



## RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

EDITOR, TORAH TIDBITS  
RAV, THE JERUSALEM SHUL - BAKA, JERUSALEM

# Ritual Purity as a Cornerstone

“When a woman has a discharge, her discharge from her flesh being blood, she shall be in a state of separation (*be-niddatah*) for a seven-day period...” (Leviticus 15:19). Thus begin the laws of *niddah*, which govern ritual purity within the family. Sometimes these are maligned as strictures which are unkind, or even disparaging, to married women. Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook brilliantly elucidated the rules and regulations to show that they are in fact meant to protect a woman’s honor and maintain her dignity and elegance.

Rav Kook began with a general observation on the nature of men and women. A man, he said, has a strong desire, and therefore may attempt to dominate the relationship. In this quest for dominance, the man is liable to inadequately show respect for and validate the feelings of the woman. This sours the possibility of fostering and maintaining a relationship of genuine respect and intimacy. The laws of *niddah* create a period during which physical intimacy is forbidden, and therefore encourage other forms of intimacy that restore balance to the relationship and are pleasing for the woman.<sup>1</sup>

Another positive outcome of observing *niddah* law is that the enforced separation increases spouses’ yearning and appreciation for each other, thereby strengthening the bond of marriage. This idea is expressed boldly in the Talmud:

Rabbi Meir would say: Why does the Torah say a *niddah* [is impure] for seven days? [Otherwise] one would become accustomed to and displeased by her. The Torah [therefore] said let her be impure for seven days, so that she will be as dear to husband as under the wedding canopy.<sup>2</sup>

This idea of cultivating an impassioned attraction between spouses, said Rav Kook, is particularly important during the years when parents have their hands full with children and work. With each *niddah* cycle, the enchantment is rekindled so that the attraction never grows stale.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from the inestimable benefit provided to a relationship, Rav Kook further detailed the positive spiritual effects of observing *niddah* law. The period of monthly separation frees the couple from the shackles of desire and “lifts the soul” (מְרוֹמֵם אֶת הַנְּפֶשֶׁת). Observing this lifestyle facilitates focusing on one’s inner life, “increasing fear and love of God.” Not only does this elevate the state of the couple, but it ennoble the entire nation, as generation after generation follows these laws down to the very last detail.<sup>4</sup>

2. *Niddah* 31b.

3. Shalev, *Nelchah*, 53.

4. *Ibid.*, 54.

1. *Pinkasei ha-Re'iyah*, vol. 1, *pinkas* 1, 42.

Although the institution of *niddah* has a number of positive effects, Rav Kook cautioned that we should not mistake them for the logic behind the mitzvah per se. In other words, the essence of the mitzvah as an expression of the divine will is beyond our ken.<sup>5</sup> Overemphasis on practical effects can also pose a danger to observance by undermining our resolute commitment to *devar Hashem*, the word of God, because it is a decree of God. Rav Kook concretized the peril through the following Talmudic tale:

There was an incident involving a student who learned a great deal of Mishnah and Bible and attended to Torah scholars greatly. Nevertheless, he died in his prime.

His wife would take his tefillin around the synagogue and study halls, saying to them, “It is written in the Torah, ‘For it is your life and the length of your days’ (Deuteronomy 30:20). My husband learned a great deal of Mishnah and Bible and attended to Torah scholars greatly, so why did he die in his prime?” No one would respond to her.

Once I (=the prophet Eliyahu) was hosted by her, and she related that entire event. I said to her, “My daughter, during your *niddah* days, how did he act toward you?”

She said to me, “God forbid, he would not touch me even with his pinky.”

“During your days of wearing white, how did he act toward you?”

“He would eat, drink, and sleep next to me with bodily contact, but he did not think of conjugal relations.”

I said to her, “Bless the Omnipresent who killed him, for he did not show respect to the Torah. For

5. *Mitzvot Re'iyah, Yoreh De'ah*, 195:9.

the Torah says, ‘Do not come close to a woman in her *niddah* impurity’ (Leviticus 18:19).”<sup>6</sup>

Rav Kook interpreted this to mean that the young man did not give sufficient weight to the divine dimension of the law. The budding Torah scholar found it logical to separate from his wife during the actual menstruation, whereas during the additional days that require careful observation for blood he felt that he did not need to keep his distance. Ritual purity, however, has a divine logic to it, and it must be followed even when it appears irrational.<sup>7</sup>

Rav Kook had great faith in those coming to build up the land, and he often tried to bring them to Torah observance. In a noteworthy letter, *Igeret ha-Taharah*, he appealed to the settlers to observe this demanding area of Torah law. With his legendary love and compassion for his fellow Jews, Rav Kook tried to convince them to establish or maintain their commitment to ritual purity, which he believed to be indispensable to fulfilling the destiny of the Jewish people.<sup>8</sup>[9] He exhorted them:

“Whoever aspires to see the physical and spiritual betterment of the Jewish people, now and for generations to come, should rouse others, without any shame, to be exceedingly meticulous about Torah law concerning the *niddah* and the proper method of purification.”<sup>9</sup> ■

6. *Shabbat* 13a–b.

7. *Ein Ayah, Shabbat*, 1:60.

8. *Igeret ha-Taharah*, partially reproduced in Shalev, *Nelchah*, 62–63.

9. *Ibid.*, 64.

**Rabbi Goldscheider** is the author of the newly published book ‘Torah United’ (OU Press), featuring divrei Torah on the weekly parasha from Rav Kook, Rabbi Solovetichik, and the Chassidic Masters.