

CHAPTER 3

The Importance of Family Purity from a Medical Perspective

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Health and happiness in marriage – the schools of medicine and psychology look at family life according to Judaism.

The holy Torah guides the Jew on all matters of conduct from the minute he is born to the day he dies and is certainly in no need of any medical or scientific stamp of approval. Nevertheless, nowadays medicine confirms the logic behind the laws of Family Purity which totally correspond to the laws of biology and physiology governing the human body. This inference is especially pertinent to the guiding rules of physical contact between married couples regarding marital relations.

Chronologically speaking, there is an astoundingly precise parallel between the Jewish tradition and medical science concerning the three stages or periods that physiologically divide up the woman's monthly cycle:

The first period – the time it takes for the mucous membrane lining the womb to break down and disintegrate thereby causing the discharge of blood, medically termed menstruation, which is identical to that period of time determined by Jewish law and is similarly named.

The second period – the seven days following menstruation, termed the "period of proliferation", in which the womb rebuilds the previously severed membrane, coincide exactly with what Judaism terms as the "seven clean days" which come after issue of blood has completely ceased. Ovulation, which is the monthly process of detachment and release of ovules or ova from the ovary, occurs in the middle of the menstrual cycle. This is so that conception can occur in the event of this egg being fertilized by a male sperm cell. Ovulation coincides exactly with the time of ritual immersion, following the counted "seven clean days" required by Judaism.

The third period – which begins from the stage of ovulation and ends with the next onset of the menstruation cycle, is termed the "discharge period", in which the membrane lining the womb, stimulated by a hormone, thickens again and redevelops, in readiness for a potential pregnancy. This period is again parallel to the third period as defined by Judaism, which commences after ritual immersion has taken place and ends with the first sight of blood of the next menstruation cycle.

In addition to this most astoundingly precise match between the three stages of the monthly cycle from both a Jewish and a medical aspect, there lies a lot of medical common sense in the Jewish guidelines regarding intimate relations during these three stages. There is no need for scientific reasoning to clarify why medically there is no logic in having intimate relations during menstruation, taking into consideration the following facts and events that take place during this process:

- During menstruation the womb is bleeding and in a state of impair.
- The membrane lining the womb disintegrates and disappears.
- The blood vessels under the mucous membrane that remains are open and bleeding and turn this organ into a form of sponge that could draw germs into the blood stream during sexual relations, causing diseases and injury.
- During menstruation, the cervix is a little open to enable the discharge of blood from the womb and out of the body. Likewise it is also open to infection and disease which could be communicated through sexual relations.
- The vaginal membrane leading to the womb secretes an acidic substance which acts as a barrier and a disinfectant against bacteria reaching the womb. During menstruation, this substance becomes ineffective since it is acidic and blood which is alkaline-based neutralizes its effects.
- During menstruation, hormonal influences can cause physiological and emotional disorder which leads to dispirited behaviour and a low period of sexual desire.

If abstaining from sexual relations during menstruation sounds logical from a physiological, medical point of view, then where would the logic lie in abstinence during the "seven clean days" after the bleeding has completely ceased?

On the face of it, this question seems difficult to answer, however on reflecting upon what occurs in the womb during these days the answer becomes apparent.

Cessation of the bleeding at the end of the menstruation period does not mean that the inside of the womb has completely healed from the process of decomposition it has just undergone. The cessation of the bleeding only denotes that a new process of cell production and rebuilding of the womb's mucous membrane has begun, a process which takes seven days. Only at the end of these seven days, following the period of proliferation and following the development and formation of a new membrane which lines the inside of the womb, can it be safely declared that the womb is completely healed. One more point of interest on this subject is that the biological processes going on in the woman's body take into consideration the special condition of the womb during these seven days. In other words, once the womb has completed rebuilding the mucous membrane only then is it ready to receive the ovule.

The period following the seven days which in Judaism culminates in ritual immersion, is without the shadow of a doubt from a medical point of view the most suitable and logical time for having intimate relations for the following reasons:

- The womb is completely healed from the traumatic process it has undergone.
- There is a new mucous membrane lining the womb.
- The acidic substance secreted from the membrane lining the tubular tract leading to the uterus is once again at work as a disinfectant and barrier warding off bacteria that can cause infection in the uterus and the Fallopian tubes.
- Ovulation coincides biologically with fertilization which will hopefully lead to conception and offspring – the primary goal in marriage.

Despite the fact that the Torah is not a medical text book, and the main reason for keeping the Torah's commandments is not necessarily for health reasons, it's quite remarkable and interesting to see how contemporary studies on physiology and medicine rationally explain these laws, which are in fact statutes.

Once the parallel between the stages and different periods of the monthly cycle from the Jewish Halachic and the medical aspects are understood, one question remains to be asked: is medical science indicating that its data clearly and unequivocally prove

that living by the Halachic laws of Family Purity can have a positive influence on women's health and can even prevent diseases?

Medical studies point to the well-known statistical fact that cervical cancer, until some decades ago the most malignant and common plague amongst non-Jewish women the world over, was rare among Jewish women - incidence was extremely low in all corners of the Diaspora, regardless of country of origin, community, ethnic group or climate.

During the past few years, the incidence rate of this terrible disease has dropped considerably the world over due to early detection and diagnosis by a routine and periodical smear test (or Pap smear), in which cells are gathered from the outer opening of the cervix and are examined under a microscope to look for abnormalities. Sadly, the last few years have shown a rise in the incidence of cervical cancer among young Jewish women in Israel.

A research study carried out in Israel showed that each year about 100 new cases of cervical cancer are detected amongst Jewish women. Cancer researchers point to the direct connection between the disease and marital relations as dictated by Judaism, explaining the reasons for low incidence of the disease amongst Jewish women in the past and how alternating times of physical contact and abstinence in marital relations were observed and maintained by the Jewish nation only.

Until some decades ago, this way of life was undisputed and carried on from generation to generation in all the lands of the Diaspora, even by women who did not strictly observe the rest of the Jewish commandments.

Cancer researchers remark on the fact that a drop in observance of the Halachic laws pertaining to marital relations during the past decades together with the fact that we are living in a permissive society explain the loss of immunization, the rise in the incidence rate and why Jewish women have become just as vulnerable as the rest of the women in the world to this terrible disease.

Men's health can also benefit both physically and emotionally by keeping to the guidelines put down by the Jewish religion on this important subject. Research has proven that the percentage of male potency disorders in males having frequent intimate relations is much higher than those who have marital relations according to Judaism. By adhering to a regimen of restriction and abstinence in marital relations, male strength is renewed and revitalized, permitting the man to enjoy sexual activity to the full and until a ripe age. It is noteworthy to mention that just as there is a correlation between the guidelines laid down in Judaism vis à vis women's physiology and marital relations, in the same way a correlation exists between these laws and the man's psyche.

Beyond the positive and welcome consequences there is also a certain level of emotional satisfaction to be had from marital relations according to Judaism. By following the laws of the Torah the relationship between husband and wife is enhanced. But how can total physical separation between husband and wife of almost two weeks each month bring them closer? On the face of it, it would seem obvious that separation would only lead to schism and a weakening in the couple's relationship, however this is actually not so. As great as G-d's most perfect creation, man, may be and as impressive as his qualities may be, he is after all human and has weaknesses and negative traits. One of these is the inability to derive enjoyment and satisfaction on a permanent basis from routine pleasures, even those he enjoys most.

The period of separation causes the couple to maintain their attraction for each other and satisfaction and enjoyment in their intimate relations will be reinforced and renewed. Their relationship will continue to have the freshness and excitement of the most wonderful moment of their lives - their wedding night. Judaism offers in a practical way, the possibility of reliving this glorious moment every month, a kind of honeymoon on a small scale, which can be renewed every month throughout all the years of married life. In Rabbi Meir's ¹article it is easy to see how the Torah has a regard for man's spiritual tendencies and provided a rule of thumb that if abided by, ensures that habit and routine will not set in and gnaw at the couple's relationship

¹ One of the Tannaim, the great scholars quoted in the Mishnah

breeding discontent and tarnishing its beauty. Thus boredom which is destructive and can cause deterioration in marriage has no foothold in the Jewish family.

According to Judaism, intimate relations between husband and wife are a natural, basic and sanctified activity and abstaining from or ignoring these needs is forbidden. But this is not the sole and most important foundation for building a mutual relationship. Strictly speaking, intimate relations are an expression of the human inclination and are a direct interpretation of the spiritual love existing between husband and wife. Even though the Torah commands us to temporarily abstain from intimate relations, the couple learns to communicate on other levels and during this time they have to behave towards each other with respect and affection but without any physical expression of love. The period of abstinence provides them with an opportunity to become friends and talk more and listen to each other more. Their delicate relationship is based on mutual respect, affection and companionship. This temporary period of abstinence laid down by Halacha does not bring any harm to the relationship between husband and wife, on the contrary it strengthens, renews and revitalizes their intimate relationship and the love between them. During preparation for resuming their union, their desires and longings for each other are refreshed and regenerated. In this way a pleasant and healthy atmosphere prevails in the Jewish home and marital bliss together with mutual respect are preserved.