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*NIDDAH AS INDEX OF JEWISH SEXUALITY:
A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION
FOR AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF MENSTRUAL RITUALS¹*

*"[Niddah] cannot save a bad marriage;
but can make a good marriage transcendent."
- Rivkah Slonim²*

Introduction

Within the wider scholarship on menstrual rituals, the treatment of contemporary Jewish menstrual rituals known as *Niddah*, *Taharat HaMishpachah*,³ literally "Purity of the Family" or "Family

¹ The theories presented in this paper have been developed through a series of conference papers presented at Isobel-Marie Johnston, "Embodying Jewish Sexuality" (Embodiment, Corporality, and the Senses in Religion, University of Texas-Austin, 2017).; Isobel-Marie Johnston, "Jewish Marriage in Corporeal Time" (Society for the Anthropology of Religion Annual Meeting, Tulane University - New Orleans, 2017).; and Isobel-Marie Johnston, "Niddah and Marriage as Conscious Mind" (American Academy of Religion - Annual Meeting, Denver, CO, 2018).

² Slonim, Rivkah. "The Mystery and Magic of Mikvah." Presented at the 5th annual National Jewish Retreat, January 10, 2011. https://www.torahcafe.com/mrs-rivkah-slونim/the-mystery-and-magic-of-mikvah-video_3e6772f77.html.

³ 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 ritual practices. "Niddah" translates literally as "separate" or "put aside," evoking 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 1:8 of the Jewish Tanakh (acronym for the three parts of the Hebrew Bible: Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim, literally, Instructions, Prophets, and Writings) (Miriam Berkowitz, "Reshaping the Laws of Family Purity for the Modern World" (Rabbinical Assembly United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, September 13, 2006), 7. The new term *Taharat HaMishpacha*, literally "Purity of the Family", emerged in early twentieth century Germany and was first recorded in 1907 in correspondence between Rabbi Haim Ozer Grodzinski (1863-1940) and Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook (1865-1935) (Berkowitz, "Reshaping the Laws of Family Purity for the Modern World," 8). 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 Cults of Domesticity, which polarized and gendered the religious (feminine) and secular (masculine) domains. 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 (R. Susan Grossman, "Mikveh and the

Purity," stands out in at least two ways. First, *Niddah* has received repeated and increasing treatment in recent decades across multiple social science disciplines whereas studies of other communities' menstrual rituals tend to appear once, possibly twice, as part of wider anthropological research about particular communities. Secondly, studies of *Niddah* are pursued almost exclusively by sociologists⁴ and –more so than anthropologies of menstrual rituals of other communities – have persisted within the analytic paradigms of object/subject, agency/oppression, and women and/or modernity versus traditional religion. Moreover, despite their performance among religious communities as a part of broader sets of religious ritual practices, I have yet to find analytical scholarship on contemporary *Niddah* practices conducted through the perspectives of either religious studies or ritual studies. There are analytic historical studies on *Niddah* in the Early Rabbinic and Medieval periods⁵ and a variety of contemporary academic discussions of *Niddah* within the community of Jewish scholars and rabbis producing analysis within the contemporary Jewish tradition⁶; but not the hybrid space of academic analysis of contemporary *Niddah* from the Religious Studies or Ritual Studies perspective.

The majority of this compact body of scholarship on contemporary *Niddah* practices anchors itself to a specific political position within American Jewish Feminism that reifies

Sanctity of Being Created Human" (Rabbinical Assembly United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, September 13, 2006), 19.

⁴ I have also located six quantitative studies by psychologists. Three of these studies test the consistency of *Niddah* ritual adherence among Orthodox identifying couples Mark A. Guterman, "Identity Conflict in Modern Orthodox Judaism and the Laws of Family Purity," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 18, no. 1 (February 1, 2006): 92-100; Mark A. Guterman, "Observance of the Laws of Family Purity in Modern-Orthodox Judaism," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 37, no. 2 (April 2008): 340-45; Dana Septimus, "Predicting Intentions from Attitudes: A Reasoned Action Approach to Religious Ritual" (dissertation, Teaneck, N.J., Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2011).. Three of these studies test the claims of *Niddah*'s ritual effectiveness in producing greater marital satisfaction Tamar Shtrambrand, "Effects of Religious Returnees' Observance of Family Purity Laws on Marital Satisfaction Scores" (dissertation, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Walden University, 2018); Eliezer Schnall, David Pelcovitz, and Debbie Fox, "Satisfaction and Stressors in a Religious Minority: A National Study of Orthodox Jewish Marriage.," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development* 41, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 4-21; Adena Renee Meckley Ackerman, "Marital Satisfaction and the Observance of Family Purity Laws among Orthodox Jewish Women" (Psy.D., United States -- Florida, Carlos Albizu University, 2003).

⁵ Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); Sharon Faye Koren, *Forsaken: The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2011).

⁶ Rahel R. Wasserfall, ed., *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, Brandeis Series on Jewish Women (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999)..

Modern menstrual politics: isolating menstruation as an exclusively women's issue, conceptually isolating menses and its associated rituals from interaction within wider domains of social life, most notably the sphere of men's experience of women's menstruation.⁷ Janet Hoskins describes this political framework as limiting the academic gaze: "excessive emphasis on pollution has sometimes obscured collaboration between the sexes".⁸ For studies of menstrual rituals generally and *Niddah* specifically, this politics results in an exclusive focus on women's participation such that men's roles as co-performers of these ritual practices are entirely ignored. This paper is part of my larger graduate studies project to disentangle *Niddah* studies specifically, and menstrual studies generally, from this gynocentrism. To this end, I have been working with anthropological and ritual theories to develop holistic ritual theorizations of *Niddah* that recognize and incorporate its co-performativity within the social context of the marital relationship. Along the way, key moves in how I position *Niddah* to enable these theorizations suggest a much-needed theoretical foundation for establishing anthropology of menstruation and/or menstrual studies as a formal subfield.⁹

The theorizations I present here draw on motivational and instructional *Niddah* literature published within Orthodox Jewish communities since the 1960's. My analysis of this literature is informed by six years of observing participation of *Niddah* ritual practice, on top of seven years of *Niddah* observance prior to academic study, spanning two *Niddah* observing communities. At its core, this project involves translating *Niddah's* structures, functions, and claims to efficacy into academic terminology that more accurately reflects the ideals and experiences of *Niddah* practitioners as reported in Jewish motivational literature, official halakhic explications, and various website Q-A forums, and

⁷ There are transgender men who menstruate who may have partners of either gender identity and lesbian couples who observe *Niddah* laws. This study will focus on the heterosexual traditions and experience of *Niddah* as these forms the baseline from which transgender and lesbian individuals begin the work of deciding if these rituals are relevant to them (many don't) and adapting these traditional practices to their own gender and sexuality context when they decide these laws are relevant to themselves. The dynamics involved in these decisions and choices constitute the material for an entire article of its own.

⁸ Janet Hoskins, "Blood Mysteries: Beyond Menstruation as Pollution," *Ethnology* 41, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 300..

⁹ Discussions of how an "anthropology of menstruation" has been evolving and how such a subfield might be constituted have been set forward in the 2002 Special Issue of *Ethnology* Hoskins, "Blood Mysteries"; Janet Hoskins, "The Menstrual Hut and the Witch's Lair in Two Eastern Indonesian Societies," *Ethnology: Special Issue: Blood Mysteries: Beyond Menstruation as Pollution* 41, no. 4 (2002): 317-33; Alma Gottlieb, "Afterword," *Ethnology* 41, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 381.

blogs. For example, scholarship that critically analyzes the rhetorics of family in *Niddah* literature or ritual education,¹⁰ without engaging the ways that these ritual practices actually *interact* within the lives of *Niddah*-observant couples leaves out a major factor in both the durability and positive/negative efficacy of these rhetorics. On a more practical level, insights into how *Niddah* observance interacts within a couple's relationship can enhance marital therapy practices beyond merely scheduling sex therapy homework around the *Niddah* time. Thus, holistic ritual theories impact the work with *Niddah* in multiple related fields outside religious studies.

For a ritual theory to qualify as holistic, it needs to address a comprehensive range of interactions and expand recognition of agentive *entities* involved in *Niddah*'s ritual enactment, including mutualities within these interactions. Such agentive entities include the social context of the ritual enactment, in this case marriage¹¹; the structural conditions established by the ritual details themselves, and the impacts of these details on its human performers. This view of *Niddah*'s interactional context leads me to view contemporary *Niddah* observance as involving multiple agentive relationships which are embedded not in any one participant of *Niddah* but in both participants, in their religious worldviews, in the ritual observances themselves, and the contexts of contemporary constructions of relevant "historically contingent discursive traditions".¹² In the case of *Niddah*, this defines a multi-part whole: wife, husband,¹³ their relationship

¹⁰ Orit Avishai-Bentovim, "Politics of Purity: Menstrual Defilement and the Negotiation of Modern Jewish Femininities" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2007); Niza Yanay and Tamar Rapoport, "Ritual Impurity and Religious Discourse on Women and Nationality," *Women's Studies International Forum* 20, no. 5/6 (September 1997): 651; Guterman, "Identity Conflict in Modern Orthodox Judaism and the Laws of Family Purity"; Septimus, "Predicting Intentions from Attitudes"; Shtrambrand, "Effects of Religious Returnees' Observance of Family Purity Laws on Marital Satisfaction Scores"; Schnall, Pelcovitz, and Fox, "Satisfaction and Stressors in a Religious Minority"; Ackerman, "Marital Satisfaction and the Observance of Family Purity Laws among Orthodox Jewish Women."

¹¹ This term can be expanded to include "long-term, committed sexual relationships" to include the occurrence of *Niddah* observance among couples who are not formally married. This pattern is indicated by rabbinic literature in Israel arguing against single women using mikvah and the screening question "Are you married?" posed by mikvah attendants in both Israel and the United States. To date, I am not aware of any quantitative work that would indicate how widespread this pattern actually is. Thus, for now, I maintain focus on "married" couples. Were such work to emerge, it would be interesting to study if there are any differences between married and unmarried *Niddah*-observant couples either in the adherence to the ritual details or qualitative experience of the regular observance.

¹² Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 32.

¹³ *Niddah* is traditionally and in current practice largely an exclusively heterosexual practice. While I personally know one lesbian couple who observed *Niddah* during

with each other, with Judaism, with the commandments, with God, with wider contemporary culture, and with *Niddah's* ritual structures. Following from this multi-part whole, the single agency of women practitioners expands to the co-agentive participation of the couple and their multiple relational engagements within their worldview as traditionally observant Jews. Though this complex web of relationships poses daunting prospects for scholars, the reality is that all these themes *are* present in published *Niddah* literature produced within observant communities and therefore underscores the importance for academic scholarship to reflect this complexity. By arguing for such holistic theorizations of *Niddah* within its larger social context, my work aligns more with anthropologies of menstruation that push back against Mary Douglas's discussions of menstrual rituals. I prefer to align myself with Marla N. Powers' injunction to view menstrual rituals "as part of a dynamic system rather than isolated events."¹⁴

With the remainder of this article, I will offer holistic frameworks for theorizing *Niddah* on this comprehensive level. In the first half of this article, I will provide a general introduction to *Niddah's* ritual context within Judaism and its performative requirements, followed by a contextualization of existing scholarship on *Niddah* that clarifies the present limitations, and how a ritual theories perspective can widen the scope of *Niddah* scholarship. The second half of this article, my second "operational" move that describes how *Niddah's* ritual structures condition specific forms of human relationality through ritualized mutual bodily interactions. Through the embodiment theories of Thomas Csordas¹⁵ and Kimmerer LaMothe,¹⁶ I will demonstrate how these ritualized practices-of-self-in-relation cultivate a relational world which is both distinct from each individual yet also emergent within and between the partners. For *Niddah*, this emergent relational ritual world is in fact an amplification of the couple's own relational dynamics, including its sexual, cooperative, communicative, and power-sharing dimensions. In a final move, I will assess the capacity these

their marriage and am aware that within traditionally observant LGBTIAQ+ there is robust debates about whether woman-woman couples should observe Niddah, I have not been able to connect with more than one such couple. Thus, I am unable, at this time, to speak to the complexities of LGBTIAQ+ Niddah engagement.

¹⁴ Marla N. Powers, "Menstruation and Reproduction: An Oglala Case," *Signs* 6, no. 1 (October 1, 1980): 32.

¹⁵ Thomas J. Csordas, ed., *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Thomas J. Csordas, *Body/Meaning/Healing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

¹⁶ Kimmerer LaMothe, *Why We Dance: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming* (New York; Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2015).

structural and operational theories of *Niddah* to address the less-than-ideal marital realities indicated by voices within *Niddah* literature that qualify claims of *Niddah's* idyllic efficacy.

What is Niddah?

Traditionally, Rabbinic Judaism includes a set of marital-menstrual practices known as *Niddah*¹⁷. The term *Niddah* can refer to this body of ritual law, to the practice of these rituals, to uterine bleeding events as a general category,¹⁸ or to the menstruant herself. *Niddah* observance begins at marriage¹⁹ and ends with either the end of menstruation (menopause/hysterectomy) or the end of the marriage (divorce/widowhood). These ritual practices organize Orthodox and traditionally observant Jewish heterosexual marriages²⁰ into alternating periods of sexual and non-sexual interaction, orchestrated around the female partner's uterine bleeding events. Each monthly *Niddah* involves a six-stage process: *veset* (anticipation of menses), *Niddah* of menstrual days, *Niddah* of

¹⁷ Rabbinic *Niddah* practices were developed from Second Temple practices during the earliest phase of rabbinic development and recorded in the Mishnah. While we do not have the level of detail about pre-rabbinic *Niddah* practices as we do about rabbinic, we can be sure of two major developments which are strictly rabbinic: the additional seven "white" days following the cessation of bleeding and the system of blood stain evaluation. For discussions of the rabbinic development of the additional white days see Berkowitz, "Reshaping the Laws of Family Purity for the Modern World"; Tirzah Meacham, "An Abbreviated History of the Development of the Jewish Menstrual Laws," in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 23-39. Charlotte Fonrobert has given a detailed discussion of the development of the stain taxonomy as rabbinic effort to objectivize women's subjective experiences of menstruation in *Menstrual Purity*.

¹⁸ Such events include menstruation, post-partum bleeding, ovulatory and gestational spotting, peri-menopausal irregularities, and illness.

¹⁹ *Niddah* observance by unmarried couples in the United States and Israel results efforts to exclude women from the mikvah Elisheva Wolfe, "Does a Mikvah Dunk Make Pre-Marital Sex Kosher?," *Jewcy.Com*, February 18, 2008; Haviva Ner-David, "Mikveh and the Single Girl," *The Times of Israel, The Blogs* (blog), May 12, 2013. Informal statements through my casual conversations with mikvah attendants that they have turned away unmarried women and women in interfaith marriages.

²⁰ To date, I am only aware of two lesbian married couples observing *Niddah*. While lesbian *Niddah* suggests interesting positionalities within relation to Orthodox / Traditional rhetorics and variations on the traditional logistics of *Niddah* practice, I have not found –so far – sufficient number of *Niddah*-observant lesbian, transgender, or otherwise non-normative couples with whom to develop such an analysis. That said, this present discussion of *Niddah's* cultivation of heterosexual marriage as an emergent relationality has applicability for any couple who follow *Niddah's* behavioral requirements. I invite any non-normative *Niddah* practitioner who would be interested in participating in a micro-study of this topic to contact me.

“white days” following the end of menstruation,²¹ preparation for immersion in a ritual pool or *mikvah*, immersion in the *mikvah*, and concluding with post-immersion resumption of sexual activity²². *Niddah* ritual practices on *veset* and *Niddah* days entail the complete cessation of a couple’s sexual interactions: sleeping separately, increasing visual and verbal modesty with each other, as well as proscriptions on touching –and among stricter observances – passing objects hand to hand. Starting in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the first half of the twentieth century, American Judaism experienced a steady decline in ritual observance among those who still identified as Orthodox and what later identified itself as the Conservative movement.²³

Since the 1970’s, this trend has been reversing through increased observance of traditional practice among established Orthodox communities, higher retention rates within Orthodox communities, conversion from outside Judaism, and the reengagement of traditional practice among liberal and unaffiliated branches within Judaism, most notably the Traditional-Egalitarian and Neo-Hasidic movements. *Niddah* observance has experienced a parallel upswing evidenced in increasing rates of mikvah construction and renovation²⁴ and the development of a “*Niddah* culture industry” in Israel and the United States²⁵ which promotes *Niddah* observance through educational organizations, a substantial body of Orthodox

²¹ There are rabbinic efforts to enforce a halakhically standardized set of behaviors during the full *Niddah* phase (menstrual and “white” days). This may, however, be an area where a great deal of individual discretion and “customization” occurs which deviates from halakhic norms. Separate studies by sociology student Mark Guterman and psychologist Dana Septimus show that many couples, particularly those married longer, do not adhere to the full set of halakhic prescriptions. Septimus, “Predicting Intentions from Attitudes”; Guterman, “Observance of the Laws of Family Purity in Modern-Orthodox Judaism”; Guterman, “Identity Conflict in Modern Orthodox Judaism and the Laws of Family Purity.”. While both authors correlate these inconsistencies with strictness in other areas of halakhic practice, it may also reflect a libidinal reality, that over time couples learn what arouses each other and what does not.

²² Isobel-Marie Johnston, “The History of *Niddah* in America as Social Drama: The Genealogy of a Ritual Practice” (Thesis, Tempe, AZ, Arizona State University, 2016).

²³ The majority of this following paragraph comes from the author’s master’s thesis listed in above note.

²⁴ According to The Taharas HaMishpacha Organization, Inc., “between 1970 and 2014, approximately 470 mikvaos were either built or renovated globally” (Chaya Klein, The Taharas Hamishpacha Organization, Inc., e-mail, February 5, 2014.) This is one organization’s numbers. In the time I lived in Cincinnati Ohio (2006-2013) two new mikvaot were constructed and knew at least mikvah renovated/reconstructed in Dayton, Ohio.

²⁵ Orit Avishai, “‘Doing Religion’ in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency,” *Gender & Society* 22, no. 4 (August 2008): 419.

literature, resources for mikvah supplies, websites, webinars, and phone apps.²⁶ *Niddah* literature in particular, since the earliest days of Rabbinic Judaism as recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud (c. 200-400 C.E.) persistently credits these ritual practices with ensuring the sexual relationship retains the zest of newlyweds.

Contemporary motivational and instructional literature on *Niddah* published since the 1960's offer variations on this traditional motif: –retaining the sexual and emotional spice of marriage, – “keeping the marriage fresh,” –working against boredom or taking each other for granted, –presenting *Niddah's* ritual practices as a uniquely Jewish sexual ethic, and – attributing rosy ideals of marital harmony to its observance: “This separation is that [which] puts the poetry back into marriage, which retains the charm, the elegance, the excitement. It is the pause that refreshes all of married life.”²⁷ Lynn Davidman²⁸ and Orit Avishai²⁹ have contextualized this emphasis on the family within Orthodox Judaism's self-definition against the threats of secularization, liberal religiosities, and the varieties of family structures that have emerged since the mid-twentieth century. While such political readings have legitimate grounds, attention to these politics without taking experiences into account risks undermining serious engagement of these claims. Understanding how claims of *Niddah's* ritual efficacy can gain the traction they have been depends in part on understanding *Niddah* observance on a phenomenological level. However, the intense privacy and virtual invisibility of *Niddah* observance pose significant challenges to both ethnographic study and phenomenological analysis.

Niddah's Invisible Challenges to Study

Niddah involves very subtle changes in behavior which are virtually invisible, except to the trained eye that wants to know – and even then, are utterly ambiguous to anyone outside the observant couple. Passing objects is an example of the subtlety and ambiguity of publicly observable *Niddah* behavior. If an

²⁶ This paragraph excerpted and revised from Isobel Johnston, “What Difference Do Jewish Menstrual Rituals Make?” (unpublished manuscript, Arizona State University, December 2014).

²⁷ Norman Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses: Jewish Insights into Marriage and Married Life*. (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1987), 59–60.

²⁸ Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

²⁹ Avishai-Bentovim, “Politics of Purity.”

observant husband passes an item directly to his wife's hand, they are either experiencing their sexually active time or unconcerned with this detail of *Niddah* observance during their sexual rest time. However, if he places the object on a table for her to pick up, even if someone notices this as a distinctive behavior, his motive is open to interpretation. They might be in a *Niddah* phase; or, the husband may enjoy acting waiter-like with his wife by placing the object where his wife may take it for herself; or he does not want to walk over to give it directly to her hand. Generally, within Orthodox communities, the restrictions on more overt physical contact, and modesty of speech and clothing are public norms specifically for the purpose of preventing anyone from knowing when a couple is sexually active or not, thereby guarding their privacy.

Another example of the subtlety of *Niddah* signs are women's fingernails. *Mikvah* preparations include trimming nails short and removing polish in order to remove particles on and under the nail which constitute a barrier to full bodily contact with the *mikvah* water. Thus, within a *Niddah-observant* community,³⁰ the condition of a woman's nails, particularly short and unpolished, could potentially indicate her sexual state. Long, polished nails would be more ambiguous since they indicate either that a woman is sexually active and approaching *Niddah* (Since it takes about two weeks for nails to grow to a length worth painting); or, she is actually *Niddah* and not sexually active. On account of these practicalities, orthodox women *generally* trim their nails to *mikvah* length weekly and do not wear colored nail polish.³¹ An exception that proves the rule came through a casual conversation I had with one Lubavitch³² woman. She commented that, in a community where pregnancies are not publicly announced until the mother is obviously showing between four and five months, longer and/or painted nails are often the first, silent sign that a *Niddah-observant* woman is pregnant, and hence suspending *Niddah* observance. So, signs are available; but they are incredibly subtle and to a significant degree ambiguous. In Conservative or Traditional Egalitarian Jewish communities where the public assumption is that *Niddah* is *not* observed, but

³⁰ Due to the need to walk to synagogue on Shabbat and holy days, Orthodox communities tend to live in close proximity to both their synagogue and fellow congregants. This means that neighbors may see each other regularly throughout the week.

³¹ There is also a custom for both men and women to prepare for the Sabbath of attending to one's nails on Friday afternoon.

³² The Lubavitch are one sub-branch of Jewish practice known colloquially as Hasidic or Haredi. The Lubavitch are more culturally integrated to American life than other Haredi groups by in part resulting from their outreach movements to increase mainstream Jewish observance (Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America*).

some couples *may be Niddah-observant* to various degrees, the ambiguity that comes from lack of community conformity renders the status of these specific behaviors virtually invisible. One contextual signal which might be considered to exist in such congregations but not in Orthodox ones is seating. In congregations with mixed-sex seating, *Niddah-observant* couples may feel it normatively necessary to sit near each other, but per *Niddah*, not close enough that they are touching. A compromise strategy might involve sitting with one chair-space between them, either placing a child or pile of prayer books on the empty seat so as to ascribe another purpose to it, or one member of the couple wanders around socializing or ostensibly supervising their children during the service. However, this could also indicate many other conditions of their relationship or simply a preference that day. Thus, public observation of *Niddah* practice, due to its subtlety and ambiguity, is nonexistent.³³ What can be more apparent, is when they are in their sexually active time, signaled by sitting together and physically touching or kissing each other during or after the service.

A couple's enactment of *Niddah* in the private domain of their own home would be seriously impacted by the presence of an outside observer. The most obvious signal of a *Niddah-observant* home resides in the two-bed, or bed and couch, furnishing of the master bedroom since *Niddah* observance requires fully separated sleeping arrangements.³⁴ For the less obvious details, the couple would have to narrate for the researcher which behaviors, ordinarily presumed to be arbitrary, are deliberate choices due to *Niddah* status, such as not sitting on the same couch at the same time or not passing a plate hand-to-hand at meals. On the major level, the most overt *Niddah* behaviors are also the most intimate, such as not changing clothes where the other spouse might see, and observation of such behaviors would inappropriately insert the researcher into the couple's relationship. Thus, observation of *Niddah* practice within the home possesses similar challenges as public

³³ Two other customs of Conservative/Traditional Egalitarian prayer services that present challenges to the *Niddah-observant* couple: being called as a couple to the Torah during its reading (making a joint aliyah) and the custom of lifting and dressing the Torah scroll after the reading. Both these situations can involve the couple in touching the same object at the same time.

³⁴ Common arrangements include either two twin beds which may be place side by side or separated or a queen/full size bed with a cot or pullout couch. For orthodox couples, such arrangements are in place from the beginning of marriage. For, non-orthodox couples transitioning to *Niddah* observance may require one of the partners, usually the husband, to sleep on a couch elsewhere in the home until such time as they either stop observance or decide to upgrade to the two-bed arrangement.

observation. These visibility issues account for the dominance of social science methods in *Niddah* studies to date: surveys and interviews rather than first hand observation of the components of ritual practice and thus is heavily dependent on practitioner interpretation at the first level of data collection. Additionally, the intensely private, home-bound nature of many menstrual rituals may explain why research of menstrual practices have so often focused on menstrual huts and, for *Niddah*, on the *mikvah*. An outsider can observe a woman entering a menstrual hut or *mikvah* building, staying, and leaving it. The researcher may observe and move about in both spaces. At least one anthropologist, Janet Hoskins has herself spent several menstrual cycles in a menstrual hut³⁵ though not a Jewish one.³⁶ The closest way for ethnographers of *Niddah* to engage with *Niddah* ritual practices is to observe it themselves. I have read from only three writer-researchers on *Niddah* who have publicly stated observing at least one *Niddah* cycle in order to understand their respondents better and none were anthropologists or religious studies scholars.³⁷ While their singular or occasional observance of *Niddah* may give them an introductory sense of the ritual similar to an anthropologist engaging in a ritual activity once or twice, it leaves the experience of *Niddah as a way of life* to speculation, if it is considered at all. That said, some scholar-authors who are *Niddah-observant* have relied on social science surveys and interview methods, downplaying their personal statuses as *Niddah* practitioners.³⁸

³⁵ Hoskins, "The Menstrual Hut and the Witch's Lair in Two Eastern Indonesian Societies," 317. It is also worth noting that the public nature of menstrual huts indicates a different cultural attitude toward menstruation and sexuality. Foremost in this context, menstrual huts indicate a less private perspective on the sexual and menstrual statuses of couples since a degree of public knowledge is unavoidable with huts located outside homes. Often cultures which engage in menstrual isolation of some sort also still actively engage purity concerns which may deflect attention away from sexuality, which has become the primary signified entity in Jewish menstrual observance.

³⁶ Menstrual huts are used by some with Ethiopian Jewish communities. See Ilana Tal, "Exploring the Meaning of Becoming a Woman in a Non-Western Culture: A Narrative Analysis of First Menstruation Stories of Ethiopian Jewish Women," Dissertation Abstracts International. Section B: Physical Sciences and Engineering 65, no. 07 (2004): 3752-3971.

³⁷ Lis Harris, *Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family* (New York: Summit Books, 1985), 144-49; Liz Rosenberg, "In the Depths," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology* (Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), 153-57. Harris is a journalist. Rosenberg is a poet, English Professor, and consulting editor of *Total Immersion*.

³⁸ Guterman, "Identity Conflict in Modern Orthodox Judaism and the Laws of Family Purity"; Guterman, "Observance of the Laws of Family Purity in Modern-Orthodox Judaism"; Mark A. Guterman, Payal Mehta, and Margaret S. Gibbs, "Menstrual Taboos Among Major Religions," *The Internet Journal of World Health and Societal Politics* 5, no. 2 (August 12, 2008); Jane Calem Rosen, "Marital Relations Focus of New Study," *Jewish Standard Daily*, February 15, 2007; Tova Hartman,

Why theorize? The Need for New Analytics of Niddah as Ritual

Social science studies of *Niddah* have suffered from an under-engagement with developments in the anthropology of menstruation, long-aspiring to the status of subfield.³⁹ While most anthropological studies have been more descriptive than critically analytical, they do model placing menstrual rituals in their own cultural context and the effort to analyze these rituals on the terms set within those societies. Again, Marla Powers article on the Oglala Sioux set of menarche rituals argues this point more robustly than other anthropological studies of menstrual rituals.⁴⁰

Niddah specifically emerged as a viable topic of research in the decade following Reform Rabbi Rachel Adler's theologically-framed-mainline-Wave-feminist dismissal of *Niddah* as an irrevocably patriarchal oppression of Jewish women. Because I have yet to find any direct links between these studies and Adler's article itself, this timing may reflect deeper movements and tensions within American and Israeli Judaisms in this period, more than a direct result of Adler's work. The sentiments and positions expressed in Adler's article, and their counter-stances, arguably drive social science *Niddah* scholarship more than do culturally analytical approaches found in anthropological studies of menstrual rituals. The most striking example I have found of this pattern in *Niddah* scholarship is Yanay and Rappoport's pseudo-Foucauldian analysis of an Israeli *Niddah* instructional brochure. These authors read specific ritual details as "textual mechanisms which act as a strategy of domination, forming a powerful system of compliance which is presented as a personal religious commitment and faith... mechanisms such as specificity, vagueness, and arbitrariness constitute a symbolic system of domination ensuring that the

Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation, HBI Series on Jewish Women (Waltham, Mass.; Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press; University Press of New England, 2007); "Dr. Naomi Marmon Grumet, Author at The Eden Center," The Eden Center (blog), accessed February 6, 2018.
³⁹ Efforts to develop the anthropology of menstruation into a distinct subfield were first explicitly made through the Blood Magic Thomas C. T. Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, eds., *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and a special issue of *Ethnology* (Gottlieb, "Afterword."). I understand the lack of progress in the attainment of subfield status as reflecting a lack of theoretical framework for how menstruation and menstrual rituals should be analyzed anthropologically. I hope the theories presented here reinvigorate efforts to generate such a theoretical basis for menstrual studies, better supporting arguments for establishing its status as a subfield.

⁴⁰ Powers, "Menstruation and Reproduction."

cosmic order is represented by the separation and hierarchy of the sexes."⁴¹ This statement, reflective of the whole article, speaks from a specific culturally-inflexible Wave feminist ideological position which is as much anti-ritual as it is anti-*Niddah*. In contrast, Orit Avishai's work on the *Niddah*-culture industry⁴² in Israel and Tova Hartman & Naomi Marmon's joint ethnographic study of Israeli women's experiences of *Niddah*, both report that their respondents self-positioned their experiences of *Niddah* observance as voices countering the paradigm of *Niddah* as oppressive "I do not feel oppressed; for me it is not intrusive"⁴³ and argue against positioning *Niddah*-observant women as less-than-agentive victims, "respondents were far from oppressed "doormats" -but neither were most of them engaged in strategic compliance or in active resistance."⁴⁴ While none these scholars or their respondents explicitly reference Adler, her assessment of *Niddah* as oppressive maintains an implicit presence in their scholarship through either support or qualification of a certain feminist rhetorics of patriarchally oppression through which Adler speaks. That the respondents in Avishai's and Hartman & Marmon's research stated variations of "I am not oppressed" speaks to the depth that this politics circulates within Jewish Israeli society.

In attempting to move past these political constraints for framing *Niddah*, Avishai's and Hartman & Marmon's studies demonstrate that for its orthodox practitioners, *Niddah* is first and foremost part of a larger religious way of life in which it is only one of several Jewish religious bodily ritual practices engaged by their respondents.⁴⁵ Yet, in challenging the oppression paradigm by qualifying women's experiences of *Niddah* observance with an ethnographically grounded taxonomy of experience ranging from "unbearable to beneficial" with various degrees of "burdensomeness" in between, psychologist Tova Hartman and sociologist Naomi Marmon show themselves still bound by it.⁴⁶ In contrast, Avishai promotes Judith Butler's concepts of gender performance as an antidote to prior research that viewed "educated women's" participation in conservative religious practices generally as incredulously rooted in the "tacit

⁴¹Yanay and Rapoport, "Ritual Impurity and Religious Discourse on Women and Nationality," 657.

⁴² Avishai coined the term "Niddah culture industry" Avishai, "DOING RELIGION."

⁴³ Tova Hartman and Naomi Marmon, "Lived Regulations, Systemic Attributions: Menstrual Separation and Ritual Immersion in the Experience of Orthodox Jewish Women," *Gender and Society* 18, no. 3 (June 1, 2004): 389.

⁴⁴ Avishai, "Doing Religion", 428.

⁴⁵ Avishai, "Doing Religion", 412; Hartman and Marmon, 398.

⁴⁶ Hartman and Marmon, 2004.

assumption [that] religious women are oppressed or are operating with a false consciousness,” and thereby construes conservative religious women as objects of religious traditions and objectifying their participation in terms of conditional compliance, resistance, subversion or “strategic compliance.”⁴⁷ She specifically calls out this latter concept for “extend[ing] the analysis of agency beyond the dichotomization of subordination and subversion.” None of these categories of agency, she argues, take “structural and cultural contexts into account,” thereby excluding religious experience as an end goal and misrecognize that ‘compliance’ may be more “a mode of conduct or being” than a strategy per se.⁴⁸ Her corrective Butlerian-spun concept of “doing religion” positions *Niddah* as part of a larger set of Orthodox Jewish identity performances. I am indebted to Avishai’s and Hartman and Marmon’s work for rupturing the oppression paradigm concerning *Niddah*, clearing a path for me to formulate new analytical frameworks for studying *Niddah* from a ritual studies perspective that expands the ranges of explanatory potential beyond Orthodox women’s attitudes and experiences of *Niddah*. Whereas their driving arguments concerned defending and nuancing *women’s* observance of *Niddah*; my ritual studies perspective pursues questions of how *Niddah’s* ritual observances impact the observing couple. How do *Niddah* rituals interact with the observant couple? How might *Niddah* observance be accountable to the marital affects attributed to it in *Niddah* literature?

My approach to these questions builds on two areas of Avishai’s and Hartman’s & Marmon’s analytics where features of the oppression paradigm necessarily persist because this is what their work complicates. First, the oppression paradigm focuses attention only on women’s nuanced experiences of *Niddah*, to the exclusion of the role and experiences of male partners, who also observe *Niddah*, beholden to the same set of behavioral restrictions. Second, their attention to women’s agentive performance of *Niddah* as a strategy to challenge the oppression paradigm’s allegations of inherent victimization neutralizes the ritual practices themselves. This neutralization thereby represents *Niddah’s* ritual practices as 1) passive entities 2) inherently lacking meaning in themselves until engaged by agentive humans. From these positions, *Niddah’s* experience is produced unidirectionality. This unidirectionality is confounded by religious *Niddah* literature, extolling the ritual practice’s

⁴⁷ Avishai 2008, 412. This article also contains a solid review of research on religiously conservative women.

⁴⁸ Avishai, “Doing Religion,” 412.

positive effects on participants' personal and sexual lives within their marriages: formalizing space for individual identity within couplehood, maintaining sexual interest over the long-term, synchronizing sexual drives, increasing men's verbal expressiveness, and an assortment of other interpersonal skills presented as necessary for strong marriages.⁴⁹ All these claims speak to *Niddah* as an important means of cultivating specific styles of social relationships.

Existing scholarship's hyperfocus on women's experiences of *Niddah*, cannot address these ritual practices in their *relational social context*. Thus, new theories are necessary to account for the ways that the ritual practices themselves interact within the couple in ways that may or may not produce the efficacy attributed to them in practitioner-written literature on *Niddah*. From the perspective of religious and ritual studies, such alternate theorizations of *Niddah* strive to account for the impacts of *Niddah's* ritual structure upon its enactors and how these structures can be harnessed, intentionally or less-than-consciously, for various effects within the relationship.

Alternate Contextualizations

The earliest assertions of *Niddah's* positive effects appear in Rabbinic Judaism's central text, the Talmud (compiled c. 200-600 CE), and reflect generations of male rabbinic authors' experiences of *Niddah's* capacity to maintain marital interest and promote fidelity among Jewish husbands. Thus, the list of attributes in today's *Niddah* literature reflect an updating and further nuancing of very traditional interpretations within Jewish religious literature. While some might argue this undermines today's claims, from a ritual studies perspective, it can be argued –as I do here – that these claims reflect an experiential continuity produced by the ritual practices themselves across time, geographies, and cultures.

Such affectational claims situate *Niddah* as integral to Jewish couples' cultivation of specific forms of marital relationality. From this foundation, my overarching theorization of *Niddah* may be framed as a Foucauldian practice of self-in-relation that engages *Niddah* as both a ritual performance and an ethical practice. This resonates with Alma Gottlieb's assertion that the area of "anthropology of menstruation, [constitutes] an exemplar

⁴⁹ This is an extremely common refrain in *Niddah* literature. The following represents a small sampling of explicit discussion of the marital skill set enhanced by *Niddah*: Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage*; N. Lamm 1987; R. M. Berkowitz 2006; Bulka, "A Most Delicate Mitzvah."; Ginsburg, "When the Subject Is Women: Encounters with Syrian Jewish Women."

of the embodied subject."⁵⁰ I will argue for this reading through a tripartite set of moves that applicable to other menstrual rituals: ritual indexing, ritual structures, and ritual enactment. Applied to *Niddah*, these three analytical moves frame this ritual practice as ethical performances that cultivate consciousness of the marital relationship as an emergent entity that is greater than the sum of its two partners.

Indexing Menstrual Rituals

Traditionally, Jewish men and women only observe *Niddah* while married. If one partner dies or they divorce, *Niddah* observance stops. Today, it is not uncommon for unmarried, sexually active traditionally observant couples to observe *Niddah* also. This exceptional feature proves the rule across menstrual rituals worldwide that such ritual observances begin with the onset of menstruation and end with the cessation of menses. This disruption to an otherwise universal pattern of menstrual ritualization, facilitates identifying another known but under-examined key feature of menstrual rituals: indexing. *Niddah's* exclusive proscription of sexually related activities,⁵¹ and the timing of resuming sexual relations on "mikvah night" close to ovulation⁵²-- all reinforce contemporary readings of *Niddah's* structures as a sexual and reproductive practice indexed to, and articulated around, menstruation. However, the experiences of living these ritual practices as a specific marital structure, produce affects within the observing couple's embodied relationship itself that exceed heterosexual reproduction, and argue for a dual indexing to (hetero)sexuality and marriage.

⁵⁰ Gottlieb, "Afterword," 389.

⁵¹ That non-menstruating Jewish male partners also observe *Niddah's* proscriptions around sex, halakhically including masturbation, underscores that the tabooed subject is sex not menstruation itself. Additionally, *Niddah* proscribes touching, dressing in front of each other, passing objects hand to hand, eating from the same plate, and sleeping together...all practices that are both sexual and relational. Menstruation within heterosexual marriage is the condition that initiates the sexual and relational taboos for both partners.

⁵² *Niddah's* ovulatory timing was unknown in both the biblical period, the period of rabbinic reformulation of biblical commandments, and in any period up until the modern period. In the rabbinic period specifically, following the Hippocratic medical model, women were believed to "emit seed" during orgasm Meacham, "An Abbreviated History of the Development of the Jewish Menstrual Laws," 25.. Moreover, the rabbinic conflation of biblically nuanced *Niddah* periods (regular versus irregular bleeding) which added the regular observance of "white days" for regular menstruation has resulted in the phenomenon of "halakhic infertility" when ovulation occurs prior to mikvah night. It is estimated that twenty-five to thirty-five percent of *Niddah*-observant couples experience this type of infertility Miriam D. Mazon, *Infertility--Medical, Emotional, and Social Considerations* (Human Sciences Press, 1984).

Reading menstrual rituals as indexical expands their social contextualization and fundamentally reorients the concept of “menstrual taboo”. Indexing enables seeing taboos associated with menstrual rituals reciprocally, as taboos around other social and cultural features. For example, Islamic menstrual rituals also include a prayer taboo; Hinduism -a food preparation taboo, and as Mary Douglas observed, the Lele of Kasai River region in Belgian Congo (now Democratic Republic of the Congo) -a weapons taboo.⁵³ In so far as Douglas builds her analysis of this *menstrual taboo* prohibiting menstruants from touching men’s weapons as reflecting an acquisitive male culture marginalizing and commodifying women, Douglas *does* work with an implicit indexical analysis.

Yet, I have two concerns with Douglas’s analysis that account for its lack of traction as a method for analyzing menstrual rituals more generally. First, she placed Lele menstrual taboos in service of her larger argument about purity and danger without examining the menstrual rituals on their own terms. Second, the very language of her analysis does tap into an indexical relationship but by equating women with weapons, Douglas shifts the index from martial culture to concepts of property, acquisition, and ownership, subverting the Lele menstrual-martial index in service of a projected Western European menstrual politics: “Female pollution in a society of this type is largely related to the attempt to treat women simultaneously as persons and as the currency of male transactions...Female pollution in a society of this type is largely related to the attempt to treat women simultaneously as persons and as the currency of male transactions”⁵⁴. This description strongly resonates within the “highly competitive, acquisitive culture” of Western European-based cultures, wherein the Second Vatican Council formally ended the last vestiges of menstrual rituals in the Catholic Church in the same decade that *Purity and Danger* was first published. Powers sums this up well, “Anti-menstrual attitudes have a long history in Western thought... therefore, some anthropologists, educated in the Western tradition, have explained tribal menstrual rites in light of their own pre-suppositions, not those of the tribal cultures.”⁵⁵ However, when menstrual indexing is placed in a subject culture’s own structural and experiential frameworks, and analyzed through *ritual* theory lenses, we enrich our

⁵³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, Routledge Classics (Routledge, 2002).

⁵⁴ Douglas, 154.

⁵⁵ Marla N. Powers, “Menstruation and Reproduction: An Oglala Case,” *Signs* 6, no. 1 (October 1, 1980): 56. I am privileged by post-colonial conceptual frameworks and theories of ritual, indigeneity, and body that were unavailable to Douglas.

understanding of indexed entities like prayer in Islam, food preparation in Hinduism, martial customs among the Lele, and marital relationality in Judaism in ways that render the term “taboo” inadequate. Indexing serves as the skeletal framework upon and through which their respective ritual structures form and articulate these domains of daily life.

Relational Ritual Structures

Examining the ritual structures of menstrual rituals such as *Niddah*, requires first revisiting the issue of agency undergirding Avishai’s assertion of *Niddah* as religious identity performance. In *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood posits agency as “a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located”⁵⁶ and she portrays the women in her study as engaging with their religious traditions in an intensely active process of negotiating traditional norms with contemporary self-expressions for the purpose of living modern realities through inherited religio-cultural expressions. In these interactions, religious tradition exists as an entity in its own right, interacting reciprocally with practitioners who enter into relationship with it. With traditional practices that structure indexical relationships across different cultural domains, these connections between cultural domains are maintained across generations, even when the meanings and values of those domains change over time. By identifying these indexical relationships, we can deepen our knowledge of each cultural domain through the ways menstrual practices articulate not only the relationships between each domain but also how specific ritual forms and practices condition culturally specific experiences of self-in-relation to others within the broader cultural fabric.

Niddah observance can be understood as producing a set of enacted relationships which are embedded not in any one participant of *Niddah* but in all entities understood as impacting participants’ performance. In the case of *Niddah*, this defines a six-part whole: wife-husband-Judaism-commandments-God-dominant cultural trends. These six entities converge not only *Niddah* observance but also the marriage wherein *Niddah* is enacted. Understanding marriage as a locus, shifts its conceptualization from passive anthropological category label to a dynamic cultural space *and* active emergent entity in its own right. To anchor marriage’s analytical independence as an emergent anthropological actor-space in the *Niddah* ritual

⁵⁶ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 32.

process, I turn to Eduardo Kohn's theories of human interaction with non-human subjectivities.

Analytically Distinguishing Niddah and Marriage

Marriage, as an entity, is invisible, evident only by the self-identification of the couple. Yet, marriage is experienced viscerally such that its loss is often felt physically. Thus, there is something to be gained by analytically individuating marriage as an entity that encompasses a couple while exceeding them as more than a sum of one plus one. Here, I find it helpful to draw an analogy between processes between and across cultural forms and the processes between and across natural forms in the work of Eduardo Kohn.⁵⁷ Kohn argues that interactions between human and non-human subjectivities produce emergent realities that "both exceed and [are] continuous with its component parts", articulating these interactions as nested processes that assert increasing constraints on emergent phenomena.⁵⁸ Kohn identifies these emergent phenomena as general *types* such as water flows (or sex).⁵⁹ Each instance, or *token*, of a whirlpool, stream, or river (or traditions of sexual ethics) manifests through specific sets of constraints that produce that specific *form* of that type (individual instances of sexual practice). Human interactions with such naturally occurring forms as the "distribution of water flows" into creeks, streams, and rivers produce further emergent forms such as the location of communities and patterns of trade.⁶⁰ Transposing these terms from the material entities Kohn addresses onto the study of cultural entities, we can understand inherited ritual practices as acting within a cultural ecology in a closely similar fashion as the natural ecological forms in Kohn's work. Applying this analogy, we can reframe marriage as a non-human or quasi-human entity emerging from cultural constraints placed upon the general types of sexuality to produce the token 'marriage', and *Niddah* as reflecting a set of further constraints placed upon the token of marriage (a token of a token?), with individual *Niddah-observant* couples constituting forms of traditional Jewish *Niddah-observant* marriages. Kohn suggests that, "If as anthropologists, we can find ways to attend ethnographically to those processes of form amplification and harnessing them as they play out...we might

⁵⁷ Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2013).

⁵⁸ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 167.

⁵⁹ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 161-162.

⁶⁰ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 166.

become better attuned to the strange ways in which form moves through us.”⁶¹

The constraints that *Niddah* places upon the form of marriage produce an emergent entity that is qualitatively distinct from other forms of sexual relationality. *Niddah* ritual practices, with their capacity for cultivating and maintaining conscious awareness of a couple’s interpersonal dynamics provides just such an ethnographic subject of form amplification. Because *Niddah* may be understood as a token of the token ‘marriage’, its ritual practices act as amplifying constraints that constitute and produce both the token group of *Niddah*-observant marriages and a set of patterns across specific forms (individual practitioner couples). From this, each partner’s participation within their *Niddah-observant* marriage shifts to an interaction between a human and quasi-human (cultural) entities that produce new emergent realities under the umbrella term “Jewish Marriage”.

Identifying Structural Features

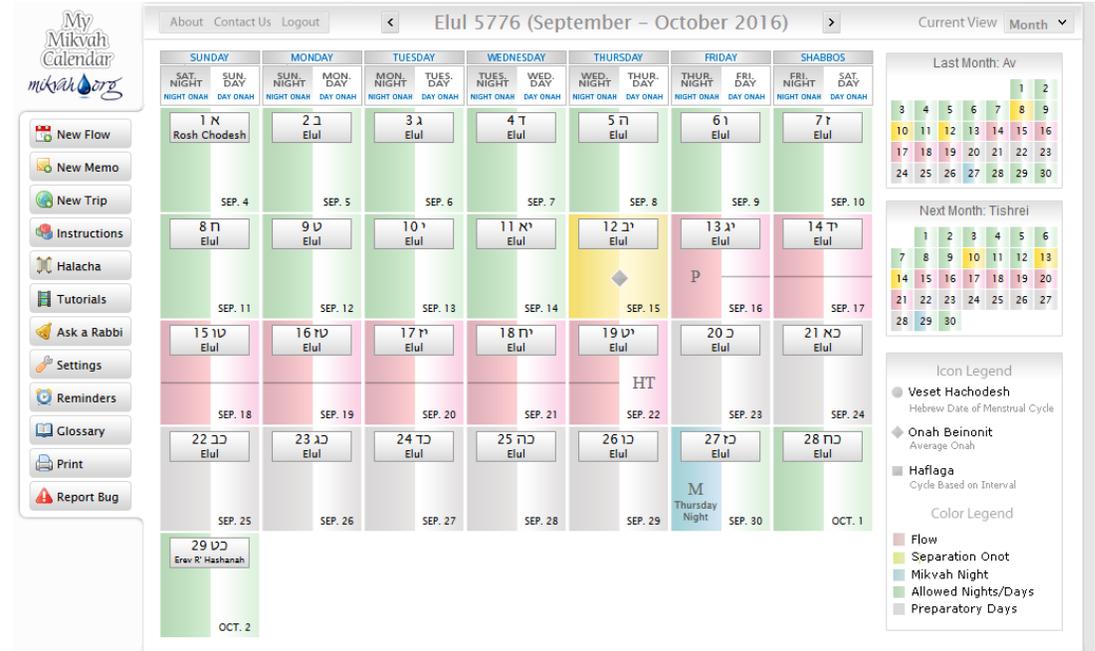
Transposing Kohn’s analysis of natural “processes of form amplification” to *Niddah* ritual practice, enables a fine-grained analysis of *Niddah*’s structural impact on Jewish couples and a deeper appreciation of how ritual structures generate the relationships practitioners dwell within. The proscriptive behavioral “constraints” that define *Niddah*’s ritual practice and establish its ritual rhythm are both *temporal* –its cyclic repetition of sexual availability and restriction over the course of many months and years— and *corporeal* –the physical behaviors of sexual restraint and release. Together these two features condition *Niddah*’s ritual practitioners to consciously live their relationship within two alternating sets of relationality: sexual and non-sexual. These patterned sets of interactional behaviors arguably exert real neurological impacts on individual practitioners that affect how they experience themselves as part of their couple and, as I will argue, produce their relationship as a distinct entity-object in its own right.

Archetypal Temporality: Relational Cycles

At the macro-level, *Niddah* organizes observant marriages into alternating periods of sexual and non-sexual interaction which are themselves coordinated around the rhythm of a woman’s reproductive bleeding events: menses, ovulation bleeding,

⁶¹ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 160.

spotting, conception, pregnancy, childbirth, perimenopause irregularities, uterine irregularities and illness. The ritual calendar here, used by *Niddah-observant* women to keep track *Niddah's* various ritual timings, illustrates the micro level wherein *Niddah's* ritual timing organizes a couple's sexual life into six distinct time-specific events.



NIDDAH CALENDAR: This calendar is downloaded from the author's online calendar, accessible by website and phone app.

- 1) "*Veset onot*" (yellow, day and night Sep. 15): anticipated days for the onset of menstruation. There are three different ways to calculate these the dates, and in my experience using both conventional and *Niddah* calculations with irregular cycles, the latter has a greater accuracy rate due to its individualization. "*Veset onot*" can last a full 24-hours, day-only, or night-only. During an onah, the physical details of sexual separation are observed, adding to the total times of unavailability. In the main calendar, the *veset onot* overlap, but the smaller calendars in the upper right corner illustrate that *veset onot* can be spread out.
- 2) "*Niddah*" (pink with gray line through middle, 16-22 Sept.): here, referring to the days of active bleeding.
- 3) "*Hefsek Taharah*" ("HT", day Sep. 22): lit. "purity check," a ritualized method for confirming that the bleeding as has ended by two forms of inspection: internal wiping with a soft cloth (*hefsek*) followed by the insertion of another such cloth (some

- approve the use of tampons) prior to sunset and removed approximately an hour after (*hefsek taharah*).
- 4) "White days" (grey, Sep. 28 - 29): the seven days non-bleeding days following the end of the period during which *hefsekim* (pl.) are performed in the morning and evening to confirm non-bleeding status.
 - 5) "Mikvah Night" (Blue with "M Thursday Night", Sep. 29): the evening of the seventh white day, also the beginning of the eighth day in Jewish time. This is a multi-step event that culminates in the couple resuming sexual contact.
 - 6) Non-*Niddah* days of availability (green, Sep. 4-14 and Sep. 30 - Oct 2).

This calendar underscores several points. First, this calendar illustrates an intersection of corporal time with temporal time. This ritual timing organizing the marriage into specific patterns of interactions, which over time become the rhythm of the marriage itself, personalized to each couple (second) entirely around the rhythms of the menstruating partner's personal bodily rhythms and irregularities. Lastly, it provides a graphic representation of a couple's sexual and non-sexual interactional phases, patterns of specific bodily and interactional behaviors. Several *Niddah* writers have noted that some couples, individually and jointly integrate anticipated menses into the advanced planning of their social and personal activities, extending the temporality of *Niddah* into their interactions and activities beyond their relationship and even beyond their home. To contrast, in non-*Niddah* marriages, the sexual and non-sexual dimensions of the relationship ebb and flow in a more organic or non-regulated manner with varying levels of conscious awareness by the partners, which can occasionally result in a couple realizing that they haven't had sex for several months. *Niddah* clearly regulates, or in Catherine Bell's terminology, ritualizes, these dimensions of the marriage. While *Niddah* couples' "on-time" (and post-menopausal stages) live both sexual and non-sexual dimensions together; their "off -times" simultaneously focuses attention on non-sexual relationality by turning-down the sexual dimension while still keeping -for healthy marriages - sexual interest and desire alive. Authors within the *Niddah* literature attribute two main advantages to these periods of separation. First, the avoidance of sexual interactions during *Niddah* increases couples' awareness of their relationship's non-sexual foundation: a positive experience for marriages in healthy phases but a potentially negative experience for struggling marriages. This awareness is not just a mental phenomenon, but through *Niddah*'s physical behavior changes, becomes a full-bodied lived experience. Second, this full-bodied

experience of separation is often described as personal time, distinguished from couple-time. Some writers in the literature describe *Niddah* as carving literal and psychically individuated space into the relationship, a space for the cultivation of one's individuality within the context of couplehood, or a safeguard against losing oneself in the identity of the other, their as a couple, or through objectification of a spouse (N. Lamm 1987, 32, 65).

*Archetypal Corporeality: Somatic Modes of Attention, Attunement,
Amplification and Bodily Becoming*

This section of this article has been the most challenging to write because working through the various ways that somatic modes of attention in *Niddah* practice can be teased apart and individuated performs a disingenuous rupture to the wholeness of *Niddah* experiences, akin to breaking open a kaleidoscope, sorting out and naming its different colored pieces, and then expecting them to return to their dynamic motions folding ever emergent patterns upon themselves one after the other. So, I hope the reader will bear with a certain amount of non-linear repetition or looping back with patience as I try to both suss-out distinct facets within *Niddah's* archetypal corporeality while trying to maintain the integrity or wholeness of ways these facets of can interact, recombine, and/or loop back on one another. Whereas the temporal dimension can be discussed in general terms and still remain whole with the caveat of individual variation, the corporeal dimensions lack such a consistent framework and individual variation picks up some features but not others at different times in a couple's history with each other (I will bring Thomas Csordas's concept of ritual indeterminacy into the final section of this paper).

Recalling that *Niddah* performance of *veset*, *Niddah*, and white days entails more than cessation of a couple's overtly sexual interactions (sleeping separately and dressing privately), but also proscribes visual and verbal flirting and *all* touching – including, by stricter observances – passing objects hand to hand. More than the other requirements, *Niddah's* ritual proscriptions on not touching expands ritual awareness into every interaction between the observant couple, including during the non-*Niddah* weeks. Specifically, the need for alternating between different types of coordinated movement results in each member of the couple becoming acutely attuned to their partner's movements. Here Thomas Csordas's theory of *somatic modes of attention* closely intersects with the concept of *attunement* in developmental psychology. Studies of attunement between

infants and caregivers focus on vocal and facial cues, yet *Niddah* observance underscores that attunement is also a whole-body experience between adults. Csordas' theory of somatic modes of attention holds that rituals' multi-sensory physical and experiential activities direct practitioners' and participants' attention toward the issue or entity that the ritual addresses. *Niddah* rituals focus the couple's attention on their relationship itself with ritual activities orchestrating full bodied attunement between the partners. Since couples already tend toward a degree of attunement, regardless of the positive or negative dimensions of their relationship, *Niddah's* ritualized attunement has the effect of *amplifying* the dynamics of within the relationship.

Amplification

Family Purity educator, Rivkah Slonim, qualifies traditionally rosy claims about *Niddah's* positive effects, "[*Niddah*] cannot save a bad marriage; but it can make a good marriage transcendent."⁶² While this statement acknowledges that *Niddah* observance does not fundamentally change marriages, it also asserts this ritual's capacity to *elevate* "a good marriage". Here, the psychological concept of *amplification* accounts for and deepens our understanding of this experiential claim of elevation, or "transcendence".

Living through the archetypal temporality described above means that regular observance of *Niddah* ritual practices produces conscious rhythmic movements between sexual and non-sexual interpersonal relationalities, intensifying the experience of the married relationship. These relationalities are expressed and characterized for each couple through their bodily movements. *Niddah's* rhythmically ritualized movement between sexual and non-sexual interactions, call on couples to continually adjust their actions to meet both the demands of whichever phase of this ritual movement they are in on any given day, the dynamics of their relationship, and the practical needs of the moment. *Niddah* metaphorically and literally *moves* an observant couple into *conscious* enactment of their relationship in its sexual and non-sexual dimensions. This persistent consciousness demanded by these oscillating bodily and verbal behaviors can not avoid cultivating in observant couples some degree of regularly heightened, or amplified, awareness of each other's bodies, movements, words, gestures and their role in the relationship.

⁶² Rivkah Slonim, "The Mystery and Magic of Mikvah."

To convey the deeper relevance of this persistent consciousness, I turn to Kimerer LaMothe's constructions of humans as perpetually enacting "bodily becoming" recasts ritual as "collections of movement patterns gathered and remembered for their efficacy in helping humans cultivate relationships... patterns of movement that facilitate an experience shift: a person practices patterns that engage and educate her senses in line with both cultural memory and situational challenges."⁶³ *Niddah* observance establishes a particular style of bodily marital becoming, creating a structure within which the relationship moves and evolves over time. Concepts of bodily becoming also helps us articulate how *Niddah's* relational style earns the characterization as "the abstinence... that helps keep that attraction and longing fresh and youthful."⁶⁴ Foremost, the ironic sexual spice of *Niddah* proscriptions is that exactly at a time when sexual abstinence is required, the conscious acts of avoiding any sexual interaction has the result of focusing the couple's attention on each other, heightening their awareness of exactly what arouses them *and* what turns them off. In discussing the intersection of her work with this project after meeting at the 2016 AAR Annual Meeting, LaMothe elaborates:

The proscriptions [of *Niddah*] educate the senses of those who practice to the patterns of touching they are creating and becoming. By forbidding touch, *Niddah* calls attention to it. The proscriptions not only require that couples exercise their kinetic creativity in finding new ways to connect with one another; they also create the opportunity, when the touch is possible, for the experience to be heightened by all of the sensory awareness awakened by the restrictions. In this way, *Niddah* helps partners become conscious of the ways in which the bodily movements they (or any humans) make in relation to one another *become* that relationship. These patterns define the channels of attention, of sensing and responding. It is beneficial, then, to pay attention to the movements we make in relation to one another, and to become conscious of what opportunities and emotions we are creating as we do. Ritual opens up a place for improvisation and play in which the improvised movement express the trajectories of attention and care that the ritual has been educating a person's senses to move along. You could even say that

⁶³ LaMothe, *Why We Dance: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming*.

⁶⁴ Norman Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses: Jewish Insights into Marriage and Married Life*. (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1987), 58.

Niddah creates the opportunity for the sexual relationship to be a heightened even ecstatic moment – one that is experienced as divine. Here the source of power that the ritual primes people to experience is both divine and biological.... and the ritual works to help people experience them as one and the same.⁶⁵

Despite *Niddah*'s overtly sexual focus, these amplified experiences play out on both sexual and non-sexual levels. Most certainly, all long-term couples live their relationships through sexual and non-sexual dimensions. The difference with relationships conditioned through *Niddah* ritual practice is the degree of *conscious awareness* of these dimensions as distinctive qualities of the relationship, each having its own relational skill sets, cultivated and amplified through *Niddah*. In terms of the sexual relationality, by proscribing a range of activities associated with arousal, *Niddah* ritual practices draw attention to the experience of arousal and –in the case of passing objects – arguably confers an erotic quality to this activity that it otherwise generally lacks in modern day culture. In terms of non-sexual relationality, proscriptions of arousing contact and speech condition couples to both seek and expect alternate ways to communicate and address both their individual and mutual needs within the relationship. Some *Niddah* literature asserts that male *Niddah* observers develop stronger emotional vocabularies.⁶⁶ However, heightened sensitivity to gestures, eye contact, and vocal inflection as well as alertness to the expressiveness of non-verbal acts are also relational skills that can be cultivated through *Niddah* ritual enactments. Additionally, the virtual invisibility of these micro-practices, known only to the couple themselves, and the sense of uniqueness in their improvised movements can enhance a couple's sense of privacy. This can have an amplifying effect in its own right, adding to the intensity of bodily or sensual attunement and conferring a virtually tangible bodily quality to 'intimacy' from the otherwise visceral abstraction 'privacy'. In the *Niddah* literature, this is more often referenced by women who frame this sense of privacy in terms of their "secret" or their

⁶⁵ LaMothe-Johnston email correspondence: "Seeking Bibliographic Suggestions," November 28, 2017.

⁶⁶ Rivkah Slonim, "Introduction," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, ed. Liz Rosenberg (Jerusalem: Urim, 2006); Reuven P. Bulka, "A Most Delicate Mitzvah," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, ed. Rivkah Slonim and Liz Rosenberg (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), 64–75; Norman Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses: Jewish Insights into Marriage and Married Life*. (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1987).

“personal rhythm,”⁶⁷ binding this experience of intimacy inextricably within both the temporal and corporeal structures in a way that begs for hyphenating these domains.

An additional consequence of this amplified attunement reflects Csordas’s concepts of co-embodiment which can manifest in a variety of ways. At least two authors, and myself, have observed the male partner becoming more aware of the approach of their female partner’s menses than themselves, which is particularly interesting in the case of irregular cycles. Additionally, more than one author in *Niddah* literature has noted that *Niddah* can synchronize a couple’s sex drives. This speaks to a hormonal synchronization which indicates that *Niddah* can impact couples on a profoundly biological level, as well as the more emotional, relational level I focus on here.

Bringing It All Together: Bodily Becoming Meets Relational Neurology

An alternate way to understand and explain the amplification capacity in *Niddah*, which may appeal to some readers more than others, draws on the neurology of relationship. Specifically, a recursivity in neural conditioning results from repeated patterns of behavior. Dan Siegel’s synthesis of research on the role of interpersonal relationships in the development of mind argues that our interpersonal interactions literally forge connections within the brain’s neural networks.⁶⁸ Applied to ritual analysis, this argues that practices of self or bodily becoming are enacted through full body neural networks and directly condition neurological pathways. Mirror cells function by activating parts of the brain associated with the movements observed in another person and. For example, if I see you pat your head, my mirror cells will activate in my brain, arm, wrist, and hand in an approximation of your movement without any actual movement on my part. Thus, mirror cells may be understood as fundamentally wired for reciprocal interaction and particularly important for appreciating the mutuality of visceral-cognitive affects orchestrated through a *Niddah* couple’s bodily movements over the long term. Regular repetition of ritual behaviors such as those generated through *Niddah* observance activates mirror cells, trains muscle memory, and reconfigures neurological networks in those parts of the brain

⁶⁷ Tamar Frankiel, “To Number Our Days,” in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, by Rivka Slonim, ed. Liz Rosenberg (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), 13–22.; Roni Loeb Richter, “A Different Time,” in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), 131–33.
⁶⁸ Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2012).

involved in enacting *Niddah's* bodily interactions. Through these multiple levels of neuro-physiological attunement, couples come to literally embody sexual and non-sexual patterns of their unique relationality with each other, and to a degree, literally embody their relationship with each other. Not only does neural recursivity lend further explanation and credence to colloquial claims that *Niddah* observance can synchronize a couple's sex drives, as described in the previous examples of co-embodiment, but that such bio-chemical attunement synchronizes around the female partner's ovulatory and menstrual cycles,⁶⁹ underscoring *Niddah* as a fundamentally gynocentric ritual practice.

Siegel explains that these connections, forged through repeated patterns of physical and verbal interpersonal interactions, directly augment the brain's neurology in a recursive manner. This recursivity means that as a certain set of interactions repeats, they begin to change or augment existing neural pathways, the brain and body together through the whole-body neural network, become primed to anticipate certain realities based on prior experience. Siegel refers to this as the "relational aspect of mind."⁷⁰ This anticipated reality contours the brain to perceive what it anticipates, conditioning the very world within which the individual understands themselves as operating. These anticipated realities, when encountered, are experienced by the brain as *the* reality that individual encounters. It is this neurologically constructed world that Siegel understands as the mind that exists beyond the physical body of the individual. In *Niddah-observant* marriages, this perceived world *is* the marriage itself. Moreover, a couple's repeated enactment of *Niddah* / non-*Niddah* as lived ritual patterns of relationality, from day to day, month to month, year to year underscores the continually emergent nature of their relationship and its marriage-mind. The key here, regardless of the ritual indeterminacy of individual couples, is that *Niddah's* ritualized behavioral strictures affect its practitioners on both the conscious and subconscious levels.

Ritual Indeterminacy: Questioning Embodiment and Efficacy

⁶⁹ Norman Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses: Jewish Insights into Marriage and Married Life*. (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1987); Tamar Frankiel, "To Number Our Days," in *Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology*, by Rivka Slonim, ed. Liz Rosenberg (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996); Rachel Adler et al., "Ten Women Tell ... the Ways We Are: [Choices and Changes Made to Live as Jewish Feminists]," *Lilith: The Independent Jewish Women's Magazine* 1, no. 2 (1977): 4-16.

⁷⁰ Daniel J. Siegel, *Mind: A Journey to the Heart of Being Human*, First edition. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 262.

Niddah's proscriptions around direct and indirect touch requires each couple to negotiate and create their own ways of interacting around these proscriptions within both their domestic-family spaces and public spaces. While some *Niddah* ritual manuals suggest strategies for especially challenging situations, like passing an infant from one parent to the other, how couples choose to enact (or to not enact) the range of these recommendations are experienced as highly individual to each couple. Moreover, their individualized enactments condition both the ritual practices themselves and thereby the impact of that ritual upon practitioners. This aspect of reciprocity between the ritual practices and the practitioners, and their highly unique set of interactions informing these reciprocal behaviors, brings Thomas Csordas's concepts of *ritual indeterminacy*⁷¹ into play with LaMothe's *bodily becoming*. Rather than belaboring the variations that indeterminacy can bring to *Niddah* marriages amplified into "transcendence", I will use these combined concepts to explore ways that *Niddah* can play out in less functional or troubled relationships, or how "[*Niddah*] can not save a bad marriage."⁷² *Niddah's* somatic attention does not have a perfect track record concerning marital harmony and longevity. Since *Niddah* is enacted within and informed by the context of a couple's intimate interpersonal relationship, the dynamics of their relationship inform both their enactment and their experience of the ritual practices, and at the same time, these ritual practices *amplify* those same interpersonal dynamics, for better or for worse. Naomi Marmon observes, "For women who are, by their own admission, unhappy in their relationships, the concentration of physical intimacy that *Taharat hamishpacha* entails fosters intense sexual pressure, which can be very stressful."⁷³

Within *Niddah* literature, Rabbi Reuven Bulka wrote an essay outlining interpersonal dynamics which can complicate or completely undermine a couple's *Niddah* observance, and I will argue exacerbate problematic dynamics within their relationship.⁷⁴ In one sense, this section tests the theories I have present above. Do the combination of theories outlined here account for negative experiences of *Niddah* that occur despite or perhaps as a result of its particularly intense modes of somatic

⁷¹ Thomas J. Csordas, *Body/Meaning/Healing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁷² Rivkah Slonim, "The Mystery and Magic of Mikvah,".

⁷³ Naomi Marmon, "Reflections on Contemporary Miqveh Practice," in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, ed. Rahel Wasserfall (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 242.

⁷⁴ Reuven P. Bulka, "A Most Delicate Mitzvah".

attention? As Catherine Bell observed, “ritual produces nuanced relationships of power...defining, empowering, and constraining”⁷⁵ those power constructions that the enacting couple bring to their *Niddah* performances. The near infinite variations of interpersonal power dynamics that any couple can bring to *Niddah* may be understood in Csordas’s terms of indeterminacy of ritual experience. Very specifically, the indeterminant interpersonal power dynamics of each couple directly impacts their performance and experience of *Niddah*. R. Reuven P. Bulka, and several ethnographic respondents, have pointed out that *Niddah* observance becomes a satisfying experience of marriage only when the partners achieve a mutually satisfying cooperative arrangement featuring the relational skills of flexibility, mutuality, and respect.⁷⁶ The reality is that few marriages can claim this for all their *Niddah* years. Underlying issues between the couple can manifest in *Niddah* observance through arguments, avoiding intimacy, justifying emotional withdrawal, refusing to immerse in the mikvah to maintain the physical and sexual separation, or otherwise engaging *Niddah* as a weapon.⁷⁷ Thus we may understand *Niddah*’s somatic modes of attention as intensifying interpersonal dynamics like steam forced through coffee grounds, producing an espresso version of the marriage. The pressures that *Niddah* observance puts marriage through can amplify marital tensions causing them to come to the surface sooner than they might otherwise. What a couple does with this intensified experience of their marriage reflects the dynamics of their relationship. Do they address problems constructively or destructively? Or do they avoid problems, letting them fester and worsen? –for how long? Do they blame *Niddah* for the problems? Would eliminating *Niddah* make their relationship problems become better –or only less obvious? Here we see that not only can *Niddah*’s somatic modes of attention intensify the experience of problems within a couple’s relationship, but that even *Niddah*’s time structures can be manipulated as an instrument of spousal warfare. Such spousal warfare underscores *Niddah*’s ritual structures as a structure or a tool which couples can engage to augment their relationship for better or for worse. Thus, the dynamics that a *Niddah* couple brings to this ritual observance directly impacts

⁷⁵ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, USA, 1992), 221.

⁷⁶ Reuven P. Bulka, “A Most Delicate Mitzvah,” 68.

⁷⁷ Reuven P. Bulka, “A Most Delicate Mitzvah,” 69; Ellie Jacobs, “Forced Marriage: ‘It Took 14 Years to Realise I Wanted to Live before I Died,’” *Jewish News: Britain’s Biggest Jewish Newspaper*, February 11, 2021, 4:17 pm edition.

both their experience of their relationship *and* their experience of the ritual observance itself.

Does this mean a couple is “at fault” for “incorrectly” observing *Niddah* and making themselves miserable? No. Rather, by recognizing *Niddah*’s structures as quasi-independent amplifying relational tools, couples can harness *Niddah*’s potential as both a diagnostic and remediator, providing them a means to manage their relationship more intentionally. As a diagnostic, I look to the micro-interactions that characterize both a couple’s *Niddah* and non-*Niddah* periods to identify mismatches in needs and expectations from the relationship, or as symptoms signaling deeper conflicts that would benefit from attention and perhaps intervention. These same micro-interactions also constitute a space where a couple can make small changes in their interactions that have potentially deep reach and resonance because of *Niddah*’s capacity for attunement and amplification. Micro-interactions around *Niddah* observance can become a space of intentional experimentation, a shared point of reference for communicating about what works and what doesn’t for each member of the couple. Thus, *Niddah* can provide both a space and means of consciously recalibrating the relationship over time. This therapeutic engagement of *Niddah*, which some couples may already intuitively engage, point to clinical and pastoral applications made available by understanding *Niddah*’s structures in terms of their socio-cultural functionality. This understanding requires taking *Niddah*’s claims of ritual efficacy seriously and unpacking its ritual structures in light of both ritual and anthropological theories.

Conclusion: The Expansive Relevance of an Anthropology of Menstruation

In many respects, academia has lacked the theoretical tools and perspectives to adequately and respectfully address *Niddah*, or other menstrual rituals, until this past decade or so. This present study is highly dependent on postcolonial/post-modern theories of the non-human subject and theories of human embodiment. Foremost, indexical analysis of menstrual rituals requires incorporating other socio-cultural domains into consideration of the ritual practices themselves. In this light, a revision of Douglas’s comments on the Lele menstrual-weapons taboo could involve a more detailed and blended examination of both the Lele cultures of hunting and weaponry with the wider Lele concepts of menstruation and both men’s and women’s relationship to hunting and weapons both generally and during menstruation. As this study of *Niddah* demonstrates, once indexical domains are identified, then structural ritual analysis

and considerations of ritual indeterminacy contribute to understanding how menstrual rituals condition specific intracultural relationships that, in turn, condition culturally specific experiences of self-in-relation to the interpersonal and cultural ecosystem of the lived ritual practice.

I close by briefly tapping into two examples of the types of research questions that open up by applying ritual studies to an indexical analysis of menstrual rituals and how ritualized menstrual practices can enrich our knowledge of the indexed cultural domain. First, consider how this approach can forge a new path from Douglas's observed indexical relationship between menstruation and weapons. Building on anthropologies of non-human entities and studies of ritual's roles in relationality we can ask: What happens when we take seriously the claims of *dis-efficacy* asserted through the menstrual-weapon taboo? Are there other ritualized interactions with hunting tools that the menstrual taboos situate within? How do weapons-menstrual taboos cultivate temporal or gender-specific relationships to hunting? -between sexual partners? What do we learn about hunting and weapons by examining the structures that articulate these taboos?

Second, ritual theories that give attention to the ways that rituals place people in intentional relationship with one another, cultivating culturally specific forms of relationality supports richly constructive analytical questions for the Rastafari House of Bobo Shanti's three-week menstrual separation. How does this ritual pattern cultivate the marital relationship?⁷⁸ -How are women's relationships with each other cultivated through these patterns? How are men's relationships cultivated by their equivalent separation from their wives? How is the Bobo Shanti sexual ethic characterized and cultivated through this three week-off and one to two-week on pattern? How is child rearing and growing-up flavored by parents' ritual separations? How do children navigate needs and desires met differently by mother, father, and both parents as a unit, which the Bobo Shanti patterns of menstrual separation articulate as distinct spaces in time? These questions about children's participation and experiences of these menstrual practices, suggests that more than marriage per se, that of Bobo Shanti menstrual separations indexes the entire family unit. Rastafari religio-culture holds menstrual prohibitions surrounding the preparation and participation in communal ganja ceremonies for women during their menstrual and reproductive years, pointing to an indexical relationship with the domain of sacramental marijuana.

⁷⁸ My thanks to Dr. Shamara Wyllie Alhassan for sharing this information with me.

This latter set of questions dovetails with Simon Coleman's recent call to include the wider impacts of ritual in terms of expanded ritual ecologies.⁷⁹ When we widen our lens to view the ritual ecologies around *Niddah*-observant couples and communities, the disciplinary range of menstrual studies expands greatly. In addition to the therapeutic applications for *Niddah* marital intervention described in the previous section, there are already rich ecologies of ritual education and support within *Niddah*-observant communities. Orit Avishai's sociological research on the development of "*Niddah* culture-industry" in Israel outlines the diverse social ecologies involved in promoting and maintaining *Niddah* as a culture-wide practice. Beyond the print literature and digital apps also circulating throughout the world, Israeli *Niddah* ecologies have recently grown to include entire institutional networks for engaged couples about *Niddah* observance, providing refresher courses for established couples, training women trainers and *yoetzet* (women halakhic *Niddah* consultants), and women "purity examiners" who can help a couple determine if an irregular bleeding event sources from the uterus (requiring *Niddah* observance) or from elsewhere in the vaginal area (not requiring *Niddah* observance). Further ecological consideration of *Niddah* would include the ways that obstetricians, labor and delivery nurses, midwives, and doulas learn about and accommodate the ritual needs of couples during and after childbirth. Doulas and other birth coaches are particularly popular among strictly observant *Niddah* couples because fathers are prohibited from touching their partners once the uterine bleeding of labor begins, and until she has immersed in the mikvah several weeks after childbirth. Closer to the family ecology, children of *Niddah* observant parents are sometimes engaged unknowingly to mediate their parent's inability to pass objects or eat and drink from the same vessels during *Niddah*.⁸⁰ Unarguably, *Niddah*, and other menstrual rituals, are embedded in complex ritually articulated social ecologies, which are rendered invisible when hyper-focusing on women as solo practitioners.

In addition to these post-modern anthropological and ritual theories, the theoretical frameworks presented here also depend heavily on recent acceptance of transdisciplinary scholarship. In the sense that the removal of one discipline hampers the capacity

⁷⁹ Simon Coleman, "Presidential Lecture" (Society for the Anthropology of Religion (SAR) Conference, Victoria College, University of Toronto, 2019).

⁸⁰ If the object is handled by a third party between being touched by each member of the couple, then it is no longer passed hand to hand or becomes a communal cup or plate, nullifying the erotic quality of sharing a plate or drinking from the same vessel.

for the remaining disciplines to make their argument, menstrual studies necessitate transdisciplinarity.⁸¹ The research that produced the analytical frameworks present here, involved mutually informative engagement between textual and ethnographic methods, in addition to drawing on scholarship across multiple disciplines of anthropology, religious studies, and ritual studies, and gender studies. This latter discipline supported taking the *Niddah* literature and lived ritual experience seriously to recognize men as ritual co-performers. This transdisciplinary range expands when considering the additional fields where this new theorization of *Niddah* specifically, and menstrual rituals generally, stands to radically reorient the scholarship conducted in those fields on both menstruation and its indexed entities. In the case of *Niddah*, the richer insights into Jewish marriage afforded by analyzing the indexical relationship between its menstrual rituals and marriage have the potential to fundamentally shift structuralist perspectives and assumptions that dominate cross-discipline socio-cultural studies of marriage. For example, how do rhetorics of marriage in *Niddah* literature suggest alternative measures of “marital satisfaction,” pointing to unexamined cultural biases in research on “marital satisfaction” and what constitutes “healthy marriages”?⁸² Thus, a new multi-disciplinary question becomes possible: how do different menstrual-marital structures produce qualitatively different affective priorities and different interpersonal relationalities? More broadly: How do different social structures emphasize different facets of relationality through the cultivation of different styles of interpersonal interaction? Considering ritual structures in terms of the interpersonal dynamics that these interactions cultivate has the potential to highlight varieties of relationality that are invisible largely because we don’t have the frameworks to comprehend them.

⁸¹ I received this definition from of transdisciplinarity from Dr. Lisa Anderson, Faculty Chair of Women’s and Gender Studies at Arizona State University.

⁸² I have written a course paper on exactly this question with plans to submit for publication.