The laws of *niddah* are not intended to distance you from your body.

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**The desire to remain in a state of purity leads women to impose unnecessary restrictions on themselves and at the same time to neglect their own bodies. How can one strike a balance between different needs and desires, without being overly stringent on one hand and without denying the body on the other?**

Our society tends to value self-awareness as a fundamental trait, typically associated with introspection, self-criticism, and basic psychological understanding. However, the boundaries of self-awareness do not stop at the psyche; attention to the body and awareness of its sensations are also necessary. *Paying attention to and being sensitive to how our bodies express themselves can teach us something about ourselves.*

Body signals can indicate mood, or reveal something about repressed feelings or unconscious states. They may even flash as a distress signal for disruptions in our health. Halakhah *also requires attention to the body, albeit in a completely different manner. It guides the woman to pay attention to discharges and bleeding from the uterus and to understand their source, based on several factors.*

**The desire to remain in purity.**

The halakhic language of the laws of *niddah* establishes various criteria—such as color, size, and timing of a vaginal discharge, and so on—by which the nature of the discharge is determined. Flexibility in the laws of stains allows significant weight to be given to the viewer’s perspective and to what the eye actually sees. *The rule is that what is not visible to the eye does not trigger a prohibition*; it is the very act of seeing and identifying the stain as a “stain” that creates the prohibition.

*But what exactly is a “stain”? In contemporary Western society, the standard of cleanliness and sterility has reached unprecedented levels.*Toiletpaper, cleaning products, disposable pads and tampons, trash cans, drainage systems, and running water—all these seemingly trivial components of our daily lives did not exist until about two hundred years ago and have, in fact, transformed the reality in which the laws of *niddah* were shaped.

Additionally, advertisements for menstrual products promise women that their menstrual cycle will go unnoticed, both by themselves and by those around them, and will not disrupt their daily routine. The product’s absorbency is depicted in the advertisement with a non-threatening blue color. *By such standards, any visible stain or deviation from the (unprecedented!) criteria of cleanliness becomes, in the woman's eyes, a blemish that initiates a prohibition, even though this is not necessarily the case according to* halakhah*.*

*In this context, women tend to impose unnecessary stringencies on themselves***.** They view the stain with a modern eye, accustomed to cleanliness, and see it as dirt, an undesirable, negative, and problematic phenomenon. A discharge that is not halakhically problematic might improperly be perceived as prohibitive. Hence, the common guidance for women has emerged: do not look, avert your gaze, avoid examining the toilet paper, the panty liner, or the underwear. Directing one’s gaze toward those things opens up doubts, while averting one’s gaze allows one to avoid “*niddah* impurity” and remain in purity.

Photo by Samuel Zeller on Unsplash

**Not every appearance is prohibitive.**

Social norms, combined with the halakhic concept of averting one’s gaze, create a sense of alienation between a woman and her body, fostering feelings of rejection, denial, and suppression of her physical self. *Diverting attention away from the body comes with a cost that it is important to acknowledge.*The various discharges from one’s body can signal hidden internal processes, sometimes even indicating medical issues. Lack of attention to the body and avoidance of the signals it sends can distance a woman from her body and herself, potentially causing her to miss distress signals that her body is communicating.

This creates a complex tension: the desire to maintain purity and avoid troubling doubt leads to averting one’s gaze, while the need to maintain a healthy and attentive dialogue with the body requires the opposite, directing one’s gaze. How can one balance between the two, without being overly stringent on one hand and without denying the body on the other?

First, it is important to understandand *internalize the basic halachic principle: not every stain renders a woman* niddah. In general, it is preferable to drop the term “stain” and adopt a more neutral term, “appearance.” The body produces various secretions, and the eye sees different sights. When a woman says “I saw something,” she is expressing a neutral and non-judgmental observation, whereas the statement “I saw a stain” already carries negative connotations. *The ambiguous phrase “something seen” allows for a healthy space of doubt, based on a more accurate halakhic and physical assumption: not every discharge is problematic.*

The halakhic aspiration is to enable a healthy and good marital life in purity, and therefore to avoid prohibitions as much as possible. One of the key principles in the halakhic rulings regarding stains is “where there is doubt in a matter of Torah law—be stringent; when there is doubt in a matter of rabbinic law—be lenient.” The Torah prohibition applies to discharge coming from the uterus, so halakhic rulings strive to find as many reasons as possible to question whether the source of the stain is indeed from the uterus. The less certainty there is, the more room there is to find a leniency and regard the stain as not triggering a prohibition.

Photo: Karla Vidal

**Halachic and Medical Diagnosis – Different Perspectives on the Same Appearance**

*It is important to distinguish between the halakhic determination of a discharge and a medical diagnosis. Sometimes, what is not considered forbidden from a halakhic perspective may still be medically abnormal, and this should be taken into account.*It is critical for a woman to be Aattentive to and aware of her body. Any change in sensation or any unusual occurrence requires taking responsibility and getting the appropriate attention. While not all physical signs necessarily indicate distress, it is essential to maintain daily connection and attentiveness to your body. Constantly listening to these signals will allow you, if necessary, to be alert to any irregularities.

The One who “heals all flesh and performs wonders” created the human with a soul within a body and entrusted the responsibility for the body to each person him- or herself. It is our responsibility to take care of all 248 (according to the traditional count) of our limbs and organs as much as we can. Constant attentiveness to her body allows a woman to trust herself without fear, to appreciate a body that does not remain silent but signals and communicates. *This is a delicate attentiveness that does not imply grand judgements and is not alarmed by the body’s signals, but rather knows how to give them space and allow for a range of interpretations, both halakhic and medical.*It is a movement of faith: faith in the Creator of humanity and in the Torah of Israel, and faith in myself and my ability to recognize and understand my body, to sharpen my senses to perceive it, and to develop care, attentiveness, and responsibility.