Memoir | Only Living Bodies Bleed

BY LYNNE GOLODNER

“I went into their bedroom and saw two beds,” my niece said after babysitting for an Orthodox rabbi’s children. “What’s that about?”

I nodded as it all came crashing back. “Orthodox couples don’t touch during the woman’s period until it ends plus seven days.”

Her eyes went wide.

“And they can’t touch, can’t pass the salt or the chicken or the baby, until the woman goes to the mikvah, the ritual bath,” I explained.

“Did you do that when you were religious?”

I nodded. “But I made him sleep in the smaller bed. I kept the king for myself.”

“I hope so,” she said.

I learned to be a religious wife in *kallah* (bride) classes that focused on the details of a woman’s body at every point in the month. It was required if I wanted an Orthodox rabbi to marry us, so I spent weeks at the kitchen table with a rabbi’s wife, reading the religious laws pertaining to a woman who bleeds. She turned the pages of a pink book (of course it was pink!), read passages aloud and explained how to live the laws. As a religious wife, I would check for blood in all the crevices of my most intimate parts to confirm that my cycle had concluded.

“The vagina is like an accordion, the folds tight together until it’s time to push out a baby,” she said. “Then, the skin unfurls, expanding to give the child space to come forth.”

In the Orthodox Jewish world, anyone with an open wound is prohibited from touching the Torah. This includes women during their cycles, even though menstruation is not a wound. The rule is not enforced for men, though they can choose to go to a mikvah at any time, and not just after bleeding—after a wet dream, for instance, or to purify before a holiday. They can go in broad daylight, with anyone noticing. They are not, like women, obligated to conceal this transformation in the darkness of late night. Women cannot go to the mikvah until after three stars shine in a night sky. Then they go quietly, humbly, into an unmarked building.

In most Orthodox synagogues, women are not allowed to touch the Torah, ever, just in case they might be bleeding. But I imagine by now, the reasons are far more vast than a simple monthly cycle, because even old women long past the age of menstruation do not have the privilege of touching or holding the holy scrolls. All the women sit behind a barrier, behind the men, told that they are holier, but relegated to being observers because they are so damn holy.

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I came to Orthodoxy from a liberal Jewish childhood, five years after I graduated from college, and after years of hooking up and yearning for a lasting relationship. I was tired of pretending I didn't want marriage and babies, and the Orthodox world is all about finding your beshert—the person you are destined to be with—and building a family. For a time, I believed following Orthodoxy's gender-defined roles would be easier than forging my way as a strong woman whom many considered "too much." And, after seeing guys run for the hills when they realized I was marriage-minded, I figured becoming religious would lead me to the wedding canopy.

Soon after I committed to Orthodox Judaism, I met my first husband. He proposed three months after our first date, and we married five months later. He was a talented musician who wore colorful clothing, and I thought we might make a creative couple. I liked that he didn't observe everything. No one does, really, even if they pretend to. He didn't care if I wore pants or sleeveless shirts or went swimming in mixed company, but some rules were non-negotiable. For instance, he never ate non-kosher food, he wouldn't tear toilet paper on Shabbat and he insisted on washing dishes on Shabbat using only cold water. He didn't object to having sex before marriage but insisted that once married, we must follow the rules strictly, separating the minute I got my period and not reconnecting until after I'd dunked in the mikvah. Since I was new to his world, I didn't have the confidence to know which laws to follow and which to ignore.

Upon the first drop of blood, we slept in two beds, could not hand one another a bowl of rice or a bottle of wine or a sleeping child. For at least 12 days every month, there was no kissing, no lingering trail of fingers. I went to sleep alone, while he stayed up in front of his computer. I cooked and cleaned; he came late to dinner. So many religious wives insisted the forced separation helped them focus on their emotional relationship, but it wasn't that way for us.

A woman begins counting "clean days" when her period ends. There must be seven before you can return to your husband's embrace. Every evening, I wrapped a white cloth around my forefinger and pushed it into my vagina to search for remnants of blood. Those cloths, sealed in white envelopes and left on the kitchen counter, found their way to a rabbi in a quiet alley who held the cloth up to the waning sunlight. He alone determined if I could keep counting. Every time, he said yes. If I spotted a speck of blood, my husband phoned the rabbi to ask if I could keep counting. It always came down to the color—bright red sent me back to day one, but any other hue allowed me to keep going. It was like they wanted us to jump through hoops, to be vulnerable to their laws, to submit entirely to hallowed rabbinic opinions, while also wanting couples to reunite quickly; sex (or rather growing families) was the glue that kept the community going.

Lynne Golodner and her son, when they were strictly Orthodox.

Once I could schedule an appointment to immerse in the sacred waters, there was another round of requirements.

“Remember to scrub beneath your nails to remove any dirt,” the mikvah lady instructed. “Comb out all your hair.” She glanced at my hat-covered head, then trailed her eyes down my body to indicate all the hair.

I stepped out of my shoes, unzipped my denim skirt, pulled my shirt over my head, stripped off my underwear. The books insisted that a woman should spend at least 30 minutes soaking and scrubbing and examining every inch to become as pristine as her wedding night. There were Q-tips and cotton balls, unscented soaps and nail clippers, emery boards and fluffy white towels to aid in the process.

To be sure, there were good things about that life. I loved taking a full day off from the busyness of the week to become quiet. On the Sabbath, we walked to synagogue, kept the TV off and lingered at the table over good conversation with interesting people. I learned to make bread from scratch. When I had a baby, meals magically arrived every day for three weeks. And when a loved one died, you would never be alone in the sadness.

But all the years that I was religious, I couldn’t find the good in the forced separation around menstruation. It created distance in my marriage and resentment in me. It made me feel like my very essence, the soft and miraculous parts of my womanhood, was distasteful, to be kept at a distance.

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I never had a relationship with my own blood. There was the pinprick test in the doctor's office, a nurse holding my finger between two of hers. A sharp poke, a searing sting of metal piercing skin, and then the coming forth of bright red. The nurse squeezed my finger to drip in a tube for testing. The blood told a story, a version of me, my body's secrets. There is no hiding from the story of the blood.

When I was seven, my mother sat on the edge of her bed, dust particles floating in the daylight from the window. She read a book aloud, with illustrations of a bee nosing into a flower, a dog climbing on another dog, a woman and a man lying on their backs in a bed, the blanket tucked under their armpits. The bee and flower led to more flowers, yellow pollen floating between them. The dogs suddenly had a litter of puppies. And after the humans lay side by side, a baby curled inside the woman.

"Do you have any questions?" my mother asked.

I was ten when I first learned about periods and their connection to baby-making, through animated movies in my fifth-grade classroom overlooking a field of dandelions. Teachers separated girls and boys. A Disney cartoon taught us that women bleed every month, and we shouldn't take too-hot showers when it happened. The female characters had no feet, only pinpoints.

I first bled two years later. I wiped it away with tissue, flushed, and scrubbed my hands in the white sink. Downstairs, I whispered the news to my mother. She pulled me into a hug, my heart pulsing thump-thump-thump. She handed me a box of pads.

"Pull off the paper and stick it to your underpants," she instructed. "Fold the used one up and wrap it in toilet paper. No one should look into the trash and see blood." I hid the box in my bathroom cupboard.

The next morning, I snuck downstairs before my father left for work and whispered the news to him. “That’s big, Lynnie!” he said, pulling me into a hug.

My period came every five weeks or so. My mother taught me to circle with permanent marker on a wall calendar the day each period started. “Regularly irregular,” she called it when it was different every time. “It’s always been that way for me, too.” She smiled as if we shared an important bond.

Some Jewish scholars compare women to God in our power to create life. But monthly bleeding is a nuisance. A silent something endured as a sorority of unseemliness. I assumed boys would be grossed out by the mess, and I wondered what they learned in fifth-grade—boy things like masturbation, the need to shower and wear deodorant, and how you got blue balls?

In ninth grade, during three weeks with “Mike and Mack”—Mrs. Michaelson and Mrs. McElroy, two supposedly cool moms who demonstrated how to put a condom on a banana—boys and girls gathered together in the school auditorium to learn how not to get AIDS, how not to get pregnant, and about the diseases you’d catch if you slept around.

In all the years of sex education in my public schools, there was no discussion of orgasm or mutual pleasure or hormones or the rhythm of cycles. Nothing about desire. Or intimacy. Or love. No advice about knowing your body well enough to be a willing partner. Or not needing a partner at all. Nothing about how to choose whom to love, what a healthy relationship might look and feel like. And nothing about the miracle of the human body or the beauty of life-giving blood coursing through all the crevices and folds.

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When friends see pictures of me with my hair tucked up into a big velvet hat, they say, “I can’t imagine you being religious.”

When I think about the me that was religious and the me after I left orthodoxy, I look for themes, searching for a common thread to say that the real me was there all the time. What I come to is the body—my physical form. Though the belly is a bit softer, the middle thicker, my hair shorter, the surge of delicate nerves, thumping heart, searing breath, frizzy curls and, of course, the blood, all of that is one consistent person.

A religious friend once displayed a tented sign on her dining room table that said, "Thank you for not speaking *lashon hora*" (gossip). I admired the aspiration. But the reality was different from the ideal. Now I say, don't confuse Jews with Judaism. At some point, rigidity doesn't bend, it breaks.

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The mikvah had 18 rooms (18 being the Hebrew number for *chai*, life) for women to prepare for immersion. Each room had two doors—one to go into and one that opened to a back hallway that led to the place to dunk. You are not supposed to see other women while there, to keep secret the intimacies of the marital bed.

I wrapped a robe around my body, pulled my curls into a knotted towel. On the wall, buttons sparked little lights to let the mikvah lady know I was ready. She rapped quietly and I opened the door, padding on paper shoes to follow her to the steaming tub, where I shed the robe and stood naked in the humid air.

She picked stray hairs off my skin, inspected my palms, bent to look at my feet. Brushing her fingers along my heels, she separated my toes to look for dirt. Satisfied, she waved me toward the tub.

I descended into a mix of tap water and rain from the heavens.

"Make sure you go deep enough that your hair doesn't float," she said. I closed my eyes, blew out from my nose, bent my knees to get low. Then I burst out of the water, covered my head with a washcloth and recited the prayer:

Barukh atah Adonay Eloheynu melekh ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al ha-t'vilah.

Blessed are you, Eternal God, ruler of the universe, who sanctifies us through commandments and has enjoined us concerning immersion.

“Amen!” the mikvah lady proclaimed. I submerged again, and again, as she chanted “Kosher! Kosher! Kosher!”

When I emerged, she held the robe up high to block my nakedness. The heat of a long soak had softened my skin and lulled me into calm. I wanted to head home where I could crawl into bed and sleep easy.

But after 12 days of distance, my husband wanted me. For nearly two weeks, he’d slept alone while our babies pulled at my milk-heavy breasts, curled into my lap, nestled in my bed. Not to mention all the time I spent chopping vegetables and washing plates, vacuuming, punching dough and writing articles to pay our bills, while my husband fulfilled his “obligation” as a man, to show up in synagogue and be counted. He went daily. On Saturdays, I trailed behind, pushing a double stroller, sweating under layers of covering, the neighborhood men in fur hats and flapping jackets ignoring my cheery hello. Not only women’s bodies, but also our voices were *erva*, nakedness, and couldn’t be heard in the company of men. I had become religious to be accepted, and yet being religious made me invisible.

Hebrew words are defined by their roots, three letters that form a core of meaning. Rabbis insist the mikvah is all about spiritual purity. But the words—*tumah*, *taharah,* impure and pure— can’t translate better than “dirty and clean” in English. It’s about immersing the soul, they say. I am not a linguistic scholar, so I have to trust the translations.

But it’s not just words that create separations. The community keeps men and women on opposite sides of everything. If I had grown up in that world, I might have accepted all of its idiosyncrasies. I might have welcomed the passions of a man who kept his distance because I bled, knew how to be untouchable and yet desired.

Before I was Orthodox, I loved sex. Once married, I could not find the spine-tingle of anticipation, the shiver of fingers tracing my skin. I was too caught up in the rules. My husband did not excite me. Or maybe it was the lifestyle. At night, I dreamt about the men who came before, and the memories carried me for a while.

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I left that marriage at 37, eight years after the wedding and ten years after I became religious. I left because I wanted to love with abandon. And, I was tired of putting a pin in my feminist beliefs and my strong independent streak. I welcomed back the outspoken woman who was never content to accept someone else's dictates of how to live. For the first time in my life, I was confident and happy alone.

I packed my hats into plastic boxes and shortened my skirts, pulled pants and tank tops from the dark corners of my closet. I never again went to the mikvah.

Not long after, I met the man who would become my second husband, the love of my life, the person with whom I need no barrier, no separation, no distance. We would not have children together—I had my three, plus his beautiful daughter. All of my children struggle with religion. One loves the beauty of tradition and heritage and ancestry but hates the rules. The others want nothing to do with spiritual dictates or religious rules.

I am older now, and have learned to see the beauty in every stage of my body. I have embraced what makes me a woman—the messiness of monthly cycles, the power to create life—in the twilight before it disappears. I wonder if there is a blessing for when my period stops for good, a final dunk in living waters, a formal farewell to show gratitude to the power that has made me a woman, the beauty of imperfection that I have lived. Perhaps I'll create one: immerse in the roiling waters of a cold ocean or a great lake, free to see the poetry in all the moments, and celebrate them in a ritual of my own making.

Lynn with her family on her 50th birthday, in 2020.