1. **Letter of introduction**

Shalom,

My name is Dr. Michal Prins, a married mother of four residing in Moshav Sde David, Israel. For the past decade, I have been involved in research and activism related to national-religious women's sexuality and the body. In the past year, I completed my Ph.D. in the Gender Studies program at Bar Ilan University. The title of my thesis is: “Between Body and Society: Women's Sexuality in National-Religious Society.”

In addition to my academic work, I founded the Yahel Center, which I have managed for the past eight years and which works to advance healthy sexuality within the National-Religious community. The center trains male and female professionals in the field, provides counseling for couples on healthy intimacy, organizes professional conferences, and actively promotes social change in this arena (merkazyahel.org.il).

Under the auspices of the Yahel Center, I have developed a unique model for counseling married couples. Using this model, I have assisted over 200 couples and trained over 300 intimacy counselors. Currently, I am adapting the model as a written guide that will be widely available and accessible. In addition, over the past three years, I have written a regular column in *Nashim* [Women] magazine, which has a readership of 40,000 religious women, on issues relating to the body and sexuality.

I would like to participate in the HBI Scholars in Residence Programs from the middle of August through the end of October 2020 (15.08.2020-31.10.2020).

1. **Project Title:** The Body Under Halakhic Regulation—academic paper
2. **Project Abstract**

Religious women are socialized into ideas of family purity prior to marriage, and arrive at marriage already accepting and dedicated to the observance of the halakhic practices that are the focus of this paper. Following marriage, and with the commencement of halakhic practices centered around the body, women experience a gap, at the center of which is the body, with its characteristics and signals. This point of convergence is experienced as conflicted, since it is an encounter between social demands and the needs and physical processes of a specific body, including the formation of the sexual subject, the fertility journey and contraception, and questions about bodily autonomy within the spousal domain.

The aim of this project is to expand our understanding of the body’s place under halakhic regulation.

The research framework is a qualitative study that uses thematic extraction methods.

1. **Project Description**

While writing my doctoral thesis, I addressed questions concerning the female national-religious body with regard to sexuality, relationships, and halakha. Within the framework of my current project, I would like to expand the chapter concerning the body under halakhic regulation into an academic paper.

The paper will examine how women contend with, and the various strategies they employ for, their halakhically-regulated bodies, in the light of the concept of “the point of conflict between the body and society.”

Discussion of the laws of family purity should be extended beyond the domains of theoretical halakha, identity, or relationships. The changes that have taken place regarding the body in recent years demand not only that questions be asked concerning its place within halakhic regulation, but also that a platform be provided for listening to the body under regulation (this is reflected extensively in the literature review).

I intend to conduct interviews on this subject in Israel prior to the trip, and during my residence I will assemble the data as a research paper.

1. **Literature Review**

Judaism, which views physical-sexual relations as restricted to the legal context of marriage, prohibits all other physical relations. Following marriage and the start of physical-sexual relations, the married couple becomes aware of a vast system of commandments, halakhic regulations, prohibitions, and restrictions that will accompany them throughout their married life and which are centered on the woman's body and its monthly menstrual cycle.

In parallel to this process of halakhic regulation of the married woman’s body, which begins during the period leading up to the wedding, the formation of the woman as a sexual subject also intensifies. This process, which is described through the prism of the woman’s sexual experience—masturbation, sexual satisfaction not connected to sexual relations, the ability to enjoy the body, and physical, spiritual, and social well-being—begins in adolescence (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005). However, among religious women, sexual experience only acquires a significant place during the first sexual encounter and at the start of routine married life, when the woman encounters her body and her sexuality on a regular basis.

The development of the female sexual subject gives rise to a complex and paradoxical range of responses, from restriction, oppression, and risk to exploration, discovery, enjoyment, and agency (Vance, 1984). Studies of secular women have shown that adolescence, when the sexual subject begins to develop, is, according to the research, a time of reduced agency and self-esteem (Tolman, 1994; Martin, 1996). Adolescents receive conflicting messages about sexuality from the educational system, which emphasizes a cultural double standard. These messages prohibit gaining experience, experimentation, and the exploration/trial and error required for sexual development. Thus the emergence of the sexual subject is inhibited and there is no room for the affirmation of sexual feelings (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002).

Halakhic regulation of a woman’s body after her marriage produces a conflicted physical experience that triggers the start of the development of the sexual subject. This is a turning point, where a woman’s ability to negotiate the conflicting claims over her body is revealed. This turning point can be better described by adopting Grosz’s interpretation (1994), which offers the possibility of establishing an “embodied subjectivity.” Grosz, who argues that many existing theories marginalize the body, seeks to refocus attention on the body and to consider it a significant component in the process of consolidating the sexual subject. In her view, theories of the body have two main directions of inquiry: those that approach their topic from the outside-in, and consider the body as influenced and shaped by the world around it, and those that take an inside-out approach, considering the body as influencing and shaping the world around it (Grosz, ibid).

The inside-out approach, represented in the theories of Freud, Schilder, and Merleau-Ponty, offers an explanation of the psychological structure as anchored in the body. For these thinkers, the mind is formed through the coding or translation of physical sensations, pleasures, passions, and experiences; the vehicle for this translation process is prevailing systems of social meaning. In contrast, the outside-in approach describes the social inscription of the body by educational, legal, medical, and economic systems. Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, and Guthrie are among the notable thinkers who have described the processes and powers that actively form the body as a social construct. For them, the law, morality, and values constitute expressions of the hegemonic discourse that, through its categories and associated practices, produces the body and its emotions and feelings.

Grosz (ibid), who opposes the binary poles of mind/body, sets out a theoretical model based on the metaphor of the geometric form of the Mobius strip. This form, which looks like a twisted figure eight, provides a variable interface between inside and outside. Grosz describes an enfolding of the mind into the body and the body into the mind, such that, in the merging movement of the Mobius strip, the one becomes the other. According to Grosz, the intersection between these two directions, inside-out and outside-in, enables consolidation of the sexual subject and obviates perceiving the body as an object.

Grosz's (ibid) interpretation is based on the a conceptualization of the body as “open materiality.” She argues that the subject must be observed from a combination of physical, subjective, and cultural stances, focusing on a possibly evolving collection of tendencies and potentialities. Through a simultaneous analysis of concepts from the worlds of the mind, the body, and culture, we can reveal the process of formation of the sexual subject and the agency that seeks to perceive the female body as “speaking” out of willfulness and autonomy, in order to mark its place in the world.

In this paper, I aim to use Grosz’s interpretation to elucidate the process by which religious women’s post-marriage embodied sexuality develops, as well as the body’s place within this process. This analysis, which will examine the complex processes that occur around the body, identity, subjectivity, culture, and discourses of meaning, will seek to draw out the complexity of the growth of subjectivity under the conditions that govern this growth. This research seeks to join additional studies that consider Grosz’s proposals of a theory that integrates the material body with the cultural body, and which can be used to explore the complexity of women's experiences (Ball, 2005; Russell, 2006; Davis & Walker, 2010).

From a halakhic point of view, the laws of family purity constitute an undisputable foundation for the home, the family, and Jewish marriage (Yanay & Rapoport, 1997; Engelberg & Novis-Deutsch, 2010), and are one of the most important of the 613 mitzvot.

The laws of family purity, or *niddah*, are a codex of detailed, fixed halakhic practices that define various aspects of itimate marital relations. At their basis is a sweeping prohibition against physical contact between the married couple from the moment of the onset of the woman’s monthly menstrual period until after a ritual purification process, which the laws also define in detail. These practices become an intrinsic part of a woman’s daily life upon her marriage, and have practical, psychological and physical implications, as well as implications for her identity (Hartman & Marmon, 2004; Rodrigous-Garcia, 2015; Prins, 2011; Uzan-Nachmani, 2015).

Observation of these halakhic practices, whose focus is the woman's body, occurs on a continuum that spans the intimate/private through the social/public. The practices center on issues relating to a woman’s intimate and private life, but they are also the subject of detailed discussions in the Beit Midrash. They encourage a woman to get to know her own body and make independent decisions, but also undermine her ability to do so and urge her to turn to halakhic authorities for every question and decision. Their observation by a married couple may also range from commitment and dedication to halakhic details and minutiae through partial observance and personal discretion.

Previous studies (Rodrigous-Garcia, 2015; Prins, 2011; Uzan-Nachmani, 2015) have addressed the experience of halakhic regulation over women's bodies through the prism of identity. This perspective focuses on the identity conflict that arises when a woman enters the world of the body, and examine how she copes and the strategies she employs to restore a sense of choice and control over her life. The experiences of religious women prior to marriage are revealed in interviews, in which women describe how they were repeatedly urged to relinquish their own desires in favor of a significant other, the group, faith, values, or ideology (Uzan-Nachmani, 2015). Further, their identity in the early stages of married life is examined through developmental, relationship, identity, and socialization theories. These studies describe identity conflicts around fertility, halakha, and relationships, and focus on conflict resolution, the consolidation of complex identities, and the creation of the subject. However, such an intensive focus on identity leaves no room for the conceptualization of the body as “open materiality,” or for examining the embodied subjectivity proposed by Grosz.

These studies situate the body as a stage within the identity development process. However, they do not analyze how the body influences the formation of the identity conflict itself, or the subsequent development of the sexual subject. Uzan-Nachmani (2015), for example, describes the process by which a woman, who is taught to be pleasing and self-effacing, experiences an identity conflict when she must choose between her old, familiar, pre-marriage identity, and the new aspects of identity required of her after marriage. Eventually, the woman resolves the conflict and regains a sense of choice and control. While Uzan-Nachmani (ibid) uses words like “discomfort,” “pain,” and “helplessness” to describe the experience of the body that precedes this identity conflict, she does not position this experience as an inherent stage within the identity conflict process itself. This paper seeks to focus on the experience of the body as an inherent part of the identity conflict process, and to identify it as a basis for the formation of the conflict. This paper also aims to interrogate the body’s place within the process of the establishment of embodied subjectivity in halakhically-regulated space.

The encounter Grosz (1994) describes between the outside-in (which includes the halakha, its interpretation, its social agents, and its shared cultural narrative) and the inside-out (which includes religious identity, female identity, and sense of halakhic commitment) produces an experience of the body that causes confrontation between a woman’s various identities. Interviews with married religious women reveal a complex story of the body; by listening to this story, we can understand the aspects of the body that play a central role in the development of embodied subjectivity.

1. **Curriculum vitae**

**Education:**

2018-2019 The Mandel Program for Leadership in Jewish Culture

2012-2018 Ph.D. in Gender Studies in the Interdisciplinary Program, Bar Ilan University. Thesis title: “Between Body and Society: Women's Sexuality in National-Religious Society”

2008-2010 MA Gender Studies in the Interdisciplinary Program, Bar Ilan University.

Thesis title: “Religious Women's Contention with Sexuality and the Body after Marriage”

2006-2008 BA Psychology, The Open University

2002-2005 SWA BA in Social Work, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

**Work experience:**

2012–present Founder and director of the Yahel Center for Personal Life Counseling and Training

2017-2019 Author of weekly column in *Nashim* [Women] magazine on issues relating to sexuality

2011 Army reserve service under career army conditions: Military Mental Health Officer, Jerusalem Recruiting Office

2010 Research assistant to Dr. Delila Amir, Department of Sociology and Gender Studies, Tel Aviv University

2004-2008 Facilitator and educator, Nativ, a course on Judaism and Zionism for new immigrant soldiers in the IDF

2006 Social worker in the Mateh Binyamin Regional Council Welfare Department

**Military service:**

2009-2018 Active service as a military mental health officer (rank of captain), Jerusalem Recruiting Office

2001-2002 Education officer, head of the information unit at Yad Vashem. Released with rank of first lieutenant

2000-2001 Teaching NCO at the Machva Alon (Alon Education and Instructional Center) Base within the Yuval course of supplementary education for soldiers who have 12 years of school

1. **Lecture topics**
2. The physical-religious revolution: on the sexual revolution in Israel's national-religious sector
3. Body activism: the struggle for bodily autonomy, and the High Court decision on the mikvah as a case study
4. Between body and culture: on the conflicted encounter between body and culture in the bedroom
5. **Where did I learn about the program?**

My PhD. supervisor Dr. Ronit Irshai, who is herself an alumna of the program, recommended I apply, and I also received a recommendation from another program alumna, Dr Rivka Neria Ben Shahar.