1. **Letter of introduction**

Shalom,

I am 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 in the field of national-religious women's sexuality and the body. In the past year, I completed my Ph.D. within 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, I established 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 motivates social change in this area (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 this model into a guide that will be accessible to all. 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 undergo a socialization process regarding family purity prior to marriage, and arrive from a position of acceptance of, and dedication to, the observance of the halakhic practices with which the above title is concerned. Following marriage, and upon the commencement of halakhic practices centered around the body, women experience a gap, in the middle 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 of a specific body, along with other physical processes, 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 research is to expand understanding of the place of the body under halakhic regulation.

The research framework comprises 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."

Discussions of the laws of family purity should be extended beyond theoretical halakha, identity, or relationships. The changes that have taken place regarding the body in recent years demand not only that questions be asked regarding 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 process the data into a paper.

1. **Literature Review**

Judaism, which views physical-sexual relations as restricted to the legal context of marriage, prohibits all physical relations that do not fall within this context. Following marriage and the start of physical-sexual relations, the married couple becomes aware of a vast system of mitzvot, halakhot, prohibitions, and restrictions that will accompany them throughout their married life and which are centered around the woman's body and its monthly cycle.

In parallel to the process of halakhic regulation of the married woman's body, which begins during the period leading up to the wedding, the process of formation of the sexual subject also intensifies. This process, which is described through the prism of 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, in religious women it is granted 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 paradox that ranges from restriction, oppression, and risk to exploration, discovery, enjoyment, and agency (Vance, 1984). Studies of secular women have shown that adolescence, during which the sexual subject begins to develop, is the time at which, according to research, agency is reduced and there is a reduction in self-esteem (Tolman, 1994; Martin, 1996). Adolescents receive conflicting messages about sexuality from an education system that emphasizes a cultural double standard. These messages prohibit experience and the search and exploration/wondering/errors required for its development, and thus the emergence of the sexual subject is inhibited and there is no room for the affirmation of sexual feelings (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002).

The halakhic regulation of a woman's body after her marriage has implications for the process of development of the subject, since it gives rise to a conflicted physical experience that becomes a trigger for the start of the process; a turning point in which women are situated and where their ability to enter into negotiations regarding the context for the claims on their bodies is revealed.

This turning point can be described by adopting Grosz's view (1994), which offers the possibility of establishing an "embodied subjectivity." Grosz, who notes the marginal attitudes of various theories vis-à-vis the body, seeks to place the body at the center and to reference it as a significant component in the subject's consolidation process. According to her, theories of the body have two main directions of inquiry—those that position their direction of inquiry from the outside-in, and which deal with the body as being influenced and shaped by the world around it; and those that position their direction of inquiry from the inside-out, and which consider 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 being anchored in the body. According to this approach, the mind is formed through the coding or translation of physical sensations, pleasures, passions, and experiences, where the vehicle for the translation process is systems of social meaning. In contrast, the outside-in approach describes the process of the social inscription of the body through education, legal, medical, and economic systems. Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, and Guthrie are among the notable thinkers who described the processes and powers that actively formed 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, produce the body and its emotions and feelings.

Grosz (ibid) who opposes the binary presentation of mind/body, offers a theoretical model based on the geometric form of the Mobius strip. This form, which looks like a figure eight, is twisted and provides a variable interface between the inside and the outside. With regard to the body, 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 the two directions, inside-out and outside-in, allows for the consolidation of the subject and suppresses the possibility of perceiving the body as an object.

Grosz's (ibid) proposal is based on the assumption that this defines "open materiality," and according to her an observation of the subject must be carried out from a combination of physical, subjective, and cultural meanings, as a collection of tendencies and potentialities that may evolve. A simultaneous analysis of concepts from the worlds of the mind, the body, and culture will enable the discovery of the process of subject formation and the agency that seeks to perceive the female body as "speaking" out of willfulness and out of an autonomous status, which seeks to mark its place in the world.

In this paper, I aim to use Grosz's (ibid) proposal in order to draw out the process by which the embodied subjectivity of religious women develops after marriage, as well as the place of the body within this process. This analysis, which comprises an accumulation of 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 it. This research seeks to join additional studies that consider Grosz's proposition 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 mitzvah of family purity constitutes an undisputable foundation for the existence of the home, the family and the Jewish marriage (Yanay & Rapoport, 1997; Engelberg & Novis-Deutsch, 2010), and is one of the most important of the 613 mitzvot.

The laws of "family purity" or the "laws of *niddah*" are the names for a codex of halakhic laws that deal with various aspects of personal relations between a man and his wife. These laws are detailed, fixed, and encompass many aspects of marriage. At their basis is a sweeping prohibition on touching by the couple from the moment of onset of bleeding from the uterus until after a process of purification, which is itself also defined in detail. Upon marriage, the laws of family purity become an inseparable part of a woman's daily life, and they have implications that are practical, psychological, physical, and which also concern identity (Hartman & Marmon, 2004; Rodrigous-Garcia, 2015; Prins, 2011; Uzan-Nachmani, 2015).

The laws, which are centered around the woman's body, converge into an issue that is discussed in private, marital, social, and public circles. The observation of halakhic practices stretches along a continuum from the woman's intimate and private life through detailed discussions in the Beit Midrash; from encouraging the woman to get to know her own body and make independent decisions through undermining her ability to do so and encouraging her to turn to halakhic authorities for every question and decision; and from the commitment and dedication of a woman and her husband to halakhic details and minutiae through partial observance and keeping halakhic traditions according to 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 examining the identity conflict that emerges upon a woman's entry into the world of the body, how she deals with this, and strategies to restore the feeling of choice and control over her life. These studies are concerned with the identity of religious women prior to marriage, which is expressed through a central experience that is revealed through the interview subjects who describe how they were repeatedly urged to give up their own desires to benefit a significant other, the group, or faith, values, and ideology (Uzan-Nachmani, 2015), and in the early stages of married life through developmental, relationship, identity, and socialization theories. They describe identity conflicts around fertility, halakha, and relationships, and are concerned with conflict resolution, consolidating complex identities, and the creation of the subject. The intensive focus on identity does not leave room for "open materiality" or for the possibility of establishing the embodied subjectivity proposed by Grosz.

These studies note the place of the body as a stage in the identity development process, but do not analyze its influence on the formation of the identity conflict, or on the subsequent process of the development of the subject. Uzan-Nachmani (2015), for example, describes in her study the process by which a woman, who is taught to be pleasing and self-effacing, develops an identity conflict, in which she must decide between various alternative identities: her old and familiar pre-marriage identity, and the new identity elements that are required of her following her marriage; and how eventually she resolves the conflict and regains a sense of choice and control. Uzan-Nachmani (ibid) describes the experience of the body with words like discomfort, pain, and helplessness as preceding the identity conflict stage but does not position this as an inherent stage within the process. This study seeks to focus on the physical experience of the process and to identify it as the basis for a meaningful stage of conflict formation, while raising the question of its place within the process by which embodied subjectivity is established within the regulated space.

It seems that the encounter that Grosz (1994) describes between the outside-in--including the halakha, its interpretation, its social agents, and its common cultural story--and the inside-out-- which includes religious identity, female identity, and sense of halakhic commitment--produces a current physical experience that confronts the woman's various identities. The interviews reveal a complex story of the body; by listening to this story, we can learn about the aspects of the body that play an important 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 Bachelor's degree 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 a 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" course—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—supplementary education for soldiers who have 12 years of school.

1. **Lecture topics**
2. The physical-religious revolution—regarding the sexual revolution in Israel's national-religious sector.
3. Body activism—the struggle for bodily autonomy. The Mikvah High Court 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 alumnus of the program, recommended the program to me; and I also received a recommendation from another program alumnus, Dr Rivka Neria Ben Shahar.