University of Bristol

28.4.24

CAN'T TOUCH THIS? JEWISH WOMEN, MIKVEH AND MEANING

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Word Count: 9931

I declare that the research contained herein was granted approval by the SPAIS Ethics committee.

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Acknowledgements

To my Grandma Anne, the kindest person in the world, or this planet at least and my biggest cheerleader and inspiration.

A huge thank you to my supervisor, Thomas, the only man mentioned in the entirety of this dissertation, whose unwavering support, kindness, time, and endless patience made this possible. I can't express my thanks and appreciation enough.

A heartfelt thank you to all the women kind enough to participate in this research.

to the faith that I love and struggle with so much,
and to those who also see the world in colour.

"I need to hope. And I do." (Klepfisz 1985:179)

"Although my tradition is... patriarchal
I love it, claim it as mine, and intend to work within it".

Sheila Shulman 1994:22

Glossary

Definitions are deliberately simplistic to ensure this research is accessible to anyone unfamiliar with Judaism. Most words have been transliterated from Hebrew/Yiddish, so spellings are approximate and may vary. The words in this glossary are italicised in the text.

Balanit: Sometimes referred to as a '*mikveh* lady'**.** A female attendant to the *mikveh* who ensures that a woman's immersion is fully submerged and *kosher*.

Bedika: A self-performed examination of the vaginal canal done by a woman using a white cloth to check and swab menstrual blood**.**

Bereshit: Book of Genesis.

Bereshit 32:27-29: Verse which tells the story of Jacob who wrestles with an angel and his name becomes "Israel" known as the one who struggles with G-d.

Brit Milah: Ceremony of circumcision of the foreskin performed on male babies at 8 days old signifying the covenant between Jews and G-d, symbolic of Abraham's story.

Chabad: May be referred to as Chabad-Lubavitch. A specific branch of *Chasidic* Jews.

Challah: Special braided bread eaten on *Shabbat* and other Jewish festivals.

Chicken soup: A traditional Jewish dish, often eaten for Shabbat meals with family.

Chukkim: Jewish religious commandments that are accepted as divine degrees and are beyond human comprehension.

Chutzpah: Yiddish term for audacity or gall, for good and bad**.**

Deracheha Darchei Noam VeChol Netivoteha Shalom: Verse from Proverbs 3:17 translating to 'The ways of the Torah are ways of pleasantness, and all of its paths are peace'.

Devarim: Book of Deuteronomy.

Diaspora: The scattering of Jewish people all over the world from their ancestral homeland of Israel.

Eruv: Ritual *halakhic* enclosure which symbolically extends the household to permit transfer of domains on *Shabbat.*

***Halakha*:** Body of Jewish law that defines rules and practices, derived from the Written and Oral *Torah*.

Kashrut [kosher]: The set of dietary laws governing food preparation, storage and eating.

Kavanah: Translates to focus or intention of a worshipper to make prayers meaningful. Theological concept about religious devotion.

Mechitzah: Partition used in traditional synagogues to separate men's and women's sections. Women often sit behind a cloth or barrier.

***Mikveh* [mikvaot]:** A ritual bath in Judaism traditionally used to achieve ritual purity.

Mitzvah [mitzvot]: A religious commandment from G-d of which there are 613 in Judaism.

Niddah: Term for a woman who is in a state of ritual impurity because of menstrual or uterine bleeding. According to *halakha,* adherence to *niddah* requires physical separation between a wife and husband during this time and for 7 days. Typically, it is 13 days, but different traditions vary.

Orthodox Judaism: Umbrella term for several Jewish denominations that strictly adhere to traditional practices. Believe that the *Torah* is the word of G-d and should be followed without change.

Pesach: Hebrew word for Passover, a Jewish holiday which celebrates the Israelites' exodus and freedom from slavery in Egypt. Story of the Exodus and liberation.

Pesikah: Rabbinic legal decision making.

Progressive Judaism: Umbrella term for Liberal and Reform Judaism which emphasise the evolving nature of Judaism and ethical, modern values. These denominations believe that the *Torah* was man-made, rather than by G-d, and divinely inspired.

Rabbinic Times: The current period of Judaism since the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in 70 CE. The beliefs and practices of *Torah* are defined and interpreted by rabbis.

Schmooze[ing]: Colloquial term to refer to friendly chatting with others inside the Jewish community.

Shabbat: Day of rest beginning Friday night at sundown and ending approximately 25 hours later, prohibiting 39 types of work.

Sheitel: A head covering, a wig or scarf, worn by some married Jewish women as part of *tznius*.

Shul: Yiddish word for synagogue.

Simchat *Torah*: Jewish holiday celebrating the completion of the annual reading of the *Torah.* Celebrated by dancing, singing, and parading the *Torah.*

Taharah: Meaning ritual purity.

Taharat HaMishpacha: Set of ritual laws for Jewish married couples concerning menstrual cycles and sexual purity and impurity.

Talmud[ic]: Main text alongside *Torah* in *Rabbinic Judaism* and the primary source of *halakha.* Written by rabbis and comprised of the Oral *Torah* (*Mishnah)* and rabbinical commentary on the Mishnah (*Gemara)*.

Tanakh: Acronym for Hebrew bible of *Torah* (Five Books of Moses), *Nevii'm* (Book of Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (Book of Writings).

Temple Times: Time period between 950 BCE and 70CE of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem which stood as the central place of worship. Anybody who entered the Temple had to have immersed in the *mikveh* to ensure spiritual purity.

***Tevilah*:** Full ritual immersion – in this research in the context of conversion, wherein converts to Judaism must undergo *tevilah* to signify their entry into Judaism.

Tikkun Olam: Central Jewish concept of healing and repairing the world, often associated with ecological justice.

Time-bound *mitzvot*: Positive *mitzvot* which must be observed at certain times. Traditionally, only men are obligated to perform these, and women are only bound to three: *niddah*, *challah* and lighting candles on *Shabbat.*

Tkhines: Collections of prayers published in Yiddish for women, by women, in the 16th to 19th century.

Torah: The Hebrew Bible or *Pentateuch* – Five Books of Moses.

Tumah[tame]: A human state of ritual impurity (opposite to *taharah*).

Tznius/tzniut: Group of Jewish laws concerned with modesty of both dress and behaviour.

Ultra-Orthodox/Charedi: Umbrella term for Jewish denominations defined by the strict interpretation of *halakha*, taking a theologically, politically, and socially conservative approach to Judaism.

1. Mikveh Up Your Mind

> "Jewish feminism? That's clearly already a parallel!"
> "Sexual empowerment? In Judaism? No way."
> "Think again."

These were staff responses to me when I proposed my dissertation topic, which – although frustrating – were attitudes that were disappointingly reflected in the literature, which had a consensus that feminism is "antithetical to the interests of contemporary Judaism." (Heschel 1995:5)

Pivotal feminist scholarship advocates in favour of secularism and against organised 'patriarchal' religion, because "patriarchy has G-d on its side" (Millett 1970:53). Jewish feminist literature echoes similarly pejorative sentiments, such as Judaism's treatment of women as a "subdivision of humanity" (Ozick 1983:124). Therefore, as the literature review further discusses, within both scholarship and contemporary attitudes, religious Jewish women face an impossible double bind: rejection from wider feminism as Jews or rejection from wider Judaism as women.

Whilst the androcentric culture within Judaism receives broad criticism, it is the laws of family purity, referred to as *Taharat HaMishpacha* (TH), which are subject to specific disparagement by feminists. TH is comprised of *niddah* and *mikveh*, which "organises marital sexuality through recurring cycles of purity and impurity" (Avishai 2008; Hartman and Marmon 2004, Taragin-Zeller and Kasstan 2021:11). *Niddah* is a state of impurity which necessitates physical separation of wife from husband during her menstruation and for seven "clean days" after which she must immerse in a ritual bath, a *mikveh*, which requires careful preparation (Sered 2001, Zanbar et al 2023:496) including bathing, combing hair, and removing any jewellery.

Secular criticisms can thus be attributed to these rituals around menstruation and purity, which do not conventionally align with contemporary Western and progressive attitudes towards menstruation or women's bodies in general (Gillson 2021). TH is also scrutinised

by many Jewish feminists, whose criticisms state that TH as mandated by rabbis today are patriarchal and unjust misrepresentations of the original *halakhic* teachings from Leviticus (15:18:20, Lis 2011:1). Key changes in TH's observance can be partially attributed to the destruction of the second Temple, which initiated rabbinic Judaism, whereby rabbinical legal decision making (*pesikah*) became central to *halakha* (Ross 2000:3). Consequently, this brought change in the *niddah* laws (Ivry and Segal-Katz 2021:389). Rabbis mandated that *niddah* (requiring *mikveh*) would no longer apply to all bodily fluids (including men's) but to just menstruation (ibid). Thus, Jewish feminists argue that rabbinical hegemony has proliferated women's subordination in Judaism.

With that in mind, I chose to research women and water, using the *mikveh* as a microcosmic example of the complexities of Jewish feminist practice and ancient, intimate rituals. For Jewish women, as Plaskow notes, "there is no area in which modern practice and traditional values are further apart than the area of sexuality" (Plaskow 1990:191).

> "If the researcher is a bloke, forget it."
> "Sorry, I wouldn't feel comfortable asking people, it's personal".
> "*Mikveh*? No chance."

Two weeks later, I received these disappointing comments from inside my community. Although I knew these interviews would be perceived as provocations due to the religious restrictions of *tznius* modesty (Schwartz 2021:58), I nevertheless continued to seek participants, hopeful and (possibly) naïve.

1.1. Method

Well, fifty Facebook message requests and fourteen semi-structured interviews later, the generosity and openness of Jewish women (most of whom I did not know) who were willing to speak honestly was humbling, but mainly surprising, given prior reasonable concerns about *tznius*. There was, in fact, strong consensus that these women wanted to be heard. Whilst it would be reductionist to attribute their willingness to participate to a singular factor, it was evident from their enthusiasm and curiosity that such research opportunities were rare and notably absent. Perhaps the isolating consequent effect of *tznius*

barriers incentivised women to participate, or maybe fears of whispers in the small, insular Jewish community made the anonymous opportunity to externalise and discuss their experiences of TH appealing. Therefore, the research strategy and its standpoint feminist approach (Hartsock 1983) did precisely that: enable Jewish women to tell their stories on their own terms, an issue that is eloquently summarised by the iconic director Nora Ephron,

> "I try to write parts for women that are as
> complicated and interesting as women actually are."
> (Dean 2018)

To summarise, the following paper uses semi-structured interviews to investigate the attitudes and experiences of British Jewish women in their practices of *Taharat HaMishpacha* and *mikveh*. Whilst TH rituals are the primary focus, I also examine wider experiences of gendered *halakha* (Jewish law) and modesty – situating women as members of the small British Jewish community – to analyse how sociodemographic and cultural factors affect *halakhic* observance and religious approaches. My research question endeavours to investigate if Judaism and feminism are, in fact, incompatible and whether *mikveh* and TH can be reclaimed as sites of women's sexual empowerment or if they are intrinsically sexist.

1.2. Mikveh and Meaning-Making

The subsequent findings prove that whilst TH and *mikveh* serve both as sites of women's agency and subordination, this is only one aspect of women's religiosity and female identity and only half of the sequence of the phenomenological equation, which do not fit into the 'sexist/empowering' binary categories that the research question asked.

Instead, the meaning of *kavanah*, which refers to the intentionality behind rituals, is more significant for Jewish women than the practical observance itself.

The following paper holistically explores Jewish women's practices whilst acknowledging the effects of religious, cultural, locational, and value-based factors. Accordingly, this research situates Jewish women as 'products of their environment' to effectively express

the significance of *kavanah*, illustrating how meaning-making manifests through women's lifestyles, not just their 'experiences', 'attitudes' or 'practices', but because “it is a way of life” (Sarah, interview) and not just a monthly dip.

2. Can The Jewish Woman Speak?

This chapter critically analyses existing literature on Jewish women, first summarising secular feminist scholarship before highlighting its epistemological issues. It then considers Jewish literature to outline the three main Jewish 'feminist' approaches to *Taharat HaMishpacha* (TH) and *mikveh*. The concluding section draws upon the paucity of adequate literature on British Jewish women's experiences and practices to advocate for a feminist standpoint epistemology, and highlight the research's focus, ontological angle, and role in addressing such research gaps.

To date, all three feminist waves have depicted religion negatively (Antler 2018), portraying secularism as an empowering alternative to religion (Feldman 2011, Chetcuti-Osorovitz and Sanos 2017). Moreover, antisemitic rhetoric and microaggressions, such as Holocaust comparisons within the feminist movement, have often made these spaces hostile to Jewish women (Radonić 2015). Consequently, Jewish women "recoil from the idea of putting Judaism up for scrutiny under the world's microscope" (Greenberg 1999:151). Given this, pivotal religious scholars challenge feminism's incredulity at oppressed pious women's "false consciousness" (Johnston 2017:185). Critiquing feminism's "ethnographic refusal" to engage with religious women (Mahmood 2005:17, Bangstad 2011), religious scholars examine their gendered ethnocultural practices. Through the lens of engaging with gender and piety as an active, integrated experience (Fiorenza 2013, Shahar 2015), they emphasise religious women's agency, as the next section outlines.

2.1. A Double 'Invisibility'

Across decades of broad sociological scholarship, scholars have recognised the reflexive and multidimensional nature of Jewish identity construction: ethnic, personal, communal, cultural, and religious (Bankier-Karp 2023:447). For example, Weiner's (2023) study of "Jewish activist girls" in America examines the complex identity of young Jewish women, who battle to reconcile their ethnocultural identity with their feminist, modern values. Simultaneously, there is significant androcentrism in Judaism, which is reflected within Jewish scholarship, in which male scholars dominate (Ross 2016). A plethora of prominent female scholars problematise cultural sexism, including Antler et al. (2010:211) who blame

Jewish men with “their penises in their heads”, and Ozick (1983:125) who notes that “my own synagogue is the only place in the world where I am not named Jew”.

Thus, Jewish women have protested their exclusion in both Jewish and feminist spheres (Meyers 2006, Frydman 2022) because it makes cultivating a sense of belonging more difficult in an already complex ethno-religion (Pellicer-Ortín 2022). Consequently, American and Israeli Jewish women have written extensively about *halakha*, sexism, and religious feminist complexities, as illustrated further in the following sections. For 14% of American *Orthodox* Jews, issues related to women or women's roles are what causes them “the most pain or unhappiness” (Shain 2018:1). Despite the lack of equivalent statistics, analogous struggles are reported by British Jews, such as respected Rabbi Dr Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz (2016) who describes *Orthodox* women as having a 'double invisibility' in both Jewish and secular worlds.

On the other hand, such statistical and theoretical expositions cannot be generalised to British Jewish women because there are such distinctive political conditions of Jewish life (Bankier-Karp 2023), which can partially be attributed to the demographic disparities between America's community of 63 million (JPR 2024) and Britain's 300,000 (ibid). Moreover, the British Jewish community overall “perpetuates a conservative ideology that subordinates women's emancipation to ethnic considerations” (Tylee 2007:78), whilst American Jews are comparatively much more liberal in their attitudes towards gender (Fishman 2014).

Notably, a 2016 British governmental report delineated misogyny and “regressive” attitudes within *Orthodox* Jewry (Casey 2016:130). To date, no single study examines why British Jewish women's experiences differ from their Israeli or American 'sisters' (Simmonds 2019:51), and significant British scholarship does not exist, mostly beyond Simmonds' research on British Orthodox Jewish women and Taylor-Guthartz's London ethnography (as cited). Therefore, existing Jewish feminist literature cannot be generalised to British women, and a range of demographic factors distinguishes their lifestyle and practices from other Jewish women (see findings).

2.2. Fearing Feminism

The focus of the previous section and the scholarship raises epistemological questions over the term 'feminist', as only a few of these studies explicitly articulate how the research participants or the researcher define feminism, as pointed out by Shain (2018). “Feminism” is divisive and problematic within *Orthodox* Judaism, often recognised as a foreign concept (Neitz 2014). The extrapolation of mainstream feminist ideals to *Orthodox* Judaism, particularly of equity, is perceived to be a secular imposition and a threat to *halakha's* gender duality (Imhoff 2016).

Therefore, only limited Jewish scholarship explicitly adopts the term 'feminist' (see Goldstein 1986, Abraham 2015, Harris and Skinazi 2020). Most literature, even if appearing to be of a ‘'feminist’ ideological perspective, does not implement the label. Subsequent scholars have identified that *Orthodox*y fears the secular modern values of feminism, as they perceive it to be an existential threat to undermine and uproot Jewish norms (Ross 2016). Therefore, this fear, alongside the private and insular nature of Jewish sexuality (Turgel 2012), explains why Jewish scholarship has fallen behind in the realm of feminism and sexuality (Fonrobert 2005) because such ethnoreligious attitudes cause barriers to research.

Those who tended to identify as feminists explicitly were mostly *Progressive* or secular Jewish women who rejected Judaism in favour of feminism, such as Rachel Adler, Cynthia Ozick, and Judith Plaskow, the leading Jewish feminists of the 1970s-1990s. The exceptional *Orthodox* feminist Blu Greenberg pointed out in 1990 that *Progressive* Judaism’s compatibility with feminism exacerbated the delicacy of *Orthodox* feminism. Unfortunately, there have been almost no equivalent iconic Jewish feminists in recent decades, yet modern Jewish women are still demanding changes within their tradition today (Pellicer-Ortín 2022). Thirty years later, *Orthodox* feminists are *still* “psychologically split at the root” (Rich 1986, Shain 2018:3) as illustrated by Farber (2010:11) “Therefore we must ask, if *halakha* can be flexible, why isn't it more compromising when it comes to *Orthodox* women?”. To summarise, whilst the following research will take an explicitly feminist epistemological lens and use ‘women’ and ‘feminist’ interchangeably, it must be noted that the word creates an inherent ontological challenge.

2.3. Approaches to TH and *Mikveh*

Two broad categories are identified in Jewish feminist literature when approaching women's status in Judaism: rejectionists and accepters. However, as this project particularly focuses on TH and *mikveh*, the following section will therefore outline the broad categories and then how these apply to TH and *mikveh*. TH and *mikveh* are especially significant examples of gender-specific *halakha*, as they regulate purity concerning women's bodies. Religiously, TH is one of women's three time-bound *mitzvot* (Kowalska 2021:74) meaning that they profoundly impact Jewish women, whether positively or negatively.

2.3.1a Rejectionists - Can women even be Jewish?

Existing Jewish feminist research is mostly 'rejectionist', divided between those who reject some aspects of Judaism but are still religiously observant and others who are entirely secular Jews on feminist grounds.

Full rejectionists argue that *halakha* positions the male as the representative Jew (Ross 2016:5) and women as inferior and impure (Schapira 2018). Regarding TH, they perceive customs around *niddah* to be physically intrusive, suffocating and dehumanising (Hartman and Marmon 2004:401). Serving as a tool of biopower, TH restricts a woman's sexual autonomy and then enables her husband to 'consume' his wife post *mikveh* (Redmond 2019). Similarly, others pose the question: if sexual intercourse after *mikveh* is an obligated element of a sanctified Jewish marriage, then is consent possible? (Taragin-Zeller and Kasstan 2021). Subsequently, these attitudes lead to the total rejection of TH and are held mainly by secular or *Progressive* Jewish feminists, as *Progressive* Judaism disregards TH (Meacham 2009).

2.3.1b Wrestling Against the Rabbis

On the other hand, most rejectionists recognise the dogmatic, sexist aspects of Judaism but also embrace positive opportunities within *halakha*. Within literature, blame is mainly attributed to rabbis: *halakhic* practices are "rabbinized" (Fonrobert 2009), used to assert power and patriarchy (An-Na 2023:55). Consequently, throughout Jewish history, from 16th century women writing their own prayers (*tkhines*) through to the current battle for

female leadership, equality, and bodily autonomy, women struggle against rabbinical hegemony (see Cicurel 2000 and Redmond 2019). As painfully illustrated by Wisenberg (2008:83) “It is as if the rabbis have been writing all over our bodies for centuries, crafting their arguments onto our skin, in Aramaic and Hebrew and Middle French and German, Yiddish and English”. Scholars take a nuanced approach to TH by recognising its scope for empowerment. However, *bedika* checks, when a woman must conduct an internal swab and consult a rabbi if she is unclear about her menstrual or *niddah* state (Rock-Singer 2025:182) undermine women's agency.

Bedika checks are symbolic of Judaism's male dominance in both the Jewish private and public realm (Fonrobert 2005). They are just one example of legitimated spiritual hegemony, where rabbis absolve themselves of their role in casting women as the “other” in Judaism (Daly 1990, Jackson 1997, Grossman 2021), maintaining their mandate by proposing that these patriarchal practices are divinely commanded (Redmond 2019). Further examples are cited in the Casey (2016:107) report which writes of “unequal treatment of women enacted in the name of cultural or religious values”. Subsequently, these rejectionists deny rabbinical input in TH to reclaim bodily autonomy within TH's *halakhic* bounds, becoming ‘reclaimers’ through theological and practical creativity, as detailed below.

2.3.1c Rejecting to Reclaim: Sanctified Nakedness

As mentioned above, these rejectionists refuse elements of Jewish practice to either reinterpret text, exercise agency, or reinvent ritual for empowerment. There are both historical and contemporary examples of women reclaiming agency through these practices, such as extending their *niddah* for contraception or preventing intimacy by refusing to attend *mikveh* (Wasserfall 1999, Ivry and Segal-Katz 2021:389). Arguing that “*niddah* is a site of resistance and meaning-making within a patriarchal culture” (Avishai 2008:417, see also Hartman and Marmon 2004, Johnston 2017), such rejectionists conduct self-examined *bedika* checks (An-Na 2023:62) or adapt *niddah*.

The most pivotal example of reinterpretation is Rachel Adler's groundbreaking work (1997), which, rather than ‘purity’ (*tumah*) or ‘impurity’ (*taharah*), suggested that *niddah*

is instead a symbolic confrontation of 'mortality' and a reaffirmation with 'immortality' connected to life cycles of 'light and dark'. Women enter the *mikveh* naked like infants enter the world, and thus, the *mikveh* is a spiritual rebirth, symbolic of the womb (ibid). Thirty years later, the centrality of language in Judaism remains clear as a generational connector to the past, present and future (JWA 2021). Accordingly, such religious linguistic reinterpretation is still fundamental, as illustrated by significant literature (see Ner David 2009, Hartman and Marmon 2004), which similarly detaches *niddah* from notions of impurity and towards "that of holiness, something to which we all strive" (Grossman 2021:96).

Regarding the *mikveh*, rejectionists suggest that this immersion is not definitively sexist by nature and is a 'liminal', inclusive, woman-only space (Marmon 1997:137, Schwartz 2021) when women are not undermined by rabbinical authorities or labelled as impure "pollutants" (Rubel 2005:91). Scholars emphasise the *mikveh's* scope for empowerment, as the only Jewish and societal space where a woman's naked body can fulfil a *mitzvah* (Zanbar et. al. 2023:206). Rejectionists propose alternative *mikveh* usage, such as marking abortion (Grossman 2021), healing from heartbreak (Holub 2012:14) or for ecological justice as part of *Tikkun Olam* (see Aylon 2012), as methods in which to reclaim the *mikveh* as empowering. Additionally, evidence of widespread interest in reclaiming the *mikveh* is demonstrated by Teen Vogue, NPR, and The Face's articles (Smith 2006, Rubensteen 2017, Lipson 2021).

It is important to note that Jewish feminists legitimise their alternative ritual through pivotal Proverbial verses, for example, using 'Deracheha Darchei Noam VeChol Netivoteha Shalom - the ways of the Torah are ways of peace' (Proverbs 3:17, Ross 2000:14) to validate their rejection of intrusive practice *halakhic*ally. Rejectionists propose the *mikveh* as a tool for creating a new egalitarian Jewish tradition, such as using the *mikveh* to immerse a newborn girl into Judaism as an equivalent to a (baby boy's) *Brit Milah* (Barrie 2021). Others embrace *niddah* fully but suggest that the husband should also immerse before sexual contact (Tran and Halberstam 2021), which is justified by the religiously commanded sanctified, kosher marriage (ibid). Although diverging from "the original [*halakhic*] spirit [these practices] bear no tension" [to Judaism] (Ross 2016:10) and are

fundamental to feminist identity because Jewish tradition hinges on the ritualisation of the sexed body (Fonrobert 2009) and so *halakhic* re-empowerment is significant.

However, whilst these rejectionist/ reclaiming attitudes and practices (and literature) are significant amongst American Jewish feminists, alternative *mikveh* usage and *halakhic* repurposing is practically non-existent amongst UK women, partially due to the more conservative attitudes found amongst British Jewry, as the findings explore.

2.3.2. Accepters: "Benevolent" Patriarchy?

In contrast to the impassioned attitudes detailed above, other Jewish women, 'accepters', take a much more simplistic view, suggesting that *niddah* is just a boundary within the context of wider *halakha* (Sandmel 2013:14). This group can be considered 'accepters' because they do not passively observe the laws, but instead actively participate, despite ambivalence, an aspect of 'doing religion' which is a "semiconscious self-authoring project" (Avishai 2008:413, see also Irby 2021).

This is particularly noteworthy as *Taharat HaMishpacha* are *chukkim*, *mitzvot* beyond human comprehension (Johnston 2015) which are some of the most fundamental religious obligations. Thus, for 'accepters', the significance lies within the religious commitments rather than the physical practicalities of the TH ritual. As this justifies TH, apologetically overruling *halakhic* selections (such as rejectionists' selectivity), 'accepters' defend *niddah's* polluting effect, claiming that notions of impurity are justified because women have expelled a potential life (Alpert 1991, Schapira 2018). Likewise, others suggest that "benevolent" patriarchy is a "cultural given" in rabbinical literature but clarify that the term is not synonymous with misogyny – it is rather a 'cultural paradigm' (Hauptman 1997:285, see also Irshai 2019). Therefore, in highlighting cultural meanings, 'accepters' agentically, yet ambivalently, embrace TH through contextual, spiritual, and historical considerations.

2.4. 'Cultural Knapsacks'

After analysing the scholarship, what is patently missing is a culturally relevant strategy to research Jewish women, which accounts for the encompassing nature of Jewish identity, as

illustrated by Fletcher (2022) “I live within the spatial boundaries that delineate the physicality of the *Charedi* community but more so, my ‘cultural knapsack’.” The Jewish *Orthodox* Feminist Alliance also emphasises relativity at their national conference: “What are the visions … of our communities? How do these affect our shuls, schools, homes, and the other arenas of Jewish communal life?” (Ross, Greenberg, and Fishman 2005:6). Accordingly, research adopts a standpoint feminist lens, as it successfully enables Jewish women to tell their stories and self-advocate (Neitz 2014), platforming voices that have been otherwise denigrated (see Spivak 1988 ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’). Furthermore, through context specificity, this epistemological approach successfully researches sacraments which mainstream feminism may have otherwise discarded as sexist without threatening *halakha* (Ross 2016, Cohen 2020). Together, this situates participants in their national British context (Vuola 2017) and considers sociocultural factors (Farber 2010, Cohen 2020, Creese 2020). In-depth phenomenological insight is thus obtained because Jewish women are listened to as spiritual “ritual experts” (Sered 1992).

2.5. The Research Question

Whilst comprehensive, relevant studies of TH and Jewish feminism exist, there is an insufficient body of data on Anglo-Jewish women, and what is available involves a handful of doctoral dissertations (see 2.1). Collectively, these studies outline a critical role in an investigation of TH that incorporates both a feminist sociological ontology and a culturally appropriate context to understand *halakha* directly from British Jewish women themselves.

3. “It's The Way We Do Things That Make Them Jewish.”

The following section outlines and evaluates the methodology that this research implemented, looking at its’ research strategy, sampling, research design and data analysis, before critically reflecting upon the epistemic challenges of researcher positionality and feminist epistemology faced during the research process (Avishai, Gerber, and Randles 2013).

3.1. Methodological choices

A constructivist grounded approach (Charmaz 2006, Watson et al. 2018) was chosen as the most appropriate tool to address the research question and examine Jewish women's identity both methodologically and conceptually. Such constructivist phenomenology acknowledges that neither *pesikah* nor original *Tanakhic* teachings are value-free or objective (Ross 2016). Thus, Jewish women’s “constructed religiosity” must be explored “in the context of symbolic boundaries, regulatory, cultural regimes, and institutional structure” (Avishai 2008:428).

Subsequently, I conducted semi-structured interviews, which enabled participants to shape the interview schedule and research agenda around their lived experiences, as shown through this chapter's title, which is a quote from Elli's interview. As this method is effective at “open[ing] a window into the interviewees’ worlds” (Levy and Ayalon 2024:303), a plethora of relevant scholarship uses this approach (see Barrie 2021, Frydman 2022, Gottlieb 2024). Thus, data collection obtained detailed illustrations of the multifaceted nature of Jewish identity (Pellicer-Ortín 2022), which was pertinent to the research sample, as discussed next.

3.1.1. Sample and Recruitment

This sample involved fourteen Jewish women (see Appendix 3 for more details). The criteria included living in the UK and attending the *mikveh* (previously or regularly). Whilst 78% of participants visit the *mikveh* regularly for TH purposes, others immerse (*tevilah*) for alternate purposes or provide a less traditional interpretation, as the findings illustrate. Eligible participants were informed of the research's objectives: to examine UK Jewish

women's experiences of *mikveh* and TH from a feminist approach and were given an information sheet with more detail.

Preliminarily, I used snowball sampling from my existing social and communal networks before, which enabled access to 'hard to reach' social groups (Li 2021) of which Jewish women are categorised. This is a method which is particularly useful for conducting sensitive research (Browne 2005:48). Additionally, to provide a representative sample, I used purposive sampling to obtain participants a variety of religious denominations (Chudner et al. 2025). Subsequently, the sample included women from; Liberal, Reform (*Progressive*), Modern *Orthodox*, *Orthodox*, *Charedi* and *Chabad* backgrounds, categorised to which they self-identified as. Moreover, with topographical aspects in mind, it was crucial to ensure that the research sample encompassed a variety of Anglo- Jewish communities beyond London, where nearly 60% of British Jews are based (ONS 2020). Hence, I recruited participants from Manchester, London, Brighton, and Milton Keynes, and whilst the sample size was small, it is reflective of the denominational and regional diversity among British Jewry. Despite this sample providing significant insight, further studies are needed in order to generalise the findings.

3.1.2. Practical Data Collection

Before data collection, I performed an informal pilot interview to evaluate and improve the research design. Then, I conducted individual interviews in November 2024, each lasting between 60-90 minutes. Interviews took place online and were all audio-recorded. After establishing trust through the recruitment process, I continued to build rapport with participants during data collection.

Building upon existing Jewish scholarship and constructivist approaches, I incorporated a plethora of open-ended questions about TH and wider *halakha* in the interview schedule (see Appendix 2). The first questions garnered insight into contextual factors such as location, religiosity, and lifestyle before asking about participants' feelings towards *halakhic* interpretation regarding TH and their personal *mikveh* usage (or refusal). Then, I focused on Jewish feminism, asking participants about their gendered experiences of Judaism. Upon completion of the questions, I offered participants the opportunity to clarify

or expand on their answers, before thanking them for their time and reminding them of their right to withdraw at any point.

3.2. Data Analysis

After data collection, I transcribed the interviews by using Gilligan et al.'s (2003) voice-centred analysis. This method enabled accurate Hebrew translations of words and adequately typified participants' emotional lived experiences, expressed through tonal cues. This method is a well-established approach that captures linguistic cues by incorporating the participants' tone of voice (see Marnin-Distelfeld 2021, Slee et al. 2023:12). To interpret the data, I used thematic analysis, using the research questions and literature to create deductive codes. In addition, to accurately encapsulate participants' data, I also generated inductive codes when new themes and relevant patterns emerged from the dataset (Clark et al. 2017).

3.3. Ethics

Prior to this research, I obtained ethical approval from SPAIS and adhered to ethical guidelines throughout. Thus, participants' informed consent was gained through digital signatures before and reaffirmed upon interview completion and all data was stored on my University OneDrive. Following interviews, I allocated pseudonyms to participants to ensure the utmost level of anonymity, except for participant Elli, who explicitly asked to be named. The pseudonyms chosen are the names of rebellious and influential women from the Torah, congruent to the research's epistemologically feminist lens.

Without generalising the ethno-religious lifestyles of a whole group (Fishman and Shain 2019), Jewish communities can be small and insular (Poniscjakova 2021). Correspondingly, extra stringency was undertaken to eliminate precise data, ensuring that data which could be identified was used sparingly (Luyts 2016). Furthermore, three participants displayed emotive reactions during the interview, as expected, because the research topic was sensitive. In response, I ensured the participants' wellbeing by taking a delicate approach, offering participants the opportunity to pause or end the interview and I followed up with their wellbeing afterwards. My 'insider status' as a Jewish researcher (see

below) also helped to mitigate participants' emotionality, as I was able to maintain trust and a strong relationship with them, as a fellow member of the community.

3.4. "Whose Interview Is it, Anyway?"

Court and Abbas (2013) title their research by asking, "Whose interview is it, anyway?" to tacitly illustrate the interviewer's positional subjectivity and highlight the shared experience of data collection, which is both personal and academic when conducting a cultural study. My Jewishness provided a way to build rapport with participants in a phenomenon that other Jewish researchers have warmly referred to as "Schmoozing with my sisters" (Creese 2020:1). Thus, I levered my cultural status to capitalise on my authenticity whilst maintaining a formalised, professional manner. However, my positionality was also a limitation (Darwin 2020), because it raised serious empirical issues of information bias and overidentification with participants. As Turgel (2012:89) illustrates, "it is difficult not to engage with the specificity of the women's experience[s]". Consequently, I was careful to maintain a formal but polite tone with participants and only used university email to communicate with them.

On the other hand, feminist researchers highlight that even when the researcher is a group member, one is only an 'insider' in specific Jewish settings (Webster-Kogen 2021). As far as *Charedi* communities are concerned, I was an outsider. As Judith Plaskow eloquently puts it, "I am very aware that I approach the issue of gender as an American Jew for whom Liberal Judaism is normative" (Plaskow and Ross 2007:207). Thus, I was conscious of the risks of subjectivity if I over-identified with participants who shared similar views to me or were of a similar religious. Hence, to mitigate these risks, I allocated pseudonyms immediately to participants before transcription, which I only conducted after I had completed all fourteen interviews, which mean that interviews were transcribed reliably. Furthermore, to ensure consistency and reduce information bias, I analysed and coded all transcripts collectively which made codes reliable across the dataset.

Despite the risks of subjectivity caused by my positionality, it must be noted that gaining access to this group (particularly *Charedi*m) or conducting this research would have been severely more difficult, if not impossible, had this research not have taken an emic

approach, because *Charedim* are inward-facing, highly controlled communities that typically would not engage with (non-Jewish) outsiders (Poniscjakova 2021).

Moreover, my female gender identity was also crucial for access, as Ultra-*Orthodox* Jewish communities often prohibit mixed-gender interactions (ibid), or at least such exchanges cause discomfort. These barriers to research were amplified by the research subject, TH, which is shrouded in secrecy and highly taboo in *Orthodox* communities (Taylor-Guthartz 2016:202). For comprehensive research into sensitive topics such as ethnicity, religion, and gender, it is necessary to have a "full panorama" of an issue or group (Fishman and Shain 2019:418), and thus a culturally informed, emergentist approach was vital, as detailed below.

3.5. Unavoidable Modesty: Feminist Emic Approaches

With a constructivist, sensitive approach in mind, I dressed *tzniusly* to conduct interviews, to ensure that participants felt comfortable, and to demonstrate my emic position. Current Jewish feminist researchers, often disparagingly, have recognised that participation in this dress code "is an instrumental means of gaining entry" (Sheldon 2022:2). The necessary evil of access requirements is one aspect of the 'feminist ethnographer's dilemma', partially because of the researcher's dichotomous challenge of their "political commitment to give voice to participants" to those whose opinions or normative attitudes they disagree or find discomfort with (Avishai, Gerber and Randles 2013:402). On the other hand, the ethnographic participation in this research, regardless of the above dilemmas, can be positively examined to be an instrument of feminist disruption (McClelland 2017). Just the involvement of Jewish women alone contravenes the literatures' representation of their passivity and also subverts androcentrism within the field of Jewish literature by platforming women's voices, which the findings next discuss in more detail.

4. Well, Well, Well: Women in their own wor[l]ds

4.1. Introduction

This chapter takes a phenomenological approach to discussing the research findings using narrative analysis which allows for detailed insight while still keeping Jewish women's experiences at the forefront (Fishman and Shain 2019). Although all fourteen participants offered fascinating insight, this analysis will specifically explore the dataset through the stories of six women: Lilith, Elli, Ruth, Rachel, Eve, and Deborah. These six women were chosen as they are a diverse sociodemographic cohort (see Appendix 3 for more) who provide a representative micro-sample of the feminist attitudes; religious denominations, and interpretations of *mikveh* found in this research.

Accordingly, all six narratives demonstrate that the discrete categorisations of Jewish feminist attitudes towards TH found in scholarship of 'rejectionist' and 'accepter' are oversimplistic. Rather, Jewish women's attitudes and experiences must be understood relationally, as they lie on a wide continuum of customs, paradigms and sometimes contradictions. Most importantly, however, the findings demonstrate that the categories are reductionist, have an incorrect focus. Instead, Jewish women's religious identities and ritual practices are defined by the meanings they attach to them rather than the ritual's religious significance, or their own feminist position or religious denomination. Regardless of age, location, or lifestyle, from *Progressive* to *Chabad* (inclusive), women consciously make meaning and re-create rituals, not as 'accepters' or 'rejectionists' but as religious, agentic women, who are Jewish with intent (*kavanah*), as the following demonstrates.

4.2. Rebels to Role Models

Four participants reflect on their careers in the *Progressive* rabbinate, two of whom, Vashti and Elli, were among the first female rabbis to be ordinated in the UK (1984 and 1989, respectively). They both experienced sexism and exclusion even within their *Progressive*, egalitarian congregations; neatly summarised by Vashti, "everything was difficult", paving the way for the younger two, Lilith and Rebecca, who comparatively spoke much more positively. British Jewry's egalitarian progression is illustrated by Lilith mentioning that

she had "never known a world without female rabbis", an optimistic attitude which shines through her project, as the following section discusses, followed by Elli, whose leadership helped to make such opportunities for British Jews possible.

4.2.1. Tides Against Toilets

Lilith is a London-based mother and founder of a *mikveh* project, which I will refer to as 'Pond', which she left the rabbinate after 18 years to establish. Pond is the first UK *mikveh* to be purpose built for alternative *mikveh* usage, primarily for mental health. Warmly, Lilith describes Pond as "post denominational" and gender neutral. Alongside a traditional *mikveh* (indoor) pool, Pond will also have an outdoor pool of water from natural streams for nature-based healing.

Lilith's visit to an aesthetic, inclusive, open access *mikveh* in America sparked a significant inspiration for Pond. However, the main persuasion for this project is deeply personal because she struggled with infertility and used the *mikveh* for healing during IVF treatment when every menstruation was a painful loss. There, she was able to complete *tevilah* to marking these losses, and she is passionate about others having the opportunity to heal, too. In a moving reflection, Lilith recounts,

> "Going was incredibly powerful and really allowed me to reclaim my body uniquely and change my attitude to myself, my body and kind of the life that we are living and no longer letting it be about striving for something we cannot have but being grateful for what we do have. It's about the intention; I'd created a ritual within the mikvah for myself. I was not being sent there or told I had to do it on a certain day or time."

Lilith challenges *Taharat HaMishpacha's* notions of purity or impurity, rejecting *niddah* and suggesting that it stigmatises women and is outdated, returning "back to a misogynistic culture of men of being afraid of blood". Most significantly, Lilith argues that *mikveh* rituals now (dictated by rabbis/*Talmud*) are not observed in the way they were religiously intended to be (from the Temple), which is to mark a transition. Whilst intentional

immersion is a theme weaving through many participants' stories, Lilith's emphasis on demarcating time corporeally is especially unique,

> "You can light the *Shabbat* candles and be thinking about turning the oven off, getting dinner ready, doing a million things. But *mikveh* preparation and actually easing yourself into the water requires focus."

When reflecting on her career as a rabbi, Lilith found that congregants needed a ritual "to fall back on their Judaism, at a time that at the moment Judaism does not have the language for." The absence of meaningful liturgy and traditional *halakhic* rituals for life changes, such as bereavement or trauma, are examples of where the *mikveh's* liberatory waters can fill and be embraced. *Mikveh* has the power to provide spiritual healing because it "uses every inch of one's body".

On the other hand, what remains unclear is how and if Pond will systematically change *mikveh* usage among British Jewry. Lilith discusses how the traditional attitudes held by UK Jewish communities could be initial obstacles, as using the *mikveh* alternatively fundamentally challenges British Jewry's *mikveh* doxa, which the Orthodox United Synagogue dictates. Accordingly, *mikvaot* are only used by *Orthodox* communities for *niddah*, in line with their *halakha*, and seldom by *Progressive* Jews in Britain.

However, in America, *Progressive* Jews mark lifestyle events like a Bar/Bat *Mitzvah* or pre- Pesach by dipping in *mikvaot* such as Mayim Hayim. By contrast, in the UK, only one *Progressive mikveh* exists, which is a renovated disabled toilet next to a nursery, used for the sole purpose of enabling converts to complete their conversion process, which involves immersion (*tevilah*). This is a *mikveh* that Lilith knows all too well, she says, stating,

> "When you are at your most vulnerable standing naked there trying to have a spiritual moment, all you can hear are the noises of small children".

On the contrary, Lilith's practice is complicated by the unpleasant practicalities in such a location. This demonstrates that even in London, where most Anglo-Jewry is concentrated (ONS 2020), the practical sphere of *halakhic* possibilities is narrow compared to other diaspora communities whose facilities are expansive. This discrepancy can be attributed to communal attitudes, which have a cyclical relationship to practical resources.

Lilith's story, in many ways, encapsulates the findings of this dissertation: highlighting the importance of kavanah, whether for mental health immersion or a wildly different *halakhic* direction, as explored next through Elli. Her project, Pond, is emblematic of how socio-geographic and inter-communal factors shape and constrict British Jewry's ritual. However, Pond presents an (almost literal) sea-change for this community- access to the UK's first accessible mental health *mikveh*. Perhaps there will be a sea-change amongst British Jewry's conservative *halakhic* attitudes, too, a potential newfound openness?

4.2.2. Making Waves

Rabbi Elli Tikvah Sarah expresses an animated passion for re-interpreting *mitzvot*, and she is symbolic of the multifaceted and diverse ways of 'doing gender' and 'doing Judaism'. As the first (openly) lesbian to join the rabbinate in Britain, a leader in the small Brighton *Progressive* community, she argues, perhaps from personal experience, that Judaism's nature is a reflexive, ongoing dialogue and Jews should "transform Judaism through participation".

As Elli explicitly states, this interpretative approach aligns with *Progressive* Judaism's stance against "empty *mitzvot*", which refers to passively following commandments for religion's sake. Instead, she encourages purposeful observance beyond conventional liturgy, arguing that "all *mitzvot* are reinventable". Regarding *mikveh,* as the (*Orthodox*) *mikveh* in Brighton does not accept Progressive *conversion* or tradition, Elli instead uses the sea for personal *tevilah* and in her pastoral and spiritual role, accompanying and encouraging congregants to momentously immerse for healing, rather than *niddah*.

On the surface, Elli, as a *Progressive* rabbi, appears similar to Lilith. However, she provides a differing angle, a lens into how sociodemographic factors shape *halakhic* practice. Comparatively, Lilith's London location affords her choice and ease of *mikveh* access, which makes radical, innovative ideas and exciting projects like 'Pond' seem possible. In contrast, Elli is not afforded choice or access to a *mikveh*, which narrows the sphere of possibilities. Interestingly, these locational barriers almost force Jewish women to be creative and open-minded regarding *halakhic* observance, as Elli's unconventional sea immersion exemplifies. Unlike Deborah (see 4.5), who experiences similar regional constraints, for Elli, accessibility does not limit what is viable. Instead, it poses a stimulating creative challenge to actively make *halakha* work, which Elli believes is an essential element of the *mitzvah*.

Notably, Elli uses reflexive Biblical metaphors to highlight the significance of liberatory water within Judaism, connecting the symbolism and holiness of *mikveh* waters as akin to the Israelites crossing the Red Sea from slavery. She reiterates her interpretations of water-based rituals as emancipatory, exemplifying liquid liberation by likening *mikveh* to ritual *Shabbat* handwashing. As Elli writes in a sermon, “Jewish practice is visceral; it concerns what Jews do with their bodies, from the kitchen to the bedroom” (Sarah 2023), consistently emphasising that religious observance must be corporeal, ‘embodying Judaism’.

Whilst other participants from across the religious spectrum (Esther, Hepzibah, Leah, Abi, and Rachel) do not use the term “embodied Judaism”, they equally emphasise the distinctiveness of *halakhic* corporeality elements, which requires intentional, physical *kavanah*. Women explain that focus and intention is essential in *Taharat HaMishpacha* rituals, as (*Orthodox*) Abi talks about how in the *mikveh* she “really breathes into it” yet says candidly that otherwise she does not “buy into the whole spiritual divine feminine stuff”. Similarly, (*Charedi)* Shifra mentions the physical elements, “cleaning oneself of any barriers that there may be between my body and the water”. She also points out that wider Judaism “is very much connected to a woman's body”, reiterating other women's emphasis on the corporeal aspects of religious observance.

Whilst Elli's interpretation and practical *mikveh* usage stray from the original TH laws, her practice is still firmly rooted in *halakha*; as illustrated when she this Torah verse, 'you should practice G-d's teachings in your heart and mouth' (Devarim 30:11-14). This is fundamental to her Jewish sense of belonging,

> "I have been excluded as a woman and as a lesbian. Nevertheless, Judaism is mine, my inheritance. So, I absolutely believe in reclamation, but it is not just reclamation in the sense of 'I am going to now fit myself in.' No, reclaiming something as my own".

Herein, the importance of reclaiming *halakha* for religious empowerment reverberates through Elli's poignant testimony and other participants' stories. Similar raw, personal stories narrate the struggles faced by Jewish women in Judaism, and their self-directed *halakhic* solutions, penetrating throughout the dataset, surpassing denomination, location, or age. Perhaps Jewish women practise *kavanah* so emphatically because it is the antidote to their battles of Jewish feminism (Rachel and Eve), a medicinal tool for androcentrism (Elli) and trauma (Ruth/ Lilith) or a tool to regain agency from rabbis (Deborah). Such strength found within religious anguish, through intent, is amplified next by Ruth.

4.3. Ruthless

For a radically distinct perspective is Ruth, a *Charedi* activist and scholar in Manchester, who believes that the *mikveh* is an external method of assault. Raising important criticisms around power, Ruth argues TH "is a form of spiritual abuse", and she poses the question, if sex is a religiously obligated *mitzvah* after *mikveh*, how can proper consent be given?
In multiple troubling anecdotes, Ruth refers to stories of inappropriate behaviour by *mikveh* ladies (*balanit)*, such as pulling attendees' hair painfully and obstructing their boundaries of privacy. Ruth further affirms adversity towards purity rituals, stating that TH is problematic, sexist, and patriarchal.

From one angle, Ruth is an embodiment of agency and bravery, directly contradicting the literature's portrayals of *Orthodox* Jewish women as passive and oppressed, "who enter

Jewish spaces silently" (Greenberg 1999:149). Other participants speak candidly against cultural sexism, such as Vashti, who describes elements of *Orthodox* synagogues (the *mechitzah*) as the "*apartheid* section". However, it must be noted that Ruth is the only non-Progressive woman to use such explicitly pejorative language towards Judaism .In a similar vein, Ruth is one of the very few participants to identify as explicitly feminist, a label that no other *Charedi* woman (and only three Orthodox women) used. This label is also significant, contravening doxa about *Charedim's* insularity, secrecy and perceived 'backward' attitudes. Additionally, Ruth's outspoken bravery shines through her incredible lifework as an activist to better safeguard and protect those in *Charedi* communities, using cultural sensitivity to help people without them having to transgress religious or cultural boundaries.

On the contrary, her story is a worrying example of the dangers of embodied, physical Jewish practice. Yet, despite this, Ruth also emulates strength and determination to make Judaism work, mentioning her meetings with Rabbi 'Penina' for *halakhic* guidance, wherein they discussed how Ruth's tears "could be her own *mikveh*" and made a plan for Ruth to *tevilah* once more, but using the sea instead, to gain closure and re-empower herself, after prior negative experiences. Therefore, it proves how the same rituals that caused so much pain may be the antidote to healing through intention, kindness, support, and positive symbolism.

4.4. One Bad Apple? Picking Patriarchy

Taken together, the next two women are both London-based *Orthodox* feminists in their twenties. At the surface level, my choice to narrate both stories may seem superfluous because they are of similar age, religiosity, and area. However, their differing Jewish feminist approaches are emblematic of the subtle monopoly that the underlying purpose of a ritual has on Jewish women's observance. Whilst Rachel's feminist perspective takes a macrocosmic, societal view of patriarchy, in comparison, Eve's feminist stance is mainly constrained to her Jewish world, as first discussed.

4.4.1. Fashionably Late to Feminism

The first woman (of the two), Eve, is a London-based journalist and an ardent feminist. She was raised as *Charedi* but as an adult is *Modern Orthodox*, and when asked about her upbringing, Eve laughs, "Feminism is the antithesis of all our [Charedi] values", yet she then reveals that feminism within Orthodoxy still poses challenges,

> "There's the Western liberal Eve, and then there's the Jewish Eve, who recognises that feminism doesn't fit naturally with *Orthodox* Judaism. But I want to change that".

The purpose behind *a mitzvah* is the defining factor in whether Eve chooses to reject or embrace it, as exemplified through her attitudes towards TH. Interestingly, unlike literature and other participants, she does not see TH as patriarchal , because it operates as a "dual responsibility" rather than an instrument of sexism. She says, "*Niddah* is an interaction between husband and wife; so, it doesn't make me feel like I'm not allowed to participate in society." This is a stark contrast to *tznius*, which Eve rejects because it operates to "other" women,

> "If you can't wear practical clothing, it inhibits you; can't run for the bus, can't ride a bicycle or be in a professional setting. You're not part of the functioning world; you must dress gracefully and be on the sidelines. So, I hate that …. I do feel there's a place for modesty in Judaism, but not in the way it's been codified."

In a similar vein, Rachel similarly problematises the intercommunal dogma of *tznius*, which she believes has a sexist function, accentuating that "*tznius* has been co-opted as this way to police women's bodies, it drives me nuts".

What is striking once again, despite being acutely aware of Judaism's misogyny, is that Eve embraces Judaism for all its good and evil, as she candidly expresses about *Simchat Torah*, a festival that her synagogue will not allow women to celebrate. Herein, Eve's story is emblematic of Orthodox feminism's inherent dichotomy, which poses an existential challenge, forcing women to foster a meaningful existence for themselves within the parameters of their androcentric community, a challenge which they rise to. On the other

hand, Rachel emphatically notes that sexism is not an issue unique to Judaism, taking a macrocosmic approach to Jewish feminism, as explored below.

4.4.2. Problematic Pedestals

The following story concerns Rachel, an interfaith worker, mother, and outspoken radical feminist from London, who articulates an epistemologically distinctive view of TH, suggesting that approaching *mikveh* through the lens of empowerment or placing it on a spiritual pedestal is inaccurate, as it is simply just another *mitzvah.* Candidly, Rachel states,

> "*Mikveh* is a fundamental part of religious life; it is not empowering any more than eating chicken soup is empowering".

Rachel is ambivalent towards *mikveh*, not seeing it as an issue of empowerment, sexism, or agency, but a part of her wider piety, which is a significant perception because it highlights rudimental context is in the examination of Jewish women's practices. Herein the research focus should be shifted from specific rituals (tiny fragments of the bigger issue), and so is the choice to embrace a Jewish life of tradition and modern values. The mundanity of the *mikveh* is similarly echoed by Hepzibah, who articulates similar ambivalence, stating that labelling *mikveh* as 'empowering' would be exaggeratory, but so would the label of 'sexist'. For Hepzibah, the significance of *mikveh* lies within TH's religious obligations, to maintain a kosher marriage. As these *mitzvot* are theologically significant, this creates wider questions about how ancient rituals are navigated and justified in the present day.

A prevalent view in the literature and among participants was that rabbis were to blame for Judaism's patriarchy, as illustrated by Rebecca, "We talk about *mikveh* as being in terms of women's bodies, but I think it applied to men far more until we entered rabbinic times, where the power shifts". On the contrary, Rachel firmly disagrees, arguing that this is an oversimplistic, "apologetic" explanation because *halakha* is "complicated gender-wise", holding a reach far beyond rabbis. Moreover, when asked about Jewish patriarchy, Rachel shrugs, unbothered, outlining,

> "People say to me, 'You're *Orthodox* and a feminist, and how do you do that?' But it's a trick question- it's a 'pick your patriarchy' game. You can be a secular feminist, but all our societal notions of womanhood are defined by gender. That is a fallacy- the idea that if you leave religion, you leave gender behind".

Notably, Rachel problematises the inherent epistemology of this research, as her (rightful) criticisms pose a challenge to my feminist angle: perhaps this project, alongside wider feminist literature, is insubstantial, failing to acknowledge society's system of patriarchy too, which disingenuously paints an idyllic picture of society for women outside of Judaism. Possibly my standpoint approach over-scrutinises Judaism and places it on an unrealistic pedestal when the inequality felt in Judaism may just be reflective of the normativity of societal sexism. Concerning this challenge, this paper still takes a balanced, nuanced stance that is equally critical of broader and narrower cultural contexts. However, this issue is not focal to the findings or overall argument, which distances itself from these criticisms to amplify Jewish women's voices and practices positively.

In summary, despite sharing commonalities of feminism, age and piety, Rachel, and Eve's differing observances, and differing thematic emphasis symbolise that women's self-directed intentions underpin all *halakhic* practices. In addition, topographic and sociopolitical factors undoubtedly shape women's religious lifestyles, as Deborah's narrative highlights next.

4.5. Northern Spirit

Finally, we move on to Deborah, a charity worker and Modern *Orthodox* mother from Manchester, whose story provides a particularly insightful perspective into how socio-geographic factors and social pressures shape religiosity and identity.

Interestingly, although growing up Modern *Orthodox* but not particularly religious, Deborah decided to observe TH when married. Reflecting on the course of her marriage, Deborah laughs about how she has become less stringent about following TH because an "age and stage" effect has made the intricacies feel less crucial. For example, as a

newlywed, she and her husband would separate their beds during *niddah* but are now unbothered, simply restraining from sex rather than stringent separation. Similarly, her feelings towards *bedika* checks have changed; in her tone, it is clear how passionately she feels about them. She despises this practice,

> "I was really young. There was a vulnerability in my age and attitude to wanting to do everything right that I wouldn't go along with now. Actually, the idea of having to put your knickers in an envelope and give them to your Rabbi is absolutely abhorrent, and it is not okay- the world's moved on."

Likewise, Rachel also feels similarly, "I made it a rule for myself to never ever speak to a man…. These are women's bodies, and women know women's bodies best."

However, the most significant factor in Deborah's observance is her Manchester location and the surrounding community. She highlights such factors through anecdotes and stories of sweet interactions, which are symbolic of the community-based nature of British Jewry. For example, Deborah points out that the lack of an *eruv* makes *Shabbat* more difficult, laughing as she recounts, "The Rabbi promised us there would be an *eruv* by the time we had children, and our oldest is now twenty, so maybe please G-d by the time we have grandchildren". She suggests that environmental factors felt constraining and perhaps were reflective of rigid community attitudes,

> "I think in Manchester, there is the assumption that just because you keep one thing, there is going to be a natural trail that means if you do this, you must do that, that and that".

This pattern is also reflected concerning *mikveh*, as the laws of TH are understood to be practised only by *Charedi*m and Ultra-*Orthodox* Jews. It is not commonplace for Modern *Orthodox* Jews to observe them, or at least perceived as such in Manchester, which may explain why Deborah only has access to one *mikveh*. She explains it is run by a *Charedi* woman, which is off-putting, "You turn up and the *balanit* is always inevitably wearing *a*

sheitel. I find that quite grating". Furthermore, these sociocultural expectations impact other *halakha*, as Deborah recounts dressing less *tznius*-l*y* outside her community,

> "I feel okay with that on holiday, but not in my home. It's about other people's expectations… on holiday, you're in your own space and not defined by your community".

Deborah's narrative, just like Elli's, serves as an essential sociological reminder of the disparities in perceived bounds of potential. It is fascinating how limited opportunity has had the inverse effect on Deborah as it did on Elli; for Deborah, alternative usage is not even something she has heard of, as she mentions later in the interview, because the idea of multiple local *mikvaot*, or an *eruv*, would feel radical in Manchester. Therefore, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: unsatisfactory resources become the norm, creating a restrictive cycle that curbs creativity; hence Deborah must work harder to find meaning and make these rituals worthwhile, observing in a narrower, more circumscribed way than others, but with the same *kavanah*.

4.6. Chasing Kavanah

To summarise, to answer the research question, neither *mikveh* nor *Taharat HaMishpacha* are intrinsically sexist nor truly liberatory, because without *kavanah*, they are illogical spiritual rituals (Holub 2012), naïve manifestations of blind faith, or religiously demanded sexism. Instead, my findings illustrate that "What people DO matters" (Simmonds 2019:247), and to add to that, WHY people do (ritual) matters. Fundamentally, comprehensive insight into Jewish women's experiences and attitudes requires an acknowledgement of their overall religiosity, their holistic choices to live piously and make meaning out of religion in a secular, and frankly easier, non-Jewish society.

On the other hand, Jewish women's attitudes and experiences are also considerably affected by sociodemographic factors, which in fact strengthens the importance of *kavanah*: because these factors often make practices more challenging, women must be motivated to find meaning within ritual, to make them worthwhile. Participation in *mitzvot* such as *mikveh*

depends on demography, available appropriate facilities, and practical access. Indeed, such practical restrictions conceptually shape what Jews perceive to be realistic within the bounds of Judaism and the bounds of their area, hence explaining how the typically conservative and demographically small nature of British Jewry affects *halakhic* observance and *mikveh* usage. As Rachel neatly summarises, “The UK community is a “desert wasteland for Jewish feminism”.

While rituals, especially gendered ones, can be challenging and often painful, Jewish women formally and informally readapt and personalise *halakha* to empower themselves through embracing a fulfilling Jewish identity. Notably, struggling with faith and tradition is a long-held Jewish institution, and crucial in fully understanding the *halakha*. Jews are known as the people of Israel, which means those who 'wrestle with angels' (and by implication, G-d: *Bereshit* 32: 27-29).

To summarise, although they do not know each other, Jewish women are united by their stories of unconventionality, struggle, faith, and *kavanah.* These findings are symbolic, considerable acts of resistance by Jewish women: a rebellion against both stigmatising, sexist Judaism, which demanded their passivity, and de-agentic Western feminism, which perceived them as passive instruments in a male-dominated culture.

5. Halakhic Hot Takes

5.1 Conclusion, Interrupted: A Conversation

"Women's very bodily functions are devalued and made the center of complex taboos; their voices and natural beauty are all regarded as snares" (Plaskow 1990:191).

"For me, it's an acknowledgement of the incredible female body and its power to create life" — Esther.

"Traditions may be accepted without questioning, adaptations to taboos may be forced onto future generations… and girls' bodies may be [being] shamed" (Webster 2017:25).

"*Mikveh* is a powerful space like no other…. First period, recovering from addiction, all sorts of transitional moments to honour. A lovely space to be a part of". — Rebecca.

"The 'otherness' of women, evident in Jewish liturgies and texts, cannot be remedied through piecemeal *halakhic* change" (Umansky 1988: 187).

"It's challenging that women cannot do as much in the *Orthodox* Jewish world. I hold on to the things that feel meaningful to me and make them work in my way". — Deborah.

"Having to petition a man for menstrual validation and sexual permission… in addition to being viscerally repellent" (Hartman and Marmon 2004:396).

"I understand why it is impurity, but I don't think it's sexist—I'm not cast off in society or the family". — Abi.

"Women's purity' [is] culturally defined in terms of … absence of agency" (Sered 2001:167).

"I do not know if I would use the word empowering for *mikveh*, but it is a beautiful, meaningful, and personal thing I can do for myself, for my family". — Deborah.

After eight months of this labour of love, I am feebly attempting to summarise the findings of fourteen interviews, literature from nearly two hundred scholars, and plenty of *chutzpah*. In this research, the story has been "both the participant's and the interviewer's" (Creese 2020:3) and I feel a profound personal connection to the data, but mostly a strong moral obligation to accurately represent my participants. Consequently, I included the above conversation between the literature and interviewees because it is intimate, personal, and somewhat tangled. There is an infamous colloquialism, 'three rabbis have six opinions', which this conversation surpasses in breadth, feminism, and creativity.

The wide range of attitudes and contradictions displayed above are emblematic of Jewish women's *mikveh* experiences and TH observances, which may seem trivial at best and oppressive at worst. Moreover, this imagined conversation challenges the scholarship both epistemologically and thematically. Furthermore, this dialogue mirrors pages of Talmudic debate between rabbis, which have dominated *halakha* for centuries. Consequently, this dialogue methodologically subverts androcentrism, by platforming Jewish women's ten opinions, rather than the rabbis', for once.

Interestingly, the women referenced in this conversation (and in the dataset too) do not directly challenge the literature's positions on purity and stigma, but instead they subtly undermine scholarship's preoccupations with their supposed subordination simply by their focus on the *mikveh* rituals that they do find comfort, spirituality, or pleasure in. Interview excerpts, as exemplified, contravene the binary positions in Jewish, feminist, and Jewish feminist literature as Jewish women reflect on their choices about *mikveh* and TH candidly. Women across the dataset have articulated their agency, challenges, comfort, and discomfort *through* their *halakhic* observance *practices*, crucially not *despite* it. It is the intention and purpose behind religiosity and ritual that are significant in the lives of Jewish women, rather than literature labels of 'feminist', 'empowering' or 'sexist'.

Accordingly, the dataset provides comprehensive insight into the experiences of British Jewish women, acknowledging that they cannot be classified based upon religious denomination, synagogue choice, or feminist affiliation, but rather the meanings attached to *halakha* - from *tznius* to kashrut, then to *mikveh* and all *mitzvot* in between. Additionally,

the findings demonstrate the significance of socio-geographic and demographic factors in shaping the practical and conceivable approaches to Jewish practice. Ergo, these factors distinguish British Jewish women's experiences from those of their Jewish 'sisters' worldwide.

5.2 Further Research, Future Women

Lastly, this is a personal, positive, and affirming research contribution. Too often has scholarship been nihilistic and depressing, extensively rattling on about oppressed Jewish women or rabbinical hegemony, detracting from the lived experiences of happy, empowered, pious Jewish women. It has been lazy, hapless, hopeless, and adumbrating in claiming that Judaism will never be for the autonomous, agentic, feminist woman.

This research says otherwise. Unwaveringly hopeful (potentially naïve), it illustrates the rich, complex, sometimes painful, but mostly joyful lives of practising Jewish women in Britain. Going forward, research must disrupt the amplification of men's and external feminists' voices and instead recentre Jewish feminists ourselves. Scholarship must retell and represent our life stories in narratives that are as jumbled and complex as our lives are: as women who wrestle with angels or, less esoterically, questionably bearded rabbis.

Not by might, not by power, but by spirit alone.

Debbie Friedman 1990

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Appendix 1: Interview Transcribed

The text in bold indicates the interviewer's (ER) questions.

Interviewer: ER

Interviewee: AH

Date/ time: 14/11/24, 6.20 pm GMT.

[ER]

Would you argue that misunderstandings of the words around niddah and *mikveh* are due to textual mistranslations of Hebrew to English?

[AH]

Yes, it's an issue of not understanding the shift from Temple Judaism to Rabbinic Judaism. So, impurity, and ritual purity only really has relevance in a world where the Temple is standing, and once the Temple is gone, like it is today, it doesn't really matter.

This is because niddah was then about whether you can worship in the Temple or not, and so *mikveh*, even though it might cleanse us from niddah, it can only cleanse us from various impurities. It cannot cleanse us from the impurity of death; only the red *heifer* in the Temple can do that, so we're all impure all the time. The mitzvah is not about purity anymore, and the word purity doesn't have a negative or positive connotation in Hebrew as it does in English; it's literally a ritual state that we all move out of. Actually, there is an amazing article that Rachel Adler wrote in the 1970s where she explores the natural cycles our bodies move through from light to darkness, rather than purity or impurity and then there was a later article she wrote in Tikkun, which contrasts her earlier work.

[ER]

That's really interesting, yes, Rachel Adler writes amazingly, are her connotations of niddah as light and dark interpretations that resonate with your understanding of the *halakha*? Is Taharat HaMishpacha about life and death in your experience?

[AH]

I think that light and dark is a beautiful metaphor, but for me the *mikveh* has a much wider realm to give us a Jewish space and a time to process many aspects of life. It gives us time and space to process, and to hold space. There's no other space where you can be vulnerable in that way in Jewish life, right? Everything is about food and family and community and being together, but this is the one space that's private and vulnerable, the *mikveh* can take whatever you leave in it.

[ER]

Thank you for sharing, are there specific events or times that you have specially gone to the *mikveh* to mark or to process?

[AH]

During IVF, when I was experiencing infertility, the *mikveh* was a hugely valuable tool for me, which gave me permission to acknowledge how crap it was at the time. We haven't really created those spaces for men, which is really important and giving them those opportunities as well. There are lots of ways we process things, you know, talking, sharing, but yea, the *mikveh* space was very meaningful for me.

[ER]

Wow, thank you for sharing. At the start you mentioned that you also use the *mikveh* for niddah, even though it is not typically your Progressive community's tradition. Was there a main inspiration for observing it?

[AH]

Well my husband and I came from different denominations, he is more Orthodox, so we did it because as a couple it was necessary, and then after going regularly, I found how useful it could be, but I'm really grateful I was in the habit of going every month, because this inspired me to start exploring how else I could use the space of *mikveh*.

[ER]

Fascinating, and there are also many debates about Taharat HaMishpacha and the *mikveh* ritual within itself being patriarchal and sexist beyond the ideas of 'impurity', what are your thoughts about this?

[AH]
So, I think it's complex. I think there are, if we look at the Rabbinic texts, absolutely elements of it that are patriarchal. So, if we go back to Leviticus 15, which is where we get most of the biblical laws (there's a couple of other mentions), but essentially, it's Leviticus 15. We see a very non-value-based instruction on, I think, public health policy and how to keep the community safe. It's not only about natural body emissions but also about sickness. So, if you've got something oozing from your genitals that shouldn't be there. There's a much longer, stricter restriction than if you're having a natural bleed or if you ejaculate. There are very clearly understandings that there are natural healthy emissions and there are unnatural sickness emissions, and they are differentiated in the *Torah*.

The reason there are restrictions around when we menstruate, and ejaculate is to do with the fact that those acts are holy. When something holy happens to the body- it enters a state of *tameh* of impurity. The *Talmud* says if you want to know if a holy text is holy, it's because it renders the hands unclean, which is a really odd thing from a modern perspective, but essentially, something holy makes us *tameh.* It puts us into a different state. And I think ejaculation, orgasm and menstruation were seen as holy things that the body did naturally, whereas illness and genital illnesses were understood to not be the same as natural menstruation and natural ejaculation.

When we entered rabbinic period, it became more positive. I think so if you look at Niddah 21b it says, ‘why are we keeping these laws in a world where the Temple is gone, why are they relevant?’ It says, ‘the reason we keep them is so that we don't come to the take each other for granted. It uses the language that we shouldn't come to hate each other through overt familiarity, right?

However, there are also rabbinic sources that talk about women as ‘bleeding pots of filth’, so there is definitely misogyny within it. But if we think about how niddah works, women are entrusted with a huge amount of *halakhic* power and responsibility because if you don't count correctly, or you pretend something is happening that isn't happening it is very serious. It’s a very serious thing to sleep with a woman who is menstruating according to

traditional Jewish law, so a woman is trusted to tell her husband when he's not going to break the law to sleep with her.

The Rabbis, I think, do put quite a lot of effort into trying to wield some of that power back. So, for example, saying that you should show your stain in a bedika check to a male rabbi to determine whether you're pure or impure when most, I would say, 95% of women know what's going on with their bodies.
They also essentially say ‘we don't know what a natural emission is these days, or you're sick, and we're going to make everyone as if they're sick’. So, the restriction has actually expanded since then. Interestingly in the Conservative tradition, their response says that ‘if you're going to keep the laws of niddah, we recommend that you keep seven days, not 12 to 14, because that's what the Torah says, not the Talmud, we don't agree with the rabbis that women don't know what's happening with their bodies. We think women do know what's happening with their bodies’.

So, there's a sort of giving with one hand and a taking away with the other. And I think it's important to acknowledge both, which I do There are ways that the laws of niddah were very empowering to women, and there are ways that rabbis tried to take it back.

[ER]
Yes absolutely, I think the level of nuance is really important but also recognising the potential positives. Are there ways in which you find niddah to be empowering too?

[AH]
Yes absolutely, it's like you're reunited from a honeymoon when you come back together after being separated; it's essentially a marital aid to keep the sexual spark alive. We know that modern psychologists and couples’ therapists use separations and reunions o help couples work through sexual issues. So, it's very much for 2000 years been seen as a marital aid by Jewish sources, not as a restriction. Which is one of the benefits, I think, of keeping it up. You can't just kiss and make up when you've had an argument. You have to talk it out.

[ER]

How do you personally observe niddah? How many days do you separate for?

[AH]

So, we've talked about keeping seven. My husband's interested. Sephardim are actually much more lenient anyway, so it's seven plus four rather than seven plus five. So, we keep seven plus four if I've finished menstruating.

Appendix 2: Interview Schedule

This was used as a guide to conduct interviews efficiently and accurately.

Topic	**What I am trying to ask or do**	**Potential Questions**
Background	Build Rapport Religious Upbringing Religious Background	"Please can you begin by telling me a bit about yourself". "Where in the UK are you based?" "What was your religious upbringing?" "Has your religiosity changed since your upbringing/ during your life?"
Practicalities of *halakhic* practice	Patterns in British women's *niddah and mikveh* practices	"How often do you attend the *mikveh*? (weekly, monthly, bi-yearly, yearly)?" "What are your main reasons for attending the *mikveh*? *(niddah*, menstruation, before your wedding, alternative purposes or other)?"

Affiliations	Affiliation with religious denominations and synagogues Congruency of denomination and practice	"Which religious denomination would you identify most with – *Chasidic/ Ultraorthodox/ Orthodox*, *Progressive*, *Progressive*, no denomination, Other?" "Do you have membership of an affiliated synagogue? Why/ why not?" "Do you identify with the traditions of your synagogue?"
Identifications with feminism	If feminism is a relevant belief or issue for Jewish women. If feminism and Judaism are antithetical How women navigate their Judaism with their other values	"There's debates about niddah/*mikveh* being a feminist issue, what are your thoughts on this?" "Would you identify as a feminist? Why/ Why Not?" "Do you feel that feminism is congruent

		with Judaism? Why/Why Not?" "Do you compartmentalise your modern values and beliefs regarding Judaism, or do your values feel congruent?"
UK Background	Patterns within Jewish British community How location affects religiosity and practice Spheres of possibility amongst Anglo-Jewry	"Where is your nearest *mikveh*?" "Do you have a choice of *mikveh*?" "Have you ever been to a *mikveh* outside of Britain? If so, please expand on your experiences". "What are your experiences of living within the British Jewish community? What is the nature of the community around you or British Jewry more generally in your experience?"

		"Do you think that your experiences of *mikveh* and Jewish practice in general are affected by living in the diaspora, outside of Israel? Why/ Why not and how?"
Negative attitudes towards niddah/*mikveh*	Patterns in attitudes towards Taharat HaMishpacha British Jewish women's understandings of gender specific practices	"There's debates within literature that *Taharat HaMishpacha* is restrictive towards female sexuality, how do you understand it?" "Do you feel that these practices are sexist? Why/Why Not?"
Positive attitudes towards *Taharat HaMishpacha*	If *niddah/ mikveh* is empowering or can be reclaimed	"Theres debate around whether *niddah / mikveh* is a practice that is empowering for women or subordinating for women. What would you argue about that?" "Do you find *mikveh* empowering? Why and how /Why Not?"

Rabbinical input	The impact of religious leaders on women's experiences of *niddah* Opinions of *bedika* checks.	"Have you ever consulted a religious leader about your niddah status? Y/N and why/ why not. If so, please elaborate?" "What are your attitudes towards such consultations (bedika checks)?"
Social expectations	The existence and impact of socio-cultural religious pressures	"How do your religious practices fit with your own identity (e.g. occupation, politics, ideologies, social circles)? Why and how/ why not?" "Does your surrounding Jewish community or social circle impact how you observe *mikveh?* If so, how?" "Do you feel that external pressures affect your *halakhic*

		observance? If so, how, or why not?"
Shame and stigma	Impact and existence of menstrual/sexual taboos within Judaism and Jewish cultural life.	"Does stigma/ shame exist around discussing *niddah* in your community, or is it a topic that is discussed openly?" "Do you feel that *niddah* stigmatises your menstrual cycle? Why/ why not?" "Do you feel that sexual taboos exist within *halakha* or your Jewish community? If so, how?"
Passion and Intimacy	The impact of *niddah/mikveh* on Jewish women's marital relationships	"In the literature, there are many discussions about how *Taharat HaMishpacha* affects sexual intimacy within a marriage. How do you understand this?" "If you feel comfortable sharing, does *Taharat*

		HaMishpacha have an impact on your own marital intimacy? Has this changed over the course of your marriage?"
Interpretation of *halakha*	Mistranslations Secular misunderstandings of the meanings behind *mikveh* and *niddah*	"There's debate that there are misunderstandings of the true meanings behind *Taharat HaMishpacha*, what are your thoughts on this?" "Some Jewish Feminists suggest that *mikveh/ niddah* is related to life and death cycles. Do you agree and why/why not?" "Do you use alternative interpretations or traditional Torah interpretations to guide your *halakhic* practice? Please explain".
Tznius	Modesty and Jewish women's wider attitudes towards embodied *halakha*	"What are your attitudes towards restrictions of *tznius?"*

		"Is *tznius* something you adhere to? Why/ why not?"
Reclaiming *mikveh* practice	If Jewish women are using the *mikveh* for alternative purposes Purposes such as: Self- care Non- *mikveh* purposes Eco-feminism Trauma	"Have you ever used *mikveh* for non-*niddah* reasons, such as self-care, marking trauma etc... Why/why not?" "Do you think that the *mikveh* can be reclaimed? Why/Why Not?"

Appendix 3: Participant Pseudonyms

Participant number	Pseudonym	Denomination	Occupation	Location	Age Decade
1	Lilith	Progressive (Reform)	Rabbi	North London	40~
2	Eve	Orthodox	Journalism	North London	20~
3	Sarah	Chabad	Religious Education	Brighton	60~
4	Rebecca	Progressive (Reform)	Rabbi	North London	40~
5	Rachel	Orthodox	Interfaith	North London	20~
6	Leah	Orthodox	Medical	North London	50~
7	Abi	Orthodox	Medical	North London	40~
8	Shifra	Charedi	Religious Education	North London	30~
9	Deborah	Orthodox	Charity	South Manchester	50~
10	Esther	Orthodox	Sustainability	North London	20~
11	Hepzibah	Orthodox	Student	North London	20~
12	Ruth	Charedi	Activist	North Manchester	30~
13	Elli Tikvah Sarah	Progressive (Liberal)	Rabbi	Brighton	60~
14	Vashti	Progressive (Reform)	Rabbi	Milton Keynes	60~