the woman's body itself, [or grasp the sensation of a blood-flow] focused their attention on the colors of blood and the bloodstain, because they could establish control based on external evidence... rabbinic discourse [[thereby] objectified menstrual bleeding... Women are disowned of their bleeding since the projected scientists of the menstrual science, scopic and theoretical... are, of course, the rabbis.⁵³

This reading frames the issue of rabbinic inspection of vaginal fluids squarely in issues of who has authority to speak for women's bodies.

Mira Balberg's *Purity, Body, and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature* least directly addresses *niddah*; but, her work is most theoretically proximal to the framework in which I will attempt to translate contemporary conceptions of *niddah* for the academic community. Balberg, like Biale, constructs her arguments around the impacts that Roman and Greek concepts of body circulating

⁵² Avishai, "Doing Religion"; Hartman and Marmon, "Lived Regulations, Systemic Attributions."

⁵³ Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 115.

within Post-Temple Palestine factored heavily into the rabbinic reconstruction of Jewish life in the early Talmudic period. Balberg observes that the Mishnaic redactors' conception of the self significantly parallels the dominant Greco-Roman conceptions of body and self-hood, by virtue either of their immersion in the Greco-Roman mindset or the mindset of a colonized minority.⁵⁴ While distinctions between body and soul⁵⁵ are present in rabbinic literature, Balberg demonstrates they are mutually interdependent and inseparable. These perceptions of selfhood, she argues, formed the basis of their engagement with and reconstitution of the biblical purity laws, culminating in a "unique notion of a bodily self" and a uniquely Jewish *technology of self*, though not a means of self-formation per se.⁵⁶ This technology revolves around a concept of self as an entity in "relation between the subject and the material world—namely between one and one's own body."⁵⁷ More than a Self in the modern sense, the Mishnah reveals a self-consciousness or self-awareness of the individual as human *be-ing* (emphasis on the verb as an active), conscious process. The Mishnaic paradigm of bodily self in which the body is identical to the self only in so far as the body is invested with subjectivity.⁵⁸ Rabbinic purity ritual practices, as a *technique of self*, effected the formation of a perpetual consciousness of holiness through fulfilment of divine law. While the Jewish concept of self can hardly be said to have remained static through the centuries, neither is it likely to have been totally lost or abandoned. Louis Jacobs⁵⁹ has traced the Jewish relationship between body and soul as expressed in major rabbinic texts from the Bible. He concludes that Judaism has maintained through the ages a paradoxically interdependent conceptualization of body and soul which places equal value on the

⁵⁴ Balberg, *Purity, Body, and self in Early Rabbinic Literature*, 52-53.

⁵⁵ This further begs the question of the biblical term נֶפֶשׁ (nefesh), more often translated as "life force" or "breath of life". If the rabbis are indeed using the term נֶפֶשׁ to refer to a Platonic-like soul, this may reflect a further impact of the Greco-Roman thought upon the rabbis of the Mishnah. Thanks to Joel Gereboff for this clarification.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁹ Jacobs, "The body in Jewish worship: three rituals examined."

physical and spiritual aspects of human experience.⁶⁰ Balberg offers technologies of self as an explanation for how rabbinic law expressed this symbiotic interdependency.

Jewish concepts of the body's religious expression have undergone a long period of upheaval and renegotiation to which I will turn shortly. Religious Studies scholarship, which has not—to my knowledge—addressed *niddah* in its current context, and ethnographic research, which does not engage religious history or religious contexts with substantial depth, can be understood as complementary bodies of work which can inform cross-fertilized study of *niddah* as it is enacted today and discussed in the religious descriptive literature. At present neither discipline is doing justice to research on contemporary *niddah*. Ethnography discusses *niddah* in isolation from its historical influences and religious Studies does not address contemporary *niddah*.

Modern History of *Niddah* in the United States

Only three scholars have discussed modern *niddah* in terms of its history in America: Jenna Weissman Joselit, Joshua Hoffman, and Michael Meyer. Of these three, Weissman Joselit explores the circumstances surrounding *niddah* observance in greater detail whereas Hoffman and Meyer attempt to provide a general overview of changes in *niddah* observance over the course of American history. A fourth scholar, Beth Wenger, has written a close examination of the medical arguments found in *niddah* promotional literature of the interwar years. This body of literature has been identified by Weissman-Joselit as “a new genre of American rabbinic and prescriptive literature—modern marriage manuals.”⁶¹ Wenger's sources also overlaps significantly with Hoffman's historical survey.

Weissman-Joselit devotes an entire chapter in *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880-1950*,⁶² to the state of Jewish marriage during this period. She situates the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 81.

⁶¹ Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, 117.

⁶² Weissman Joselit, Jenna. “Kissing Business” in *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880-1950*.

interwar⁶³ campaign to bolster *niddah* observance within the context of “marriage educator and the marriage education movement.”⁶⁴ This movement was part of a broader concern with high divorce rates across American society at the time.⁶⁵ “Thousands of prospective couples, newlyweds, and old-timers crammed auditoriums and lecture halls to hear experts expound on the “art and Science of family living”⁶⁶ Weissman-Joselit showcases Rabbi Goldstein’s *The Meaning of Marriage and the Foundations of the Family: A Jewish Interpretation* as an example of Jewish spin on marriage education:

“With chapters on truth, comradeship, fidelity, and the household budget, little distinguished this text from those either commonly drawn upon or penned by most [non-Jewish] marriage educators. What rendered it distinctive and appealing to Jewish couples, though, was its insistence on reconciling the “Jewish ideals of matrimony”--- affection, trust, and mutual respect—with “studies now being made in the social-science laboratories...Goldstein’s text demonstrated that “the wisdom of the ages” was wholly compatible with contemporary thought”⁶⁷

Weissman-Joselit’s observations indicate that there was interest in creating happy, successful marriages, even interest in specifically Jewish marriages reflecting Jewish values. However, “despite the efforts of advocating writers, educators, *mikvah* committees, the vast majority of Jewish women “simply didn’t take to it”⁶⁸

Weissman-Joselit dedicated a sizable section of a chapter in *New York’s Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years* to the crisis of *mikvah* attendance in New York during this period. She draws comparisons between the increasing crisis of *niddah* observance and the scandals surrounding *kosher* meat supervision during the same period. However, she

⁶³ 1920s-1940s.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 38-43. In 1895 “ratio of marriages [to divorces] in the “general community” was 9.4 to 1, the ratio of Jewish marriages to divorces was more on the order of 24 to 1. By the 1940’s, however, that divide had narrowed. The Jewish community now celebrated 4.9 marriages for every one divorce, as compared with 3,3 marriages for every divorce within American society at large.(39)

⁶⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁷ Weissman Joselit, “This Kissing Business,” 20, including quotations from Goldstein, *The Meaning of Marriage and the Foundations of the Family: A Jewish Interpretation* (date not provided).

⁶⁸ Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 121.

asserts that the campaign to revive *niddah* observance was not as successful as similar campaigns concerning “*kashruth* and synagogue participation—some of Judaism’s “oriental” rituals were comfortably and successfully reconciled with a modern outlook.”⁶⁹ Yet, despite the efforts of advocating writers, educators, and *mikvah* committees, the vast majority of Jewish women “simply didn’t take to [*niddah*]: neither the beautifully appointed *mikvah* nor the well-reasoned arguments of the *mikvah* manual could overcome objections to what was seen as the fundamentally oriental nature of the practice.”⁷⁰

What made *kashruth* and synagogue practices more adaptable than *niddah*? Synagogue attendance had a clear counterpart in Christian church attendance. *Kashrut*’s modern rationale is less clear until we recall that the late nineteenth century witnessed a prolonged fascination with the impacts of food consumption on physical health, most notably the vegetarian movements promoted Rev. Sylvester Graham, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, and the Seventh Day Adventists; and, the development of nutritional guides and food groupings in the first half of the twentieth century.⁷¹ In contrast, regarding *niddah*, Eva Levin has detailed the long tradition of public sexual regulation in Eastern Europe⁷². However, such sexual regulation simply did not exist in the modernizing United States. “Ultimately, it was precisely the absence of logic or reason or, to put it differently, the absence of westernness in the observance of family purity that prevented its observance from becoming as accepted and widespread a Jewish woman’s ritual as, say, *kashruth*.”⁷³ Reading *kashrut* and synagogue in terms of their counterparts in the broader American culture in this period supports Weissman-Joselit’s argument for the non-westernness of

⁶⁹ Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 121.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁷¹ Dr. Wilbur Olin Atwater’s *Principles of Nutrition and Nutritive Value of Food*, 1904; Caroline Hunt. *Food for Young Children*, 1916. “How to Select Food,” 1917. First Recommended Daily Allowances published in 1941. “History of USDA Nutrition Guides.”

⁷² Levin, *Sex and Society in the Word of the Orthodox Slavs, 900-1700*.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 121.

niddah and *mikvah*, and –as we shall see in the next chapter- my own argument regarding the rupturing concepts of religion, body, and ritual that emerged in the late nineteenth century.

Joshua Hoffman's "The Institution of the Mikvah in America" was written specifically for Rivkah Slonim's *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*.⁷⁴ Hoffman attempts to provide a comprehensive consideration of *mikvah* in the United States starting as early as the colonial period. Hoffman engages the term *mikvah* to refer to the actual *mikvah* pool but also, the history of this ritual pool is taken as an indicator of *niddah* observance throughout American history. Hoffman's essay provides a wealth of evidence about the existence and conditions of mikvaot in the United States, demonstrating that the institution of *mikvah* is neither simple, nor straight forward. Among other details, Hoffman argues that the father of American Reform Judaism, Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise, was likely a supporter of both *niddah* and *mikvah*. Hoffman's article suggests that wide scale abandonment of *niddah* was much later than is generally assumed.

This view is upheld by Michael Meyer's essay "New Waters in an Old Vessel: A History of Mikveh in Modern Judaism."⁷⁵ Meyer's historical survey focuses on *mikvah* the nineteenth and twentieth centuries specifically, but gives separate attention to dynamics within the Reform and Orthodox Judaisms through to the present day, with some attention to the position of Conservative Judaism as it emerged the twentieth century. Meyer's main purpose is to "examine, through a specific instance, how a particular tradition, having been abandoned by a segment of modern Jewry, can in response to intellectually and aesthetically induced vicissitudes, regain vitality"⁷⁶ Meyer's article provides more detail concerning both the early Reform movement and

⁷⁴ "Contributors" in *Total Immersion*, 243.

⁷⁵ In *Between Jewish Tradition and Modernity: Rethinking an Old Opposition, Essays in Honor of David Ellenson* (2014). Dr. Gereboff forwarded Meyer's essay to me very late the drafting process, at the conclusion of the chapter on "Crisis and Redressive Action". This is important to note because Meyer identifies several of the ambiguities that I have put forward in this thesis. While I have arrived at several of same conclusions as Meyer, and I engage his work to provide my conclusions greater authority, I have discerned these ambiguities and challenged assumptions independently of Meyer's work. Moreover, Meyer does not frame this history within Social Drama theory, nor does he challenge quite so many of the "common knowledge" assumptions that I do in this essay, nor does he identify late nineteenth century ideas of religion, body, and ritual as a conceptual set that undermined *niddah*'s ritual foundations.

⁷⁶ Meyer, "New Waters in an Old Vessel," 142.

the tension between Rabbi Wise and Rabbi Einhorn in the United States. While Meyer observes that “Classical Reform Judaism rejected body-related observances as distractions from the true, higher forms religion, which was exaltation of the spirit through prayer and commitment to moral deeds,”⁷⁷ he does not identify this rejection with wider social concepts of religion, body, and ritual. Concerning *mikvah* today, Meyer engages the term *mikvah* beyond use as a euphemism for *niddah*. He surveys the multiple innovative purposes for *mikvah* immersion that have been emerging recently within the liberal branches of American Judaism, such as *Rosh Chodesh*,⁷⁸ recovery from rape, divorce, surgery, and “a men’s initiative” found at *Mayyim Hayyim* (lit. Living Waters) in Boston and Rodef Shalom’s *mikvah* in San Raphael, California. Meyer’s chapter, like Hoffman’s essay, offers a rich abundance of historical detail over a shorter time period but encompassing a wider range of Jewish observance levels.

Beth Wenger analyzed a compact body of pro-*niddah* literature, from the interwar periods 1920-1940, which featured scientifically based medical findings correlating uterine health with *niddah* observance.⁷⁹ “The renewed interest in Judaism’s sexual regulations in the interwar years emerged from disparate sources; from scientists investigating patterns of disease, from Jewish leaders combating the identification of Jews as a separate race, and from rabbis attempting to preserve tradition in an era of rapid social change.”⁸⁰ Wenger discerns that interwar attitudes toward sexuality and family formed the unifying vision behind efforts to persuade Jews to observe *niddah*.

...the discourse surrounding the observance of family purity testifies to the powerful public meanings associated with sexuality and the family unit. Scientists as well as Jewish leaders perceived sexual behavior within the family as crucial to their broader programs for maintaining good health, investigating racial theories, and ensuring the persistence of Jewish tradition. Yet prescriptive literature inscribed those larger social

⁷⁷ Ibid., 145.

⁷⁸ *Rosh Chodesh* (or Rosh Hodesh) is the start of the Jewish lunar month, indicated by the new moon. *Rosh Chodesh* has traditionally been considered a special woman’s holiday.

⁷⁹ Wenger, “Mitzvah and Medicine.”

⁸⁰ Ibid., 178.

issues on the sexuality and practices of Jewish women and, by extension, on the stability of their families.⁸¹

Wenger further identifies fears of assimilation at the heart of this discourse. “For men, family purity was advertised as a means of practicing self-control, a highly valued male character trait in American culture. Jewish men were told that their “self-command” would grow stronger and so, too, would their “virility, energies and vitality”⁸² this line of argument reflects a certain medical concept that sexual activity depletes a man of small amounts of his vital force and that the cumulative effect of excessive sexual activity produces effects of depletion on the body. Both men and women were warned of the “physical and moral peril that would befall children born from intercourse during menstruation”⁸³ Wenger understands these polemics as reflecting a wariness about “sexual freedom and a preoccupation with regulating both male and female sexuality.”⁸⁴ However, I read these warnings as indicating lingering medieval beliefs that the conditions of conception directly impact the form and character of the offspring. Such a reading intersects this argument back to concerns over assimilation and the future of the Jewish people. This is further supported by the tension that Wenger identifies within Jewish engagement of medical research that risked conflating Jewish health benefits of *niddah* with Jewish racial resistance to cervical cancer. Wenger argues that “behind the extensive dialogue about proper sexual expression lay a multilayered set of Jewish concerns: deep-seated fears about assimilation, anxiety over changed gender roles, optimistic faith in science, and resistance to the definition of Jews as a racial type. These issues, often removed from the area of sexuality, intersected in twentieth-century prescriptive literature and created a paradigm in which the maintenance of social order and the survival of the Jewish people appeared to depend entirely upon the actions of Jewish women and the sexual behavior of the Jewish family...reveal[ing] a great deal about the complex

⁸¹ Wenger, 198.

⁸² Wenger, “Mikvah and Medicine,” 192. Wenger quotes from Hoenig, *Jewish Family Life*, 23; and Miller, *The Secret of the Jew*, 61.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

interrelationship between the private domain of the family and the larger realm of public discourse.”⁸⁵

All of these articles overlap multiple sources, creating an extremely compact ‘body’ of historical literature about the history of the conflated *niddah-mikvah* rituals in American Jewish history. By placing the evidence and analysis provided by this historical literature into Turner’s Social Drama framework, various ambiguities will become apparent and ‘facts’ about American *niddah* -common throughout the wider American Jewish community- will be revealed to be assumptions which are not after all supported by historical the evidence. Additionally, seen through the lens of Social Drama, previously understood disjunctures will become continuities and a long-term process of cultural negation concerning concepts of religion, body, and ritual will emerge.

Analytic Boundaries within the Religious Descriptive Literature

The critical point of departure between academic scholarship and religious literature exploring the meaning and/or experience of *niddah* is the conceptualization of Jewish religious law as either human or divine in origin. Whereas the scholar approaches these texts as artifacts of human culture or expressions of historical, social, and cultural forces; the religious person approaches them as originating outside human culture, wherein lays the authority of sacred texts. This point of origin frames religious discussion in ways that distinguish the divine context from the human context, thereby placing boundaries on the ways in which the laws can be discussed.

In the case of the literature on *niddah* discussed here, both Norman Lamm, *Hedge of Roses*, and Rivkah Slonim, *Total Immersion*, take care to frame their discussions of *niddah* within the Jewish category of religious discourse called “*taamei ha-mitzvot*,”⁸⁶ the explanation of the

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Taamei HaMitzvot represents a very long history Jewish discussion concerning the nature and purpose of the commandments. Isaac Heinemann’s *The Reasons for the Commandments in Jewish Thought* (English translation by Leonard Levin in 2008) offers a comprehensive introduction to the topic. This text was originally published in 1942

commandments... [or literally] ‘the tastes of the commandments.’”⁸⁷ Lamm explains this category by distinguishing the search for God’s reasons, which are unknowable because God is incomprehensible, from perceiving God’s purposes or “larger ends” in the commandments, which can be perceived in Jews’ experience of performing them. “We want to know not why God commanded them, but what he wanted us to know from them...i.e., the functions of the commandments in our life.”⁸⁸ Lamm draws a further fine line by asserting that *taamei ha-mitzvot* function to enhance “the flavor [of] our spiritual diet”⁸⁹ while keeping the Law itself “independent of and unconditioned by the values, reasons, and purposes we believe we have found in it”⁹⁰

Rivkah Slonim frames the same argument within the three categories of commandments: *Mishpatim*, moral laws of social conduct such as theft and murder; *eidut*, commandments which commemorate Jewish historical events; and *chukkim*, “suprarational” commandments which surpass human comprehension.⁹¹ *Niddah* is a *chok* (s. of *chukkim*). As such, Slonim asserts, it provides “a pure, unadulterated avenue of connection with God” and is “capable of affecting the soul on the deepest levels.”⁹² For Slonim, whereas *mishpatim* and *eidut* appear to have motivation built into the commandments themselves, *chukkim* are performed “simply because God so ordained it.”⁹³ Like Lamm, Slonim holds that “insights [on the experience of *niddah*]...can add dimension and meaning”⁹⁴ to its observance.

Many scholars are critical of such analytical boundaries because they ostensibly place certain areas of the discourse beyond analysis or criticism, such as the social-historical factors

⁸⁷ Lamm. *A Hedge of Roses*, 49-50.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Slonim. *Total Immersion*, xxix.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, xxix

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

impacting development of ritual observances. In this case, the critical question at stake is “Why observe menstruation in the first place?” Lamm and Slonim both assert that the only motivation for observing *niddah* is that it is commanded by God, a *mitzvah*, as part of the Jewish people’s covenant with God. Many scholars may read this as an intellectual cop out. However, Caroline Humphry and James Alexander Laidlaw⁹⁵ offer a theoretical construct from which to engage this concept in secular terms. Their concept of archetypal action holds that human action can be meaningful in and of itself, that actions may be done simply for the sake of doing. This *innate significance*⁹⁶, as I prefer to think of it, accounts for Lamm’s and Slonim’s assertion that God’s *mitzvot* do not need any other rationale for their observance.⁹⁷ In this sense the innate significance of performing the commandment is intimately bound with concepts of God and God’s commandments. Moreover, *Kabbalah* defines the *mitzvot* as encompassing spiritual counterparts in the divine realm. The capacity of *chukkim* to “affect the soul on the deepest levels”⁹⁸ results from the fact they are more function more profoundly within the incomprehensible spiritual realm and in the comprehensible physical realm. Humphry and Laidlaw use the concept of innate significance to urge scholars to respect practitioners’ authentic articulations of such boundaries around rationale-izing of religious performance. To this I would like to add a consideration of what can happen when rationales for archetypal action become too bound to culturally specific interpretation(s), either by practitioners or by critical “analysts.”

As I suggested in a paper⁹⁹ presented at the Northwestern University, the biblical commandments, such as those regarding *niddah*, may have appeared more self-evident within

⁹⁵ Humphrey and Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual*.

⁹⁶ This alternate phrase for archetypal action emerged through a conversation with Alexander Henn. I do not remember who specifically coined the term.

⁹⁷ Additionally, identifying motivation for observing commandments in the Jewish people’s contractual relationship with God leaves conceptual space for an individual to develop their own personal relationship to the commandments and to God through their performance. This enables the individual to act as both a member of a larger community through shared actions and to retain and nurture her or his own individualism through personal meaning.

⁹⁸ Slonim, Op. cit., xxix.

⁹⁹ Johnston, “Jewish Purity Laws as a Template for Environmental Policy”.

their originating cultures and therefore lacked such specific explanation as is found with some other of the commandments. When cultural practices, such as *niddah*, outlive their original cultural context, new relevance must be negotiated or innovated if the practice is to continue. If a practice is too bound by cultural rationales specific to a certain place and time, then it lacks the flexibility to change over time and to persist.

Lamm argues for keeping Rabbinic Law “independent of and unconditioned by the values, reasons, and purposes we believe we have found in it.”¹⁰⁰ Lamm does not deny that individuals and communities have found alternate purposes and motivational rationales to find meaning in the ritual practices. Lamm asserts these rationales are highly specific to individuals and communities in different times and places, and are hence more than secondary rationales. I suggest that this distinction between the divine constitution of a ritual and its lived experience have struck a balance between continuity and change over time.

That said, *niddah* practices have clearly differed over the centuries and between cultural groups, and more than the “the taste of the commandment” has changed. Foremost, the entire Talmudic reworking of *niddah*¹⁰¹ testifies that its ritual performance has changed since its original biblical mandate. Sharon Cohen has specifically pointed out that medieval rabbis argued against non-rabbinic “‘incorrect’ purification practices”, indicating that the *niddah* observance was far from uniform then.¹⁰² It is not clear if this reflects that rabbinic practice as stipulated in the Talmud had not been fully implemented among the Iberian Jews or if customary practice among Iberian Jews of this period had been changing.

¹⁰⁰ Lamm. Op. cit., 51

¹⁰¹ Examples of rabbinic reworking include extending the *niddah* period from the duration of bleeding to the duration plus seven white days; the system of blood stain analysis, the requirement to immerse after menstruation, and possibly the confinement of immersion to marriage only rather than applying to all menstruation.

¹⁰² Cohen, “Purity, Piety, and Polemic: Medieval Rabbinic Denunciations of ‘Incorrect’ Purification Practices.”

Throughout the last century of decline and revival of *niddah* observance among Euro-American Jews, the issue of observing or not-observing by majority of American Jews¹⁰³ has overshadowed issues of ritual detail as the primary problem.¹⁰⁴ Contemporary ethnology of *niddah* ritual practices among Israel's ethnic Jewish minorities demonstrate such variation of practice does exist within today's Jewish world.¹⁰⁵ In light of the realities of cultural variation, the boundaries that Lamm and Slonim place on analysis may be better appreciated as a guard against a certain type of modern over-rationalization rather than a refusal to negotiate or rearticulate *niddah's* present with its past.

Historically, Euro-American Western scholars have interpreted menstrual rituals in light of nineteenth century hierarchies of religion wherein bodily practices are cultural artifacts, antiquated and at best, optional, particularly for those who resist modernity. The oppression-subversion-agency framing has not gotten far from this position. The cultural artifact perspective results in the argument that if the rationale for a ritual is no longer relevant then the ritual should be discontinued¹⁰⁶. Moreover, post-modern concepts of culture suggest that ultimately, specific cultural expressions are a blend of arbitrariness, culturally historic references, and negotiations of the present with the past. This line of reasoning privileges individual choice over communal obligation and leads what is critically called 'cafeteria-style religious practice' in which practitioners select which components of practice they perform. These culturally-bound definitions of *niddah's* purpose and function are exactly what Lamm and Slonim caution against. This also

¹⁰³ There has not to date been any documentation of abandonment of full rabbinically defined *niddah* observance among those Jews that we would today identify as *Haredi*.

¹⁰⁴ Among communities in which *niddah* continued to be observed, it is highly likely that issues of how to halakhically observe in the new American conditions continued to be discussed.

¹⁰⁵ See Star, et al., "Talking about *Mikveh* Parties, or Discourses of Gender, Hierarchy, and Social Control"; Anteby, "There's Blood in the House": Negotiating Female Rituals of Purity among Ethiopian Jews in Israel"; Allouche-Nenayoun, "Rites of Water for the Jewish Woman of Algeria: Representations and Meanings"; Cicurel and Sharaby, "Women in the Menstruation Huts: Variations in Preserving Purification Customs among Ethiopian Immigrants"; Tsoffar, "The Body as Storyteller: Karaite Women's Experience of Blood and Milk".
Variations documented in this literature include: menstrual huts or menstrual rooms, bridal *mikveh* parties, and immersion in bathtubs with the tap running and the drain unstopped.

¹⁰⁶ As has been advocated in an article by Guterman, Mehta, and Gibbs, "Menstrual Taboos among Major Religions."

accounts for Lamm's distancing of *niddah* from the traditional menstrual practices found in other cultures,

The Torah's legislation is simply not of one piece with...the primitive customs recorded in Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Unfortunately, such identification of the Torah's laws with primitive pagan and mythological cultures often does take place in the mind of the contemporary Jew or Jewess who is uninitiated into the world of Torah and the Jewish Tradition who cannot, therefore, view Jewish Family Purity from a broader perspective and greater knowledgeability¹⁰⁷

So how does the religious scholar negotiate a balance between the consideration of *niddah* as an expression of both bodily culture and spiritual religiosity? This split itself is a red herring produced by the body-religion binary. Drawing on Humphry and Laidlaw, I suggest, by way of a middle path, that the boundaries asserted by Lamm and Slonim, and the traditional religious literature they cite, define the negotiables and non-negotiables of *niddah* observance in a manner which accounts for *niddah*'s survival over the centuries. Specifically, a core of the physical practices persist under the traditional boundaries explained by Lamm and Slonim, while the much lower ranked realm of human interpretation enables *niddah* ritual practice a degree of flexibility which ensures its negotiability and hence, its survival across social and cultural variations.

Conclusion

Moving forward from this position, my historicization of the modern decline and revival of *niddah* observance will illustrate the difficult dynamics produced by these contrasting approaches to understanding *niddah*. I will frame this history in terms of Victor Turner's concept of Social Drama. This framing will organize this period into three overlapping stages. First, I will discuss the rupturing forces that resulted in the initial American crisis of *niddah* observance around the turn of the twentieth century. Secondly, I will explore the relationship between the *niddah* crisis and the redressive efforts made through the first half of the twentieth century to ebb the flow of adherents from *niddah* and to bring adherents back to its practice. When was the crisis identified? How was

¹⁰⁷ Lamm, *Hedge of Roses*, 41.

it defined? How can the redressive actions evidence how contemporaries understood the crisis? Thirdly, I will present the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century literature on *niddah* in the context of its reconciliation, arguing that this literature represents a period of continued redressive action and reorientation. Reconciliation resulted from the dialogue between two bodies of redressive action, those critical of *niddah* and those who advocated for it. As integrated concepts of religion, body, and ritual gained legitimacy beside the discrete conceptual categories of the nineteenth century, the early twentieth century arguments for *niddah* observance were developed to form new articulations of *niddah*'s role in fostering healthy sexual hygiene and uniquely Jewish styled marriages.

I will examine this late twentieth century reorientation period through three major documents of promotional *niddah* literature that demonstrate how those articulation of traditional practices reflect a process of negotiation with the late twentieth century critical redressive action against *niddah*. These texts are *Hedge of Roses* (1966) by Rabbi Norman Lamm, *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology* edited by Rivkah Slonim (1996); and a set of three responsa on *niddah* by the Rabbinical Assembly United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (2006). By engaging theories of social drama, I will argue that this reorientation has resulted from traditional Judaism's positive and negative engagement of social movements originating in the 1960's: Feminism, the Sexual Revolution, and the late-twentieth century Great Awakening.¹⁰⁸ I will conclude this examination with a discussion of the many areas of scholarship that might benefit from my genealogy of American *niddah* literature. However, before we can give our full attention to contemporary presentations of *niddah*, we need to understand more about the modern context in which this literature emerged.

¹⁰⁸ There is a debate over how best to identify the phenomena of the spirituality movements since the 1970s; many question the claim that this period constitutes an Awakening at all. Viewing this period as encompassing numerous, diverse, but otherwise isolated spiritual movements supports reading the revival of *niddah* as exclusive to the revival Orthodox Judaism. In contrast, viewing this period as a Great Awakening supports reading the *niddah* revival as indicative of broader social changes which occur across the branches of Judaism. This position helps interpret the existence of *niddah* observance outside the boundaries of Orthodoxy. For this reason, I endorse the Great Awakening position. In deference to the debate over whether this constitutes a Third or Fourth Great Awakening, for which I do not yet have a position, I will refer to this as the late twentieth century Great Awakening.

2 –RUPTURE: HISTORICIZING *NIDDAH* IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Social Drama as Genealogy

Currently, in the United States, *Niddah*, or Jewish menstrual rituals, is required and presumed to be universal among Orthodox Rabbinic Jews. *Niddah* is officially required by Conservative Judaism, though the majority of Conservative Jewish lay women are presumed to *not* observe *niddah*.¹⁰⁹ Reform, Reconstructionist, and Humanist Judaisms officially do not endorse *niddah*.¹¹⁰ During the first half of the twentieth century, Orthodox Judaism experienced a steady decline in overall adherents and ritual observance. Since the 1970's this trend has been reversing through higher retention rates within Orthodox communities,¹¹¹ conversion from outside Judaism, the return to Orthodoxy from liberal and unaffiliated branches within Judaism known as the *ba'al teshuva* movement,¹¹² and increased observance of traditional law among established Orthodox communities. *Niddah* observance has experienced a parallel revival evidenced by increasing rates of *mikvah* construction/renovation¹¹³ and the development of a "*niddah* culture industry" in Israel and the United States¹¹⁴ which promotes *niddah* observance through educational organizations, a substantial body of Orthodox literature, resources for *mikvah* supplies, websites, webinars, and

¹⁰⁹ Two or three times when sharing my knowledge with other Conservative Jews that some Conservative Jewish couples (besides myself) do observe *niddah*, I have received the speculative response, "It must be some women rabbis." Thus, Conservative *niddah* practices fall within the boundaries of the unthinkable or at best, a marginal concept of Conservative Jewish practice.

¹¹⁰ With one recent exception. Reconstructionist Rabbi Jill Hammer has proposed that the rituals of *niddah* may –after all–offer spiritual nourishment to today's Reconstructionist women in her on-line article "Rising from the Ritual Bath -- Jewish Ritual."

¹¹¹ Jonathan Sarna references "one survey [showing] Orthodoxy retain[s] only 42 percent of those born into its fold" (*American Judaism*, 327). Conversely, this indicates a 58% retention rate.

¹¹² Literally "masters of return or repentance."

¹¹³ According to The Taharas HaMishpacha Organization, Inc., "between 1970 and 2014, approximately 470 mikvaos were either built or renovated globally" (Chaya Klein, e-mail message to author, 2014). This is one organization's numbers. In the time I lived in Cincinnati Ohio, 2006-2013, two new mikvaot were constructed and I knew at least *mikvah* renovated/reconstructed in nearby Dayton, Ohio.

¹¹⁴ Avishai, Orit. "'Doing Religion' in a Secular World," 419.

phone apps. The published literature, webinars, and websites, in particular, represent modern reorientations to *niddah* observance which have been developing since the early twentieth century.

Reframing *niddah* within Jewish textual discourse is not a recent development in Euro-American Jewish history; however each period differed in both its driving concern and innovation of *niddah*'s observances or attitudes toward it. *Niddah* has been reworked on the structural and interpretive levels within Rabbinic Judaism starting with the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud,¹¹⁵ and by Kabbalistic innovators of the medieval period.¹¹⁶ In both these broad cases these changes reflect, as David Biale has argued, a negotiation of traditional ritual practice with the dominant culture of the time, particularly concepts about sexuality.¹¹⁷ The formative rabbis, to the best of our knowledge, changed the observance of *niddah* at a structural level, or elaborated structural changes¹¹⁸ which may have already been evident at the time, this aspect is still uncertain. These early rabbis primarily pursued the question of “how” to observe *niddah* now that its Temple-based purity rationale was gone. Boyarin and Biale have both observed that the formative rabbinic innovations to *niddah* reflected concerns to control male sexuality, vis-a-vis self-control and discipline.¹¹⁹ Conversely, Charlotte Fonrobert's describes Mishnaic innovations to the *niddah* system as an effort to objectivize women's subjective experience of menstruation as an effort by male rabbis to exert some degree of objectivism –and hence control, over a ritual system managed and overseen by women and their experience of their own biological events, which directly impacted male sexual access.¹²⁰ In many respects all three scholars are correct as their statements relate to different aspects of the development of rabbinic *niddah* ritual law. Boyarin

¹¹⁵ Fonrobert, Charlotte. *Menstrual Purity*; Balberg, Mira. *Purity, Body and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature*.

¹¹⁶ Koren, *Forsaken: The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*.

¹¹⁷ Biale, *Eros and the Jews*.

¹¹⁸ These structural changes included the taxonomic system for stain identification (Meacham, “An Abbreviated History of the Development of the Jewish Menstrual Laws, 29-32); extension of the *niddah* period from seven days to twelve-fourteen days (Reisner, “Observing *Niddah* in our Day,” 7-8) and the limitation of *niddah* observance from all menstruants to marriage.

¹¹⁹ Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*; and Biale, D. *Eros and the Jews*.

¹²⁰ Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 115.

and Biale refer largely to rabbinic attitudes toward *niddah* in a cultural environment wherein asceticism and sexual abstinence were widely valued.¹²¹ These early rabbis tried to walk a fine line between rejecting ascetic practices but also to adhering to the commandment in Leviticus 18:19 to not engage sexually with menstruant women. This fine line resulted in the repositioning of *niddah* law as primarily a sexual practice.¹²² Fonrobert's perspective speaks specifically to the euphemistic terminology¹²³ with which Mishnaic writers discussed women's bodies and biological processes and the development of a rabbinic taxonomy of blood stains analysis.¹²⁴ These three scholars assert that rabbinic reorientations and innovations of *niddah* ritual practice resulted from these men's engagement and negotiation of their commitment to living by the Jewish commandments within the cultural specifics of the late Roman Empire.

The medieval orientation of *niddah* appears to have occurred more on levels of renewed or continued enforcement of the details of halakhic practice¹²⁵ and interpretation.¹²⁶ Shaye Cohen has observed that medieval women's practices do not appear to have reflected halakhic norms in so far as some rabbis wrote condemning certain non-halakhic practices.¹²⁷ This enforcement

¹²¹ It should be noted that Christianity is currently understood to be only one of the ascetically embracing religious expressions during late antiquity, including several non-rabbinic Jewish communities. This wider cultural view of sexuality resulted in the non-rabbinic Jewish text the Baraita de-*Niddah* which resurfaced among European Jewry during the medieval period.

¹²² Wasserfall, "Introduction; Menstrual Blood into Jewish Blood" in *Women and Water*, 5.

¹²³ Specifically, women's vagina, cervix, and sexual activity were referred to in terms of a house: outer chamber, lower chamber, upper chamber, and "servicing her house." Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 40-67.

¹²⁴ This taxonomy aided rabbis in evaluating blood stains on women's clothing to determine if the blood reflected uterine flow or another source which would not render a woman *niddah*. Such evaluations were conducted only in cases in which the woman herself expressed uncertainty.

¹²⁵ Cohen, "Purity, Piety, and Polemic: Medieval Rabbinic Denunciations of "Incorrect" Purification Practices," 82-100.

¹²⁶ Koren, "Mystical Rationales for the Laws of *Niddah*" in *Women and Water*, 101-121. See also, Koren, *Forsaken: The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*. Both these works examine the development of strongly negative interpretive valences of *niddah* as a mystical and material reality.

¹²⁷ Per Cohen, "Purity, Piety, and Polemic" in *Women and Water*, 83. "In correct practices are of many sorts: the women do not properly count the days of their period and the seven clean days; during the days of their period and the additional seven days they separate themselves too much from their households and their household tasks—or they do not separate themselves enough; during the days of their period and the additional seven days they incorrectly abstain from contact with sacred objects, places, and actions—or they do abstain enough; they do not properly prepare themselves before going to the *miqveh*; they do not purify themselves properly."

effort occurred proximally with innovations in medieval Jewish mysticism which negatively impacted both menstrual practices and women. Sharon Koren has argued, Jewish mysticism was undergoing major revival and innovation in parallel with Christian and Muslim European mystical developments during this part of the medieval period. Koren's work suggests that many negative Jewish attributes connoted to menstruation and women derived from an intermingling of rabbinic practice with notions expressed in the non-rabbinic, late antique text the *Baraita de Niddah* and with *Merkavah*¹²⁸ mysticism. This had two major impacts on medieval attitudes toward menstruation. First, menstruation was a metaphor for a divine process of purging evil from the spheres approaching the heavenly realm.¹²⁹ "Any contact between the pure and impure could infect the Godhead with the forces of the demonic realm."¹³⁰ Secondly, this metaphor reflected within the human domain in literal menstruation which was understood as one of many means the human had for excretion spiritual waste and evil.¹³¹ Medieval engagement of *niddah*, then, centered on issues of purity necessary for men's mystical experience of the Divine. Not only did men need to avoid contagion of spiritual detritus through contact with menstruants, but kabbalists observed a form of *niddah*, separation, during which time they too sloughed off spiritual detritus through purificatory rituals such as fasting. This impacted *niddah* on the attitudinal level; specifically, that menstruation derived from forces of evil and expressed cosmic rhythms of purging evil from holiness.¹³² While both self-control and purity concerns were present in both early rabbinic and medieval periods, but the emphases were different. During the rabbinic period of late antiquity *niddah* was emphasized as a practice of sexual self-control. In the medieval period the emphasis shifted to fearing impurity in the sense of evil, evil being attributed to menstrual blood itself. In both the early rabbinic and medieval periods, the necessity of *niddah*

¹²⁸ *Merkavah* translates as "chariot" and refers to the traditional association of this mystical tradition with the Prophet Ezekiel who traveled to the heavenly realm in a fiery chariot.

¹²⁹ Koren, *Forsaken*, 87-86.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 86, 106.

¹³² Koren, *op. cit.*, 75-79.

observance was a given. Questions of “why” were subordinate to questions of “how.” Understanding meaningfulness of specific ritual observances was beside the point of their correct performance.

In the modern period, the official structure of *niddah* has remained unchanged; but emphasis on the “why?” has challenged the very existence of *niddah*. “Why” has become less a question about the meaningfulness of its ritual performance and more a question of its existential merit. The consideration of modern orientations to *niddah* practice are complicated by the fact that discussion and assessment of menstrual rituals generally and *niddah* specifically has extended beyond the parameters of internal Jewish debate. In the cases of early rabbinic and medieval Judaism that I have just cited, recent post-modern scholarship informs my explanation of *niddah* in the past, without much opportunity for the past itself to refute the conclusions of such scholarship. However, in the twentieth century, such scholarship participates in the conversations which define *niddah* today, both indirectly through scholarship on menstruation and directly through scholarship on *niddah* itself. As we will see later in my discussion of late twentieth century *niddah* discourse, *niddah* has often been reoriented in deliberate response to academic criticism of menstrual rituals. Both sides of this conversation, however, engage a set of shared historicizing assumptions about the decline of *niddah* observance from approximately 1850-1960. My goal in this chapter is, first, to unsettle these assumptions. The remainder of this chapter seeks to lay out an approach which aspires to suggest alternate processes of cultural negotiations between Judaism and the dominant American culture(s) –and European-based conceptual constructions that imbue the American consciousness—that shaped *niddah* observance throughout the last hundred-some years. I will suggest that historicizing the *niddah*’s decline in terms of Victor Turner’s Social Drama produces a far richer and more complex framework than either common knowledge of Jewish history or scholarship on *niddah* and *mikvah* have assumed. The questions that will arise from both this unsettling and recontextualization will establish the foundation for my analysis of contemporary discussions of *niddah* and suggest rich new directions for future research on its observance in the United States.

It is very important to comment here on a methodological issue. No liberally-based writing on the history of the evolution of American Judaism gives much, if any, attention to *niddah's* decline within either liberal branches or in Orthodox Judaism. In fact, most American Jewish history books, on any branch of American Judaism, do not mention *niddah* or its modern term, Family Purity, at all. I have found only four secularly trained academics whose work addresses the history of *niddah's* decline in the United States explicitly.¹³³ Joshua Hoffman has written a comprehensive history of *niddah* observance. His article "The Institution of Mikvah in America" was written for *Total Immersion* thus affiliating this essay with the Orthodox *niddah* discourse. Jenna Weissman Joselit has devoted several pages to *niddah* in her discussions of the history of early twentieth-century Orthodox Judaism in New York.¹³⁴ Beth Wenger has conducted a close examination of what Weissman Joselit identifies as "a new genre of American rabbinic and prescriptive literature—modern marriage manuals" written between 1920 and 1940.¹³⁵ This body of literature also figures prominently in the work of Hoffman and Weissman Joselit. Most recently, Michael A. Meyer has provided a more traditional styled genealogy of *mikvah* in the Modern American Judaism.¹³⁶ As a result of this limited scholarship on *niddah* in American Orthodox Judaism, I have had to derive a historicization of *niddah's* decline and revival from the larger discussion of the decline and revival of American Jewish traditional observance.

¹³³ It is true that a sizable body of sociological and anthropological literature on contemporary *niddah* experiences exists; however these works do not address the topic historically.

¹³⁴ Weissman Joselit, Jenna. "Kissing Business" in *The Wonders of America*, 10.

Weissman Joselit, Jenna. *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years*

¹³⁵ Wenger, "Mikvah and Medicine."

¹³⁶ Meyer, "New Waters in an Old Vessel: A History of Mikveh in Modern Judaism."

Historical Narratives of *Niddah's* Decline

Generational Assimilation and the Rise of Reform Judaism

To date, historicization of *niddah's* decline follows two slightly different narratives: one is more recent and centered in secular-based, academic writing on American Orthodoxy; the other dates to the early twentieth century and centers in the writing of Jewish advocates of *niddah*. The first category of writers tends to focus on the liberal branches of American Judaism.¹³⁷ This secular-based scholarship generally assumes that traditional observance, including *niddah*, declined in direct proportion to the generational assimilation of American culture and American Reform Judaism.¹³⁸

Returning to the narratives engaged by academic writers, the first and dominant narrative includes two parts: generational assimilation theory and the rise of American Reform Judaism. Generational assimilation theory holds that of those first generation immigrants from the period 1881- 1924 who, if they did not jettison Orthodoxy (and *niddah*) before or upon departure from Europe, maintained traditional observance (including *niddah*) upon arrival in America. Their second-generation children observed fewer commandments, with *niddah* among the first *mitzvot* to be rejected, and began the transition toward the liberal American traditions of Judaism. By the generation of grandchildren, according to this theory, fully assimilated American Jews inevitably integrated into either Reform branches or into the emerging Conservative Movement¹³⁹ of American Judaism, where *niddah* is assumed to have not existed. This third stage spills generational assimilation theory into the theory that *niddah* declined in proportion to the rise of

¹³⁷ In the context of American Judaism, the term "liberal" is currently understood to indicate all non-Orthodox movements. Jeffrey S. Gurock has argued in *Orthodox Jews in America* and Jonathan Sarna in *American Judaism* that what has come to be called Modern Orthodoxy and Conservative Judaism shared blurred boundaries until the last quarter of the 20th century. "For the greater part of the twentieth century, the lines of demarcation and the points of differentiation separating these two Jewish expressions and distinguishing their adherent weren't so readily apparent" (Gurock, "From Fluidity to Rigidity," 163.)

¹³⁸ Reform Judaism is a branch of Judaism which actively seeks to integrate Judaism in the fullest possible manner with those aspects of modern culture understood as deriving from the Enlightenment heritage.

¹³⁹ The Conservative Movement developed gradually as a way to make Judaism meet the needs of American social and work life. The movement claimed to establish a middle ground between Orthodox and Reform Judaism.

Reform Judaism. According to this theory, the development of American Reform Judaism overlaps with the period attributed to the generational assimilation theory, late nineteenth to early twentieth century. This ostensible coincidence of timing, contributes to the mutually reinforcing conflation of these theories into a single paradigm. However, this conflation does not serve the history of the Reform movement well. It assumes a definition of Reform Judaism defined by the parameters of the European Reform, mid-eighteenth century onwards. However Jonathan Sarna has suggested that a uniquely American brand of reform was underway, in response to the missionizing fervor of the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, as I will detail in the next chapter, *niddah* was not categorically rejected from Reform practice in its early decades either in the United States or in Germany.

Given the conflation of generational assimilation with the rise of Reform Judaism, one might expect Orthodox history to read as an alternative American Jewish history. However, scholars of Orthodox Judaism and Jewish writers within American Orthodoxy both engage the same historicizing framework concerning *niddah*, albeit only as part of a larger picture in which other factors are identified. When Orthodox rabbis started to address the crisis of *niddah*,¹⁴¹ they identified other factors related to the loss of European social structures which supported *niddah* observance in the old countries: access to correctly supervised mikvaot¹⁴², lack of proper parental education,¹⁴³ and the abysmally unsanitary conditions of most American mikvaot.¹⁴⁴ In 1930, Rabbi David Miller added “that women “did not wish to participate, in public, in matters that pertained to intimate personal relations.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 55.

¹⁴¹ (Hoffman, “The Institution of Mikvah in America,” 76-7, ff2 p.89. Hoffman identifies two major moments of first engagement with issues concerning *niddah*: 1902 formation of Agudat Harabbonim whose constitution placed strengthening the observance of *mikvah* among their highest priorities; and Rabbi Elozor Meir Priel’s *Hantbukh Far Die Yiddish Froy* (1920).

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁴⁴ Hoffman, *op. cit.*, 85.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Theoretical Considerations of the Narratives

Orthodox explanations of *niddah*'s decline often preface what Weissman Joselit identifies as "a new genre [in the 1920s] of American rabbinic and prescriptive literature—modern marriage manuals"¹⁴⁶ which then attempt to address and correct the perceived causes of *niddah*'s lagging observance. These modern marriage manuals then attempt to address and correct these perceived causes of *niddah*'s under-observance. In this respect, modern *mikvah* manuals identified issues related to major social change resulting from the immigrant experience but presented them as concerns related to but distinct from the process of acculturation. Orthodoxy's own historicization of *niddah*'s decline, in such texts as the marriage manuals, may then be understood as motivated and organized within a problem-solution framework.

Understanding the motivation and ramifications of generational assimilation theory and the rise of the Reform Judaism is much more difficult, particularly because neither aspects of the narrative hold up to theoretical and historical evaluation. Jonathan Sarna identifies generational assimilation as a problematic analytical category.

Not only do all such generational schemes inevitably distort the historical record, ignoring hundreds of thousands of Jews with deeper roots in American soil, as well as hundreds of thousands who immigrated after World War II; but the whole artifice rests on the false and tunnel-visioned assumption that Jews are more influenced by their generation in America than by their surroundings and events of their day.¹⁴⁷

Sarna's critique applies broadly to the history of American Judaism. It may, however, be applied to American *niddah* practices. While generational assimilation neatly explains the near extinction of *niddah* by the mid-twentieth century, it also operates within and promotes three problematic assumptions about *niddah* in America. First, this theoretical position assumes that *niddah* was not observed in America prior to 1880. Secondly, it positions the decline of *niddah* as an inevitable phenomenon of cultural assimilation, foreclosing other possible factors. Thirdly, it

¹⁴⁶ Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, 117. These marriage manuals began publishing in the 1920s, with Priel's "Hantbukh Far Die Yiddish Froy" was the first.

¹⁴⁷ Sarna, *American Judaism*, xviii.

effectively forecloses *niddah* as an option for acculturated or assimilated Jews within American Culture.

The conflation of theories of generational assimilation and the rise of Reform Judaism presents the Reform movement itself as an inevitable result of full acculturation of Judaism to the American context, asserting Reform as the most American of American Judaisms. This framework renders alternative responses to acculturation marginal and hence less relevant to the American Jewish experience. Thus, it is especially important to acknowledge, as do Sarna, Weissman Joselit, and Jeffrey Gurock that Reform Judaism was only one expression within a wide range of acculturative responses, including resistance, within American Judaism.¹⁴⁸

Additionally, this dual historical narrative results in scholarship that presents Orthodoxy's mid-twentieth century revival as an abrupt upheaval in an otherwise naturally unfolding process of acculturation and assimilation. This creates the effect of two separate, before-and-after histories of American Judaism. This sense of discontinuity extends to frame *niddah's* revival as a similar abrupt change, to the extent that is discussed outside of Orthodox communities at all.

Historical Challenges to the Narratives

As Sarna pointed out, because the “artificially constructed “generational” schemes” of generational assimilation theory are “defined on the basis of when the majority of Jews immigrated (1881-1914)...[such schemes] inevitably distort the historical record, ignoring hundreds of thousands of Jews with deeper roots in American soil, as well as hundreds of thousands more who immigrated after World War I”¹⁴⁹ In short, generational assimilation theory assumes that American Judaism did not really exist prior to 1880. Caught up in generational assimilation theory, *niddah* has been reinforced as a custom historically abandoned upon arrival in America, that *niddah* is somehow counter to the American character.

¹⁴⁸ Sarna, *American Judaism* and “American Judaism in Historical Perspective.” For detailed history of Orthodox and Conservative responses, see also Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America* and “From Fluidity to Rigidity”.

¹⁴⁹ Sarna, *American Judaism*, xviii-xix.

Joshua Hoffman's history of *mikvah* in America does engage the conflated theories of generational assimilation theory and the rise of Reform Judaism on the one hand; on the other hand, he also complicates this theory on two fronts. First, Hoffman presents evidence that *niddah* observance existed in the United States prior to 1880. This point may seem evident to some, but in light of the problems that arise by applying generational assimilation theory to *niddah*, it does bear stating. Secondly, he presents evidence that neither German nor American Reform Judaism had a consistent policy against *niddah* from their inceptions.

Mikvah (and Niddah) Prior to 1880

As evidence of *niddah* observance, Hoffman documents evidence of *mikvah* construction prior to the 1880 onset of the Eastern European immigration boom. He specifically cites *mikvaot* references from synagogue documents and newsprint in Charleston, South Carolina (1809); Congregation Brith Shalom of Easton, Pennsylvania (1848); Beth El in Buffalo, New York (1849); and Hebra Shomre Shabbat's *mikvah* at "the bath Establishment of Dr. Brun", North Beach, California (1857).¹⁵⁰ Hoffman credits this to eighteenth century German immigration rather than pre-existing in colonial Sephardic¹⁵¹ practices¹⁵². For Hoffman, as for many other writers commenting on the state of *niddah* observance throughout American history, the lack of evidence of constructed mikvaot in America prior to the nineteenth century has supported the assumption that where there are no known mikvaot, there was no *niddah* observance. However, because of the dual facts that natural bodies of water are halakhically permissible as mikvaot and that colonial Jewish communities were located predominantly in river and port cities,¹⁵³ it is impossible to know how extensively colonial Jewish families may or may not have observed this area of

¹⁵⁰ Hoffman, "The Institution of the Mikvah in America," 80-81.

¹⁵¹ The first Jews in the Americas were Jews from Portugal and Spain, known as Sephardic Jews, who had fled to the Netherlands and England.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁵³ Diner, Hasia R., *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000*.

Jewish law prior to the construction of man-made mikvaot.¹⁵⁴ That said, Hoffman has noted “a tradition in New York that next to the location of the Mill Street synagogue was a brook of free-flowing water, over which a bathing house was erected”¹⁵⁵ Moreover, the fact that constructed mikvaot are built into the ground makes them especially vulnerable to disappearance once their above ground structures are destroyed or built over. The recent archaeological discovery of an undocumented nineteenth century *mikvah* in New England illustrates the agility with which such structures can vanish from historical consciousness.¹⁵⁶ Given the possibilities of natural mikvaot, we should not assume that lack of constructed mikvaot indicates that earlier Sephardic¹⁵⁷ congregations were not *niddah* observant, but only that later German immigrants insisted on constructed mikvaot, or a higher standard of *mikvah* construction than was available. Lacking more recorded evidence prior to German documentation from the mid-nineteenth century, gaining a sense of the extent of earlier *mikvah* constructions, and presumably *niddah* observance, is limited. However, the compact evidence available suggests that it is reasonable to say that *mikvah* and *niddah* were both part of the American Jewish experience well before the late nineteenth century’s generations began abandoning it.

Niddah and Reform Judaism

Joshua Hoffman and Michael A. Meyer¹⁵⁸ both complicate the assumed role that Reform Judaism played in the demise of *niddah* observance by arguing that the early Reform movement

¹⁵⁴ This possibility is mentioned by Diner and Benderly, noting that there was a natural spring near the synagogue. *Her Works Praise Her*, 35.

¹⁵⁵ Hoffman, op. cit., 84.

¹⁵⁶ Ben-Gedavahu, “Rare Discovery of Mikveh in New England REwrite US Jewish History.”

¹⁵⁷ The terms Sephard, Sephardi, and Sephardic all refer to originally to Jews originating in Spain and Portugal. That is how it is used in this instance. It is important to note that some people use the term Sephard to refer to any non-Ashkenazic Jew, including Jews from Italy, North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia.

¹⁵⁸ Meyer, “New Waters in an Old Vessel: A History of Mikveh in Modern Judaism.”

did not abandon *niddah* as early as commonly assumed.¹⁵⁹ Hoffman recounts a petition presented at the Reform conference in Frankfurt, Germany 1841:

The community on Bingen asked whether it was permissible to use drawn water for its *mikvah* instead of the halakhically required rainwater. Apparently, women in the community avoided using the *mikvah* because of its filthy condition. Therefore, permission for the leniency was requested. Although permission was granted by the conference, constituting a direct violation of *halakha*, it is significant that the rabbis there did affirm the need for the *mikvah*.¹⁶⁰

Meyer further observes that this event, which he dates to 1845,

The rabbis' very serious discussion of the subject is remarkable, refuting the misconception that the Reform movement was opposed to *mikveh* from the very start. The most conservative among them opposed acceptance of the request...the radical Rabbi Samuel Holdheim argued that the purity laws were anchored in the ancient Temple cult and deserved to be abandoned in the modern age. However, the large majority was not only sympathetic to the Bingen request but spoke up in favor of the *mikveh*.¹⁶¹

Meyer's summary of the debate on this question reveals that the full range of positions regarding *mikvah* here presents with full rejection representing only one pole of the spectrum. It is especially important to note that the majority were in favor of adapting *mikvah* conditions in order to make the observance possible. Meyer further notes that following in this conference in Frankfurt am Main, "one after another, the leading rabbis, Abraham Geiger and David Einhorn among them, argued for the symbolic value of *mikveh* and indicated their desire to make observance more palatable"¹⁶² This indicates the conversation started in Frankfurt am Main persisted after it, most notably with the more radical Rabbi Einhorn among those advocating for *mikvah*. Meyer highlights that "the discussion was less about the halakhic permissibility of easing a stringency than about the effect of the experience on those who underwent [immersion]...in its

¹⁵⁹ Hoffman, "The Institution of the Mikvah in America," 81-83. Hoffman also suggests an origin for this generalization in a 1965 article by Charles S. Liebman as the possible first instance of the claim that "Mikvah was one of the first areas of Jewish law to be abandoned by Eastern European Jews upon their arrival in America" (Hoffman 78).

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶¹ Meyer, *op. cit.*, 143-4.

¹⁶² Meyer, *op. cit.*, 144. No citation for this detail was included.

focus on the subjective aspect of immersion, the Frankfurt meeting laid down a theme that would follow the discussion of the issue down to the present day.”¹⁶³

Hoffman also shares evidence that Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, credited as the father of American Reform Judaism, also supported women’s *mikvah* practices, also a clear indication that *niddah* was observed among the early Reform communities. Hoffman cites an entry in R. Wise’s *scences* (1945, 161ff) wherein he wrote that he defended himself against the charges by Congregation Beth El in Albany, NY (1850) “that he had publically ridiculed the women’s ritual bath”, by saying, “that he ‘never mocked women and always treated them with dignity and courtesy’...and that he ‘certainly never made sport of religious customs.’”¹⁶⁴ Three conclusions are important to note from this excerpt. First, it indicates that mid-nineteenth century, women of this congregation had a ritual bath and presumably used it if any ridicule would have registered negatively with them or their menfolk. Secondly, Rabbi Wise saw women’s *mikvah* immersion as a “custom” rather than a commandment. Thirdly, this event indicates that *niddah* was becoming a point of contention, but one in which the challenge or disrespecting it recriminated one’s own character.

Thirty-five years later, the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 may only be understood to mention *niddah* if it is construed as included in the category of “priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state.”¹⁶⁵ That it was not mentioned explicitly leaves it open to interpretation whether it was or was not on the minds of the drafters of the Platform. Meyer notes that “a major shift in attitude toward [*mikveh*] occurred...especially in the United States”¹⁶⁶ in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Especially in the United States, the Reform movement increasingly fostered a Judaism that sought to liberate itself from the physical aspects of religion and to focus its attention almost exclusively on worship in the synagogue. Classical Reform Judaism

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Hoffman, op. cit., 82-83.

¹⁶⁵ “Reform Judaism: The Pittsburgh Platform,” Article 4.

¹⁶⁶ Meyer, op. cit., 144.

rejected body-related observances as distractions from the true of religion, which was exaltation of the spirit through prayer and commitment to moral deeds¹⁶⁷

Meyer situates these comments within the issue of *mikvah* immersion for converts, as evidence of a wholesale rejection of *mikvah*. As we have seen elsewhere, *mikvah* and *niddah* were so intimately associated that it is reasonable to conclude that rejection of *mikvah* for conversion likely included rejection of *mikvah* for *niddah*.

Meyer notes “Classical Reform” Rabbi David Phillipson’s diary entry concerning an 1888 *mikvah* fundraising campaign in Cincinnati, Ohio “Oh! The shame of it”¹⁶⁸ Meyer and Hoffman both identify the first public dismissal of *mikvah* (and thereby an approximate dating for rejection of *niddah*) as coming from this same Rabbi Phillipson in 1928 (Meyer) or 1932 (Hoffman).¹⁶⁹ R. Phillipson responded publically in the Cincinnati Inquirer to the relocation of the Orthodox *mikvah* into the vicinity of his unidentified, Reform congregation. Therein, Rabbi Phillipson stated “The institution of *mikvah* or ritual bath...is entirely foreign to our modern interpretation of Jewish faith and practice.”¹⁷⁰ Despite this, the 1937 Columbus Platform, as did the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, avoided explicitly rejecting of any specific traditional practices, rather it urges “the retention and development of such customs, symbols, and ceremonies as possess inspirational value.”¹⁷¹ Walter Jacob confirms that Reform Judaism never explicitly states a position on *niddah* in his discussion of the practice of *tevillah*, ritual immersion in a *mikvah*, “The custom [of *tevillah*] has fallen into disuse, but was never actually rejected. It is followed for *niddah* by only a small percentage.”¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 145.

¹⁶⁸ Meyer, Op. Cit., 145 quoting R. Phillipson’s diary without citation.

¹⁶⁹ Hoffman references this detail to Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff’s *The Silver Era*¹⁶⁹ (1981), 82-86.

¹⁷⁰ Hoffman, op. cit., 83; and Meyer, op. cit., 145.

¹⁷¹ “Reform Judaism: The Columbus Platform,” 1937.

¹⁷² Jacob, Walter, *Contemporary American Reform Responsa*, 109.

These ambiguous and conflicting details about the official Reform position on *niddah* may find some clarity in the observation that different approaches to reforming Judaism existed from its inception. In Germany, this divide is reflected in the separation of the Frankfurt's School from the mainline German Reform organization in the 1840s. The Frankfurt School asserted that the cautious, tradition-sensitive German Reform was not reform enough. Within the American Judaism, these two lines of Reform Judaism are reflected in the figures of Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise, mainline German Reform, and Rabbi David Einhorn, of the Frankfurt School. Einhorn "saw no value in compromising for the sake of Jewish unity...This immediately set him apart from Isaac Mayer Wise, whose priorities were precisely the reverse."¹⁷³ A detailed history of *niddah* in the Reform movement would do well to examine the different positions on the issue helped by these two influential rabbis. It may well be that Rabbi Phillipson's objections to a *mikvah* within proximity of his congregation may reflect a position on *niddah* held by the descendants of the Frankfurt School, or the Einhorn branch of American Reform. The vehemence of his objection suggests that a *mikvah* within the same neighborhood as his own reform temple posed some sort of threat. Did this sense of threat suggest Phillipson's own ideological zeal? Or, might it indicate that *niddah* and *mikvah* had yet to make a full break from the liberal Judaism generally and Reform specifically? These questions are not, as yet, answerable. A comprehensive study of the issue might include a detailed collection of individual rabbis statements concerning both *niddah* and *mikvah* throughout the period from 1850-1950.

The history of Reform Judaism in America and Hoffman's survey of American *mikvaot* both suggest that the history of *niddah* and the American Reform movement is far more complex than is commonly assumed. Specifically, the trajectory of its development was not a simple matter of inevitable assimilation to American Judaism at large. On the one hand, Hoffman demonstrates that *mikvah* construction historically increased with new waves of immigrants prior to 1880. Specifically, he presents German immigrants as both the driving force behind both the early and late 19th century waves of *mikvah* construction. Yet, it is also through German Reform

¹⁷³ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 99.

Judaism that *niddah* is first informally rejected –well into the 20th Century. Moreover, Reform Judaism’s rejection was not the clean break so commonly assumed.

Thus far, I have identified two broad narratives with which *niddah*’s decline has been discussed: generational assimilation and the rise of Reform Judaism. The examination of *niddah* and *mikvah* in the nineteenth century reform movement, particularly Meyer’s identification of a late nineteenth century aversion to bodily expressions of religiosity, indicates that changes in socio-cultural structures and sensibilities were very much involved in forming the basis for the rejection of *niddah* by the Reform movement, though it has never, according to Walter Jacob, formally rejected the ritual practice. I have also identified several theoretical limitations and historical challenges particular to generational assimilation and the Rise of Reform Judaism. While all of these theories and observations do accurately identify factors involved in the demise of *niddah*’s observance, each set of factors seems to operate in its own sphere. I am particularly concerned about how these theories contribute to the sense of abrupt discontinuity expressed in the Post-1960’s revival of Orthodoxy. This choppy history suggests that current historicization glosses over historical factors which might otherwise speak to a continuity within Jewish engagement of American culture across the spectrum of Jewish identities. Sarna, Gurock, and Weissman Joselit all advocate including historical and cultural factors originating outside Jewish communities to which Jewish communities were compelled to respond. Sarna argues, among other factors, that American Great Awakenings and the post-1960’s spirituality movements have shaped American Judaism more than most historians have considered.¹⁷⁴ Weissman Joselit’s history of New York Orthodox Jewry, particularly, as it pertains to the decline of *niddah*, focuses on how Jewish women engaged American ideas of women’s social roles and health movements.¹⁷⁵ Gurock’s examination of the revival of American Orthodoxy since the 1960’s involves responses to the holocaust and feminism.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Sarna, “Renewal” in *American Judaism*, 272-355.

¹⁷⁵ Weissman Joselit, “This Kissing Business,” 68.

¹⁷⁶ Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America*.

Social Drama as a Historicizing Framework

Each of these approaches to understanding the development of American Orthodox Judaism still operates on isolated historical events and movements, resisting efforts to discern other patterns or continuities in the various Jewish responses to these events. I propose that Victor Turner's theory of Social Drama effectively frames both responses to specific external social factors such as Great Awakenings and Feminism, and to long-range changes over time, such as the history of *niddah's* decline and revival in the Twentieth Century. By recontextualizing the decline and revival of *niddah* observance throughout this period in terms of Social Drama, I present *niddah's* decline and revival as a series of overlapping social processes that produce a history that is far more complex than either common knowledge of Jewish history or scholarship on *niddah* and *mikvah* have assumed. Such a reframing of the history of *niddah* will raise new questions about the cause of both *niddah's* decline and its revival and form the foundation for my analysis of *niddah* promotional literature before and after 1960 in the following chapters.

To apply this anthropological theory to historicization, I correlate Turner's four-stage process with three periods each of which involves two of these four-stages. This chapter will conclude with a discussion of first period, the late nineteenth century, in which the initial breach or rupture occurs and the beginnings of crisis emerge. Because the crisis stage will overlap with the following period, it will be discussed both at the end of this chapter and beginning of this one. The next chapter will focus on the second period, the first half of the twentieth century. In this period, Orthodox Jews engaged the crisis stage more directly and developed redressive actions which will drive strategies of *niddah* promotion which are still current today. Discussion of *Niddah's* Social Drama will conclude with the second half of the twentieth century. During this period, as *niddah* observance was reviving, Feminists and anthropologists began incorporating menstrual rituals into their academic research to an unprecedented degree, producing a sub-genre of menstrual studies. This body of literature constitutes a redressive counter-action in so far as *niddah's* proponents responded to the implications and accusations in this scholarship by nuancing *niddah* apologetics from the early twentieth century. The result of such Orthodox apologetic nuancing has been a reintegration of *niddah* into modern, or post-modern, experience.

However, to present this social process in a more chronological, we must return to the nineteenth century rupture.

Rupture: Religion, Ritual, Body

According to Turner's theory of Social Drama, this first stage of "breach" refers specifically to interruptions in normative behavioral expectations between members of a society.¹⁷⁷ By applying this to the situation of *niddah*, I am already departing from a strict engagement of Turner. *Niddah* ritual only directly impacts the couple of whom it is expected. The *niddah*'s intensely private context of marriage makes it very difficult to identify variations in observance. Moreover, the larger social repercussions of non-observance are unclear. In this respect, a strict Turnerian reading of *niddah* as a public, observable, social norm is not possible. As if I were not straying enough from Turner already, I engage breach, or rupture, in terms of a conceptual orientation rather than a specific social behaviors, which I attribute to the crisis stage in the next chapter. Turner's theory speaks specifically to the rupture as occurring between human beings. I have approached *niddah*'s rupture as occurring between individuals, communities, and a ritual practice; that is, I see the *process* of social drama as occurring between within the relationships of individuals and communities with a ritual entity. This relationship, I will argue, was primarily impacted by a conceptual shift to constructs which did not support *niddah* rituals. I close this chapter by outlining a fundamental orientation to the concepts of religion, ritual, and body which very much impacted Jewish self-reflection in the process of modernizing.

Not the Enlightenment

A distinction needs to be made between Jewish engagements of the Enlightenment and of Modernity. The Enlightenment impacted Judaism through the eighteenth century and well past half of the nineteenth century. However, by the late nineteenth century, specific definitions of religion began to emerge which excluded bodily ritual practices from higher, more evolved forms of religion were became a unique hallmark of the Modern period. The Enlightenment period itself

¹⁷⁷ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 38.

has not surfaced in my research as a documented time of conflict for *niddah* per se.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, Eighteenth century European Jewish history is dominated by the Mitnadic, Hasidic, and Haskalahic nuancing of traditional practices rather than a period of large scale abandonment of traditional *halakha*. As Meyer and Hoffman have outlined, the Reform movement in the nineteenth century did not –as is commonly believed—reject *niddah* from its inception, or even throughout most of the nineteenth century. Rather, Meyer points to a late nineteenth century shift within Reform movement that sought to purge bodily practices from Jewish practice. The time frame and spiritualized concept of religion is consistent with the emergence of the narrow definitions of religion which excluded bodily practices from higher religion.¹⁷⁹ As regards reform of religious traditions generally, and *niddah* specifically, late nineteenth century concepts of religion, ritual, and body --starkly contrasting with traditional Jewish concepts— constituted more significant rupture with regard to *niddah*. For these reasons, I place the breach, or rupture, over *niddah* in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

“Religion”

In the early periods of the Enlightenment two different approaches to religion developed out of the oppositional perspectives resulting from the Protestant Revolution. One discussed religion in terms of belief-centered and intellectual and emotional spiritual experiences. The other discussed religion in terms of collections of beliefs and their associated practice-centered ritual behaviors. This later approach to the study of religion involved cataloguing differences in beliefs or practices between groups. Tomoku Masuzawa describes practice as developing an “early modern taxonomic system... classify[ing] peoples according to the kinds of homage they pay, the ceremonies and customs they observe for that purpose.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ It may be that such documentation has not been performed; or, it may reflect that *niddah* observance remained more or less stable through this period.

¹⁷⁹ Masuzawa, “The Invention of World Religions,” 46-71 and Dubuisson, “The Western Construction of Religion,” 54-55.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

Throughout the nineteenth century, these two positions evolved to apply to different groups of people. Late-nineteenth century theories of religion reflected the effort to discern patterns and systems (belief-centered) within the collected data of religious customs, rituals, and ceremonies (practice-centered). Perceived patterns of religious behaviors were then synthesized into theories of religion. In this respect, the belief-centered approach applied to assess practice-centered data. This relationships resulting in the assertion of the belief-centered approach over the practice-centered data, those who collected it, and those from whom the data was derived. “Evolved” European religions were marked by their emphasis on rational belief whereas non-European, primitive religions were marked by their emphasis on irrational ritual behaviors. Such new definitions of religion comprised various formulations of motivations and beliefs “describe[ing] distinct spiritual cosmologies and so-called worldviews particular to ...different “peoples”¹⁸¹ which can be understood as a “consistent attempt to differentiate primitive and higher forms of religion.”¹⁸² This higher and lower dichotomization identified intellectualized, “rational” belief systems as higher; thereby, marginalizing bodily customs, ceremonies, rituals, or beliefs embedded in the body or natural environment into the domain of the superstitious or primitive.

Because traditional Judaism is inherently a lived system of performed bodily practices, many aspects of Jewish religious life lay outside the boundaries of belief-based definitions of religion. In the modern period, the majority of Jews came to regard various parts of Judaism, particularly those having to do with the body and sexuality, as primitive and embarrassing.”¹⁸³ Reforming Judaism in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries revolved around identifying and emphasizing those aspects of Judaism that were perceived as expressing the Jewish belief system, and discarding aspects of Jewish traditional practice that were seen as “archaic”, “primitive”, and “superstitious”. The primary marker for primitive religion was the degree of bodily practices it endorsed.

¹⁸¹ Masuzawa, “The Invention of World Religions,” 61.

¹⁸² Eilberg-Schwartz, *People of the Book*, 3.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 3.

Ritual

Chukkim, such as *niddah*, further misaligned with late nineteenth and early twentieth century concepts of ritual and body. Even within the practice-centered approach to religion, found increasingly more among anthropologists than scholars of religion, ritual straddled the boundary between the increasingly discrete categories of religion and culture. Ritual was too embodied to qualify as an expression of evolved religiosity; and it was too attached to religion to qualify as a secularly cultural entity. The observational nature of anthropological research required a definition of ritual as an observable, usually public, event.¹⁸⁴ *Niddah* does not qualify as a ritual by any of these definitions as it is an entirely private, unobservable series of behavior changes.¹⁸⁵ Any possible social effects attributable to *niddah's* observance were indiscernible. Thus, *niddah* did not fit into either categories of religion or ritual.

Body

Along with definitions of religion that valued belief over practice went the devaluing of the body as a site for religious expression. This concept of the non-expressive body found reinforcement in the biomedical school of medicine which became the dominant medical model by the turn of the twentieth century. In contrast, in the early nineteenth century the body was situated solidly in the nexus of human behavior and moral living, “the determinants of health and illness had to do with who one was and how one lived –one’s constitution, one’s environment, one’s habits of life...treating a disorder entailed revamping one’s entire way of life.”¹⁸⁶ This model placed the body at the center of a reciprocal relationship between human activity and human wellbeing. Such a context would have supported any menstrual or sexual ritual practices which were understood as expressing virtuous living. By late nineteenth century, human morality and

¹⁸⁴ Bell, *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions and Ritual Theory Ritual Practice*.

¹⁸⁵ Positively scripted behaviors, as in actions to DO, include the details of confirming the start or cessation of bleeding. The behaviors that couples observe during derive from a list of largely negatively scripted behaviors, as in action to not do. The prescribed positive and negative behaviors are invisible to most observers beyond the couple themselves. The details for preparation for immersion and a one-sentence blessing recited upon immersion in the *mikvah*, while required as part of *niddah* observance are required for any *mikvah* immersion, emphasis reflecting the overlap of two ritual bodies of law.

¹⁸⁶ Lander, *Images of Bleeding: Menstruation as an Ideology*, 14.

the human body diverged. The biomedical body, which emerged in the late nineteenth century, was primarily a mechanistic model of the body. This mechanism was defined as an entity consisting of separate component parts, each defined by their separate functions. Biomedicine dictated healthy human behavior according to the latest knowledge about the needs of each of the disparate parts of the human anatomy. Before mid-nineteenth century, virtuous living (defined by religion and social values) produced healthy bodies. After the mid-nineteenth century, the demands of the component parts of bodies dictated healthy behaviors. Effectively, late nineteenth century medicine usurped religion's authority over human bodily practices. This contributes to our understanding of the focus of interwar marriage manuals for *niddah*'s impacts on uterine health.

Foremost, biomedical bodies are attitudinally neutral and resist attributions of meaning. Mira Balberg describes the modern body per Mary Douglas as "the ultimate bounded system... it is a self-contained, well-defined unit, whose only vulnerable points are its points of exit and entry, that is orifices."¹⁸⁷ Not only are women's bodies are subject to breaches of boundaries through sex, childbirth, menstruation, and post-partum bleeding; but these breaches often occur in emotionally charged experiences, which trigger an urge for meaning. Thus the menstruating body embodies an inherent challenge to the meaning-neutral, self-contained, clearly-defined biomedical body. Bodily religious rituals necessarily involve bodies in constructions of meaning, often ascribing meaning onto the body itself, but also beyond the body to its contexts. Discrediting menstrual rituals, stripping them of any alternative valences, positive or negative, may be read as part of a larger result of denying any signification to the body beyond its bio-medical neutrality as material reality. If it is possible, it would be helpful to determine how much of the wider American population saw menstruation in these terms of a biological process versus alternative valences throughout different times in the twentieth century.

Meaning-filled menstruation, either positive or negative, simply does not fit with modern ideas of body. "Since the late Eighteenth century when Jews were able to join European intellectual life, there has been an embarrassment over parts of the Jewish tradition dealing with

¹⁸⁷ Balberg, Mira. *Purity, Body and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature*, 52-53.

the body.”¹⁸⁸ This embarrassment may have initially reflected centuries of Christian criticism that Judaism was a carnal, earthly religion. Yet, as rational, spiritual concepts of religion came to dominate emotional, embodied expressions of religiosity by the end of the nineteenth century, these old quake lines between Jewish living and the expectations of dominant Christian-based patterns of living deepened. It seems very likely that the development of definitions of religion in the late nineteenth century that excluded and demeaned bodily religious expression contributed significantly to the rejection of *niddah* in the twentieth century. The rupture was caused not so much by Jewish Enlightenment per se, but more by Jewish engagement of specifically late nineteenth century Modern concepts of religion, ritual, and body.

In so far as American Reform Judaism formally defined its criteria for self-definition as rejecting “ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state,”¹⁸⁹ and retaining those aspects of Jewish religious tradition *chukkim* practices. However, as we shall see in the next chapter, rejection of *niddah*, while likely highest which “possess inspirational value,” Reform Judaism *can be* understood as rejecting irrational among America Reform Jews, has been understood as a phenomenon across all levels of the Jewish community. This suggests that something else besides assimilating to Reform Judaism was involved. Assimilation is still very much in consideration, but what specific aspects of assimilated American culture impacted the rejection of *niddah* practices, or at the very least, *mikvah* immersion?¹⁹⁰ The next chapter will examine the redressive actions of the 1920s-1940s for clues as to which aspects of modernity were perceived by redressive Jewish leadership as most impacting women’s choices to observe or non-observe. Rupture, and change, do not inherently lead to crisis. Rather it is the various responses to the sense of rupture and redressive actions which define a crisis as a crisis.

¹⁸⁸ Eilberg-Schwartz. *People of the Body*, 3.

¹⁸⁹“Reform Judaism: The Columbus Platform” and “Reform Judaism: The Pittsburgh Platform.”

¹⁹⁰It is possible to observe *niddah* without the *mikvah* immersion. While not halakhically acceptable, the possible existence of such a truncated practice should not be excluded from scholarly consideration.

3 –CRISIS AND REDRESSIVE ACTION: *NIDDAH* IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICA

Social crisis, according to Turner, is a phase wherein behaviors derived from the rupture increase throughout the social group, “unless the breach can be sealed off quickly ...there is a tendency for the breach to widen and extend until it becomes coextensive ...in the widest set of relevant social relations.”¹⁹¹ Already in Turner’s definition, crisis is interwoven with reaction to it, redressive action. “In order to limit the contagious spread of breach, certain adjustive and redressive mechanisms, informal and formal, are brought into operation by leading members of the disturbed group.”¹⁹² Turner advises especially careful examination of the redressive phase:

...study carefully what happens in phase three, the would-be redressive phase of social drama, and ask whether the redressive machinery is capable of handling crisis so as to restore, more or less, the status quo ante, or at least to restore peace among the contending groups. Then ask, how precisely? And if not, why not?¹⁹³

I understand Turner’s concern for the redressive phase as a diagnostic. There is a close relationship between a crisis and its redressive action, suggesting two ways in which examining the latter informs understanding of the former. First, the onset of redressive action indicates when a situation was perceived to have become a crisis requiring action. Secondly, the measures taken by redressive action reflect the “disturbed group’s” understanding of the nature of the crisis. This chapter will focus on how the problem of *niddah* observance was perceived by the Orthodox leaders who worked to revive these ritual practices in the second quarter of the Twentieth century. This chapter will close with a discussion of two scholarly assessments of the effectiveness of the campaign to revive *niddah* in the first half of the twentieth century.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Turner, “Social Drama and Stories about Them,” 151.

¹⁹³ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 40.

Before delving into the crisis and redressive action about *niddah* in the twentieth century, it is very important to bear several facts about the American Jewish context at the turn of the twentieth century. Only two branches of American Judaism existed at the beginning of the twentieth century, Reform Jews and the rest of American Jewry.¹⁹⁴ The “rest of American Jewry” was highly decentralized without rabbinic authority limited to the localized communities.¹⁹⁵ This decentralized collection of communities represented the full spectrum of positions on Jewish living in America without the defined boundaries we associate with American Judaism today. This period from the late nineteenth through early twentieth century witnessed the gradual formation of rabbinic associations, often with the goal of consolidating Jewish practices and forming a united front against the threat of American Reform Judaism. Moreover, Reform Judaism itself was not uniformly self-defined as against *all* traditional Jewish practices. If rejection of *niddah* around the turn-of-the-twentieth-century was driven only by ideological rejection of ritual practices, it would have remained within the domain of Reform Judaism. However, not only did Reform Judaism *not* explicitly reject *niddah* in any formal statement, but non-observance has been described as occurring among self-identified non-Reform or otherwise Orthodox Jews and all shades in between. Two implications stand out from this widespread and unsystematic rejection of *niddah*. First, this indicates that more pervasive factors impacted the rejection of *niddah* practices than just the Reform platform. Second, it becomes very difficult to accurately date either the beginning of *niddah*'s abandonment or degrees of non-observance along the way.

Ambiguities in Rabbinic Definitions of the *Niddah* Crisis

Identifying the start of the *niddah* crisis is generally assumed to have begun in Germany, increasing upon arrival in American, and steadily dropping thereafter. However, recorded statements concerning the state of *niddah* observance from rabbis --who are now retroactively

¹⁹⁴ Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America*, 173-177.

¹⁹⁵ There were many Jews who identified as Jews but did not identify with religious Judaism, per se; for example, Jewish Socialists, Communists, and Zionists are the perhaps the most familiar of such groups.

identified as turn-of-the-Twentieth-century Orthodox leadership-- do not clearly state the problem as one of non-observance until 1919. Efforts to redress the perceived causes of *mikvah* observance do not begin until this same time. This discrepancy between American Jewish common knowledge and available documentation merits attention before we examine the redressive actions resulting from identification of the crisis.¹⁹⁶

Turn-of-the-Century Rabbinic Context

During the period from the late-Nineteenth through early-Twentieth centuries, there were rabbinic efforts to define and consolidate an American alternative to Reform Judaism. However, since there was not fully unity among non-Reform rabbis as to what American Judaism should be, these struggles became particularly fraught with politics and economics.¹⁹⁷ The most infamous of these battles for oversight and control of lay Jewish behavior occurred in New York City's turf wars over the kosher meat and wine markets. These battles tended to involve criticism of competing Jewish butchers (*schochtim*) and wine distributors. While fraudulent kosher meat sales are substantiated,¹⁹⁸ economic and political motives are not easily disentangled from legitimate halakhic concerns.¹⁹⁹ By 1930, Orthodox leaders such as Dr. Leo Jung of New York's Jewish Center and Professor David Macht were engaged in publishing arguments to revive the observance of kashrut (Jewish dietary laws).²⁰⁰ It should not be discounted that there may have been a correlation between rabbinic efforts to consolidate control of these, sometimes fraudulent sometimes not, food markets and a decline in observance of kosher laws. Would such a response have remained within the boundaries of the Jewish community? Or, might modern concepts of religion, ritual and body have contributed to Jewish articulation of distaste for the

¹⁹⁶ Such a study would require researching the responsa literature for this topic and related issues as questions or concerns arose in the course of practice.

¹⁹⁷ Gurock, *Orthodox Judaism in America*, 109-183.

¹⁹⁸ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 162.

¹⁹⁹ Gurock, *Orthodox Judaism in America*, 175-77; see also this whole chapter, 148-183.

²⁰⁰ Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America*, 155.

political infighting which characterized the struggle for dominance of the kosher food market? These specific questions are beyond the scope of this paper. However, in so far as they may illuminate the decline in *niddah* during the same period, these questions may prove very useful. It is very possible that the battle for authority and primacy of a specific line of Orthodox practice, which has been identified in the struggle for kashrut supervision in this same period, might also have applied to *mikvah* practices. I will attempt to establish the possibility that rabbinic efforts to assert authority over *mikvah* observance may have been an exacerbating factor worth considering in *niddah*'s decline. This would place large-scale withdrawal from at least the *mikvah* component of *niddah* after the turn of the twentieth century.

Authority and Control of Religious Observance

Close examination of the few documented complaints about *niddah* observance before the turn-of-the-twentieth-century, which have appeared in my research, concern *correct* observance rather than *non-observance*. Joshua Hoffman reports that Rabbi Moshe Weinberger presented two complaints regarding *mikvah* (*niddah*) observance in his *On Jews and Judaism in New York* (1889). First, that rabbis “had to rely on the evidence and trustworthiness of one person: the bath attendant [a woman]” and that “In New York, the bath attendants are not all righteous people.”²⁰¹ Secondly, that rabbinic involvement in *mikvah* usage did not continue past initial construction.”²⁰² It is important to point out that this complaint is not about non-observance per se. *Mikvah* attendants cannot “provide evidence” on the conduct of women who do not enter the *mikvah*. Were there motivations for such “not righteous” *mikvah* attendants to over-report attendance? Rather, I believe this statement expresses concern that *mikvah* immersion is not being observed correctly. More to the point, it expresses anxiety over the indirect means through which rabbis could know *how* women were immersing following their periods. The significance of complaining that not all bath attendants were “righteous people” more than likely refers to a lack

²⁰¹ Hoffman, “The Institution of the Mikvah in America,” 77.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

of meticulousness, specifically of the details this group of rabbis considered important. Moreover, Jews from any walk of life, with varying degrees of halakhic strictness might be supervising immersions in the *mikvah* in a manner which falls short of *halakhic* correctness. According to rabbinic *halakhah*, this would invalidate the immersion and the women would still be in their *niddah* status when they resume marital relations with their husbands. This qualifies both partners for the divine punishment of *karet*, being cut off from God and the Jewish people.

This concern over supervision is heard again in 1902 when the newly formed Agudath ha-rabbanim,²⁰³ “stressed that *mikvahs* must be supervised by competent rabbinic authorities rather than laymen”²⁰⁴ and new *mikvahs* needed to be built by rabbinic experts not lay people. This direct assertion of authority, however halakhically justified, suggests several concerns for the historian of American *mikvaot*. First, it indicates that *mikvaot* were in fact built, operated, and attended by lay Jews prior to 1902. Secondly, such construction, management, and attendance indicates a significant degree of motivation for *niddah* observance among the lay community. Thirdly, the assertion of rabbinic authority over these activities constitutes simultaneous appropriation and de-democratization of *mikvah* observance in the United States. Regardless of the halakhic soundness of arguments for such rabbinic control, it is highly doubtful that the introduction of rabbinic supervisory control where it had not previously existed would have been consistently welcomed in all communities. Not all rabbis who affiliated with Orthodoxy were members of Agudath ha-Rabbanim; and those who did not concord with the organization’s policies faced exclusion, sanction, and removal from its ranks.²⁰⁵

Several important questions derived from these two quotes in the context of the development and definition of American Orthodoxy at this time. Is it possible that the politics of the *mikvah* management and supervision may have been every bit as distasteful to lay observers as the kashrut struggle? Could the increased supervision of correct *mikvah* practice have directly

²⁰³ “Agudath ha-Rabannim (the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada) was founded in 1902 to address the problems confronting Orthodox Judaism in North America. (Gurock, 118)

²⁰⁴ Hoffman, op. cit., 76.

²⁰⁵ Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America*, 171-174.

impacted its observance? How receptive were *mikvah* communities to halakhic critique? Did a rapid decline in *mikvah* observance possibly result from the assertion of rabbinic control? Would Yiddish newspapers of the period provide any information about either the rabbinic take-over of mikvaot or the response of the lay community to such actions?

If there were any documentation of such responses to rabbinic assertion of supervision over mikvaot, it would indicate a new cause for the rejection of *niddah*. I think it is unwise to assume that such documentation does *not* exist. On the one hand, it is possible that the intimate nature of *mikvah* might have kept it out of any public discussion and off the minutes of synagogues which had mikvaot. Many mikvaot in New York were constructed in locations other than the synagogue precincts,²⁰⁶ which would have brought rabbinic oversight even more deeply into the lay community and off synagogue records. Alternately, we should not discount the possibility that such evidence *might* exist but, due to the ‘hush of silence’ envelop[ing] the performance of this *mitzvah*²⁰⁷ and *niddah*’s more recent role as a marker of Orthodoxy in the late twentieth century, it has not been a subject of interest by American scholars. Or, could secular based critiques of menstrual rituals generally and *niddah* specifically have resulted in such references not receiving scholarly attention. Again, these questions are beyond the scope of this work; but they are important questions to bear in mind and suggest new directions for research, particularly regarding *mikvah* management, and if possible, usage. My intention here is not to promote any single conclusion, but rather to unsettle assumptions which have driven the lack the research on *niddah* in America. We can not assume that we accurately understand the nature or even timing of *niddah*’s decline short of extensive collection of data from Yiddish newspapers and diaries, if available.

²⁰⁶ Most [mikvaot] were little more than rusty iron tanks located in the basements of immigrant Jewish neighborhoods.” Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 120-1. See also Diner R. Diner and Beryl Lieff Benderly, *Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in American From Colonial Times to the Present*, 359-360.

²⁰⁷ Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 115-116.

Conflation of *Mikvah* with *Niddah*

An important historical and methodological note is in order here, that rabbinic assessment of the *niddah* situation was, and still is, highly dependent on *mikvah* attendance. This should not be taken as confirmation of wholesale abandonment of all aspects observance. “While sexual abstinence may have been maintained, the monthly “dip” was not.” Weissman Joselit further points out that:

Discovering what constituted normative levels of observance [during the interwar years] is all but impossible; few, if any, *mikvahs* maintained records [and] oral history interviews yield few clues, for people are extremely uncomfortable in discussing their personal observance of this ritual...if contemporary published accounts are to be believed, it would seem that the perception of widespread neglect of the family-purity laws was an accurate one, at least when it came to its more public aspects: immersion in a ritual pool.²⁰⁸

It is important to note that even though rabbinic authorities understand failure to immerse at the correct time following menstruation as rendering any other *niddah* observances null and void, this should not be equated anthropologically with full abandonment of all aspects of *niddah's* ritual practices. For example, a couple might forgo sexual relations but not all physical contact for either the duration of menstruation but not the seven additional days, or any combination of the various steps and details of traditional rabbinic *niddah*.

In recent years, I have spoken informally with a Modern Orthodox woman who told me that she had been so disgusted with her community's outdated *mikvah* that she could not bear to immerse there and that her husband agreed that a really good bath would suffice for him. Additionally, a Reform woman told me once –again informally- that when she was a newly menstruating teen, her mother taught her to take a thorough shower and trim her nails short after her period ended in order to express a new month, a new start. She did not associate these any of these behaviors with *niddah*. In the first case, the woman knew she was violating Jewish law, felt justified doing so, and observed its other details. In her mind, she was fulfilling the ritual commandment to the best of her ability. The second woman did not know she was participating with *niddah* traditions in any way. These conversations, within the past 20-years point out that

²⁰⁸ Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, 116.

gauging *niddah* observance by *mikvah* usage is a very broad and unnuanced indicator. All that may be deduced with any certainty from rabbinic statements in the first quarter of the twentieth century is that *mikvah* use was in decline. The rest of *niddah* observance can at best be described as unknown.

While rabbinic anxiety about correct *mikvah* usage may have contributed to declining rates of *mikvah* observance specifically, it may or may not qualify as a cause of rupture in its own right. Increased supervision of correct observance assumes a baseline of commitment to observance of *niddah*. It is therefore less likely to singlehandedly undermine that commitment at the deeper level that would result in widespread non-observance.

Rabbinic Pronouncement of the *Niddah* Crisis

Returning to the rabbinic assessment of the *niddah* crisis, it is also possible that rabbinic motivation for asserting authority over *mikvaot* reflected suspicions that problems with *niddah* practice existed; but that they did not appreciate the full magnitude of the problem until they achieved such oversight somewhere between 1889 when Weinberger noted the rabbinic complaints about the reliability of *mikvah* attendants, 1902 when the *Agudath ha-Rabbanim* called for rabbinic supervision of *mikvaot*, and 1919 when the same organization shifted their central concern about from proper supervision of *mikvah* practice to the observance of *niddah* itself, “report[ing] at its national convention that observance of the laws of *Taharat Hamishpacha* had become, in large part, a thing of the past.”²⁰⁹ Weissman Joselit qualifies this sweeping pronouncement of *niddah*’s demise by describing the situation as more a matter of de-normalization than nonexistence. She asserts that *niddah* had become “more a matter of limited individual observance than of normative practice.”²¹⁰ Weissman Joselit’s qualification suggests that comments on abandonment of *mikvah* usage should not be read as statement of full extinction of *niddah* in all its aspects. However, that appears to be how it was read by rabbinic leadership who would have understood omission of *mikvah* as invalidating any *niddah*

²⁰⁹ Hoffman, “The Institution of the Mikvah in America,” 77.

²¹⁰ Weissman Joselit, *News York’s Jewish Jews*, 116.

observances which might be otherwise observed. It is difficult to determine whether the expressive language of the *Agudath ha-Rabbanim* reflected the real severity of the *niddah* crisis or more their feelings about a crisis which had not yet become widespread.

This complicates the assessment of both the onset of crisis and of redressive action. It may be that suspicions of disuse motivated increasing rabbinic oversight, suggesting that they had some sense that a crisis existed. This would cast the efforts at oversight as redressive actions in their own right. However, concerns about non-observance were not the anxiety expressed in the quotes above. The first documented statement that non-observance specifically was the problem does not appear until seventeen years after the Agudath ha-Rabbanim's 1902 complaint about supervising mikvaot. This time delay raises further questions. Did the revelation by the rabbis of the *Agudath ha-Rabbanim* that *niddah* observance had all but died out result from their assumption of oversight of the mikvaot? Or, did their oversight of the mikvaot enable them to discover a situation that had been developing for decades without notice? Had Rabbi Moshe Weinberger and the founders of the *Agudath ha-Rabbanim* not fully understood the situation of *mikvah* observance when they asserted control over mikvaot? Had it, as common American Jewish knowledge holds, been in a state of decline for decades? Or, was *mikvah* observance in the 1890's more robust than is assumed today?

If it had been in decline for decades before rabbinic oversight of *mikvaot* confirmed that *mikvah* immersion was not happening, then redressive action began very late in the crisis stage. If true, then this places distinct limits what can be learned about the nature of the beginning of the crisis from the redressive actions as they only address perceived causes at that time, near the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Redressive action beginning in the 1920's can not speak with any certainty about mid-or late-nineteenth century causes. Specifically, we are only able to learn from the redressive actions of the 1920s – 1940s what Orthodox leadership thought would be convincing to American Jewish women during that time.

Two Frontlines of Redressive Action

Following the 1919 pronouncement of *niddah*'s demise, two lines of redressive action set into motion: an educational campaign and a campaign to improve *mikvah* access and conditions. The educational literature produced during this time particularly reflect the perceptions of American Jewish leadership as to why *mikvah* (*niddah*) was being abandoned. These two general approaches were first set forward in a Yiddish pamphlet entitled "Handbook for the Jewish Woman" published by the *Agudath ha-Rabbanim* in 1920 for distribution to prospective brides.²¹¹ This publication's author, Rabbi Elozor Meir Preil, outlined eight overlapping causes for *niddah*'s demise—which Joshua Hoffman condenses to four primary causes in his analysis: 1—ignorance of the laws of *niddah*, 2—ignorance of *niddah*'s place in Jewish law, 3—unappealing and unsanitary conditions of the mikvaot available, and 4—distaste for the public expression of one's sexual behavior implicit in the use of the *mikvah*.²¹² The first of these two points were understood to have existed self-sustainingly in the self-contained social structures of European Jewish communities. Lacking such social structures, formal education for girls and women had become necessary. The third and fourth causes both relate to the conditions of American mikvaot and will be addressed in the following section. Overall, the educational campaign developed more quickly than the campaign to improve *mikvah* conditions.

Modern Marriage Manuals

Rabbi Preil's 1920 "Handbook for the Jewish Woman" was the first of what became the cornerstone of the *niddah* educational campaign, "a new genre of American rabbinic and prescriptive literature—modern marriage manuals."²¹³ The little research available on *niddah* during the interwar years centers on these modern marriage manuals.²¹⁴ These manuals were

²¹¹ Hoffman, op. cit., 77. See also Weissman Joselit and Wenger.

²¹² Ibid., 85.

²¹³ Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, 117.

²¹⁴ Hoffman, "The Institution of Mikvah in America"; Wenger, "Mitzvah and Medicine: Gender, Assimilation, and the Scientific Defense of 'Family Purity'"; Weissman Joselit, "Kissing Business" in *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880-1950*; and *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years*.

primarily written by male rabbis and presented to engaged couples prior to their marriages. “Though both men and women were enjoined to observe the laws of family purity, women (then as now) “managed” that ritual, seeing that its intricacies of time and performance were fully observed. It was to them alone that these texts were addressed.”²¹⁵ (parenthesis original)

Moreover, educational engagement with both partners about *niddah* appears to have been largely limited to the impersonal presentation of such texts.²¹⁶ Rabbi Leo Jung of New York’s Jewish Center, now identified as a modern Orthodox rabbi, stood out for his face-to-face approach with couples concerning *niddah*. “Jung was one of the few rabbis who made a point of personally meeting with the bridal couple expressly to discuss the ritual. Sometimes visiting with the couple together and at other moments meeting with them individually.”²¹⁷ If data exists concerning Rabbi Jung’s success rate, I have not found it. For the majority of rabbis these modern marriage manuals constituted the whole of the educational campaign.

These modern marriage manuals “sought to make a case for the inherent viability of the traditional Jewish marriage laws...to make accessible the laws of family purity to an audience increasingly unaware of them.”²¹⁸ These arguments also assumed a great deal about what would make *niddah* appealing to modern women. “Where the language explaining the laws and legal niceties of family purity was controlled and neutral, the narrative accompanying them was unabashedly propagandistic...employing language more commonly found in popular women’s magazines of the 1920s and thirties.”²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 117.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ *Ibid.* The argument against the substitution of the home bathtub for *mikvah* immersion “suggest[s] that many, perhaps even most, observant women did just that.” (Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 118) This argument indicates that other components of *niddah*, such as sexual abstinence and other prescribed behaviors, were being followed. Contemporary references:

Moses Hoenig’s 1942 publication, *Jewish Family Life: the Duty of the Jewish Woman* (1942); also public speeches by Sara Hyamson to Women’s Branch of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, December 7, 1926 (Slonim, *Total Immersion*, 100-103); and by Aidel Dubin at a Yiddish conference for Jewish women in Riga, May 1938 (Slonim, *Total Immersion*, 104-106).

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Each scholar of the three scholars who engaged these modern marriage manuals contextualizes them differently. Hoffman presents this body of literature as the rabbinic response to the *niddah* crisis.²²⁰ Wenger intersects the marriage manuals with other Orthodox and Conservative literature concerning the continuity of the Jewish people through the Jewish family.²²¹ She argues that in this body of literature on the Jewish family, Orthodox leaders specifically targeted women's responsibility for the *mitzvah* of *niddah* "using the same rhetorical paradigms that proclaimed that righteous Jewish women were capable of stemming the dangerous tide of assimilation, [they] exhorted women to preserve Jewish tradition and identity by following Jewish laws of sexual conduct."²²² Wenger's description reflects an intersection of women's traditional association with the *mitzvah* of *niddah* with broader contemporary social trends identifying women with religious responsibility for their families. However, this identification of women with the religious responsibility of their families is very much opposite the eastern European Jewry religious gender dynamic, which assigned men the religious responsibilities and women were assigned what can be called the secular responsibilities,²²³ to the exclusion --in most communities-- of all but three commandments of *challah*, *nerot*,²²⁴ and *niddah* and informal prayer habits. Such a stark turn-about of gender assignment indicates a significant degree of American acculturation, specifically, an internalization of the nineteenth century Cult of Domesticity, at least the ranks of the American male rabbinate. Weissman Joselit supports such a reading so far as the formation of the American identity is concerned.

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth century, the home acquired new meaning, becoming the "nursery" of identity, religious expression, and culture...As the "custodian" of moral values, the home assumed responsibility for the emotional and ethical well-being of its members. When glossed with Judaism, the home assumed an even greater role. Likening it to a "domestic Temple" and members of the family to

²²⁰ Hoffman, op. cit., 84-88.

²²¹ Wenger, "Mitzvah and Medicine: Gender, Assimilation, and the Scientific Defense of 'Family Purity,'" 190.

²²² Ibid., 191.

²²³ This gender dynamic is described at length Paula Hyman's *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (1995); and in Iris Parush's *Reading Jewish Women* (2004).

²²⁴ *Challah* is the special bread prepared for Sabbath meals, *nerot* refers to the lighting of the Sabbath candles.

“ministering priests and helping Levites... They grounded Jewish identity in the family and localized its expression at home”²²⁵

However, Weissman Joselit contextualizes the marriage manuals more specifically within the larger early twentieth century movement to improve the condition of American marriages. Jewish divorce rates were climbing in the first half of the twentieth century. Contrast with 1895, the “ratio of marriages [to divorces] in the “general community” was 9.4 to 1, the ratio of Jewish marriages to divorces was more on the order of 24 to 1.” (quotation marks original)...By the 1940s, however, that divide had narrowed...4.9 [Jewish] marriage for every ne divorce, as compared with 3.3 marriages for every divorce”²²⁶ The wider American response to high divorce rates led to in the development of the “marriage educator and the marriage education movement...which included... college courses, lecture courses, study groups...ongoing consultation services, booklets, pamphlets, and manuals ...thousands of prospective couples, newlyweds, and old-timers crammed auditoriums and lecture halls to hear experts expound on the “art and Science of family living”.²²⁷ Weissman Joselit describes Jewish marriage manuals such as Rabbi Goldsteins’s *The Meaning of Marriage and the Foundations of the Family: A Jewish Interpretation* as differing little from the marriage manuals found elsewhere in American society. “What rendered it distinctive and appealing to Jewish couples...was its insistence on reconciling the “Jewish ideals of matrimony”... with “studies now being made in the social-science laboratories”²²⁸

As specifically concerns *niddah*, these manuals engaged multiple lines of reasoning to promote observance of *niddah* which can be sorted into two major categories: health and

²²⁵ Weissman Joselit, “Kissing Business” in *The Wonders of America*, 10.

²²⁶ Ibid., 39. Weissman Joselit discusses divorce *The Wonders of America* page 38-43. She qualifies the high Jewish divorce rate to additional factors which may or may not have been shared with the “general population”: Increasing rates of *agunot* (wives abandoned without Jewish divorce, sing. *agunah*) in first generation immigrants (38-39); and also Jewish divorces mistakenly assumed to suffice for legal divorce as had the Jewish wedding (39-43); the speed and tempo of modern life, relaxation of religious practice, feminism, and increasing restlessness among men (40).

²²⁷ Ibid., 19-20.

²²⁸ Ibid., 20.

relational arguments. Of these two, the arguments for *niddah*'s health benefits have received the most consistent attention of all three scholars who have written on this literature. For Beth Wenger, the medical arguments constitute the primary focus of her article.

The Jewish marriage manuals employed the conclusions of multiple scientific medical studies to support their case that *niddah* was both healthy and compatible with modern sensibilities. This may be very much understood as a matter of continuity from the nineteenth century when medical research identified “a correlation between adherence to the laws of family purity and the infrequency of cervical cancer [or uterine cancer] among women.”²²⁹ In 1919, Dr. Hiram Vineburg published his conclusions from a study of 50,000 New York women, the majority of which were Eastern European immigrants who evidenced a high number of risk factors: poor, less hygienic surroundings, married having born children. Yet, their rate of cancer relative to non-Jewish women in the study as 1:15.²³⁰ Dr. Alec Horowitz conducted similar surveys of women treated at the Mayo Clinic between 1920 and 1925 in which Jewish patients constituted only ten out of 1237 total cases of uterine cancer.²³¹ In the same period, David Macht and Dorothy Lubin sought to prove not only that menstrual blood contained toxins, which also permeated pores of the skin, but that it “could only be fully removed by the particular water properties of the *mikvah*”²³². These findings were included in scientific rationales in Jewish literature on Family Purity to promote observance and the construction of *mikvaot* (ritual pools).²³³ Dr. Charles Spivak, a columnist for the Yiddish *Jewish Daily Forward* “advocated following Jewish law because it had been substantiated by modern science... ‘Faith alone is discredited. Statistics and

²²⁹ Wenger, “Mitzvah and Medicine,” 181.

²³⁰ Wenger, “Mitzvah and Medicine,” 181-182.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

²³² *Ibid.*, 183.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 184-5. Titles include: Rabbi Simon Baumberg's *The Golden Chain* (1929); Jacob Smithline *Scientific Aspects of Sexual Hygiene* (1930) and “Scientific Aspects of Sexual Purification” (*The Jewish Forum* 1930); and Rabbi David Miller's *The Secret of the Jew* (1930), Moshe Epstein *Torah Verified by Science*; Rabbi Mordechai Aaron *Family Purity: A Jewish Religious and Hygienic Standpoint* (1923); Rabbi Sidney B. Hoenig *Jewish Family Life: the Duty of the Woman* (1942); Deborah M Melamed *The Three Pillars: Thought Worship and Practice for the Jewish Family* (1931)

figures are demanded.”²³⁴ Then Orthodox Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan “went so far as to attribute the survival of the Jewish people solely to the faithful adherence to the precepts of *niddah*.”²³⁵ Throughout her article, Wenger identifies a tension between the eugenic tendency in the research and rabbinic efforts to emphasize the behavioral aspect of these conclusions.

Racial theory was a potentially explosive and dangerous weapon”²³⁶... Jewish leaders knew too well that the fascination with racial difference could easily give way to prejudice and racism.²³⁷...Therefore, although Jewish groups collected data about Jewish physical and mental traits, they used their research to prove that behavioral and environmental factors rather than racial attributes accounted for Jewish distinctiveness²³⁸

Despite this tension, it is interesting to note that the medical rationale about cervical cancer specifically still appears in literature on *niddah* today. Other medically related arguments included “enhance[ing the] possibility of conception.”²³⁹

...some guide books went so far as to suggest that “the sturdiness of the Jewish stock is directly due to the [Jewish family laws]. Jewish law feels that healthy Jewish offspring, physically fit to cope with life’s many problems, can only come from healthy, physically fit mothers...and the law of monthly separation...takes every precaution to safeguard the mother’s health...observance of *mikvah* was thought not only to produce physically fit mothers and children.”²⁴⁰

This assertion goes hand in hand with the dire warnings of the “physical and moral peril that would befall children born from intercourse during menstruation.”²⁴¹ Scientific arguments account for many of the arguments which sought to win Jewish women over to *niddah* observance, but not all. The second category of argument, relational benefits was also present in these manuals. To a

²³⁴ Ibid., 186-7.

²³⁵ Ibid., 189.

²³⁶ Wenger, 193.

²³⁷ Wenger, 194-5.

²³⁸ Wenger 195.

²³⁹ Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 118.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 119. Bracketed text in Weissman Joselit’s original.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 192.

significant degree, the benefits to a couple's marital and sexual relationship had precedent in rabbinic Judaism's most authoritative text, the *Talmud*.²⁴² The Talmud speaks of controlling men's sexual urges²⁴³ and that the abstinence period ensured that a wife remained dear to her husband. Rabbi Jung translated or expounded on such traditional arguments to recast "the seemingly anachronistic, outmoded halakha, or system of Jewish laws, which regulated sexual congress, with modern-day notions of happiness, self-respect, and personal freedom."²⁴⁴ He asserted a central value to sex in the marital relationship "especially when channeled and controlled and consensual..." "Love must not become a vulgar thing of *routine*, dictated by whim or caprice, stimulated by food or drink or exceeding masculine desire," he wrote in a 1930 pamphlet *The Jewish Way to Married Happiness*, "urging men to display consideration and sensitivity."²⁴⁵ Rabbi Jung's integration of traditional rabbinic emphasis on sexual self-control with "consideration and sensitivity" for women presented *niddah* "as a safeguard, of freedom, growth, beauty in marriage."²⁴⁶ Jung also correlated women's non-sexual time with their need for what we now might call her psychic needs, "Jewish Law to a marvelous extent takes care of women's constitutionally physiological difficulties, decreeing times of solitude in accord with the laws of nature and in divine comprehension of her mental and emotional needs."²⁴⁷ Similar psychological arguments were added to the 1960's edition Moses Hoenig's *Jewish Family Life: the Duty of the Jewish Woman*, originally published in 1942.²⁴⁸ Moreover, the arguments are still in circulation today with remarkably little variation.

²⁴² *Talmud* is the body of literature, encompassing multiple works, attributed to the founding rabbis of Rabbinic Judaism. Its compilation dates to the 1st through 6th centuries C.E.

²⁴³ Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 111-12

²⁴⁴ Weissman Joselit, "Kissing Business," 21.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 21. Weissman Joselit quoting Jung, Leo. "The Jewish Way to Married Happiness."

²⁴⁸ Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, 118, fn 112 on p176, citing Hoenig 1969 ed., 29. Hoenig's publication included descriptions of the "Psychological Value" of the family-purity laws ...suggest[ing] that

What can we learn about contemporary perceptions of *niddah*'s lack of appeal from these arguments for it? From the medical arguments, we can interpret that *niddah* was seen as lacking in practical purpose. From the relational arguments, we can interpret that *niddah* may have been seen either as irrelevant to marriage or as an impediment to the marital relationship. While the interpretation of rabbinic arguments may or may not leave out the actual perceptions of women who read such marriage manuals; the issue of *mikvah* conditions leaves less room for doubt.

Conditions of *Mikvaot*

Hoffman states that the cleanliness of mikvaot was a major factor in its abandonment.²⁴⁹ The earliest complaint about *mikvah* conditions which Hoffman cites came from Rabbi Bernard Illowy in the middle nineteenth century. This European immigrant “complained[ed] that *mikvahs* were not being maintained in the clean condition that the dignity of the *mikvah* demanded.”²⁵⁰ More recent documentation of widespread unsanitary conditions of early twentieth century mikvaot in New York exists due, in part, to the records of the New York City Board of Health that cited specific mikvaot as “menace” multiple times in the first quarter of the twentieth century.²⁵¹ The same description of deplorable *mikvaot* appears several times in the compact scholarship on early twentieth century *niddah* as a rusty *mikvah* tank in a basement with water changed only every 300 immersions.²⁵² Rebbetzin²⁵³ Sara Hyamson placed responsibility for these conditions

the observance of this ritual “provides a sense of renewal, fulfillment, and purification.” Norman Lamm’s *Hedge of Roses* also addresses the psychological value of *niddah* observance throughout this work.

²⁴⁹ Hoffman, op. cit., 79.

²⁵⁰ Hoffman, op. cit., 80.

²⁵¹ Diner and Benderly cite 1912 in *Her Works Praise Her*, 360; and Weissman Joselit cites a series of closures in the 1920’s in *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 119-120; also mentioned in the mid-1800’s and “shortly before World War I” in Hoffman “The Institution of Mikvah in America,” 80 and 79 respectively.

²⁵² Diner and Benderly, *Her Works Praise Her*, 359-60; Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 119-120.

²⁵³ “Rebbetzin” is the title for the wife of a rabbi.

on the leaderships of the Jewish communities in her 1926 address to the Women's Branch of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations²⁵⁴,

In regard [to sanitation and attractiveness] our leaders have not been sufficiently alert and foresighted...They have done their duty to the rising generations in religious education...nevertheless we must grant that the provision of proper, sanitary, and attractive *Mikvaot* is equally important, and should come even before the establishments for religious instruction²⁵⁵

In addition to his personal educational campaign for *niddah* observance, Rabbi Leo Jung of led a modest campaign that constructed sixteen "aesthetically pleasing" mikvaot starting in the 1920's.²⁵⁶ The formation of the Mikveh Owner's Association²⁵⁷ in New York brought an organized dimension to this effort. Originally, the association sought to work with New York's health department "to correct the most egregious health citations."²⁵⁸ By the 1930's "model' *mikvahs* were constructed throughout the New York area to comply with new health codes, including regularly changing water and ultraviolet sanitizing lamps.²⁵⁹ The new features of these *mikvaot* speak to more than mere sanitary concerns. Attractive décor, including bathrooms with colored tubs, tile floors, and walls lined with beveled mirrors and beauty parlors, sought to reinforce the perception of the *mikvah* as a modern institution which catered to women's aesthetic sensibilities.²⁶⁰ However, other more subtle features spoke to new concerns about privacy. Utmost discretion was taken with the building itself,

...no signage defined the building...the exterior deliberately called no attention to itself...The discreet, unobtrusive quality of the model *mikvah* contrasted dramatically with the unrelieved publicness of its predecessor, whose existence was boldly heralded through large, hand lettered signs announcing in Yiddish or Hebrew, "Kosher Mikve far

²⁵⁴ Hyamson, "We Must Act" in *Total Immersion*, 100-103.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁵⁶ Hoffman, *op. cit.*, 80.

²⁵⁷ Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, 120; and Hoffman, *op. cit.* 79-80. Hoffman indicates that this association formed "shortly before World War I." Weissman Joselit's does not specify a date for the founding of the Mikvah Owner's Association; however, from the context, its precise date appears to

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, 120.

Bnos Yisroael” (A Kosher Mikvah for All Daughters of Israel)...in its secret, promotion of itself, the new *mikvah* had evolved into a thoroughly bourgeois social institution, the very model of discretion and politesse²⁶¹

This contrast with earlier urban American mikvaot speaks to the internalization of a modern need for privacy which had not existed at this level before. I find it hard to believe that the same intense concern over privacy existed in the old countries as did in the United States. European Jewish villages and neighborhoods in towns might not have needed signage as everyone would have known what and where the *mikvah* was. Anyone seeing a woman walking into a *mikvah* building would know what she is doing. In urban Jewish communities, this may have been different; or not, as Jewish communities were generally geographically consolidated. I harbor suspicions that the increasing urbanization heightened awareness and a need for both signage and privacy. We should not discount the possibility that more than sexual privacy was sought during this period. Since *mikvah* practice was generally seen as an archaic practice, women may have wished to hide their *mikvah* use from those in the community who did not. Many of these new mikvaot were renamed “ritualarium” or “Jewish Women’s Club”²⁶² suggesting that the word “*mikvah*” had achieved such a negative connotation that only renaming the institution could deflect this negative charge. However, the issue of unsanitary, repulsive mikvaot had persisted for decades and *mikvah* continued to be thought of as a dirty, unhealthy place well into the second half of the twentieth century.²⁶³

²⁶¹ Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 121.

²⁶² Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 120-121.

²⁶³ Anteby, Lisa. “There’s Blood in the House” in *Women and Water*, 174-176. Anteby explains that Ethiopian Jewish women living in urban areas of Israel interpret the biblical phrase *mayim chayyim* “living waters” as flowing, not stagnant, waters in contrast with the rabbinic interpretation as naturally sourced. Modern urban living has cut these women off from in ground flowing waters such as rivers, lakes and seas. A reluctant solution among these women has been purification through a shower’s water spray.

Ruth Tsoffar, “The Body as Storyteller” notes that Karaite Jewish women purify from menstruation by “taking a shower in which another woman pours seven cups of water over her body and says the *shema*” (8).

Alan D. Crown, in an article in the Jewish Women’s Archive, “Samaritan Sect,” describes Samaritan post-menstrual purification as “the woman purifies herself at home by immersion in a bath of warm water. Before the immersion, she removes the plug, turns on the tap and immerses herself. This is a symbol of living water.”

The concerns about sanitation, privacy, and aesthetics were a luxury for large Jewish communities such as New York where multiple mikvaot existed. For many small communities across the then still expanding United States, mere access to a *mikvah* posed the greater issue. Moses Hoenig's *Jewish Family Life: The Duty of the Jewish Woman* (1942) included the first known *mikvah* directory for the continental United States. It "listed...*mikvahs* in Jewish communities as remote as Cheyenne, Wyoming and Tuscon, Arizona."²⁶⁴ However, many small communities lacked any *mikvaot*. Yet, the compact literature on *mikvah* and *niddah* in the United States does not indicate the development of organization necessary for the widespread *mikvah* construction until the second half of the twentieth century. Hoffman identifies Mrs. Yetta Rothman as creating a one woman organization in the 1960s United Jewish Women for Torah Traditions to promote not only education about *niddah* and *mikvah*, but also "to build *mikvahs* in areas where none existed"²⁶⁵ The Lubavitch Women's Organization established by Rabbi M.M. Schneerson in the 1950s but the R. Schneerson's "concentrated campaign to build *mikvahs*" did not launch until 1975.²⁶⁶

Possible Alternative Social Factors

Weissman Joselit frequently compares the campaign to promote *niddah* with its contemporary campaign promoting kashrut observance,²⁶⁷ noting that the kashrut campaign was more successful.

...in certain instances—as in kashruth and synagogue participation—some of Judaism's "oriental" rituals were comfortably and successfully reconciled with a modern outlook...Ultimately, it was precisely the absence of logic or reason or, to put it differently, the absence of westernness in the observance of family purity that prevented its observance from becoming as accepted and widespread a Jewish woman's ritual as, say, kashruth.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁴ Hoffman, op. cit., 86.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 86.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 86-87.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, 121.

What made kashrut and synagogue practices acceptable? This question returns us to the larger social forces in which American Jews navigated their relationship to their own traditions.

Synagogue attendance had a clear counterpart in Christian church attendance, though the weekly business calendar interfered with many Jews' observance of weekday and Sabbath worship.²⁶⁹ Kashrut's modern rationale is less clear until we recall that the late nineteenth century witnessed a prolonged fascination with the impacts of food consumption on physical health, most notably the vegetarian movements promoted Rev. Sylvester Graham, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, and the Seventh Day Adventists in the nineteenth century; and, the development of nutritional guides and food groupings in the first quarter of the twentieth.²⁷⁰ This food and health consciousness arguably provided a socially acceptable framework in which to embrace kashrut. Moreover, concern with bodily health is evidenced in the argument that Judaism prohibited pork due to an intuitive knowledge of its association with an illness, identified in 1835 as trichinosis. Such a medically based argument parallels the arguments that *niddah* observance reduced the risk of cervical cancer, supporting the perception that medical arguments would effectively persuade Jewish women to resume or to improve their observance of *niddah*.

To enrich the discussion of arguments for *kashrut* and *niddah*, I point out that *kashrut* is public and communal, more accessible to communal pressures; whereas *niddah* and *mikvah* are private and *less* accessible, particularly in a context wherein sexual matters are not discussed publically. Weissman Joselit qualifies that Orthodox women may well have continued observing various degrees of *niddah* laws without *mikvah* immersion. However, *niddah*'s private nature might have worked in its favor as no one would have known what a couple chose to observe traditional Jewish sexuality. That *niddah* declined despite its private nature argues that some, as yet unidentified cultural aspects about sexuality had been internalized.

²⁶⁹ Needed? In all the sources.

²⁷⁰ Dr. Wilbur Olin Atwater's *Principles of Nutrition and Nutritive Value of Food*, 1904; Caroline Hunt. *Food for Young Children*, 1916. "How to Select Food," 1917. First Recommended Daily Allowances published in 1941. "History of USDA Nutrition Guides."

Body and Sexuality

Understanding attitudes toward sexuality is more complex, and very much deserving of further research as it pertains to the abandonment of *niddah*. Eva Levin has detailed a long tradition of public sexual regulation in Eastern European Orthodox²⁷¹ which began to break down with the Eastern European Enlightenment in the late nineteenth century. Thus, changing patterns in attitudes toward sexuality in Eastern European Orthodox Christianity may explain the mixed response of Eastern European Jews to *niddah* laws upon arrival in the United States. Such sexual regulation simply did not exist in the modern industrializing United States. In contrast, Western European Jews, would have had earlier and more pervasive exposure to the shifting attitudes toward the body and sexuality. This suggests an explanation for various rates of engagement of Modern ideas about religion, body, and ritual depending on the cultural proximity of Jewish communities to Western European concepts in the dominant cultures. I offer, in addition to this argument, an alternate perspective into Jewish body concepts that originates within Jewish communities themselves.

David Biale, has argued that the major concern for marriage reform among *maskilim*²⁷² in the nineteenth century centered not on *niddah* but on eradicating the Europe-wide practice of child marriages which had been established since the early medieval period.²⁷³ He describes trauma experienced by young boys sent to live with their new wives' families, who were expected to engage sexually with their wives from the marriage night onward from ages as young as 8. Biale presents this is a major factor in the tendency for young eastern European men to leave their wives to study in yeshivas for long stretches of time. In this context of traumatic sexuality, *niddah* might very well have been appreciated for its establishment of an absolute minimum of sexual activity only once per month, yet maintaining an effective reproduction rate. On the other hand, this might have built strong negative associations around "*mikvah* night." Particularly for

²⁷¹ Levin, *Sex and Society in the Word of the Orthodox Slavs, 900-1700*.

²⁷² Members of the European Jewish Enlightenment

²⁷³ Biale, David. *Eros and the Jews*, 127-130. I also see this social practice as an important "missing link" in understanding the development of highly negative attitude toward menstruation in the medieval period.

families embracing enlightenment or modern thinking only upon arrival to America, the first and second generations of the early twentieth century would have been working through long standing negative cultural associations with sexuality. Parents are hard pressed to pass on positive attitudes toward something which they themselves regard with ambivalence or outright negativity. Both scholars, D. Biale on Jewish sexual culture and Levin on Eastern European Orthodox attitudes toward sexuality, establish a foundation for future scholarship on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that would take into account the possibility that these generations may have represented stages of recovery from traditions of trauma-based negative attitudes towards sexuality.

Body and Birth Control

Another possible factor in the development of American Jewish women's attitudes towards *niddah* centers on two interdependent aspects of *niddah*: its capacity to enhance reproductive rates and women's control over this area of ritual life. *Mikvah* in particular brought public attention to an area of ritual life that was experienced exclusively by the couple themselves and thoroughly managed by women. Rabbinic efforts to gain oversight of *mikvah* could possibly have been seen as an invasion of privacy and in as an effort to gain control of women's bodies. It may be useful to recall that the early twentieth century also witnessed the final stages of male appropriation of women's domestic medicine, most poignantly in the transition from women's birthing with women midwives at home into the male-dominated hospital setting. Note that this socio-cultural shift in birthing is closely connected to the medicalization of childbirth, closely associated in time and theme with the medicalization of menstruation.

Additionally, traditional emmenagogues, herb-based methods of birth control and early-term abortion, were replaced by anti-abortion legislation in late nineteenth century²⁷⁴ and by the mass-produced condom in the early twentieth century. The condom conflicted with Orthodox

²⁷⁴ Siedlecky, "Pharmacological Properties of Emmenagogues: A Biomedical View." 98. The first half of this anthology discusses the history of emmenagogues usage in the modern West. Emmenagogues are traditional herbal remedies taken to trigger menstruation or change its consistency and quality. Scholarship in this text asserts that most cultures viewed emmenagogues as important components in maintaining and promoting fertility through regularly timed and consistent quality of menstrual flow. Some, but not all, emmenagogues could trigger miscarriage/abortion.

understandings of *onan*, wasting seed. Might there have been connections between *niddah* and unprotected sex, thus demeaning *niddah* in the light of family planning? Might the fertility impact of *niddah* or the intimate self-knowledge women who observed it have had any connection in women's minds with *niddah* being a highly fertile practice and hence unsatisfying to women seeking to control and space births? Alternately, given the appropriation of reproductive health care by male-dominated medical profession, the possibility should not be discounted that women's rejection of *niddah* may also have reflected women's internalization of conceptualizations that women's sexual rituals were anachronistic and inferior.

Conclusion

To all appearances, these redressive actions sought to address the problem of *niddah* observance comprehensively through multiple, arguably rather nuanced approaches to educating the Jewish community about *niddah* and upgrading *mikvah* conditions. However, "By 1942, the Committee on Traditional Observances of the Rabbinic Council of America declared the practice of monthly purification "on the verge of extinction," although no hard data exists on the custom's actual incidence."²⁷⁵ Commonly, *niddah* observance is believed to have continued to decline along with other Orthodox practices through the 1950's and into the 1960's despite the efforts of the modern marriage manuals and model *mikvaot*. This apparent failure of early twentieth century redressive actions has been explained in terms of inadequacy to the inherent challenge of the ritual itself. The marriage manuals and modern *mikvaot* simply could not override the conviction among American Jewish women that *niddah*, or at least, *mikvah* was "an archaic throwback."²⁷⁶ Hasia and Benderly specifically point to the ritual for its own decline, "which factor weighed more heavily in the decline of *niddah*—the immersion itself or the nearly two weeks of sexual abstinence that preceded it—is not known."²⁷⁷ This assessment assumes that reduced *mikvah* attendance equals full reject on *niddah* in all its details and there is simply no evidence available

²⁷⁵ Diner and Benderly, *Her Works Praise Her*, 360.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

to support such a claim, and some evidence to the contrary.²⁷⁸ Secondly, the possible causes of rejection highlighted by these scholars, immersion and sexual abstinence, reflect a combined set of conceptual positions about bodily, religion, and ritual on the part of the writers. Specifically, that sexual abstinence and ritual immersion were sufficiently undesirable aspects of *niddah* to justify abandoning the ritual. More contemporaneous source cites a different issue with sexuality. Rebbetzin Sara Hyamson²⁷⁹ spoke to Women’s Branch of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America regarding *niddah* 1926 blaming, among other factors, late-nineteenth century “Victorian...fashion to be very reticent on human sex life. Mothers and fathers did not consider it their duty to enlighten their sons and daughters on the mysteries of their bodies and inclinations”²⁸⁰ Interestingly, Hyamson asserts the climate of late 1920s was more supportive of frankly discussing sexual matters because “sex hygiene is now taught even in the schools.”²⁸¹ She also notes that “our special sex laws are being more and more observed by many enlightened and intelligent women of other faiths.”²⁸² My guess is that this trend that Hyamson refers to may reflect mainstream American response to the scientific observation that *niddah* laws prevented cervical cancer.²⁸³ Hyamson’s frank discussion and references to the sexual mores of

²⁷⁸ See the discussion of the argument against bathtub immersions in the section on Mikvah Conditions.

²⁷⁹ Sara Hyamson was Orthodox rebbetzin of New York’s Orach Chayim Congregation from 1913-1949. Her husband, Rabbi Moses Hyamson was acting Chief Rabbi of the British Empire (1911-1913) prior to leading Congregation Orach Chayim. He was also an early leader of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America and professor at Jewish Theological Seminary. (Slonim, *Total Immersion*, 243; and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_Hyamson.)

²⁸⁰ Hyamson, Sara, “We Must Act” in *Total Immersion*, 102.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ The idea that non-Jewish women had started observing *niddah* during this period suggests an interesting new spin on the film industry’s regulation that bedroom scenes needed two beds. Commonly this has been interpreted today as reflecting concerns that a single, larger bed was too sexually suggestive. However, perhaps there was a public health reference in this original rule which has not yet been identified. I do not know how long it was fashionable for the wealthy to maintain two separate bedrooms. If this custom predates the suggested health benefits of *niddah*, there may have also been an element of identifying with upper classes. Either way, this discussion suggests that there was much more to sexual habits prior to the 1960s than the sexual revolution recognized.

her time suggest that we should not assume anything about the attitudes of American toward sex prior to the 1960s, particularly that abstinence itself was seen as problematic.²⁸⁴

Weissman Joselit hints at wider conceptual constructs indirectly by explaining American Jewish women's continued aversion to *niddah/mikvah* in terms of the western versus the oriental, associated per modern nineteenth century conceptualization with undeveloped, primitive forms of religion.

...neither the beautifully appointed *mikvah* nor the well-reasoned arguments of the *mikvah* manual could overcome objections to what was seen as the fundamentally oriental nature of the practice...the entire ritual called into question and conflicted with middle-class American Jewish women's much-valued sense of herself as modern, urban, and westernized.²⁸⁵

Weissman Joselit's assessment that *niddah* was perceived as too foreign finds reinforcement in a documented contemporary speech by Aidel Dubin at a conference for Jewish women in Riga, Latvia in May of 1938, in which she described the state of *niddah* that she observed on a recent trip to Western Europe, "The ritual [there] is observed only by a select few, the poor and simple. The intelligentsia completely deride the notion."²⁸⁶ Dubin attributes Western European women's aversion to *Taharat Hamishpacha* to ignorance of *niddah's* place in the mitzvot but also reflecting "embarrassment before the greater society in which they find themselves. They are afraid of being mocked and scorned for their adherence to such an outmoded belief system."²⁸⁷ While this contemporary reference refers to Western Europe in a speech to Eastern European women, it may well reflect the movement across Europe of certain modern concepts that impacted how *niddah* was being perceived, which I identify concepts of religion, body, and ritual. This reference to Europe is relevant to American Judaism because these nineteenth century concepts were present everywhere modernity was acculturated. On the one hand, this pervasive conceptual

²⁸⁴ This argument that sexual abstinence was no longer tolerated was made by Diner and Benderly in *Her Works Praise Her*, 359-360.

²⁸⁵ Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, 121.

²⁸⁶ Dubin, "In the Merit of Righteous women" in *Total Immersion*, 105.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

constructs supports Weissman Joselit's assertion that the non-westerness of *niddah* was the greatest factor in its demise. At the same time, Weissman Joselit does not specify *how niddah* failed to fit.

It is difficult to know to what extent the nature and limitations of these scholars' assessments constitute projecting late twentieth century values onto early twentieth century subjects; or to what extent their perspective now about *niddah* in the past reflects a continuity of feelings about the ritual practice which were already widespread throughout the United States by 1940 and which continues to this day. Discussions about religion, ritual, and body are simply not at the surface level in the primary sources. Everything in the redressive actions of the interwar years speaks to modernizing *niddah* at less abstract levels. These scholarly assessments of interwar redressive actions are the first whispers connecting us back to these large conceptual constructs.

This issue will gain some clarity as I examine the redressive actions of the second half of the twentieth century. What will be most striking is how little has changed in both the overall approach and the detail of the redressive actions. It is as if the redressive efforts of the first half of the twentieth century were establishing a foundation from which later advocates could develop. I will argue in the next chapter that what changed in the second half of the twentieth century was the women themselves. The few, but significant, changes which did occur in redressive actions of the late twentieth century will then bring into stark relief differences in the conceptual environments in which women perceived *niddah in the two periods*. This sea change will bring my argument back to the fundamental notions of religion, body, and ritual. Where late nineteenth century concepts argued against *niddah's* relevance to modern life, late twentieth century challenge to these very constructs opened a position from which *niddah* could be interpreted as compatible with modern life.

4 –REDRESSIVE ACTION AND RECONCILIATION: LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY *NIDDAH* ADVOCACY

Introduction

Redressive action regarding *niddah* continued and developed in the second half of the twentieth century. These actions engaged the same strategies to educate and improve the experience of *mikvah*, including the same arguments that were raised in the first half of the twentieth century. Late twentieth century redressive actions expounded upon these earlier strategies with increasing depth and detail, seeking as the early twentieth century advocacy did, to make *mikvah* appealing and to articulate explanations of *niddah* in ways that appealed to the aesthetic and social sentiments of the wider American context in which Jews were situated. Continuities have several implications. First, they present the twentieth century *niddah* campaign as a continuous process, rather than a new phenomenon of the late twentieth century. Second, the persistence of continuities suggests that the arguments for *niddah* have not fundamentally changed, rather changed only in the details of their articulation. Thirdly, the preponderance of continuities throughout twentieth century *niddah* advocacy means that those innovations which have occurred take on greater importance. I will argue that innovations in *niddah* advocacy discourse reflect processes of negotiations between Orthodoxy and those anti-establishment movements which emerged out of the 1960s. These movements both challenged the nineteenth century constructs of religion, body, and ritual that had worked against *niddah* observances for decades, but also challenged *niddah* as perceived through those nineteenth century constructs. In defending itself from direct challenges to *niddah*, advocates capitalized on the same anti-establishment movements to assert and develop very traditional arguments for *niddah*'s role within married life.

Turner's Phase of Reconciliation

The *niddah* crisis, defined as widespread non-observance, continued in the second half of the twentieth century. Likewise, redressive action continued to promote observance of this ritual practice. In so far as fully rabbinic *niddah* observance did revive –as evidenced in numbers of new and renovated mikvaot and the development of the “*niddah* culture industry”²⁸⁸— I interpret this period as one in which the social drama surrounding *niddah* observance was reconciled into contemporary American Jewish life. Because the reconciliation phase brings the social drama to a resolution, it becomes possible with this phase to consider the process as a whole. Whereas redressive actions seek to correct the crisis situation, thus revealing aspects of the crisis as perceived by the affected leadership but not necessarily addressing the causal rupture, reconciliation, in contrast, reveals a resolution on the level of the causal rupture. Thus, the relation of reconciliation to the rupture may be understood as being stronger than the relationship of reconciliation to the crisis events, which are primarily the concern of redressive actions. In the previous chapter's consideration of the relation of redressive action to the crisis events, it became evident that redressive actions were limited because factors of the causal rupture were still present and continuing to exert pressure on the ritual practices of *niddah*. To be sure, redressive action and reconciliation are not distinctly delineated phases; rather, the two phases do overlap significantly. However, to better identify the connection between the nature of the reconciliation with the nature of the rupture, defined as the set of European-based nineteenth century concepts of religion, ritual, and body as incompatible categories, this chapter will consider the events of reconciliation primarily and continued redressive actions secondarily. To begin this examination of the reconciliation phase, I return to Victor Turner.

²⁸⁸ This phrase was coined by Orit Avishai, “Doing Religion’ in a Secular World,” 419.

Turner describes the phase of reconciliation as achieving one of two ends²⁸⁹: either “social recognition of irreparable breach between contesting parties” or the “reintegration of the disturbed social group”²⁹⁰ or, as in this case, ritual practice. In applying Turner’s definition of reconciliation to the history of *niddah* in twentieth century America, I find that both reconciled differences and reintegration have occurred. One outcome, the separation of many American Orthodox Jewries from the wider American Jewish community, reflects reintegration per acceptance of irreconcilable differences where in a new social organization is integrated. Since the 1960’s, *niddah* has come to be understood as part of the broader Orthodox Jewish platform, so to speak, not an exclusively Haredi practice. This perception persists despite the fact that *niddah* is still officially endorsed by the Rabbinical Assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, possibly never explicitly rejected by the Union for Reform Judaism, and introduced as part of optional practice by at least one Reconstructionist on-line journal.²⁹¹ This alignment, at least on the surface, reflects a reconciliation along the lines of “social recognition of irreparable breach between contesting parties.”²⁹² However, if an individual’s position on *niddah* reflected his or her position with respect to other aspects of Orthodox Jewish observance, then the rupture with the ritual can be understood as a rupture between one type of American Judaism and another. Certainly, reviving *niddah* observance within the consolidating Orthodoxy was a distinct priority. However, *niddah* advocacy continued relatively seamlessly from the first half of the twentieth century at all levels of Orthodoxy (Neo-Orthodoxy, Modern Orthodoxy, Haredi and the shades in between) and to a lesser but real extent within Conservative Judaism. The redressive actions of the interwar period continued through republication of marriage manuals and the continued efforts of rabbis like Leo Jung; but their efforts appear to have concentrated inward. This reassociation of *niddah* with the newly delineated American Orthodoxy has

²⁸⁹ Turner, Victor, “Social Dramas and Stories About Them,” 151. Turner qualifies that there may be other processes and ends which achieve social reintegration as well.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Hammer, “Rising from the Ritual Bath -- Jewish Ritual.”

²⁹² Tuner, op. cit., 151.

contributed to the perception of *niddah* as an integral component of the American Orthodox “party line.”

However, revival of *niddah* observance, as evidenced in Conservative publications and my own observations within the Phoenix community, appears to have extended beyond the boundaries of Orthodoxy by the latter half of the twentieth century. It is not known with any certainty how long or how extensively this has been the case. As my previous examination of the—as yet sparse—evidence of the Reform and Orthodox positions on *niddah* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggested, Reform and Orthodox practice then were not necessarily consistent with our current perception of the Reform and Orthodox “party lines.” Moreover, the only knowable “fact” about early twentieth century *niddah* practice was *mikvah* use. While this measure rabbinically equates *mikvah* non-observance as *niddah* non-observance, it is an anthropologically limited measure of ritual participation because it does not account for degrees of ritual participation which may exclude *mikvah* immersion. Just as rupture with *niddah* occurred across the branches of American Judaism, in so far as those branches were defined from each other in this period, behaviors resulting from this rupture appear to reflect a similar gradation. American Jews appear to have been observing indeterminate degrees of *niddah* minus the formal immersion in *mikvah* throughout the past century, unbeknownst to either the rabbinic or academic communities. Thus, while a formal separation of parties developed within Judaism, and while *niddah* observance generally follows these sectarian lines, it should not be understood to be *clearly* part of the binary of Orthodox versus non-Orthodox practice. This mixed outcome suggests that the factors which drove responses to *niddah* in twentieth century America may not fully parallel those factors which drove the revival of Orthodox Judaism.

Additionally, and on the other hand, there is evidence that reconciliation has also occurred in terms of reintegrating *niddah* into American Judaism. The fact that *niddah* observance has extended into non-Orthodox branches of American Jewish life, however marginally this extension may be, speaks to some degree of reconciliation of *niddah* as a ritual entity into potentially increasing corners of the American Jewish fabric. The pervasiveness of *niddah* observance suggests that causes for its revival reflect changes on a broader level than sectarian

conflict, which also points to larger social forces outside of the American Jewish community but which impacts all branches of that community. Such a broad based reintegration of a ritual practice suggests that either its meanings have been reintegrated more effectively with those modern concepts which worked against it in the first half of the twentieth century; or, there has been a conceptual shift within American culture, which is more supportive of *niddah* practice, and as a result also among American Jews. I will argue in this chapter that while both means of reintegration have occurred, the later has informed and made possible the former.

First, I will demonstrate that while pro-*niddah* arguments have developed in concert with turn of the twentieth century sensibilities, the primary arguments have not fundamentally changed. Secondly, I will describe how American social movements since the 1960's produced conceptual shifts which have both supported the development of traditional pro-*niddah* arguments and also promotes a greater receptivity to the newly re-packaged articulations of *niddah* observance. From these two points, I will assert that *niddah's* reconciliation has resulted primarily from changes to the nineteenth century conceptual constructions of religion, body, and ritual.

As with the phase of redressive action, Turner asserts that reintegration "has its specific properties"²⁹³ which impact scholarly analysis of both the nature of the reintegration itself and the continuum of the four-stage social drama. Discerning causes from the final reintegration stage requires working backward from the conclusion. The details of the reconciliation, perceivable largely after the fact, indicate which elements in the crisis took on greater relevance and contributed more significantly to the resolution of tensions, and by extension may have contributed to the initial rupture and ensuing crisis. As concerns *niddah*, it is not until the phase of reconciliation that the conceptual frameworks of religion, ritual, and body stand out as the causal factor in *niddah's* decline in the first part of the twentieth century. This is because new concepts of body and religion emerged through major social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that both directly challenged and provided new means of articulating the pro-*niddah* arguments.

²⁹³ Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 43.

The Sources

To investigate the dynamics of redressive action and reconciliation in late twentieth century, I rely on three bodies of work. Though these all date within the last half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, these works reflect in significant measure arguments and themes established in American *niddah* literature of the second quarter of the twentieth century. Lectures, publications, and courses on *niddah* continued, apparently without interruption, throughout the twentieth century. However, during the 1950's there was a distinct lull in new publications. This may reflect the distillation of the Orthodox community during these decades. This should not, however, be taken to indicate that efforts to educate Jews about *niddah* declined. A few of the titles produced during the interwar period continued to be republished through the 1950s and 1960's.²⁹⁴ As fewer American Jews formally identified with Orthodox Judaism, the readership for such manuals may have gone down. Those texts that were republished likely reflect those presentations and arguments, which were proving most effective within the Orthodox community during this time.

The decades following the 1950s witnessed a new round of titles which reflected the new perspectives on the old themes of *niddah's* place in Judaism, the nature of the *mikvah*, and its impact on married couples.²⁹⁵ The first of these titles, R. Norman Lamm's *A Hedge of Roses: Jewish Insights into Marriage and Married Life* (1966),²⁹⁶ closely follows the themes of the earlier

²⁹⁴ R. Sidney Hoenig's pamphlet *Jewish Family Life: The Duty of the Jewish Woman* was published in 1942 and 1969 (Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America*, 176). Dr. Jacob Smithline's "Scientific Aspects of Sexual Hygiene" was published in 1930, 1962, and 1968. R. Nisson Telushkin's *Mikvah, Taharat Mayim* was published in 1947, 1950, 1964, and 1990.

²⁹⁵ In 1976 Aryeh Kaplan published *Waters of Eden: The Mystery of Mikvah* wherein he describes the mystical significance of *mikvah* and immersion generally. In 1977, R. Moshe David Tendler published *Parades Rimonim: A Manual for the Jewish Family*, republished in 1988. As the sub-title indicates, the work draws on the marriage manual tradition. Tendler, having a PhD in Biology from Yeshiva University in addition to his rabbinic ordination and acting as professor of Medical Ethics, nuances the presentation of *niddah* laws with medical explanations, in such sections as "The Biology of Nidus;" and on halachic issues involved in natural childbirth;" gynecological procedures; infant care; population control, Jewish family planning, and infertility; In this respect, Tendler's manual can be understood as an updated version of the scientific and medical arguments produced in the first half of the twentieth century.

²⁹⁶ Curiously enough, in the same year that *A Hedge of Roses* was published, two other significant works on menstrual rituals were made public. First, a sermon by R. Dov Zlotnick to the conservative Jewish Theological Seminary, New York published as "Today's Met Mitzvah" (*Total Immersion*, 107-111); and Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*.

marriage manuals but was, in fact, the publication of “a lecture given at the Young Marrieds Club” of The Jewish Center in New York.²⁹⁷ This lecture, delivered by a recognized Modern Orthodox rabbi to a Modern Orthodox identifying group, may reflect the inward focus within the consolidating ranks of American Orthodoxy. In its origin as a lecture, this work also reflects the continuity of non-print educational efforts, notably those of R. Leo Jung with whom Lamm had worked and from whom he took over the rabbinic leadership of the Jewish Center in 1959. Michael Meyer identifies *A Hedge of Roses* as part of “an Orthodox literature that dwells on the subjective dimension of separation between a husband and wife during menstruation and the immersion that marks its conclusion”²⁹⁸

In *A Hedge of Roses*, R. Norman Lamm engages almost all the major themes from the interwar publications. Yet, he develops and expands on most of them thereby establishing a broader platform for innovation within those themes established by earlier educational literature on *niddah*. The major exception to this thematic continuity is *niddah*'s medical benefits. Lamm acknowledges these medical arguments only to dismiss them in a single sentence, contrasting them with the “more impressive”²⁹⁹ psychological impacts of *niddah* upon the marital relationship. However, the psychological strategy, synonymous with mental health, is not far removed from the category of the medical. In fact, in the 1970's psychology and medicine increasingly intersected and psychology was becoming a means of medicalizing conditions which had previously lain outside the purview of both medicine and psychology.³⁰⁰ In this sense, psychology was joining the authoritative position that medicine had earlier in the century. Lamm's psychological angle was preceded by both R. Leo Jung and R. Moses Hoenig. In his 1942 *Jewish Family Life: the Duty of the Jewish Woman*, Hoenig suggested that the observance of this ritual “provides a sense of renewal, fulfillment, and purification.” R. Leo Jung, asserted that *niddah* observance “enhanced

²⁹⁷ Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses: Jewish Insights into Marriage and Married Life*, 16. Rabbi Dr. Lamm served as rabbi for the Jewish Center 1959-1976.

²⁹⁸ Meyer, op. cit., 146.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 46.

³⁰⁰ Granek, “Grief as Pathology”; Browner, “On the Medicalization of Medical Anthropology.”

woman's self-worth, dignity, and sense of self."³⁰¹ Lamm's distinction is his ability to harnesses the authority of both halakhic and psychological explanation³⁰² of the merits of *niddah* observance, and the depth of his explanation of *niddah*'s interaction with long term, monogamous sexual life.

Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology was produced by Rivkah Slonim who is a Chabad *rebbetzin*.³⁰³ The Chabad movement of the *Lubovitch*³⁰⁴ branch of Hasidism complicates the ostensibly strict boundaries between the Orthodox and Haredi communities and the more liberal branches of Judaism, the inward focus on Orthodox practice within American Orthodox Judaism. This outreach organization works worldwide to first increase Orthodox observance among the non-Orthodox population, with the second though ultimate goal of drawing *ba'alot t'shuvot* (those who return to Orthodoxy) into Lubovitch communities. In this respect, Chabad focuses both inward to nurture their own community and outward to nurture increased observance among the non-Orthodox.

As a Hasidic text, this anthology includes Kabbalistic interpretations of various aspects of *niddah*, providing the majority of references to the spiritualization of *niddah*. As a Chabad work, *Total Immersion*, is the only primary text studied in this chapter which is directed to a broad cross-branch audience of American Jews. This collection of essays is carefully selected to represent a wide range of backgrounds and experiences with the observance of Family Purity or *Taharat HaMishpacha*. Michael Meyer also credits *Total Immersion* with

...add[ing] –as the men writing on the subject [of *niddah* and *mikvah*] could not— [women's] own specific experiences...[and] their writing, like that of Jewish women in liberal Jewish circles, had been affected by a significant shift in American feminism [that]...dwelt unabashedly on the particular physical qualities of womanhood and the

³⁰¹ Weissman Joselit, Jenna. "Kissing Business" in *The Wonders of America*

³⁰² Lamm does not generally cite specific medical research in his argument. This may reflect that *A Hedge of Roses* was originally a speech intended to inspire young married to observe *niddah*, rather than as a scholarly defense of it.

³⁰³ *Rebbetzin* is the traditional term for a rabbi's wife. Within the Chabad organization, *rebbetzot* partner with their husbands in operating their Chabad Center.

³⁰⁴ The Lubovitch, particularly those involved in the Chabad outreach, may be thought of as a more liberal Haredi communities in so far as they engage with the non-Haredi world to a greater degree than most other Haredi communities.

experiential possibilities that it offered...some observant Jewish women began to see *mikveh* as a rite that united body and spirit, that was productive of a form of empowerment, and that enabled them symbolically to express the agency that they were increasingly taking for their lives.³⁰⁵

Additionally, of the volume's forty-seven essays, thirty-four are contributed by women and thirteen by men. The volume is organized into three sections: "In Theory and Practice" it includes essays that explain the *niddah* process and challenges, its significance, sexual politics and history. This section provides the majority of my references to *Total Immersion* in this work. Part II, "Voices" includes two speeches and eighteen personal narratives by fifteen women and three men. Part III, "Memories and Tales" contains eighteen historical stories and folktales that are contributed by seven men and eleven women. Slonim, herself, advocates an honest and realistic portrayal of *Taharat HaMishpacha*, her preferred term, acknowledging that there are difficulties in its observance and that everyone experiences this ritual practice differently.

The third primary source I will examine in this chapter is a set of three *t'shuvot*³⁰⁶ by the Rabbinical Assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, approved in 2006. R. Miriam Berkowitz's "Reshaping the Laws of Family Purity for the Modern World;" R. Susan Grossman's "Mikveh and the Sanctity of Being Created Human;" and R. Avram Israel Reisner's "Observing *Niddah* in Our Day: An Inquiry on the Status of Purity and The Prohibition of Sexual Activity with a Menstruant." Meyer comments that

For Conservative Jews...the commandedness of *mikveh* plays less of a role and meta-halakhic considerations loom larger...the vast majority of its members do not observe rituals unless they find personal meaning in them...Yet, because Conservative Judaism is more oriented toward tradition than is Reform it possess a greater inherent attachment to *mikveh* and the desire to integrate its observance within a flexible halakhah.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁵ Meyer, op. cit., 146-147.

³⁰⁶ *T'shuvah/ t'shuvot* (s./pl/) literally translates as answers and are equivalent to responsa in Rabbinic Judaism.

³⁰⁷ Meyer, op. cit., 147.

These *t'shuvot* situate *niddah* within several themes found in the earlier Orthodox *niddah* advocacy literature, reflecting on *niddah* in terms of rabbinic tradition, its potential for nurturing spiritual development³⁰⁸, educational strategies. These *t'shuvot* also respond to and offer recommendations for several practical problems which arise in *niddah* observance such as *halakhic* infertility³⁰⁹ and post-partum mothers' need for touch for their emotional health, particularly in cases of post-partum depression. Meyer observes that "by the time the subject was taken up by the Conservative rabbis, interest in *mikvah* has spread within the movement. Students at the Jewish Theological Seminary were increasingly observing *mikvah*."³¹⁰ Rather than select one of the three responsa as the official position, leaving the other two as dissenting opinions...

The Rabbinical Assembly accepted all three documents as official *t'shuvot* feeling that they should all be legitimate options under the umbrella of Conservative Judaism...Rabbis should feel free to teach any or all of the *shitot* (approaches) or to draw from the various argumentations enough information by which to guide their congregants through specific personal questions.³¹¹

Social Movements Pertinent to *Niddah*

Explaining the impact of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s
—women's movements, Sexual Revolution, the consolidation of American Orthodoxy and the various spirituality movements of the Late twentieth century Great Awakening³¹²— upon the pro-

³⁰⁸ While spiritual development surfaces in a few Hasidic discussions of *niddah* (see Gila Berkowitz's "Loving Jewishly" and Susan Handelman's "*Tum'ah and Tahara: Mystical Insights*" both in *Total Immersion*; and Rivka Slonim's "The Mystery and Magic of Mikvah" at torahcafé.org) these do not carry the same weight as does their inclusion in a rabbinic *t'shuva*.

³⁰⁹ *Halakhic* infertility occurs when a woman, is unable to become pregnant because she ovulates during the seven "white" days rather than after *mikvah* immersion. The various responses to this will be discussed later in this chapter.

³¹⁰ Meyer, op. cit., 149.

³¹¹ Berkowitz, "Mikveh and the Sanctity of Family Relations," 2.

³¹² There is a debate over how best to identify the phenomena of the spirituality movements since the 1970s; many question the claim that this period constitutes an Awakening at all. Viewing this period as encompassing numerous, diverse, but otherwise isolated spiritual movements supports reading the *niddah* revival as exclusive to the revival Orthodox Jewish. In contrast, viewing this period as a Great Awakening supports reading the *niddah* revival as indicative of broader social changes occurring across the branches of Judaism, many of which do not appear on the surface to bear much relation to *niddah*, such as the havurah (Jewish fellowship) movement and renewed interest in celebrate Rosh Chodesh

niddah campaign, is complicated on two counts. Both counts reflect that the pro-*niddah* campaign occurs(ed) within two major social contexts; that of the larger trends of American society and also of the trends within the American Jewish community. The first challenge of the American social context rests in the fact that almost every new articulation of *niddah*'s explanations interacts with two or more of these social movements on multiple levels which are interwoven in near breath-taking intricacy. To parse out the different impacts of each movement on any one example of late twentieth century articulations of *niddah* threatens to undermine its integrity as a whole. The second challenge of the American Jewish context results from the conflation of the pro-*niddah* campaign with Orthodoxy's trend toward increasing consolidation and resurgence since the 1950s. This conflation has two effects. First, it obfuscates the continuities of the *niddah* campaign prior to the 1970s; and as a result, presents the *niddah* campaign as an issue of internal Jewish religio-identity politics. Both these effects foreclose the recognition of non-Orthodox *niddah* practices, as well as any search for impacts upon *niddah* outside the American Orthodox Jewish community.

This specific history of the development of Orthodox Judaism into its current forms has been discussed elsewhere in the scholarship on American Judaism.³¹³ What I propose here is that the growth and development of American Orthodox Judaism has provided the motivation and social context in which Orthodox Jews have negotiated interpretations of *niddah* within the broader socio-cultural context of an America greatly impacted by these social movements. Because these articulations of *niddah* are embedded within responses to these social movements, they should also be understood as appealing to an audience wider than American Orthodox Judaism. I do not intend my attention on the impacts of larger social movements upon

(new moon) as a women's holiday. Reading these disparate movements through the lens of a Great Awakening helps to interpret the existence of *niddah* observance outside the boundaries of Orthodoxy. For this reason, I endorse the Great Awakening position. In deference to the debate over whether this constitutes a Third or Fourth Great Awakening, for which I do not yet have a position, I will refer to this as the late twentieth century Great Awakening.

³¹³ Most notably in the work of Samuel Heilman and Jeffrey Gurock. These scholars consider the recent developments of Orthodox Judaism as a discrete history for set of communities which are distinct from the rest of American Judaism to various degrees. Jonathan Sarna discusses American Orthodoxy in the broader context of American Judaism in *American Judaism*.

niddah to overshadow or replace the context of the consolidation and intensification of Orthodoxy in American Jewish life; but rather, to enrich our understanding of today's *niddah* discourse and extend scholarly thought on the topic beyond the confines of Orthodoxy.

I will attempt to meet the challenges of situating *niddah* in all these intersecting contexts by first providing a broad description of each: Feminism, the Sexual Revolution, and the spirituality movements of the Late twentieth century Great Awakening, with attention to the ways in which they each interacted with the *niddah* campaign. I will then outline the dynamics within American Orthodoxy as a fourth social movement which unfolded against the background of the other three. Then, in the next section of this chapter, I will explore a set of specific issues within the selected literature on *niddah* dating from 1966-2006, which I will introduce. I will first clarify those aspects of this discourse which are continuous with the marriage manuals of the 1920s-1940s. Then , I will study three topics, purity and marriage to demonstrate the intricate intersections of Feminism, the Sexual Revolution, and the spirituality movements of the Late twentieth century Great Awakening in current discussions of *niddah*.

The Consolidation of American Orthodoxy

Despite my assertion that the specific forces impacting the revival of *niddah* observance in American Judaism are distinct from those impacting the consolidation and revival of American Orthodox Judaism, the two events are extremely difficult to disentangle. This is because this consolidation and revival took place within the context of these larger social movements. To a great extent, American Jewish Orthodox communities increasingly defined themselves in opposition to, and hence in relation to, the very social context in which American Orthodox Jews lived. Thus, it is not accurate to describe this relationship between Orthodox Judaism and mainstream American culture as either negative or positive since the relationship encompassed both qualities. Therefore, I will present the briefest of overviews to the context of the revival of Orthodoxy before identifying those mainstream American social forces which appear to have contributed to the specific expressions that developed in the late twentieth century redressive actions to revive *niddah* observance.

The origin and boundaries of the late twentieth century *niddah* revival is commonly ascribed to the larger return to stricter Orthodox observance which gained momentum in the 1950s. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the boundaries between Conservative and Orthodox Judaism were indiscernible.³¹⁴ By the 1950's several factions within American Orthodoxy had begun in earnest the process of separating themselves from the wider American Jewish community. To illustrate an example of this rift, in the 1950s, the Council of Torah Sages of the Agudath Israel³¹⁵ censured Orthodox rabbis who participated with the Synagogue Council of America. This inter-branch communal organization's sole mission at that time was the "protection of Jews both here and abroad."³¹⁶ Their ban was grounded on the premise that "cooperative efforts were forbidden" because they implied Orthodox acceptance of the Reform and Conservative theological positions.³¹⁷ In this situation, what is now termed *Haredi* Judaism³¹⁸ began to make gains in exerting pressure on the non-Haredi branch of self-identifying Orthodox Jews to align their practice more consistently with *Haredi* practices and distance themselves from the rest of American Judaism. At stake was the ability of American Orthodoxy to preserve itself through alternative articulations of what it means to be Jewish in America, an articulation that maintained as much of the traditional European-Jewish lifestyle as possible. By "alternative," I

³¹⁴ Gurock, "From Fluidity to Rigidity: The Religious Worlds of Conservative and Orthodox Jews in Twentieth-Century America," 171-185.

³¹⁵ This organization is different from the Agudath ha-Rabbonim mentioned in earlier chapters. Agudath Israel represents an extreme right, or *Haredi*, orientation to Judaism. While not exactly Modern Orthodox (Orthodox Union), the Agudath ha-Rabbonim is closer to center than Agudath Israel. Jeffrey S. Gurock states that by the 1950's the Agudath ha-Rabbanim has come under the influence of the Agudath Israel (*Orthodox Jews in America*, 223).

³¹⁶ Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America*, 223-224.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ *Haredi* Judaism is commonly terms "ultra-Orthodox". Haredim (pl.) are known for the strictness and attention to detail in their observances. Many *Haredi* communities are also Hasidic. That is, their enactment of Jewish life reflects the heritage of eighteenth century counter-Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah movement) movement. Originally this movement could be likened to the Romantic Movement's response to the more radical intellectual emphases in Enlightenment thought. However, over the centuries, Haredi / Hasidism grew to reflect a selective approach to negotiating modern life. The event of World War II arguably drove this tendency deeper.

mean in contrast to the trajectory of American Reform Judaism, with its curtailing of traditional Jewish religious practice, which was asserting itself as *the* American Judaism.

Gurock has described this mid-twentieth century period of the 1950's as "a winnowing out of the Orthodox synagogue of so many nonobservant "diehards" and their comfortable relocation within what were becoming ritually distinctive, suburban Conservative synagogues."³¹⁹ This winnowing, and its resultantly smaller Orthodox communities, has led the 1950s to be described as a period in which American Orthodoxy was "in decline". However, "distillation" or "consolidation" may better express the process of removing undesired elements, through censure and winnowing,³²⁰ to create a smaller, more homogenously defined American Orthodoxy. These efforts were intensified, and possibly accelerated, by the events of World War II's *Shoah*;³²¹ but arguably not initiated. Not only did the loss of world Jewry's cultural center in Europe lend new motivation to reviving and purifying American Orthodoxy;³²² but these efforts found reinforcement and invigoration in the resettlement of European Hasidic and Haredi refugees who, preferring to have not left the Europe which forced them out, committed themselves to building communities in America which resembled their lost communities as much as possible.³²³ The increasing presence of *Haredi* Jews raised the standard of Orthodox expectations. It is important to note that very small numbers of what we now classify as Haredi Jews were present in the United States throughout the first half of the twentieth century. While the influx of Haredi Jews surrounding World War II period, and sympathies toward the circumstances of their immigration, bolstered this factions' efforts, it is important to note that such efforts were already in place prior to their

³¹⁹ Gurock, "From Fluidity to Rigidity," 185.

³²⁰ "Winnowing" is Gurock's term for this process. This term express the process of selection to form a smaller group. My term "distillation" includes this denotation of process plus the additional connotation of the production of a purified, more unified entity.

³²¹ "*Shoah*" is the Hebrew term for the Holocaust. The term Holocaust is highly problematic for Jews. Its literal meaning as a form of Biblical sacrifice suggests that the events of World War II had a spiritual significance and purpose, thus ennobling the actions of the perpetrators.

³²² Sarna, op. cit., 293-306. See also Heilman, *Sliding to the Right*.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 296.

arrival.³²⁴ This is particularly true with regard to the promotion of *niddah*, as we have seen through the evidence of the interwar marriage manuals. Because most American Jews are not aware that the marriage manuals existed prior to World War II, the revival of *niddah* observance since the 1970s is most commonly credited to the influence of *Haredi* Judaism since World War II.

However, this perception assumes two things. First, it assumes that *niddah* observance has consistently remained within the boundaries of American Orthodox Judaism, which my research indicates may not be as true as commonly believed.³²⁵ And secondly, it assumes that the *Chabad* movement initiated the pro-*niddah* campaign. While it is true that the late Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson supported the development of both Chabad and *Mitzva Taharas Hamishpacha International* (1974/5)³²⁶; as I have demonstrated earlier, these were not the first efforts, Rebbe Schneerson arguably built on the dual strategies of education and redesigning of *mikvaot* established since the 1930's. In fact, the majority of redressive actions concerning *niddah* in the last half of the twentieth century are strikingly continuous with those of the second quarter.

These erroneous perceptions and their underlying assumptions are reinforced by two factors. First, the most visible *niddah* advocacy today is associated with the outreach efforts of the *Chabad*³²⁷ movement, which is run out of the Lubovitch Hasidic community in Brooklyn, New York, arguably a *Haredi* community. The second reinforcing factor is the apparent hiatus of the *niddah* campaign within the wider American Jewish public arena. Prior to the 1950's, efforts to

³²⁴ The increasing in-fighting and politicking of various American Orthodox Jewish groups has been discussed in detail by Samuel Heilman, Janna Weissman Joselit, and Jeffery S. Gurock.

³²⁵ See footnote 6 in this chapter.

³²⁶ Lubovitch, "Chabad Lubovitch Brooklyn New York NY World Headquarters." This organization appears to be either the same or strongly connected to Taharas Hamishpacha Organization, the current Lubovitch *niddah* organization. Joshua Hoffman identifies this original organization as an earlier organization "The Lubovitch Women's Organization" established in the 1950s "to increase awareness of [*niddah*] laws through publications and educational programs" (Hoffman. "The History of the Institution of Mikvah in America," 86-87.) The Taharas Hamishpacha organizations may reflect further specialization on this subject, hence the differentiation of its own organization.

³²⁷ *Chabad* is an outreach organization of Lubovitch branch of *Hasidic* Judaism whose mission is to promote the return to Orthodox Jewish lifestyle. Chabad is currently the most public of the ba'al teshuva movements that started in the 1960s and 1970s. Lubovitch refers to their original geographical point of origin in Eastern Europe, Lubov. The term *hasid* refers to a specific style of Jewish pietism.

promote *niddah* were directed to a wider range of American Jews in large part because American synagogues and communities themselves encompassed a wide range of observance levels. While this point merits further research, for now, it appears likely that Orthodox efforts to revive *niddah* turned inward during the 1950s and 1960s to improve observance within the consolidating ranks of Orthodox Judaism. This apparent pause in the *niddah* campaign among the wider Jewish community made it possible for its existence to fade from the non-Orthodox collective memory. Once these perceptions and assumptions are clarified and dispelled, the late twentieth century *niddah* campaign reveals significant continuities from the earlier advocacy strategies.

Feminism

Feminism may be most broadly defined as set of movements all of which actively seek new ways for women to achieve access to and recognition of public presence and power inherent in social roles beyond those of home and family. These movements differ in their perceptions of the problems facing women and the solutions they advocate. Womanism, either a counter-movement or sub-movement of Feminism, responds critically to certain feminist positions which advocate the elimination of sex and gender difference. Womanists seek goals similar to those of mainline Feminism with regard to access to and recognition of wider social roles for women, but also advocates for women's ability to fulfill commitments to home and family as meriting equal or greater value than women's place in the paid workforce. Womanism³²⁸ encompasses a wide range of positions within its camp, including womanists who advocate fully for women's traditional roles in the home and family. As Feminism and Womanism encompass a range of views, these groups similarly interact with Judaism on multiple levels, with the various branches of Judaism responding to Feminism and Womanism in terms of both rejection and engagement.

In the case of *niddah*, on one hand, the line(s) of Feminism which most opposed the institution of marriage were seen as the first, greatest threat to those religious institutions which

³²⁸ I engage the term Womanism in its broader sense, "believing in and respecting the abilities and talents of women; acknowledging women's contributions to society." ("Womanism" Dictionary.com). I understand Womanism to refer to the branch of Feminism that acknowledges and celebrates qualities unique to the female sex and their related expressions in culture.

valued marriage and family life. This line of Feminism is most strongly associated with the 1960s Sexual Revolution. Orthodox rabbis lost no time in presenting marriage as under attack by both Feminists and the Sexual Revolutionaries, holding up Orthodoxy as a refuge for those who continued to value as traditional marriage and morality. Within the scholarship on *niddah*, Womanism can be heard in the ethnographic respondents who assert that the rules and boundaries of Orthodox Jewish marriage provide them with leverage to enlist their husbands' active participation in child rearing and domestic activities.³²⁹

On yet another level, again regarding *niddah* those line(s) of Feminism that argued for greater inclusion of women in all levels of public, social activity resulted in an increase of women's participation in redressive actions advocating *niddah*. Women appear to have been a minority voice in the public promotion of *niddah* prior to the 1980s. In the interwar years, at least two women were identified as actively involved in the promotion of *niddah*: Rebbetzin Sara Hyamson, known now for her speech to Women's Branch of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America;³³⁰ and "Mrs. Yetta Rothman created [a one-woman] organization, United Jewish Women for Torah Traditions... [that] endeavored to organize women throughout the United States to promote observance of *Taharat Hamishpacha* and to build *mikvahs* in areas where none existed"³³¹

An additional impact of feminism may be seen in the greater inclusion of men in the target audience and of men's personal experiences of *mikvah* as seen in a few selections of *Total Immersion*. This shift may have started with R. Leo Jung who was known to educate grooms regarding *niddah* individually and with their fiancées.³³² However, Lamm departed from the tendency of the previous marriage manuals which

...though [enjoining] both men and women...to observe the laws of family purity, women (then as now) "managed" that ritual [and]...It was to them [women] alone that these

³²⁹ Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women*; Avishai, "DOING RELIGION;" and Yadgar, "Gender, Religion, and Feminism"

³³⁰ Hyamson "We Must Act" in *Total Immersion*, 100-103 (ff p100).

³³¹ Hoffman, "The History of the Institution of *Mikvah* in America," 86.

³³² Weissman Joselit. *New York's Jewish Jews*, 117.

[earlier marriage manuals] were addressed...Where the language explaining the laws and legal niceties of family purity was controlled and neutral, the narrative accompanying them was unabashedly propagandistic...employing language more commonly found in popular women's magazines of the 1920s and thirties.³³³

Lamm's social criticism and his call to action is directed at the couple throughout. While men's and women's concerns relative to *niddah* do receive individual attention, the overarching call to action is addressed to both partners. This is not to say that Lamm presents *niddah* fully in terms compatible with Feminist, or Womanist, interests; there are statements which do and do not. However, this change in audience shifts the onus for observance, the benefits of observance and the consequences for its non-observance, from the women alone to both members of the marriage.

By the close of the twentieth century, women were extensively represented in the operation of mikvaot; *mikvah* organizations such as Taharat haMishpacha; and the creation of an entirely new halakhic role within Orthodoxy, the *yo'atzot*, or *niddah* consultant. Generally questions related to specific problems which arise in the regular observance of *niddah* must be directed to a male rabbi. *Yo'atzot*, Orthodox women *niddah* consultants, offer an alternative for women who are uncomfortable consulting a male rabbi about such personal matters.³³⁴ *Yo'atzot* originate in Israel but serve internationally including in the United States. The impact of the shift from male rabbis advocating that women observe *niddah* to the advocacy of *niddah* by rebbetzins, *yo'atzot*, and women rabbis³³⁵ (within Conservative Judaism) cannot be understated.³³⁶ Not only may women find it easier to accept as relevant arguments for increased

³³³ Ibid., 118.

³³⁴ See Avishai, "Halakhic *Niddah* Consultants and the Orthodox Women's Movement in Israel." And Ganzel and Zimmerman, "Women as Halakhic Professionals." More

³³⁵ Meyer explains that as some women became rabbis, they sensed a contradiction "Could they take upon themselves the mitzvot previously limited to men...while neglecting one assigned specifically to women" (Meyer, op. cit., 148). Also, Miriam Berkowitz has written *Taking the Plunge: A Practical and Spiritual Guide to the Mikveh*. It is also interesting to note that Orthodox Rabbi Haviva Ner-David, whose ordination is widely unaccepted by the international Orthodox community, also writes on *niddah* and *mikvah* advocating accommodations and variations in practice which are more liberal than the conservative t'shuvot.

³³⁶ Evaluating the differences in men's and women's articulations of *niddah* would make an interesting study in its own right.

observance from women, but it also complicates arguments about the imposition of *niddah* upon women by male leadership. Another area in which the continuities and innovations of *mikvah* management can be debated is the involvement of women in those organizations which support the construction and renovation of mikvaot and local supervision of individual mikvaot.

Women *mikvah* attendants have been a long standing part of women's immersions. Recall that the initial anxiety about problems with *mikvah* (and *niddah*) –as presented by Joshua Hoffman in his history of the American *mikvah*— is concern that the *mikvah* attendants could not be trusted. However, it is unclear how much women were involved in the construction, design, and supervision of mikvaot in the first three-quarters of the twenty-first century. Today, women serve in almost all areas of *mikvah* promotion and maintenance, with the possible exception of the oversight of the actual construction itself which may well still be the exclusive domain of male Orthodox rabbis who specialize in this area of ritual law.

Mikvah and *niddah* supervision overlap through women's involvement with education. Women are now trained in Israel to serve as *Yo'atzot*, halachic consultants, within Israel and internationally.³³⁷ The creation of this new, somewhat public role within Jewish Orthodoxy very much reflects the impact of Feminism on Orthodox Judaism. *Yo'atzot* are able to respond to many specific questions related both to *niddah* observance which previously had to be addressed to male Orthodox rabbis. "In addition to rigorous halakhic study" *yo'atzot* are also trained in "the medical, sexual and psychological aspects of *niddah*, thus providing halakhic consultants a more rounded education than that of male rabbis, who approach *niddah* as a legal realm of knowledge."³³⁸ *Yo'atzot* are not able to answer all questions, referring some questions back to a woman's rabbi for clarification of local custom, or to marital professionals, or they themselves

³³⁷ See Avishai, "Halakhic *Niddah* Consultants and the Orthodox Women's Movement in Israel." and Ganzel and Zimmerman, "Women as Halakhic Professionals."

³³⁸ Avishai, "Halakhic *Niddah* Consultants and the Orthodox Women's Movement in Israel." 197.

consult with Orthodox rabbis within Nishmat, the educational institution that trains and manages the *Yo'atzot* organization.³³⁹

Feminism and Anthropology

Feminism's assessment of *niddah*, primarily among Jewish Feminists, is greatly complicated by both the conflicted history with menstruation inherited from First Wave Feminism³⁴⁰ and earlier anthropological assessments of menstrual practices that struggled to consider them as legitimate religious practices.³⁴¹ During Feminism's first wave, a major argument against women's higher education and their professional employment centered on women's reproductive capacities, which were understood to define their nature and social role exclusively. In this argument, menstruation played a central role as it was presented as prime evidence of women's unreliability in higher education and professional careers.³⁴² "Women's exclusion from political life and middle-class women's exclusion from economic life were being routinely justified on grounds of menstruation as periodic disability."³⁴³ This history of menstruation within the American Women's movement reflects broader social issues with menstruation and women in America.³⁴⁴ Both mainstream attitudes about menstruation and the Women's movements, which challenge or complicate those attitudes, form the context for the Jewish feminists' criticism of *niddah*. These feminist writers then respond to *niddah* both as feminists about menstruation and as Jewish women about *niddah*. While some Jewish feminists

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Johnston, "The Menstrual Other," 2-4.

³⁴¹ See Buckley and Gottlieb, *Blood Magic* for a critical review of menstrual anthropology from 1966-1980's; and Avishai, "DOING RELIGION" for a critical review of similar scholarship prior to 2006.

³⁴² Lander, *Images of Bleeding*, 103-129.

³⁴³ Ibid., 103.

³⁴⁴ Louise Lander argues in *Images of Bleeding* that Feminism has not (at the time of her publication) successfully resolved its relationship to menstruation.

articulated rejections of *niddah* on grounds that it stigmatized women;³⁴⁵ others equate reclaiming *niddah* with reclaiming women's bodies for women and reclaiming Jewish tradition for women.³⁴⁶

Nineteenth century First Wave Feminism emerged during a time when anthropologists began asserting that menstrual practices reflected superstitious and magical thinking, thereby indexing menstrual practices as one criterion that distinguished "primitive" from more "advanced" societies. Jenna Weissman Joselit's explanation for the inability of "the beautifully appointed *mikvah* [and] the well-reasoned arguments of the *mikvah* manual [to] overcome objections to what was seen as the fundamentally oriental nature of the practice"³⁴⁷ reflects this cultural othering which occurred on the anthropological level. Weissman Joselit positions *niddah* campaigner R. Leo Jung against such anthropological critics "By Jung's reckoning, the family purity laws were hardly the retrogressive or oppressive institution their critics made them out to be"³⁴⁸ By 1966, early in Feminism's Second Wave, Mary Douglas described menstrual taboos as part of patriarchal mechanisms that oppressed women within certain male-centered social structures.³⁴⁹ While Buckley and Gottlieb's *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* directly challenged the "oppressiveness" of menstrual purity in the late 1980s³⁵⁰ and Douglas herself moved away from her own position in the 1990s,³⁵¹ scholarship on *niddah* continues to concern various agentive responses to patriarchal oppression.³⁵² This antagonism toward menstruation and menstrual practices has resulted in two main responses from *niddah*

³⁴⁵ Editorial note appended to Rachel Adler's "Tum'ah and Taharah: Ends and Beginnings. The editorial notes "a letter [to Adler] from the editors" yet the volume specifies only Elizabeth Koltun as editor. Rachel Adler later expressed this same editorial opinion in "In Your Blood, Live."

³⁴⁶ Such as Miriam Berkowitz, Susan Grossman, Rahel Wasserman,

³⁴⁷ Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, 121.

³⁴⁸ Weissman Joselit. "Kissing Business," 21. This argument will be reiterated by Tamar Frankiel in "To Number Our Days" in *Total Immersion*, 13-22.

³⁴⁹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 186-189. See also Buckley and Gottlieb, "Introduction: A Critical Appraisal of Theories of Menstrual Symbolism" *Blood Magic*, 9-15 and 26-29.

³⁵⁰ Buckley and Gottlieb, "Introduction" in *Blood Magic*, 3.

³⁵¹ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*.

³⁵² Avishai, "DOING RELIGION," 410-412.

advocates. First, there has been a consistent effort by *niddah* advocates throughout the twentieth century to distinguish *niddah* as fundamentally different from, and better than the menstrual practices of other religio-cultures. “It is not the kind of superstition that, in other cultures, has stigmatized the menstruant as repulsive, placed upon her mysterious and stringent taboos, and banished her from the community for the duration of her menses.”³⁵³ A second response from *niddah* advocates is closely related; namely, it has produced challenges to the categories of *tameh* and *taharah*, purity and impurity, which are fundamental to *niddah* ritual law. These categories are understood by critics as vilifying menstruation and oppressing women as a class.³⁵⁴ *Niddah* advocates have responded to these criticisms in two ways.

Niddah advocates have responded to these criticisms in two ways. First, advocates have offered a variety of interpretations of *tameh* which seek to deflect negative connotations to the menstruant woman by emphasizing the spiritual, non-moral nature of purity and impurity³⁵⁵ or to situate *tameh* as a positive category within the Womanist strand of Feminism.³⁵⁶ The second response has been to argue for changing the terminology involved in the definition and performance of *niddah*'s rituals.³⁵⁷ In this respect, feminist and womanist apologists of *niddah* echo Leo Jung's proto-Womanist argument that *niddah* “...enhances woman's self-worth, dignity, and sense of self...Jewish Law to a marvelous extent takes care of women's constitutionally physiological difficulties, decreeing times of solitude in accord with the laws of nature and in divine comprehension of her mental and emotional needs.”³⁵⁸

³⁵³ Lamm, *Hedge of Roses*, 40. See also Slonim, “Introduction” in *Total Immersion*, xxx-xxxi.

³⁵⁴ See note 58 above.

³⁵⁵ Slonim, *Total Immersion*, #; Berkowitz, “Reshaping the Laws of Family Purity,” #.

³⁵⁶ Ner-David, “Reclaiming Our Tum'ah”; and Handelman, “Tum'ah and Taharah” in *Total Immersion*; and Frankiel, “To Number Our Days” in *Total Immersion*.

³⁵⁷ Grossman, “Mikveh and the Sanctity of Being Created Human.” Berkowitz, “Reshaping the Laws of Family Purity” and “Mikveh and the Sanctity of Family Relations.”

³⁵⁸ Weissman Joselit. “Kissing Business,” 21. Quoting Jung, original location not cited.

I will discuss this repackaging of *niddah* in greater detail in the final section of this chapter. Here, I offer my reading of the interplay of *niddah* critics and apologists. In the second half of the twentieth century, both sides arguably engaged in redressive actions aimed to further respectively both *niddah*'s non-observance and its observance.³⁵⁹ I understand these contrasting voices as participating in a complementary dialogue. The critique of *niddah* as vilifying menstruation, and thereby women as a class, is not unfounded. Shaye Cohen³⁶⁰ and Sharon Koren³⁶¹ have both described that highly negative traditions concerning menstruation and the menstruant accumulated in the medieval period of European Jewry, largely through the *Merkavah* mystical tradition and the extra-rabbinic influences of the text *Baraita de Niddah*. Such attitudes persist today among those Jewish women who express discomfort with touching Torah scrolls during their menses. I read *niddah*'s critics as identifying those aspects of the *niddah* traditions most at odds with late twentieth century interests. In their apologetics, advocates refashion or purge these critiqued customs and attitudes from contemporary *niddah* observance. Both critics and advocates, thus, participate in a reciprocal process that results in what some might see as the modernization of *niddah* through the removal of extra-rabbinic accretions.

In this respect, late twentieth century feminist and womanist movements directly involved themselves with both the merits of *niddah* as a legitimate ritual practice and in asserting the participation of women in its oversight and management.

³⁵⁹ I have not yet found scholarship or primary sources that indicate significant publication efforts against *niddah* in the first half of the twentieth century. Within the Jewish community, I have only found reference to Rabbi Phillipson of Cincinnati's editorial that specifically speaks against *niddah* (Hoffman, "*The History of the Institution of Mikvah in America*," This does not mean that other such evidence does or does not exist; only that I have not found it.

³⁶⁰ Cohen, "Purity, Piety, and Polemic: Medieval Rabbinic Denunciations of 'Incorrect' Purification Practices"; Cohen, "Purity and Piety."

³⁶¹ Koren, *Forsaken: The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*; "The Menstruant as 'Other' in Medieval Judaism and Christianity"; and "Mystical Rationales for the Laws of *Niddah*."

Sexual Revolution

While the lines of Feminism originating in the 1960s are widely accepted as the “Second Wave” following the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century’s “First Wave”, the Sexual Revolution’s heritage from the 1920s is less commonly known. Moreover, feminism and anti-establishment sexual movements are related in both periods. Public protests against the established standards of modesty and marriage were performed by radical First Wave Feminists, most notably in Greenwich Village, New York. Additionally, the birth control movement of the 1920s was led by women and daughters among the First Wave, and followed by large segments of the female population who may or may not have identified with other issues of concern to First Wave Feminists. This earlier birth control movement motivated the quest for better birth control methods which resulted in the invention of The Pill, itself credited as a major contributing factor to the 1970s sexual revolution. In both periods, *niddah* advocates defined the moral virtue of *niddah* observant marriage against the radical tendencies in the women’s and sexuality movements. *Niddah* was specifically presented as an integral part of Jewish sexual morality and as a means to address the abuses of the marital state. However, the Sexual Revolution, as did the late twentieth century women’s movements, contributed to the articulation of *niddah* observance in more complex ways than simply offering a binary contrast.

While the Sexual Revolution appears on the surface to be new and specific to the 1960’s, it is not. Lamm’s concern for sexual morality echoes Sara Hyamson’s 1926 assessment of the sexuality of the 1920’s in which that which was once secret was now common knowledge, “...in our days there has emerged a new principle of sex equality which may result in a lowering of moral standards.”³⁶² These new principles of sex equality which Hyamson likely refers to may simply reference what we now thinking of the flirtatious, “Roaring ‘20s.” However, it is relevant to note that there was a lesser known sexual freedom movement that intersected with (or reflected an extreme pole of) first-wave feminism that was most pronounced if not centered, in New York City’s Greenwich Village neighborhood. So, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that Hyamson in

³⁶² Hyamson, “We Must Act” in *Total Immersion*,

the 1920's and Lamm in the 1960's both position Jewish sexuality in opposition to counter-culture sexuality movements. The major difference is that in the 1920s, strengthening the institution of marriage and reducing the divorce rates were widely accepted as solutions, as evidenced in the development of pre- and post-marital counseling and the creation of the of marriage manual genre.³⁶³ By the 1960s, the institution of marriage was itself under question, and divorce was offered as a solution rather than part of the problem.

On the one hand, R. Norman Lamm criticizes the Sexual Revolution's challenge to heterosexual monogamy as sanctioned by the institution of marriage, *niddah's* central structure, describing it as a not "new morality...[but] the old hedonistic immorality in a new and appealing guide"³⁶⁴ against which the Orthodox Jew must position him- or herself firmly. On the other hand, Lamm acknowledges that the Sexual Revolution benefits *niddah* by virtue of having made sex a publically acceptable topic. "This prevailing sentiment... ha[s] contributed an element of integrity and frankness to our discussion and understanding of sex and its role in our lives, and this honesty has helped us get rid of some heavy-handed sanctimoniousness that used to characterize our talk – or refusal to talk – about sex."³⁶⁵ Sara Hyamson noted in 1926 that the Victorian "reticence on human sex life" and its silence on the subject was a significant factor in the crisis of *niddah's* in her day.³⁶⁶ While Lamm only sites a reduction in "sanctimonious" talk here, elsewhere in *A Hedge of Roses*, Lamm's discussion of the nature and experience of married sexuality depends greatly on the ability to discuss this aspect of married life in its own terms.

Beyond merely decrying the Sexual Revolution as immoral, Lamm identifies it as perverting healthy sexuality. "Our very unprudish openness and frankness about matters sexual has served to push deeper into the unconscious the very antithesis of this whole approach to sex:

³⁶³ Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, 117.

³⁶⁴ Lamm, *Hedge of Roses*, 21.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Hyamson, "We Must Act", 102.

a puritanical, ascetic, sex-negating outlook that is as real as it is denied.” Lamm suggests that the excesses of the Sexual Revolution reflects and is based on a fundamentally negative and repressive attitude toward sex. He contrasts this view with the rabbinic tradition on sex “within [which] the limits set by the Torah’s morality [*niddah*], the sexual bond is not only tolerated but affirmed and encouraged.”³⁶⁷ Yet, at the same time, *niddah* requires and develops “the ability to practice restraint in the presence of temptation – and Judaism was immensely realistic in its assessment of man’s vulnerability to sexual desire –is an expression of holiness”³⁶⁸ Lamm then asserts that *niddah*’s rhythm of permissibility and forbiddenness provides Jewish couples with a means for navigating the grey line between such repression and hedonism to achieve a balanced, healthy approach to sexuality.

Lamm relates his criticism of society’s shift toward ambiguous sexual ethics to his criticism of the increasing rate of failed marriages and breakdown of the family unit as evidenced by rising divorce rates. Lamm seems to assume a direct correlation between the sexual relationship and the non-sexual aspects of the relationship. This appears to be the basis of Lamm’s identification of “the tendency for sex to become routinized”³⁶⁹ as the primary factor in failed marriages. The periodic separations and reunifications of *niddah*, he asserts, have the effect of keeping sexual interest fresh over the long term, thus preserving marital romance both in the bedroom and beyond it. “For marriage to thrive, the attractiveness of wife and husband for each other that prevailed during the early period of the marriage must be preserved and even enhanced...the abstinence enjoined by Family Purity helps keep that attraction and longing fresh and youthful.”³⁷⁰ Lamm echoes earlier claims that *niddah* observant couples experience healthier, more permanent marriages. “That Judaism’s view of these most intimate aspects of married life is worthy of consideration by modern young couples is indicated by the striking record

³⁶⁷ Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses*, 29.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

³⁶⁹ Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses*, 55. Lamm does not cite any data concerning this point.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

of domestic happiness characteristic of Orthodox Jewish homes even in the midst of an environment where the breakdown of family life becomes more shocking with each year.”³⁷¹ This same claim that *niddah* is good for marriage was made in the interwar manuals. While the manuals have not been described as citing the divorce rates per se, Weissman Joselit attributes their very structure and organization to the wider social trend of marriage preparation and management manuals which, she states, were a direct response to divorce rates in the early twentieth century.

The Sexual Revolution also intersected with the *ba'alot t'shuvot*³⁷² movement through its negative role in the lives of *some* women who turned to various Orthodox Judaism in the late twentieth century. Debra Renee Kaufman and Jonathan Sarna reports that some *ba'alot teshvuot* describe poor experiences with sexual freedom which resulted a dissatisfaction with that lifestyle and contributed to their desire to find a more satisfying experiences in the rule-bound contexts of religiously traditional sexual and family life.³⁷³ In so far as these women were motivated by unsatisfying sexual relations (not the only motivating factor identified by Kaufman's respondents), their experiences support Lamm's positioning of both *niddah* and marriage. The *ba'alot teshuva* movement reflects the intersection of both women's movement and the sexual revolution with what is ambiguously termed the spirituality movement, also identified by some scholars as a the late twentieth century Great Awakening.³⁷⁴

³⁷¹ Ibid., 52.

³⁷² Literally “masters of return/repentance” this refers to a movement starting in the 1970's of non-Orthodox Jews returning to Orthodoxy.

³⁷³ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 326.

Kaufman, *Rachel's Daughters*, 6-7, 21. Kaufman cites at least two *ba'alot t'shuvot* respondents as seeing sexual freedom, on the grounds that the free love movement's lack of rules made women more vulnerable to sexual exploitation (9, 23). This theme is the driving message of Wendy Shalit's public press *The Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*, 1999. She specifically describes Jewish family Purity laws as establishing and reinforcing boundaries

³⁷⁴ McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977*; and Fogel, *The late twentieth century Great Awakening & the Future of Egalitarianism*.

The Late Twentieth Century Great Awakening

William G. McLoughlin posited in 1978 that the Great Awakenings in American history “begin in periods of cultural distortion and grave personal stress, when we lose faith in the legitimacy of our norms, the viability of our institutions, and the authority of our leaders in church and state.”³⁷⁵ Awakenings occur during periods of major social change when individuals and communities need to “reorient. Seeking an understanding of who we are, how we relate to the rest of the universe, and what the meaning is of the manifold crises that threaten our sense of social order.”³⁷⁶ Arguably, the spirituality movement reflected efforts to resolve the tensions laid bare by these other movements.

The *ba'al t'shuvah*³⁷⁷ was one of several movements within American Judaism in the 1960s and 1970s that sought to redefine and integrate new significance to religious life. The *ba'al t'shuvot* movement, while drawing on less or non-observant Jews, nevertheless acts by pulling individuals *into* the ranks of the Orthodox rather than increasing observance levels outside Orthodoxy. This may have at first reflected the distillation process of American Orthodoxy whereby those who wished to maintain their Orthodox identity changed their practice to better align with the standards set forward by Orthodox leaderships. Later, this same movement appears to have shifted purposes from distillation to expansion. Both purposes maintain an inward orientation. The one exception to this inward orientation to Orthodox observance within American Orthodox Judaism is the *Chabad* movement of the *Lubovitch*³⁷⁸ branch of Hasidism, which pursues inward and outward orientations to increasing observance. This outreach organization works worldwide first to increase Orthodox observance among the non-Orthodox

³⁷⁵ McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 2.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

³⁷⁷ Literally “masters of return,” this phrase refers to the movement of non-observant Jews into a life of full Orthodox observance. This movement gained momentum after 1970.

³⁷⁸ The Lubovitch, particularly those involved in the Chabad outreach, may be thought of as a more liberal Haredi communities in so far as they engage with the non-Haredi world to a greater degree than most other Haredi communities.

population with the second, though ultimate, goal of drawing *ba'alot t'shuvot* into Lubovitch communities.

These spiritual movements lent a new dimension to discussions of *niddah*, the spiritualization of various dynamics of *niddah* observance. Several scholars have observed that American Orthodoxy has positioned itself in opposition to certain concepts and lifestyles which developed from those lines of Feminism and the Sexual Revolution which challenge the traditional structure of the biologically defined heterosexual, nuclear family.³⁷⁹ This only indirectly impacts *niddah* in so far as it is observed within the context of heterosexual marriages. This explains the continued focus on *niddah*'s role within marriage in writings on *niddah*. It does not explain the spiritualization of either menstruation or marriage through *niddah* observance. This trend toward spiritualization reflects the impact of the spirituality movement, sometimes referred to somewhat controversially as the late twentieth century Great Awakening.³⁸⁰ I do not intend to undermine the relevance and impact of either Feminism or the Sexual Revolution as concerns *niddah*; however, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, defining *niddah* against perceived problems with both marriage and sexuality were not new to the discussion of *niddah*.

Reflection on Social Movements

These social movements have contributed to the development of post-modern critique of the established category of religion and ultimately to its identification of nineteenth century constructs of religion as a distinct category.³⁸¹ New definitions of religion situate this category as part of an interrelated aspect of human life, intersecting most clearly with the categories of the

³⁷⁹ See Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*; Heilman, *Sliding to the Right*; and Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America*.

³⁸⁰ See McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977*; and Fogel, *The late twentieth century Great Awakening & the Future of Egalitarianism*.

³⁸¹ Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*; Masuzawa, "What Do the Critics Want?—A Brief Reflection on the Difference between a Disciplinary History and a Discourse Analysis"; Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion*. While these scholars do trace the development and form of the nineteenth century definition of religion as a distinct category, they do not address the development of the post-modern critique in which their scholarship is situated.

social, cultural, and historical but also with literary, economics, politics, science, and some might argue, with mathematics categories. This new, more flexible definition of the categorization of religion has created new avenues with which Orthodox Jews can articulate their religiosity as legitimately different and distinct from other religions. Chanoch Shuster, a contributing writer to *Total Immersion*,³⁸² directly articulates Judaism's conflict with certain unidentified definitions of religion in common use, that reflect the narrow definitions of nineteenth century religion, body, and ritual. Shuster states that American Jews "grapple with religious difficulties, because a Jew must examine Judaism, but he does so with alien categories...In the unquestioned, subterranean presuppositions of religion, in those basic statements that precede any discussion of religion, Christianity's views are a part of the West. The Jew should realize that these views are not universal, that they are specifically doctrinal, and that they are not in consonance with his own doctrines" (51). In applying this concern to *niddah*, Shuster specifically identified differences in the conceptualizations of body and religion. "Here is the real question about *Mikvah*, the assumptions that lead to the challenge...You can serve God with you mind and emotions, with your "higher" facilities, but not with such a base animal function as procreation."³⁸³ Shuster cites a specifically nineteenth century derived definition of religion here that defined the difference between this conceptualization of the body-soul dynamic. Shuster addresses the issue of the body in religion directly by identifying –in albeit very brush strokes- the differences between Christian and Jewish body-religion constructs. In Christianity, "the body is scorned as an instrument of Godliness, as an avenue to heights of the spirit."³⁸⁴ In Judaism, "All the man, all the time, in every place, under all circumstances, in every activity, in every fiber of his being, can serve God, can apprehend Him, can communicate with Him."³⁸⁵ This discrepancy has impacted perception of the laws of *niddah* since the late nineteenth century.

³⁸² Shuster, "Thinking Like a Jew" in *Total Immersion*, 51-54.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁸⁴ Shuster, *op. cit.*, 52.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

Applying constructs derived from this Christian conception of the body's relationship to the spiritual understandably results in efforts to identify the ritual practices through other conceptual means. "Since Family Purity laws "cannot" be religious, they must have some other origin and significance."³⁸⁶ While Shuster specifically cites hygienic explanations and religious anachronism³⁸⁷ as problematic interpretations of *niddah* based on extra-Judaic categories, the list justifiably includes analyses of *niddah* that situate both the ritual practice and its women practitioners³⁸⁸ within controlling patriarchal practices in which women either refuse to comply, comply conditionally, or comply strategically by "appropriate[ing] religion to further extra religious ends such as economic opportunities, domestic relations, political ideologies, and cultural affiliation."³⁸⁹ Fundamentally these readings all dissociate the body as a legitimate site of religious expression in its own rite. Moreover, and possibly as a result of the ostensible inauthenticity of the body as a ritual domain, many ethnographers of *niddah* today do not include sufficient considerations of the ritual's historical or religious contexts.

Both of these elements are present in Lamm's third social criticism and its related arguments. Lamm emphasizes the seriousness of marital breakdown by comparing it with the subject of his third social criticism, the threat of nuclear war. "The disintegration of the family and the fragmentation of man are not one bit less of a mortal peril to the future of mankind than the splitting of the atom." Throughout *A Hedge of Roses*, concern for Jewish continuity, so common in the marriage manuals, is subsumed into the concerns over sexual morality, the breakdown of the nuclear family, and the destruction of the human race. The connection, or lack thereof, between these social concerns becomes more clear as Lamm explains his perception of the nuclear crisis and of *niddah*. For Lamm, the environment of "nuclear hostility" has the effect, especially among children raised in this environment, of desensitizing individuals to the value of

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Such analyses do not address men's participation at all.

³⁸⁹ Avishai, "DOING RELIGION in a Secular World," 411. In this article, Avishai provides an excellent survey of recent scholarship on *niddah*.

life, "...accept[ing] with graceful callousness such ideas as "overkill" and nuclear proliferation. Life threatens to lose its distinctiveness, its value, its preciousness. Unless we make a conscious effort to create an environment of radically different values, this is the poison our children will inhale: contempt for life and indifference to death." Lamm reinforces the role of science in creating a live-devaluing environment by indicting bio-science generally, "Life has been denied meaning –how can anything described as "a biochemical accident" be meaningful –and consequently cheapened?" Within this environment, Lamm asserts, parents are obligated to make the conscious effort to nurture value for life and abhorrence of death within their own families. He also argues that the *Niddah* observant marriage creates the foundation for just such a family life, "A Jewish home, lived according to the noble code of the Jewish "way,' is a nursery of life's sanctity."

Lamm's primary innovations lay in his emphasis on the couple, rather than only the wife; his elaboration of sexual psychology as a benefit of *niddah*; and spiritualizing both the nature and benefits of *niddah* observance. *Niddah* literature published between 1966 and 2006 continue Lamm's, often developing one line of his argument in greater detail. "These volumes provide systems of meaning that place the observance of *mikveh* at the center of married life and at the center of women's relationship to God."³⁹⁰ They accomplish this by building on the shared experience of *niddah* by both partners in the marriage and by developing the psychological and spiritual dimensions of its observance. However, these "systems of meaning" were not created in a vacuum; but rather resulted from the pressures and critiques produced from larger social and intellectual movements within the American religio-cultural landscape. By the mid-1960s, when Lamm published *A Hedge of Roses*, the social forces which would unravel the nineteenth century concepts of religion, body, and ritual were in place. *A Hedge of Roses* touches –to varying degrees- upon the various approaches this unraveling took: the sexual revolution; feminism; the spirituality movement; and the post-modern assertion of the legitimacy of alternate models of religion. *Niddah* literature in the subsequent decades reflects a dual process of selective

³⁹⁰ Hammer, "Rising from the Ritual Bath -- Jewish Ritual."

appropriation of ideas and methods from among these movements and also apologetics in response to their perceived criticisms. From these efforts emerged a more highly nuanced presentation of *niddah* than had previously existed. The remainder of this chapter will describe how these movements interacted with the campaign to increase *niddah* observance.

New Expressions of *Tumah* and *Taharah*: Menstruation, Sexuality, and Marriage

If anything distinguishes the two periods of *niddah* advocacy,³⁹¹ it is the added quality of the late twentieth century Great Awakening. *Niddah* advocates of the 1920s-1940s appealed to concerns about sanitation, attractive *mikvaot*, high divorce rates and the science of happy marriages. *Niddah* advocates of the late twentieth century continued to struggle to change the perception of *mikvaot*, the belief that *niddah* practices defined the menstruant woman as dirty, and positioned the *niddah* observant couple against the challenges to marriage as an institution presented by the sexual revolution and certain lines of feminism. These two social movements, supported both more negative and more positive perceptions of *niddah*, challenged *niddah* on the one hand and provided advocates with new ways of articulating the Orthodox message about *niddah*, on the other hand. Most importantly, the spirituality movement(s), or late twentieth century Great Awakening, supported *niddah* advocates in introducing the primary innovative apologetic within the *niddah* advocacy literature: the spiritual, sometimes, Kabbalistic³⁹² explanations of the *mikvah*, menstruation, sexuality and marriage. That these spiritualizing expressions followed the onset of the late twentieth century Great Awakening, supports my assertion that the rupture with *niddah* centered on concepts of religion, body, and ritual. These concepts were challenged by the social movements associated with this Great Awakening. Arguably, the religious and spirituality movements of this Great Awakening endeavored to redefine and reconfigure the individual's

³⁹¹ The first being defined as 1920—1940; the second period defined as 1960—the present.

³⁹² Kabbalah is a specific Jewish mystical tradition, originating in medieval Spain and Provence, which built upon the earlier, traditional Merkavah (Chariot) mysticism, which claims origins with the biblical prophet Ezekiel.

relation to his or her own body, to the bodies of others, and –in some cases- to religio-cultural specific cosmological structures.

The articulations of *niddah* in the last quarter of the twentieth century reflect an interweaving of feminism, hetero-sexuality, Jewish concepts of holiness, and Kabbalistic mysticism which are so tightly bound together that to parse out articulations of each one separately threatens to unravel the integrity of any single example of the turn-of-the-century *niddah* literature. Thus, the remainder of this chapter will examine in detail one innovative aspect of *niddah* advocacy discourse: explanations of the purity and impurity binary known in Hebrew as *tum'ah* and *taharah*. Secondary sources do not indicate that the interwar marriage manuals discussed the concepts of purity and impurity beyond the assertion that *mikvah* immersion was not about getting hygienically clean. I will examine the way that authors in *A Hedge of Roses*, *Total Immersion*, and Rabbi Susan Grossman's and Rabbi Miriam Berkowitz's joint *t'shuvot* discuss concepts of *tum'ah* and *taharah*, impurity and purity.

The “*Tum’ah*” Controversy

Concern with the terms *tum’ah* and *taharah* largely reflect Feminist critique of menstrual practices generally and *niddah* practices specifically. Stand(s) within the feminist movement picked up on the challenge to marriage as a patriarchal institution serving only male interests by limiting the choices available to women. *Niddah* became a vehicle for oppressing Jewish women within marriage. This allegation was based on two bodies of evidence. First, the compact body of ethnographic scholarship which, following Mary Douglas, presented menstrual rituals exclusively as inherently patriarchal in origin, and as ostracizing of the menstruant per taboo about menstrual danger.³⁹³ While, on the surface, this argument against *niddah*, coming from second-wave feminism, appears new; it may also be seen as an expression of an older sentiment, that is, the non-western orientalism that Weissman Joselit cites as the insurmountable obstacle to the interwar *niddah* campaign.³⁹⁴ Western-centered categories of religion, body, and ritual have simply lacked alternate conceptual frameworks through which to view and comprehend religious ritual behaviors involving the body.

The second body of evidence for feminist criticism of *niddah* lay within certain strands of European Jewish culture in which menstruants were stigmatized either by themselves or by others. These customs *may likely* date back to the medieval rediscovery of the extra-rabbinic *Baraita de-Niddah* and its subsequent absorption into medieval Kabbalah concerns about purity.³⁹⁵ It is uncertain to what extent that beliefs of the evil aura around menstruants may have existed in non-Jewish medieval communities which might have made medieval kabbalists and their Jewish communities more receptive of the vilification in the *Baraita de Niddah*; or, if this text introduced a conception of menstruation which had not existed previously among these medieval

³⁹³ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 188.

³⁹⁴ Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews*, 121.

³⁹⁵ Sharon Koren details this process in *Forsaken*.

Jewish communities. Either way, the Kabbalistic appropriation of the *Baraita de Niddah* gave official sanction to its emphasis on ritual purity and negative imagery concerning the *niddah*.

Late twentieth century pro-*niddah* literature responds to each line of this criticism differently. Regarding the first line of criticism, Lamm and Slonim both seek to distance *niddah* as much as possible from association with the menstrual rituals found in other religio-cultures. Lamm “others” the menstrual rituals of found elsewhere in the world and asserts that correct understanding of *niddah*’s nature results from proper education in Jewish texts and tradition:

It is not the kind of superstition that, in other cultures, has stigmatized the menstruant as repulsive, placed upon her mysterious and stringent taboos, and banished her from the community for the duration of her menses...Unfortunately, such identification of the Torah’s laws with primitive pagan and mythological cultures often does take place in the mind of the contemporary Jew or Jewess who is uninitiated into the world of Torah and the Jewish Tradition who cannot, therefore, view Jewish Family Purity from a broader perspective and greater knowledgeability.³⁹⁶

Slonim similarly “others” non-Jewish menstrual practices in order to negatively identify *niddah* as not of that ilk. She particularly evokes the anthropological tone in her description of these *other* menstrual rituals

In those societies, peace could be made with menstruation only by ascribing it to evil and demonic spirits and by the adaptation of a social structure that facilitated its avoidance. Viewed against this background, the Jewish rhythm in marriage is perceived by many as a throwback to archaic taboos, a system rooted in antiquated attitudes and a ubiquitous form of misogyny.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁶Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses*, 40-41.

³⁹⁷ Slonim, *Total Immersion*, xxx.

What is important to note here is that anthropologically-based arguments against menstrual rituals were sufficiently widespread, and in fact were cited by anti-*niddah* feminists,³⁹⁸ that advocates of *niddah* needed to form an apologetic response to these associations. These lines of apology produce three effects. First, it distances contemporary Judaism from its own long history of such vilification and tabooing of the menstruant throughout the Jewish cultures of medieval Europe and the late antique Near East³⁹⁹. The second effect of this distancing is to critique and displace such taboo-like beliefs which still exist among American Jews today, who express discomfort and/or refuse to enter a synagogue or touch a Torah scroll while menstruating, regardless of whether they observe *niddah* or not. And thirdly, by situating *niddah* outside the paradigms that interpret menstrual rituals negatively, Lamm and Slonim assert the existence of other conceptual frameworks by which to comprehend *niddah*.

Tum'ah is Not...

The problem, Slonim and Lamm argue, lays in translations of the biblical terms *tahor* (pure) and *tameh* (impure). These terms have also been taken up by R. Avram Reisner⁴⁰⁰ and R. Miriam Berkowitz⁴⁰¹ in their *t'shuvot* on *niddah* for the Conservative movement,⁴⁰² and contributing

³⁹⁸ Koltun to Adler in Editorial Note in Adler, "Tum'ah and Taharah," 69-70. See also Lander, *Images of Bleeding* for a survey of feminism's struggle to come to terms with menstruation.

³⁹⁹ Koren, *Forsaken*; and Secunda, "Dashtana - 'Ki Derekh Nashim Li.'" It is interesting to note that both these scholars attribute negative attitudes toward the *niddah* to cultural influences originally external to rabbinic Judaism but which found their way into lived rabbinic culture. On the one hand the studies may be read as observing processes cultural interaction. However, on the other hand, these works may be engaged to argue that such negative associations with menstruation and menstruants is not native to rabbinic Judaism, thereby facilitating the removal of these negative attitudes from contemporary Judaism.

⁴⁰⁰ Reisner, "Observing *Niddah* in Our Day: An Inquiry on the Status of Purity and The Prohibition of Sexual Activity with a Menstruant."

⁴⁰¹ Berkowitz, "Mikveh and the Sanctity of Family Relations."

⁴⁰² This specific terminology has also been discussed in Wasserfall, "Introduction" in *Women and Water*, 6-7; Storper and Heymann, "Rabbis, Physicians, and the Woman's/Female Body" in *Women and Water*, 131-132; and Ner-David, "Reclaiming *Niddah* and Mikveh through Ideological and Practical Reinterpretation" in *the Passionate Torah*, 116-133.

writers Susan Handelman⁴⁰³ and Ellin Ronee Pollachek⁴⁰⁴ in *Total Immersion*. Lamm and Slonim first argue against statements which misinterpret these terms, then clarify what the correct interpretation of these terms should be. Handelman, Reisner, and Berkowitz speak immediately to what these terms mean, instead of arguing what they do not mean. In the case of Handelman's essay this reflects that such arguments have already appeared in the anthology's "Introduction." In the case of the *t'shuvot*, this direct approach may reflect the *t'shuva* genre itself, or it may reflect that writing ten and forty years after *Total Immersion* and *A Hedge of Roses* were respectively published, the need to counter misinterpretations of these terms had decreased.

Lamm and Slonim argue that translations of *tum'ah* as "unclean" or "impure" are problematic on both literal and connotative levels. Regarding cleanliness, Lamm states, "Family Purity is *not* just a hygienic procedure."⁴⁰⁵ Slonim identifies this association of cleanliness with *mikvah* immersion specifically, pointing out that the *niddah*, or anyone immersing, must be "scrupulously clean *before* immersing"⁴⁰⁶ (emphasis original) thereby undermining any hygienic purpose to the immersion.

Regarding the translation of *tum'ah* as "impure," Lamm describes:

...this deceptive semantic delinquency...as denoting some kind of intrinsic mysterious abhorrence that possesses the person of the menstruant and that must be purged by some magical incantation. According to Jewish teaching, nothing whatever happens to or changes in the person or character or value of the individual, man or woman, designated as "impure." No special quality makes such an individual inferior, in any way, to any other person referred to as "pure."⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰³ Handelman, "Tum'ah and Taharah" in *Total Immersion*, 23-30.

⁴⁰⁴ Pollachek, "The Woman on the Podium" in *Total Immersion*, 167-170.

⁴⁰⁵ Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses*, 44.

⁴⁰⁶ Slonim, "Introduction" in *Total Immersion*, xxiv. See also Lamm,

⁴⁰⁷ Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses*, 42.

Slonim conversely, accepts the translation “pure” and “impure” but qualifies the meaning of *tum’ah*, “*Impurity* is neither evil nor dangerous and it is not something tangible.”⁴⁰⁸ Both writers further argue the point by describing what *taharah* and *tum’ah* are.

Taharah is...

Both Lamm and Slonim argue that *tum’ah* and *taharah* refer to spiritual states⁴⁰⁹ of being, “spiritual states, and have no relation to physical disgust or attractiveness.”⁴¹⁰ Lamm expresses this state of being in somewhat psychological terms. The pursuit of *taharah* concerns “the aspiration for...self-transcendence.”⁴¹¹ Citing Maimonides⁴¹², he asserts that “*Tum’ah* is not a kind of adhesion or dirt that is washed off by water.”⁴¹³ *Taharah* involves the affirmation of life.⁴¹⁴ Pollachek’s defines *taharah* in terms of receptivity, openness “pure means open to receive”⁴¹⁵

Tum’ah is...

Lamm defines *tum’ah* (impurity) and *taharah* (purity), in terms of the presence of death versus the affirmation of life.⁴¹⁶ Thus, *niddah* observance “represents... the joyous Jewish affirmation of life and the abhorrence of death and suffering ...that life-long education in the love

⁴⁰⁸ Slonim, op. cit.. xxxi.

⁴⁰⁹ While Slonim and Lamm reference the biblical origins of Jewish purity laws and the reduction of purity concerns since the destruction of the Second Temple; they do not *frame* their arguments for the purity of *niddah* within the broader context of Jewish purity.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 79.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 55.

⁴¹² Moses Maimonides was a twelfth century rabbinic Jewish scholar from Spain and North Africa who wrote extensively on Jewish law and ethics.

⁴¹³ Lamm citing Maimonides , *Laws of Mikvaot*, 11:12 in *A Hedge of Roses*, 44.

⁴¹⁴ Slonim, “Introduction” in *Total Immersion*, xxx; Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses*, 84.

⁴¹⁵ Pollachek, Ellin Ronee. “The Woman on the Podium” in *Total Immersion*, 169.

⁴¹⁶ Lamm, op. cit., 81-84. See also either Eilberg-Schwartz *People of the Body* or Biale *Eros and the Jews* for discussion of fertility as unifying factor in all cases of *tum’ah*.

of life which commences even before life begins.”⁴¹⁷ *Tumah*’s deathly impurity is changed to *taharah* through immersion in the waters of *mikvah*.

For Slonim, *tum’ah* is a “spiritual state of being [is] the absence of purity [tahara or life], much as darkness is the absence of light.”⁴¹⁸ The *tum’ah* of menstruation lays in its “signal[ing] the death of potential life”⁴¹⁹ with its loss of “an unfertilized ovum.”⁴²⁰ Menstrual *tum’ah* carries the “whisper of death.”⁴²¹ Reisner describes “menstrual bleeding [as] represent[ing] the loss of life’s potential; that its impurity flows from the impurity of death”⁴²²

Pollachek’s contrasts *tum’ah* with her understanding of *taharah* as receptivity, “*tum’ah* is related to the word *satoom*, which means “to be stuffed up.” When a woman is *tum’ah* she is not available to receive. Not physically—obviously she can have sex with whomever she wants and receive the physicality of the act – but what she cannot receive is the spiritual unity that comes from God, her husband, and herself.”⁴²³

Susan Handelman presents a detailed Hasidic conceptualization of *tum’ah*.⁴²⁴ On the one hand, she engages the vocabulary of “evil” in the term *tum’ah*, connecting it with that which “is ‘outside,’ what is far from God’s presence or a “*chalal* (void), a place empty of [God’s] presence.”⁴²⁵ Thus, “*Tum’ah* can set in only where holiness has been and gone.”⁴²⁶ On the other

⁴¹⁷ Lamm, op. cit., 92.

⁴¹⁸ Slonim, op. cit., xxxi.

⁴¹⁹ Slonim, op. cit., xxx.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁴²¹ Lamm, op. cit., 81-84

⁴²² Reisner, “Observing *Niddah* in Our Day: An Inquiry on the Status of Purity and The Prohibition of Sexual Activity with a Menstruant” 5.

⁴²³ Pollachek, Ellin Ronee. op. cit., 169.

⁴²⁴ Handelman, “Tum’ah and Taharah” in *Total Immersion*, 23-30.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 26.

hand, she qualifies this statement as concerns the *niddah* on several levels. First, she distinguishes between natural *tum'ah*, "that God created as part of nature" and "*tum'ah* that we ourselves create when we intentionally push God's presence away."⁴²⁷ The *tum'ah* of menstruation is of the divinely created type. "It is precisely because of the high level of godliness involved in the procreative process that *Tum'ah* can occur at all"⁴²⁸ While Handelman describes menstruation as a "natural [spiritual] low,"⁴²⁹ she qualifies that this low reflects the "departure of holiness [is] not a state of degradation, inferiority, or shame."⁴³⁰ As part of the created order, *tum'ah* reflects a process of spiritual growth by which a spiritual entity must first descend in order to then ascend to a higher state of purity.⁴³¹ *Mikvah* immersion enters this spiritual process, according to Handelman, through its ability to "nullify [one's] previous state"⁴³² which is necessary for the realization of a more spiritually elevated self. Another contributing writer to *Total Immersion*, Tamar Frankiel, describes this "spiritual low" as a necessary aspect of the creative process inherent in women's reproductive capacity which she describes as having two poles: generative and resting.⁴³³ At the generative, ovulatory pole, Frankiel describes women's focus as external; and at the menstrual pole, interior.

Thus, Handelman and Frankiel present the *niddah* experience as a divinely structured natural spiritual process which requires space and effort to experience fully. Lamm, Slonim, Handelman, and Frankiel have striven to undo the negative connotations of *niddah's* purity language by redefining the terminology. They accomplish this by spiritualizing the terms and the

⁴²⁷ Both quotes in this line from Handelman, "*Tum'ah and Taharah*," 25.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴³¹ *Ibid.* See also Slonim, "Introduction" in the same volume, xxxi

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴³³ Frankiel, "To Number our Days" in *Total Immersion*, 13-22.

ritual process of *niddah*. However, not all Jews are receptive to such spiritualized solutions to the terminological discomfort.

Tum'ah, Taharah and the Sanctity of Married Sexuality

The Conservative *t'shuvot* of R. Susan Grossman⁴³⁴ and R. Miriam Berkowitz⁴³⁵ both approach these problematic terms by suggesting alternative terminology. In their separate *t'shuvot*, which speak responsively to each other, Grossman and Berkowitz recommend alternate terminologies for discussing *niddah*. Their explanations of the problems with current terminologies and of their preferred terms reveal the complexity of current discomfort with *niddah*'s linguistic, and in the case of Grossman, even structural focus on purity, women, and family. The contested terms are *niddah*, *Taharat HaMishpaha*, and *tamei/tohorah*.

Both rabbis prefer to refer to the category of laws concerning *niddah* by the term *Hilkhot Niddah*, or Laws of *Niddah*, over the term *Tohorat HaMishpacha*,⁴³⁶ or Family Purity, on the factual grounds that it is more accurate⁴³⁷ and has been the halakhic title of this category of laws for all of rabbinic Jewish history, except for the last hundred years.⁴³⁸ However, they both acknowledge that historically negative connotations still attach to the terms despite their actual *halakhic* neutrality. This negative baggage complicates the usage of the term *niddah* in other cases as well.

Berkowitz clarifies that *niddah* "is usually translated matter-of-factly as "separated," or "put aside," from the root .ט.ט.ט."⁴³⁹ is the term for a woman's ritual status, "In the Torah the

⁴³⁴ Grossman, "Mikveh and the Sanctity of Being Created Human."

⁴³⁵ Berkowitz, "Reshaping the Laws of Family Purity."

⁴³⁶ This is the spelling as used in Grossman's *t'shuvah*.

⁴³⁷ Grossman, *op. cit.*, 24.

⁴³⁸ Berkowitz, *op. cit.* 1 *fn* 1.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

woman is not called a *niddah* – the status does not define her essence.”⁴⁴⁰ Berkowitz suggests a range of terms with which women self-describe their state: “she is in *niddah*, but not that she is (a) *niddah* or better still, refer to the couple as “ready” and “not ready” or “in their time of separation/their time of togetherness”⁴⁴¹ or “רוסא, forbidden, and, רתומ, permitted.”⁴⁴² Grossman advocates replacing the self-description with a current Israeli alternative *ishah medamemet*,⁴⁴³ woman in the state of bleeding. Berkowitz expresses a preference for “the more poetic Biblical expressions חרוא שגנ'ם (orach kanashim, “the manner of women,” Genesis 18:11) or “דרך מישנ'” (derech nashim, “the way of women,” Genesis 31:35).”⁴⁴⁴ However, she challenges that all three alternative terms create ambiguity as they refer only to the bleeding days, not to the full ritual period. Thus, she advocates keeping the term *niddah* but working to remove it of its extra-halakhic negative connotations.

...the term *niddah* is useful in that it extends to the seven additional days as well as the days of menstruation. Therefore we propose either keeping this word, seeing it in a neutral, not a negative light, and using it to refer to the time, but not to the woman herself, or using the words “ready” and “not ready” presented above, stressing the responsibility and involvement of both members of the couple.⁴⁴⁵

This debate over terminology seeks to find new, and hence connotatively neutral phrases which denote the ritual realities of *niddah*. These new terms aspire to replace current words which have accrued many, often contradictory, connotations.

The remaining terms contested by members of the Conservative movement, *Tohorat HaMishpacha* and *tamei/tohorah* strongly intersect. Most curiously these *t'shuvot* present the

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Grossman, op. cit., 20.

⁴⁴⁴ Berkowitz, op. cit. 7.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

modernly coined *Tohorat HaMishpacha* as carrying more problematic denotations and connotations than the term *niddah*. Grossman simultaneously acknowledges, courtesy of Berkowitz,⁴⁴⁶ that the term *Tohorat HaMishpahah*⁴⁴⁷ “was popularized in America in the early twentieth century”⁴⁴⁸ yet also refers to the phrase as “traditional usage.”⁴⁴⁹ As I have explained earlier in this paper, this term, translated as “Purity of the Family,” is distinctly modern in origin. Referencing the term as “traditional” confers upon the term a certain authority associated with tradition but also a temporal distance. Thus Grossman’s phrasing evokes a current sense of separation from the relevance of the term. It is interesting to note that the negative charge assumed to have attached to the term older term *niddah* has shifted to the newer term *Taharat HaMishpacha*.

Both Grossman and Berkowitz challenge the term *Taharat HaMishpacha* on exactly grounds of gender essentialism and negative associations with the concept of impurity. One explanation for this may lay in the nineteenth century Cult of Domesticity which valorized and essentialized women’s domestic duties, including the domain of familial religious life, newly relegated to the private, domestic sphere. Hence, discomfort with the term *Taharat HaMishpacha* reflects as much discomfort with this form of gender essentialism as much as it reflects the negative connotations of impurity.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁶ Grossman, op. cit., 17 fn77.

⁴⁴⁷ This spelling is simply an alternate spelling of the term. Technically, it reflects a Sephardic/Israeli pronunciation, but otherwise does not generate any alternate translations.

⁴⁴⁸ Grossman, op. cit., 19.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid. In Berkowitz, “Rav Kook was the first to use the term relating to the laws of *Niddah*. In a letter addressed to Rabbi David Miller, he encouraged the translation of Miller’s teachings on the topic from English into Hebrew, and their dissemination in Eretz Israel.” op. cit., 8 nb24.

⁴⁵⁰ Joel Gereboff has pointed out that the term *mishpacha* can include the husband. His phrase is not “Purity of the Wife.” This points up the fact that Feminisms concern that the family’s purity is placed exclusively on the woman reflects, in itself, a blindness to the necessary cooperation of husbands in observing *niddah*. This provides further evidence of the necessity for conducting researching men’s experiences of *niddah*.

First, the word *taharah*. Grossman objects to this term's reference to the purity system which itself carries negative connotations.⁴⁵¹ Berkowitz, in contrast to Grossman, qualifies the term *tohorat* as "a metaphor, not necessarily a concrete physical process"⁴⁵² Berkowitz argues that while the category of *tamei* is not relevant today, that the concept of *tohorah* is, "mean[ing] all that is noble, sanctified, pure of intention as well as in body."⁴⁵³ Berkowitz explains further that the foundational rabbis of the Talmud shifted the literal state of purity/impurity to a metaphoric construct of self-purification, "symbolically a potent prelude before entering the holy domain, טעם מיקדש (Mikdash Me'at, the "miniature Temple") of the couple's intimacy and conjugality."⁴⁵⁴ Note that Berkowitz subtly shifts from purity language to holiness language. She also asserts that *tohorah* is accurately understood as a synonym for holiness (קדושה / kedushah). Indeed, she finds Grossman's replacement of *tohorot* with *kedushat* acceptable. However, Berkowitz emphasizes that the "real goal" of *niddah*'s ritual practices are "spiritual sensitivity – more than mere sexuality"⁴⁵⁵ Through *niddah* observance, a couple is able to "spiritualize and dignify the relationship and help the two treat each other not only as sexual partners but also as Jewish partners and worshippers of God."⁴⁵⁶ Grossman points out that Leviticus 18's list of prohibited sexual relationships concludes with "the command to be holy."⁴⁵⁷ Berkowitz extends holiness of the marital relationship beyond its sexual aspect. "Holiness within the family requires a range of behaviors, including the sexual attitudes and practices presented in *Shulhan Arukh Even HaEzer*

⁴⁵¹ Grossman, op. cit. 19. Grossman does not specify what these negative connotations are; but is reasonable to read this as referring to the problems associated with clean and unclean previously discussed, as well as the misogynistic traditions traceable to the Baraita de*Niddah* traditions mentioned previously, which as noted still surface in many individual women's interaction with synagogue and Torah.

⁴⁵² Berkowitz, op. cit., 8.

⁴⁵³ Berkowitz, op. cit., 7.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 8. The parenthetical comments are original.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid. Both quotations.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Grossman, op. cit., 20.

25⁴⁵⁸, as well as communication and respect in all areas of the marriage.”⁴⁵⁹ However, despite these details of rabbinic Jewish history that qualify the term *taharah* as a spiritual attribute, arguably in place since the Talmudic formations of rabbinic Judaism, Berkowitz concedes that “for many, the associations evoked by the translations “purity” and particularly “impurity” are serious obstacles to embracing this observance.”⁴⁶⁰ For this reason Berkowitz concurs with Grossman’s suggestion of the substitution of the term *Kedushat HaMishpaha*, *Holiness of the Family*, in so far as it denotes the goal of creating a holy relationship which she defines as:

It aims to sanctify the family as a covenantal, Divine-human, unit; to elevate and refine the relationship between the couple – both humanizing and enriching it; to enhance the respect and closeness between the man and the woman and elevate their bond beyond mere physical attraction and sexuality.⁴⁶¹

Grossman’s second discomfort with the term *Tohorat HaMishpaha* leads her to be critical of with her own proposed term *Kedusha HaMishpacha*. However, she specifically explains that the term *Tohorat HaMishpaha* emphasizes

the focus on a woman only when she is married, in relationship with a man...While retaining the focus on the beauty and sanctity of the marriage, which has value in this age of trying to keep families together, such language nevertheless ignores the very real challenge of defining women’s experience as women in relation to God rather than just in relation to men.⁴⁶²

Grossman, therefore, advocates the replacement term “*Kedushat Yetzirah*, the Sanctity of Creation, or the sanctity of a created being.”⁴⁶³ In line with this broader terminology, Grossman recommends expanding the ritual practice to all women, regardless of their relationship status.

⁴⁵⁸ The *Shulchan Aruch* is a compilation of Sephardic Jewish laws compiled by Rabbi Joseph Karo and published in 1565.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Berkowitz. Op. cit., 9.

⁴⁶² Grossman, op. cit., 19.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

“It is important to note that the commandment to mark one’s menses (Lev. 15) was not given in the Torah to married women, but to all women. “While immersion in that ritual context outside of sexual activity is not required (*hayav*), all women, not just those in a sexual relationship, may have the desire to enjoy the spiritual benefits of monitoring their cycles and immersing in a *mikveh*”⁴⁶⁴

To explain Grossman’s reference to Lev. 15, this Biblical command may only be understood as limiting the practice to the married woman *if* one translates the Hebrew word “*isha*” as “wife” rather than “woman”, which are the two possible definitions of the term.⁴⁶⁵ Grossman seeks to distance *niddah*’s ritual practices from the concept of purity, the term *niddah*, and even the context of married heterosexual relationship...to include all women who wish to observe menstruation. Here we see an intersection of a strand of feminism which seeks to celebrate women’s bodies with a strand of the Spirituality Movement’s desire to seek new expressions of religiosity. Berkowitz agrees that to avail the *mikvah* to unmarried women who wish to observe their menstrual cycles ritually is “legitimate”⁴⁶⁶ but she places such practices outside the domain of the laws of *niddah*, in the category of “Alternative Uses of *Mikveh*.”⁴⁶⁷

The term “הריצי תשודק” (*Kedushat Yetzirah*) creates a completely new concept, that of a woman renewing herself spiritually without a necessary context of marital relationship, while we wish to retain unapologetically the emphasis on family ...We accept *Kedushat Yetzirah* as a general term for the new use in which women visit the *mikveh* to celebrate the workings of their bodies (monthly cycle, first menstruation, menopause, or other special biologically related events).⁴⁶⁸

This reflects an openness to innovation in *mikvah* practices but, at the same time, a boundary setting around *niddah*. As such, it speaks to both the feminist interest in women’s spiritual

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁶⁵ It would be interesting to see if any future scholarship may be able to identify when the practice shifted from all women to only married women. This is a feature which makes rabbinic *niddah* ritual practices unique from most, if not all, other menstrual practices, including among non-rabbinic Jews.

⁴⁶⁶ Berkowitz, op. cit., 8.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 8

development and religious self-expression, as well as to traditional interests in preserving traditional rabbinic, if not biblical,⁴⁶⁹ structure of *niddah* in the married relationship.

Conclusion

Assessing the success of late twentieth century redressive action is difficult, and for now, limited to the observation of an apparent correlation between changes in redressive action and increasing rates of *mikvah* construction during this period. My intention in this chapter, as with this thesis as a whole, is *not* to assert any specific conclusion about *niddah* today. Rather it is to unsettle assumptions and indicate new directions for future research on *niddah*. I have revealed through the course of this work that the history of *niddah* observance in America has been largely driven by retroactive assumptions rather than driven by the available evidence.

While several of the publications and *mikvah* organization I discuss in this chapter are familiar today to many *niddah* observant Jews and scholars of contemporary Judaism, the marriage manuals and *mikvah* campaigns of the previous period are less known. This discrepancy has made it possible to regard the more recent literature and organizational initiatives as innovations specific to the current *niddah* revival. However, in examining the *niddah* promotional literature and *mikvah* organizations of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, I clarified how much is continuous from the previous period and what is in fact innovative.

One of the striking features is that there are more continuities than innovations. Many innovations, upon examination, actually reflect development of themes and arguments established in the second quarter of the twentieth century. The magnitude of the continuities lead me to two speculations. First, the *niddah* advocacy campaign did not suddenly arise in the late 1960s or early 1970s. It may have become better received during this period, but as detailed in the previous chapter, this campaign began in earnest in the 1920s. The initiative to improve of

⁴⁶⁹ I chose this set of qualifying terms to reflect my own ambivalence as to the development of *niddah* as an exclusively marital practice. I believe this topic merits more research. I read in a source which I cannot relocate, possibly in Boyarin's *Carnal Israel*, a reference in the Talmud to one of the Sages placing reed mats along the riverbank to protect his daughter's feet from the mud when she immersed. The rabbinic discussion on this domestic detail revolved around the rabbi's reasons for keeping mud from his daughter's feet; not why the daughter was immersing or why her husband was not performing this task for her. I understand this to indicate that this sage's unmarried daughter was observing post-menstrual immersion.

mikvah conditions and the major themes in the educational literature were well in place by the end of the 1940s. Second, the primary factors in the *niddah* revival may lay less with the effectiveness of the late twentieth century campaign, though this is certainly a significant factor, but more with the changes in mainstream American culture which created a more receptive environment for these redressive actions. Specifically, I identified the Feminism, the Sexual Revolution, and the (late twentieth century) Great Awakening as impacting concepts of body. The 1970's Spirituality movement, somewhat controversially identified as the beginning of the Fourth Great Awakening, deconstructed nineteenth century concepts of religion and contributed to rethinking the role of ritual as an interface between religion and body.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Why Social Drama Theory?

Was the theory of social drama really necessary to produce a history of *niddah* in America that revealed the conceptual conflict between *niddah* and nineteenth century concepts of religion?

On the one hand, I did have in mind the contrasting concepts of religion, body, and ritual as two poles underlying the different engagements of *niddah* in America in the late nineteenth century and late twentieth centuries. I might easily have framed this argument in a simpler two point organization to contrast the concepts in these two periods. However, this would have had four undesirable outcomes. First, it would have reinforced the binary thinking of modernity versus tradition that currently dominates ethnographic research on *niddah*. Secondly, it would have more readily kept the focus only on the American Orthodox context, not identifying the indications of non-observance and observance across all branches. Thirdly, it would have largely ignored the discourse of the intervening century. And lastly, it would have allowed the different components of *niddah's* history to remain in their boxes: *niddah's* decline apart from *niddah's* revival, Feminist and Womanist discourses apart from Jewish religious and mystical interpretations, etc...

Engaging Social Drama Theory as a historical framework has made it possible to articulate *niddah's* history as a cultural process, whereby its historical components can be understood as interrelated parts of a larger whole. Articulating the different periods of this history as stages in a process placed them in constructive relationship with each other, encompassing nuances which would otherwise have eluded a simpler framework. Social Drama theory enabled me to articulate how shifting cultural concepts directly impacted the viability of this religious ritual practice, which in turn affected intimate experiences of self in relation to self and self in relation to others.

Since both these concepts of religion, body, and ritual are still very much present in our culture, the Social Drama framework further enables us to insert ourselves into this history. It thereby becomes easier for researchers to understand how their own research directly participates in this ongoing history. Since at least 1966, anthropological and sociological

approaches to menstrual practices have organized around the assumption that ritual directives concerning menstruation are oppressive, thereby reading women's objectified participation in terms of either compliance, resistance, subversion or "strategic compliance" within that oppressive construct.⁴⁷⁰ With a few exceptions,⁴⁷¹ such research assumes a particular relation to this ritual entity based on constructs of religion, body, and ritual that more reflect nineteenth century constructs than the alternative constructs emerging in the late-twentieth century within which *niddah* is now being articulated and engaged. Within constructs of religion that separate religious and bodily practices, a religious bodily practice can only be examined and evaluated by isolating it from its religious contexts. In the case of menstrual studies, the rituals have been shifted from the lived religious domain of the practitioner to the researcher's domain of gender political analysis. This means that the majority of *niddah* research has assessed the ritual practice according to conceptual criteria which are inherently Other to its lived domain.

While I am interested in developing a more accurate and nuanced history of *niddah* in the United States, I am more concerned to articulate this history in a manner that today's ethnographic and textual scholars can more readily engage to inform their work.

Historical Assumptions about the Decline of *Niddah* Observance

The historical assumptions about *niddah* in America have limited research on *niddah* on several levels. These assumptions were generated, in all likelihood, by communities so deeply embedded in these constructions of religion that it was nigh impossible to identify self-reflexively. Only after these nineteenth century constructs underwent the criticisms of the social movements of the

⁴⁷⁰Avishai, "Doing Religion," 412. This article also contains a solid review of research on contemporary *Niddah*.

⁴⁷¹ Avishai, "Doing Religion" strives to break free of the paradigm of *niddah* as inherently oppressive. She asserts that observing *niddah* needs to be understood within the context of the performance of a religious identity. I see myself as taking Avishai's argument one step further to identify specific features of that identity: the conceptual constructions of religion, body, and ritual.

Carol Delaney's "Mortal Flow: Menstruation in Turkish Village Society" in *Blood Magic*, 75-93; and Ruth Tsoffar's "The Body as Storyteller: Karaite Women's Experience of Blood and Milk" both model approaches to understanding menstrual practices outside this paradigm of oppression.

1960s and 1970s, and new constructions of the body's place in religious ritual practice began to emerge, did it become possible to discern that Jewish life in the early twentieth century attempted to operate within constructs which were fundamentally opposed to Judaism's embodied religiosity. *Niddah* observance may be the area of Jewish life most impacted by the conceptual divide between religion and the body in the past century.

I have endeavored to present the recent history of *niddah* in America as a continuous socio-cultural process that was significantly impacted by concepts of religion, body, and ritual found in the dominant culture in which Judaism sought to express itself. This effort has unsettled numerous assumptions that the Jewish community has held about its relationship with *niddah*. This unsettling reveals that our current history of *niddah* has been largely constructed upon a number of assumptions, which do not reflect the complexity of the dis/engagement with *niddah* across all sectors of American Jewry in the twentieth century. Each of these challenged assumptions point to multiple new lines of research.

First, *niddah* non-observance did not result directly from Jewish engagement of either Enlightenment thought or the process of acculturating to or assimilating modern American culture. Not only are today's assumed demarcations between Orthodox and liberal Judaisms not accurate representations of the diverse and ambiguous boundaries among American Jews of the turn-of-the-twentieth century⁴⁷², but Reform Judaism itself maintained a tension between embracing and rejecting traditional rabbinic halakha until –according to the limited textual documentation currently available- the early twentieth century. While it has been accepted that non-observance occurred among all the emerging branches of American Judaism, this has been read more as an indication that some marginal groups refused to fully acculturate. However, cross-branch non-observance may also be understood to indicate that *niddah* was impacted by something more than differences in orienting Judaism to modern American life. There is a fine line between these two points, but a critical one because it changes where scholarship looks for answers. When the

⁴⁷² For that matter, with the emergence of the ambiguously defined non-Orthodox Traditional Judaism and the blurry distinctions between Reform, Reconstructionist, Humanist, and Conservative Jews, this assertion hardly holds for today either.

emphasis is that certain groups acculturated more than others, the focus for understanding the dynamics of change turn inward: How did Jews engage their American context. The answers originate in responses within the Jewish community. When the emphasis turns to what exactly was internalized among all levels of American Jewry, in some cases impacting practice in some areas of ritual life more than others, then the focus turns outward: How did American culture engage the Jews. The answers originate in the nature of the dominant culture. My project has modeled one possible outcome of searching for answers in the dominant culture.

The second unsettled assumption reflects the generational assimilation theory that *niddah*'s decline was an inevitable consequence of adapting Judaism to American life from one generation to the next. Foremost, this theory was shown to serve the interests of liberal Judaism. Moreover, some evidence suggests that what we defined now as Orthodox communities may not have abandoned *niddah* as widely or as early as has been presumed, with a revised decade of the late 1910s. The historical evidence which indicates this slower, later decline also points to the ambiguities generated by both the limited evidence currently available and the manner in which such evidence is interpreted. For example, while *mikvaot* were increasingly supervised by Orthodox rabbis starting after 1902, this should not be assumed to mean that only Orthodox-ly affiliated women were using mikvaot. Given the blurred boundaries among Jewish affiliation in the early twentieth century, it is reasonable to *not* exclude the possibility that Reform and less than fully Orthodox Jews were immersing in Orthodox supervised mikvaot.⁴⁷³ The historical detail of rabbinic appropriation of mikvaot raises two sub-issues.

The first sub-issue is this history of the rabbinic appropriation of lay run mikvaot and its impacts on observance. In 1926, Rebbetzin Hyamson indirectly holds the rabbis responsible for the continued miserable conditions of mikvaot, "In this regard our leaders have not been sufficiently alert and foresighted"⁴⁷⁴ underscores three points. First, the 1902 call for rabbis to take over supervision of mikvaot was heeded. Second, the rabbis were seen as responsible for

⁴⁷³ Nor is this an assumption that should be made in ethnography of *mikvah* attendance today.

⁴⁷⁴ Hyamson, "We Must Act" in *Total Immersion*, 103.

mikvah conditions; yet, thirdly, conditions did not register among the rabbis as a concern until it was connected to the declining rates of *mikvah* use after the fact.

If newly imposed rabbinic supervision was involved in the declining rates of observance, this potentially raises new questions. If any evidence were available about the affiliation and observance levels of *mikvah* owner's prior to the takeover, that would significantly contribute to our picture of which Jews cared about *mikvah* immersion at the beginning of the twentieth century. Additionally, is it possible to locate any evidence to indicate whether *mikvah* conditions started to decline under rabbinic supervision or if it is more a matter that conditions continued to the decline unabated?⁴⁷⁵ Just because we don't currently have the evidence does not confirm either its existence or its non-existence. There may be more answers available than have been searched for. Even if such evidence never appears, knowing what knowledge might be gleaned from it helps to clarify how much we cannot know for sure. Intellectual honesty on these questions point to how broadly our assumptions may color our consideration of the past, even projecting our own perceptions onto a history where it did not actually exist.

Potentially, the possibility that the rabbinic community itself may have been directly culpable for the decreasing rates of *niddah* observance among American Jewish communities could be read as trumping my claims that concepts of religion, body, and ritual were the dominant factor in non-observance of *niddah*. However, I argue that the fact that aesthetic conditions did *not* factor into rabbinic concerns about correct practice reflects, in itself, a lack of concern for the bodily experience of ritual performance symptomatic of this very conceptual crisis separating high, ethereal expressions of religion from low, bodily expressions. In this respect, rabbinic disregard for the physical experience reinforced concepts of religion that devalued the human body as a site of religious expression.

⁴⁷⁵ My suspicion is that these metal tub mikvaot in basements may well have originated as temporary *mikvaot*, required before the construction of a synagogue or acquisition of a Torah scroll. However, the economic and transitory nature of American urban Judaism at the turn of the century may well have resulted in a lack of communal stability and funds which then prevented the construction of more permanent and attractive mikvaot.

The second sub-issue that arises from common interpretations of the rabbi's 1902 concern about correct *mikvah* practices is the assumption that *Mikvah* use or disuse accurately reflects the state of *niddah* observance and non-observance. This comment was used by Joshua Hoffman to indicate that there are already problems with *niddah* observance in 1902. Hoffman is not at all alone with associating *niddah* with *mikvah* such that non-observance of *mikvah* equates with non-observance of *niddah*. Marriage manuals argued as late 1942 against bathtub immersions,⁴⁷⁶ indicating that immersion was still considered by some to be an important part of *niddah* observance, just not in a *mikvah*. This also suggests that various degrees of *niddah* observance may have persisted, possibly without any immersion step at all. This distinction has implications not just for historical research about *niddah* observance, but also for ethnographic research among American Jews today. I will elaborate those implications in a separate section ethnographic implications.

Historical Assumptions about the Revival of *Niddah* Observance

Currently, the *niddah* revival is assumed to be exclusive to the trend toward increasingly strict Orthodox Jewish observance. However, there are indications in this genealogy through the number of non-orthodox publications on *mikvah*, including the Conservative t'shuvot, that *niddah* is observed to some extent outside of American Orthodoxy. This fact raises two immediate concerns. First, concerns for the Conservative Movement's relationship with *niddah* today. And second, the implications of this assumption upon the other historical theories of *niddah*'s decline.

Despite the production and acceptance of the 2006 t'shuvot on *niddah* by the Rabbinical Assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ), there is not any significant educational activity occurring at the lay level of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. In fact, many lay Conservative Jews would be surprised that *niddah* is endorsed in any manner

⁴⁷⁶ Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews*, 118. Weissman Joselit identifies Moses Hoenig's *Jewish Family Life: the Duty of the Jewish Woman* (1942).

by the USJC. I have learned from a graduate colleague⁴⁷⁷, Benjamin Ricciardi of Northwestern University, who studied at the Conservative Yeshiva for two years that there is a very significant tension within the USJC about promoting *niddah* observance. Based on the joint assumptions that most Conservative Jews do not know that *niddah* has not been rejected, and that most Conservative Jews are set against its observance, there is serious concern that teaching *niddah* to people who are apt to reject it sets them up to actively sin by rejecting it. The sin of nonobservance is forgivable when it is committed in ignorance. When Jews fail to observe commandments with full knowledge that they are doing so, they can become held accountable for this sin. Thus, it is better to not promote *niddah* among the Conservative Movement. The USCJ's reluctance to educate and promote *niddah* reinforces the perception that it is an exclusively Orthodox practice. This means that Conservative Jews curious about *niddah* access the most readily available information from Orthodox outreach, websites, and publications. This results in some proportion of Conservative Jews observing *niddah* per Orthodox standards. This is important because the rabbinic *niddah* practice produces several areas of concern such as halakhic infertility⁴⁷⁸ and emotional deprivation caused by prohibitions on a husband touching his wife during childbirth and the early post-partum months. Conservative and Orthodox responses to these dilemmas are significantly different. Moreover, those Conservative Jews who do observe *niddah* observe in isolation, sensing themselves to be outsiders within their own communities. To what extent does *niddah* factor into the choice of some Conservative Jews to join either Modern Orthodoxy or the emerging Traditional Egalitarian movement? Is there a higher rate of *niddah* observance among those who self-identify as "Traditional" or "Conservodox"? All these questions are worth researching.

⁴⁷⁷ Ricciardi, *Conversation at Northwestern University Graduate Conference on Religion and the Natural Elements*.

⁴⁷⁸ Halakhic infertility results when a woman who wishes to become pregnant ovulates during the "white" days when she is still *niddah* and unavailable for sexual relations. Among the Orthodox solutions generally lean toward chemically augmenting the woman's cycle rather than falling back on the biblical observance of *niddah* for the duration of the menses only. Conservative halakha permits temporarily observing the short biblical *niddah* period.

The second issues raised by the assumption that the *niddah* revival is exclusive to the trend toward increasingly strict Orthodox Jewish observance lays in the perception of this revival being a rightward-turn against the dominant paradigms of being an American Jew. A common perception among American Jews is that Orthodoxy arrived in America and seriously declined (per generational assimilation) until 1960. Thus, *niddah*'s reemergence is bound up with the anomalous reemergence of Orthodox Judaism since the 1960s. This perception reveals massive blind spots in both the non-Orthodox history of Orthodox Judaism and the Orthodox history of non-Orthodox Judaism in America. The abruptness and exclusivity attributed to this revival expresses this sense of disruption produced by this blind spot. While the influx of refugees from World War II certainly escalated the development of American Orthodoxy, it by no means the exclusive catalyst. The history of *niddah* reflects that processes, strategies, and communal infrastructure were in place and growing prior to their arrival. Moreover, particularly in the case of *niddah*, the core of such strategies (improvement of *mikvah* conditions and education) continued unchanged since the 1920s. The perception of *niddah*'s revival as an anomaly enables the previous paradigmatic theory to stand, rather than calling for its reappraisal. Not considering that such theories as generational assimilation and the inevitable evolution of American Jews toward liberal versions of American Judaism, has significantly limited the study of *niddah* in America.

The history that I present of *niddah* suggests that a broader assimilative paradigm was at work in *niddah*'s early twentieth century decline. By framing the revival of *niddah* in the context of new concepts of religion, body, and ritual simultaneously creates a continuity throughout the period and points to a different point of radical departure. That is, the late nineteenth century concept of religion as a disembodied, exclusively spiritual and inner experience was not sustainable, and frankly did not survive as the dominant concept of religiosity barely one hundred years.

While apparent reconciliation of *niddah* with some branches of American Judaism, per the texts included in this study, indicates that these branches quickly capitalized on alternative concepts of religion, body, and ritual which have been emerging in recent decades. However, reconciliation should not be interpreted as reaching a new stability. For one, the extent to which

American Judaisms may embrace these bodily ritual practices as techniques for religiously lived sexuality and marriage remains unknown. Reconstructionist Rabbi Jill Hammer open expression of interest in *niddah*⁴⁷⁹ indicates that this period of reengaging *niddah* is not complete. Rabbi Hammer aligns herself with a strongly mother-earth centered experience of Jewish living.⁴⁸⁰ For her, *niddah*'s potential appeal lays in its connection to natural elements and its emphasis on women's inner spiritual rhythms expressed through her biology,⁴⁸¹ Rabbi Hammer's essay in the same vein as *Total Immersion* contributing authors Tamar Frankiel and Susan Handelman, reinforcing the possibility that environmentalism and other earth-consciousness movements may contribute to new articulations of the spiritual body through the ritual of *niddah*.

Another potential direction for future research lays in *niddah* advocacy literature itself. A historical mapping and analysis of the distribution of the twentieth century literature referenced herein could provide insight into how widely these ideas were disseminated. This knowledge itself might inform our understanding of how well such literature was received, possibly revising some of the assertions I have made here.

Implications for Ethnography of *Niddah* Today

It is my hope that this genealogy has presented many new points of departure for ethnographic study of *niddah* today. The most fundamental issue that impedes richer ethnographic research on *niddah* is the conflation of *niddah* with *mikvah*. Ethnographic dependence on observable phenomena has resulted in accepting that *mikvah* immersion defines *niddah*. This emphasis on *mikvah* has been reinforced by feminist concerns over the implications of im/purity issues inherent in *mikvah* immersion. While this concords with the *halakhic* assertion that the two are inseparable, it is a problematic definition for socio-cultural research. A more functional ethnographic definition would encompass various stages of *niddah* observance which

⁴⁷⁹ Hammer, "Rising from the Ritual Bath -- Jewish Ritual."

⁴⁸⁰ "Rabbi Jill Hammer."

⁴⁸¹ Hammer, "Rising from the Ritual Bath -- Jewish Ritual."

tend to get downplayed or overlooked: sexual abstinence during menstruation, during the heavy days of menstruation, during non-bleeding days following menstruation, degrees of proscribed physical behaviors, checking for cessation of bleeding known as *bedikah*, *niddah*'s role in the experience of getting married, pregnancy, childbirth, post-partum recovery, menopause, and illness.

Feminist concern for patriarchal oppression has also resulted in two more problematic focuses. First, it has focused *niddah* research on women's experience of *niddah* to the exclusion of men's. Yaakov Yadgar's "Gender, Religion, and Feminism: The Case of Jewish Israeli Traditionalists" is the only research that I have read that includes, however marginally, men's experiences of *niddah*. However, men's presence in this research brought forward striking contrasts between women's and men's engagement of the sexual conservatism involved in *niddah* observance. "Women discuss such matters [as sexual conservatism] as integral and essential part of their identity as traditionalist Jews, men do not...As one male interviewee put it, 'For men, it is an embarrassment to be portrayed as being conservative sexually.'"⁴⁸²

Secondly, the focus on patriarchal oppression results in exclusive attention to the heterosexual context of *niddah* to the exclusion of the possibility that Jewish lesbian couples might find some degree of *niddah* observance meaningful.⁴⁸³ The consideration of men's and lesbian's experiences are particularly relevant given the emphasis that *A Hedge of Roses*, *Total Immersion*, and the Conservative *t'shuvot* place upon interpreting *niddah* as both a sexual practice and a uniquely Jewish way of married life. Both these areas merit sustained research over the coming decades, especially as the implications of the legalization of gay marriage in the United States play out. Will future definitions of *niddah* assert exclusivity within heterosexuality or will its role in developing a specific Jewish style of marriage result in more expansive contexts for *niddah*? Would Jewish male gay couples feel themselves somehow negatively excluded from

⁴⁸² Yadgar, "Gender, Religion, and Feminism," 365.

⁴⁸³ This question has also been raised by Rabbi Jill Hammer in "Rising from the Ritual Bath".

both categories? Do what degree might *niddah* observance today impact the inclusion of gay relationships within the category of marriage?

Comprehensive ethnographic research on *niddah* needs to determine what degrees of *niddah* observance occur across all sections of American Jewry, not just among the Orthodox. Are there ritual practices that persist among liberal Jews who no longer recognize the halakhic origins of these practices, such as nail trimming or a special bath after menstruation? Or, how many couples observe their own variations on *niddah* fully aware of taking halakha into their own hands, such as bathtub immersions when *mikvaot* are either unavailable or unappealing? If so, are there patterns among such *niddah* observant couples that might indicate wider alternative readings of *niddah*'s role in Jewish life? Are any women immersing for *niddah* in natural bodies of water? Have any women integrated "mainstream" earth-mother rituals into some form of *niddah* observance? Do they call it *niddah*? Just how extensive of *niddah* observance in the United States?

Implications for a Subfield of Menstrual Studies

In 2004, Ayse K. Uskul published her results from conducting thirteen focus groups about women's memories of their menarche experiences with 53 women from 34 nations.⁴⁸⁴ Through women's personal stories, she sought to understand "the ways in which the personal has interacted with the larger cultural, religious, and societal environment."⁴⁸⁵ She concluded that, yes, such an interaction existed and stood out most strongly in "places where women's lives were regulated to an important degree by either religious or other cultural rules."⁴⁸⁶ Cathryn J. Britton conducted a similar study of twenty British women's menarche experiences and its effect on their

⁴⁸⁴ Uskul, A.K. "Women's menarche stories from a multicultural sample," 667.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 677.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid*.

lives.⁴⁸⁷ Britton concluded that preindustrial cultures provided “a clear framework of meaning and ritual practice”⁴⁸⁸ whereas “in modern industrial societies dominant frameworks of meaning have fractured and hence the menarche is experienced in complex and ambiguous terms.”⁴⁸⁹ What is the impact of having meaning or ambiguity? How are ritual meanings constructed? The history of *niddah* in the twentieth century models connections between major cultural concepts about the body contribute to the ability of ritual meanings to be constructed and maintained. These insights may be of use to the study of menstrual rituals (or the lack thereof) among other communities. How do menstrual rituals place women and men in specific relationship between their bodies and those activities which are proscribed during menstruation? How do menstrual rituals impact a couple’s relationship? What are the impacts of menstrual rituals on men who either participate or witness their occurrence? What are the histories of menstrual rituals among other communities? Are *niddah*’s tensions with nineteenth century concepts of religion, body, and ritual found in other communities’ menstrual ritual history? What other historical concepts or events impacted these menstrual rituals? These are only a few of the myriad questions which can be pursued not just in *niddah* studies, but in menstrual studies world-wide. This study has attempted to model what is possible when menstrual rituals are considered as having their own history and place within larger religio-cultural frameworks.

⁴⁸⁷ Britton, Cathryn J. “Learning about ‘the Curse’: An Anthropological Perspective on Experiences of Menstruation.”

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 652.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid*.

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