

REVIEW ESSAY

***A Lifetime Companion to the Laws of Jewish Family Life*, by Deena R. Zimmerman**

Aviad Stollman

Abstract: *A Lifetime Companion to the Laws of Jewish Family Life* by Deena R. Zimmerman is an excellent book for English readers wishing to study the laws of *niddah* in a serious manner. It enables one to learn the *halakhot* from the original sources placing them in a comprehensible framework. The companion is well structured and written in a clear and empathetic style. It discusses practical medical issues typically not discussed in popular manuals. While the book is a great contribution to the field of family purity laws (*hilkhot niddah*)—specifically to the genre of theoretical books teaching the basic issues involved with keeping these laws—it suffers from the tendency, seen in many other such manuals, to direct the reader to a rabbi rather than resolving issues directly.

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A Lifetime Companion to the Laws of Jewish Family Life, **by Deena R. Zimmerman** (Jerusalem and New York: Urim Publications, 2006 [Second Revised Edition] 223 pp.)*

Aviad Stollman

Deena R. Zimmerman is a physician with exceptional knowledge in Talmud and *halakhab*. One of the first graduates of the Nishmat Keren Ariel Program as a *yo'ezer halakhab* (women's halakhic advisor), she now directs the Nishmat Women's Online Information Center websites dedicated to women's health and *halakhab*, for the general public and for health care providers. Dr. Zimmerman has written a number of articles related to women's health issues and Jewish law and answered thousands of questions in the laws of *niddah* (family purity). Now she has published *A Lifetime Companion to the Laws of Jewish Family Life*,¹ which is a modern halakhic guide to the laws of *niddah*.

The companion is divided into four independent parts. The first is perhaps the

most significant, not merely in size (61 pages), but also in its contribution to the genre, especially in the English language. It is a "study guide" to the *halakbot* of *niddah* containing six chapters meant for those who wish to learn the *halakbot* together with the original Talmudic and post-talmudic sources. The sources found in this part are in vocalized Hebrew and are accompanied by English paraphrases.

The first chapter of the first part describes the laws of *niddah* as articulated in the Torah and later in the Talmud. It describes the halakhic developments that took place in the days of the *tannaim* and *amoraim*. It thus elucidates such fundamental terms as *zavah* and *niddah* and provides the reader with a broad understanding of the material. The

* I am pleased to express my appreciation to Leib Moscovitz and Haym Soloveitchik for their helpful comments. I bear sole responsibility for the contents of this review essay.

¹ It seems that the title "Jewish Family Life" was coined by the author as an attempt to render a more politically correct term than the now conventional euphemism *taborat ha-mishpaha*. According to Evyatar Marienberg, the term, '*taborat ha-mishpaha*,' itself is of German-Jewish origin, late in the nineteenth century, probably a translation of the expression "*Reinheit des Familienlebens*." The original expression was most likely coined as an attempt to suppress the obvious halakhic fact that a woman who menstruates is impure. Instead of discussing the impurity of the *niddah*, one is encouraged to think of the purity of the family. It is also probable that the term came into use to emphasize the talmudic notion that not keeping the laws of *niddah* can have consequences on the purity of the offspring. See: Evyatar Marienberg, *Niddah: Lorsque les juifs conceptualisent la menstruation* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003), pp. 40–41; Haviva Ner-David, "Niddah: A Case in Point of Feminist Reinterpretation," in *To Be a Jewish Woman, Part B: Proceedings of the Second International Conference: Women and Her Judaism*, ed. Margalit Shilo, (Jerusalem and New York: Kolech—Religious Women's Forum and Urim Publications, 2003), pp. 110–111; Tirzah Meacham, "An Abbreviated History of the Development of the Jewish Menstrual Laws," in Rahel R. Wasserfall, ed., *Women and Water—Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999), pp. 32–33; Jonah Steinberg, "From a 'Pot of Filth' to a 'Hedge of Roses' (and Back): Changing Theorizations of Menstruation in Judaism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13:2 (1997), pp. 5–26.

second chapter deals with the onset of the *niddah* status and relates to bleeding, stains, childbirth and other factors that render a woman *niddah*. The third chapter focuses on the requisite time interval that has to elapse before a woman may go to the *miqveh* to finalize the process of cessation of *niddah* status. The fourth chapter discusses all the relevant laws related to immersing in the *miqveh*. The fifth chapter illustrates the various issues related to the time when a woman is expecting her period, i.e. *dinei vesatot*. Finally, the sixth chapter discusses *dinei barbaqot*, i.e., a couple's behavior while the wife is considered *niddah*.

The second part is intended for those who simply wish to know what to do, and are not especially interested in familiarizing themselves with the talmudic and post-talmudic sources. This section is primarily an abridged version of the first part and can be used as a review for those who have read the former part of the book. It is divided into five chapters; the first four roughly match the contents of the first part of the book while the fifth contains an assortment of a dozen frequently asked questions in the field of *hilkhot niddah*.

The questions include solid halakhic queries such as “I saw a bit of red on toilet paper and none on my underwear. What do I do?” and

“Does a small spot on a sanitary napkin make me *niddah*?” along with practical questions not usually addressed in ordinary halakhic manuals, such as: “I have to go to the *miqveh* the night we are invited to a wedding. What do I do?” and “It is three months since I had a baby and I have not yet been able to complete seven clean days and go to the *miqveh*. Help!” Incorporating FAQ in a halakhic manual is a refreshing and useful idea.

The book's third part consists of a review of the *halakhot* arranged according to a woman's life-reproductive cycle, while the fourth part deals with medical issues and their halakhic implications.² It contains six concise yet informative chapters dealing with general diagnostic examinations, infertility, birth control, medical conditions, therapeutic medical procedures and sexual dysfunction. Many will find this part indispensable, since it puts into words some practices and advice never before collated in a halakhic manual. The author's medical knowledge is evident not only in this part of the book, but also in numerous comments and remarks spread throughout the book. On a deeper philosophical level, however, the author seems to have been careful (and justifiably so) to separate her scientific from her halakhic knowledge. For instance, modern

² I was quite surprised to observe that Dr. Zimmerman barely mentioned her own authoritative article on the subject of *veset ha-guf*, published not long ago. My understanding is that her significant findings and formalization in that *Tehumin* article should have challenged the way the laws of *vesatot* are conservatively taught. Based on the conclusions of that article, I would begin teaching the *halakhot* by saying that most women have premenstrual symptoms which signal the onset of menstruation. Therefore most women are not forced to rely on the problematic and complicated calculations of *vesatot* described in most manuals. This would simplify both the instruction and practical behavior for most women. See: Tova Ganzel and Deena R. Zimmerman, “*Veset ha-guf — hebet refit'i hilkhati*,” *Tehumin* 20 (5760 [2000]), pp. 363–375.

³ For an analysis of the social forces that contributed to the construction of the scientific defense of *niddah* regulations, see: Beth Wenger, “Mitzvah and Medicine: Gender, Assimilation, and the Scientific Defense of ‘Family Purity,’” *Jewish Social Studies*, 5, double issue nos. 1 & 2 (1999), pp. 177–202.

⁴ When the author discusses the obscure nature of *dinei vesatot* she does not ask the obvious question: is there any scientific basis for these laws and if so, what could be the consequences of such understanding? There was once a rabbi, actually one of the greatest talmudists of all times who did raise this question. Nahmanides, himself a physician, wrote in his novellae on *Niddah*, 64a: “[Such] knowledge [is] too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot [attain] unto it’ (Ps. 139:6): is a woman's period governed by the horoscope of the day or by the horoscope of the hour so that it depends on which the day of the week it is or which day of the month it is?! When certain time has passed since the previous period, it only makes sense that [a woman will get her period] ... this is the way of all women... According to my humble opinion the *rishonim* were not right when they dealt with many types of *vesatot*. I

scientific rationalizations for the laws of *niddah*, so popular in other manuals,³ are ignored in her book. Likewise, the book does not contain a scientific analysis of the *halakhot*.⁴

The book also contains nine valuable appendices that provide advice on caring for oneself during and after pregnancy in addition to presenting the physiology of menstruation, pregnancy and sex. One appendix is dedicated to explaining *miqveh* construction and another

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includes a *veset* calendar. Another appendix contains a checklist prior to *miqveh* immersion and another discusses the *ketubbah*. There is even an appendix elucidating the issues involved in a married woman covering her hair. The author justifies its inclusion: “While not actually part of the laws of *niddah*, the issue of hair covering is one that is unique to marriage. Therefore a summary of the relevant aspects is provided here.”

Meeting Implicit Expectations

In her recent book, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism*, Tamar Ross raised the possibility that “women’s gradual entry into the realm of halakhic deliberation” will have substantial influence on *halakhab*. While Ross does not believe that any given *halakhab* will be decided differently by women,

it is probable nevertheless that active female presence in halakhic discourse will facilitate greater attention to halakhic precedents and possibilities,⁵ specifically in *halakhot niddah*.⁶ I believe that this book shows that Ross’ predictions have yet to be confirmed, at least for now. Some might consider certain characteristics in Zimmerman’s presentation to hint at the author’s gender. Nevertheless, the book is far from articulating a feminist analysis of these *halakhot*.

For example, the attitude of the author towards various emotional difficulties facing women is ambivalent. At times she exhibits much understanding of the emotional needs of women. Such is the case when she stresses that while “frivolous talk or behavior is frowned upon,” it “does not preclude being friendly—something husbands should seriously consider, as women often feel ‘unloved’ at this point, especially because of the constant reminder of their *niddah* status engendered by *harchakot*” (p. 79). Zimmerman’s practical advice for husbands conveys a sensitivity lacked by some male rabbis: “Thoughtful gestures—sending letters or cards, small gifts, flowers for Shabbat⁷—can help counterbalance this negative message.” Another case in point is permitting the husband to attend to his wife in labor. The author does seem to believe in the importance of the husband’s emotional support and attendance in the process of labor. Yet her halakhic conclusion is based

think that the only *veset* which actually exists is when there are perfectly even intervals. Menstruation comes on time, on fixed time intervals, because this is the nature of human beings.” I don’t expect Dr. Zimmerman to draw practical conclusions from theoretical inquiries, but it would be worthwhile to treat this intriguing subject in a footnote. On Nahmanides’ approach, see: Shalem Yahalom, “The Halakhic Thought of Nahmanides According to his Provençal Sources” (Hebrew), Ph.D. dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 2003, p. 124.

⁵ Tamar Ross, *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Waltham, Massachusetts, Brandeis University Press: 2004), pp. 233–235.

⁶ See: Ross, pp. 238–241.

⁷ It is possible that the author accentuates “for Shabbat” because she feels that it is halakhically improper for the husband to give flowers to his wife while she is *niddah* on regular weekdays; Cf.: Rabbi Shmuel Wasner, *She’elot u-Teshuvot Shevet ha-Levi*, 115, 116.

⁸ See: p. 134–135. There are sound halakhic reasons to allow a husband to hold his wife’s hand when she is in labor, at least up until she sees blood; see: Rabbi David Yosef in *Torat ha-Taborah* (Jerusalem: Yehave Da’at, 1999), 13:16 (p. 144). Cf. my article: “*Taborat ha-Mishpaha ha-Datit Le’umit*”, *Akdamot* 14 (2004), pp. 239–242. Since I feel that one of

on stringent, albeit common, opinions that set up barriers between the birthing couple. These opinions forbid the husband even to hold his wife's hand (unless there is no one else to assist her) during delivery.⁸

My impression is that the author is willing to show sensitivity and understanding up to the limit where it does not require her to make actual halakhic determinations. Such is the case in the first cited example, where no halakhic novelty is presented but rather a sympathetic and compassionate style is expressed. However, when sensitivity entails making halakhically significant concessions—though not necessarily on a groundbreaking scale—and it is essential to choose between various existing halakhic opinions, the author prefers not to do so. My previous assertions are in no way judgmental, but descriptive.

The author shows sensitivity up to the limit where it does not require her to make halakhic determinations

Allow me to cite one example bearing broader ramifications that will lead to a more critical assessment of *one* aspect of the book. I assume that Zimmerman's personal experience facilitates her careful practical instructions stressing that all the exams of the *hefseq taborah*

should be made with extra gentleness (e.g. p. 89). On the other hand, her hesitation to be lenient regarding the necessity of *mokh dahug* in *hefseq taborah* in women "who find this exam uncomfortable" is most unexpected. The halakhic basis for not following the stringency of *mokh dahug* in these cases is so obvious, as implicit in many manuals,⁹ that I did not anticipate the author's instruction to consult a rabbi in this case. In such an uncomplicated matter that has a clear answer, why does Zimmerman compel a woman to seek the advice of a halakhic authority (in most cases a male rabbi) and discuss her intimate irritation? I am well aware that people go to see physicians all the time and describe their most intimate problems. But as Professor Ross has written, "In a day and age when standard kits have been developed by medical labs even for home pregnancy exams, why should similar procedures not be developed for determining women's menstrual status?" (p. 240, quoting Ross). When there is a simple solution to a simple problem, why not put it in writing?¹⁰

This leads us to discuss a broader question: Zimmerman's consistent policy of directing the reader to a halakhic authority. This trend, quite fashionable in today's halakhic literature, stands in sharp contrast to her emphasis on the importance of setting *halakhab* in a framework that one "could

the most basic duties of a reviewer of any halakhic manual is to supply the reader with a general evaluation of its approach to decision-making, I initially thought to map Dr. Zimmerman's rulings similarly to the model in the above mentioned article. However, when I started collecting data, I realized that for two reasons, this would be quite impossible. First, the condensed form of this book means that many particular halakhic issues are not explored. Second, Dr. Zimmerman abstains from ruling where halakhic questions are debated among contemporary authorities. For instance, I could not gather enough information about the five halakhic cases I used to determine the nature of halakhic rulings in the aforementioned Hebrew review essay (a stain found on a paper subsequent to urinating [in an external exam without sensation]; a large stain on a sanitary napkin; opening of the uterus in various gynecological procedures; wearing colored garments on the seven "clean days"; woman in labor with 4 cm. opening of the uterus).

⁹ Cf. Rabbi Yitzhak Mordekhai Rubin, *Mar'eh Koben* (Jerusalem: 1996), pp. 49–50; Rabbi Yekutiel Farkas, *Taborah ke-Hilkhabat* (Jerusalem: Torat Haim, 1998), p. 279. Rabbi David Yosef (*ibid.*), 2:23 (p. 16) rules explicitly that a woman who feels pain from this examination should avoid it.

¹⁰ I would not go so far as Ross, who wrote: "... the very notion that women must submit themselves to this method of outside surveillance is questionable... The mystique surrounding the degree of expertise such questions require raises the suspicion that here is merely another device for keeping women in their place" (p. 240). Nevertheless, I think that in today's reality authors of manuals should endeavor to inform their readers as fully as possible.

comprehend and thus retain” (p. 15). The author, who dismisses the approach of many other manuals that simply include “laundry lists of what to do and not to do” (p. 15), went to the trouble of providing the reader with the original Hebrew and Aramaic talmudic sources, paraphrasing them in English and elucidating the meaning of the *halakhot* in the context of their original sources. She thus attempted to educate her able readers and provide them with solid fundamental information about the topic. As a practical matter, however, she minimizes the ability of her intelligent, informed readers to make everyday decisions based on the learning they acquire from her book.

The author stresses unequivocally that “This book cannot and is not meant to take the place of rabbinical consultation.” I realize that the condensed form of this book precludes exploration of many particular halakhic issues,¹¹ but I have found more than a score of cases where specific halakhic questions are brought up and no definite conclusions are established.¹² In these cases the author simply directs the reader to a halakhic authority.¹³ Obviously, were this book merely a theoretical halakhic work, it would be proper to omit any practical rulings. But that is not the case at hand: the book is meant to be “a lifetime companion to the laws of Jewish family life.” For that reason it includes many practical guidelines, of halakhic and non-halakhic nature.

It is possible that the author's reluctance to give clear cut rulings in some halakhic matters is linked to the fact she is one of the very few and very first women to engage in this discipline. Alternatively, she may believe that her intended audience appreciates this type of reticence. These are plausible assumptions, but it is better to carefully examine the author's own explicit justifications for following a conservative, if fashionable, policy. My criticism in the subsequent paragraphs is not solely directed at the author of the reviewed book. It targets, rather, the growing tendency in modern halakhic manuals, primarily of the *haredi* sort.

The author minimizes the ability of her readers to make decisions

The first reason is straightforward. The author claims that “just as no medical manual can take the place of individual consultation with a physician, this book is not meant to take the place of a rabbi” (p. 16). This rationale, based on a simplistic comparison of medicine and *halakhab*, is problematic. Physicians possess diagnostic skills that are acquired through rigorous education and practical experience. They must interpret what disease underlies the manifest symptoms. Except in the area of *ketamim* (stains), there is little demand for diagnostic expertise in halakhic matters of “Jewish family life.” When a husband and wife have a

¹¹ There are various issues where the author justifiably did not provide a detailed ruling due to the complexity of the issues. See, for example, whether various items are considered barriers when immersing (pp. 52, 54); *luppata niddah* (p. 87); family planning (p. 163).

¹² To mention some of the cases: the status of blood found on a beige garment (p. 34, n. 18); *befeseq taborah* several minutes after sunset (p. 43); necessity of *mokh dabuq* in *befeseq taborah* (p. 43); (Ashkenazim) waiting less than the usual five days before performing *befeseq taborah* (p. 46); immersing on the eighth day (p. 50); the removal of permanent makeup, hair dye, manicure before immersing (p. 54); immersing without a *miqveh* lady (p. 59); basing anticipation on premenstrual symptoms (p. 70); the permissibility of the husband to sit on his wife's bed when she is *niddah* (p. 76); red on toilet paper (p. 102); small spot on sanitary napkin (p. 103); premature immersing prior to the wedding (p. 119); whether a pap smear exam renders a woman *niddah* (p. 149); whether endometrial ablation or dilation and curettage (D&C) render a woman *niddah* (p. 182); whether *barhaqot* apply during *aveilut* (p. 185).

¹³ In the introduction (p. 16) the author implies that she is simply coaching her readers on when and how to ask rabbis intelligent questions. But I have found at least two cases where (certainly according to her own policy) the author should have informed her readers of the possibility of asking a halakhic authority: wearing colored garments on the “seven clean days”; immersing on the seventh day before the evening falls.

problem or a question they don't need to diagnose it—the problem is obvious! They merely require an answer to their individual question. Given condition X, “Can we share a mutual king-size bed?” “Can I immerse in the sea?”, etc. If the manual is able to supply the solution to the specific problem, there seems to be no reason to ask a rabbi for a ruling. If there is any room for comparison between halakhic matters that concern everyday situations and medicine, I believe it should be made between halakhic literature and the usage of over-the-counter (OTC) medications. Notwithstanding the possible risks, contemporary practice is to reclassify many drugs as OTC allowing “self medication.” Many papers in medical journals endorse this policy, while considering both benefits and risks. In other words, contemporary medical research tends to trust the consumer to make correct medicinal choices, despite the possible risks.¹⁴ Analogously, halakhic consumers can be trusted to make educated independent halakhic choices based on good manuals. Not providing people with the opportunity to reach personal halakhic decisions independently has potentially unfortunate consequences. What sociologists label as “professional authority” may lead to negative feelings on the part of ordinary people. This can give the impression that halakhic authorities are controlling their

lives—specifically their sex lives—regulated by the laws of *niddah*.

The debate between oral transmission and literacy has been resolved in favor of literacy.

The second reason for excessive deference to rabbinic consultation is rather obscure. Zimmerman writes: “Individual questions should be addressed to a couple's own rabbi, particularly as in many matters local practice is determinative of the *halakhab*” (p 16). I fail to understand this rationalization.¹⁵ It is possible that the author intended to relate to the *pesaq* of the local rabbi, the *mara de-atra* (communal rabbinic authority) who theoretically determines the local practice. But today, the concept of *mara de-atra* has been substantially diminished by historical, sociological, and technological processes, especially in matters of domestic *issur veheter*.¹⁶ People no longer observe *halakhab* exclusively in accordance with their *mara de-atra*'s opinions. But even if Zimmerman meant that the couple should abide by the rabbi whom they usually follow, it is unreasonable to attempt to turn back time in today's reality, where people are used to seeking halakhic guidance in manuals and in

¹⁴ Many articles discuss this phenomenon. See for example: C. Bradley & A. Blenkinsopp, "Over the Counter Drugs: The future for self medication", *BMJ* 1996; 312:835–837. In this article, the authors write: “The patient empowerment that flows from deregulation can be seen as a good thing. Doctors who encourage and support responsible self medication will be seen by their patients as a more acceptable source of independent advice. The role of the doctor will then evolve to one of a collaborator with patients in the management of their health problems rather than an exclusive controller of access to medicines. The alternative approach of fighting to retain control over access to medicines will mean that, as patients gain more and more access to the means to treat their own illnesses, doctors will be rejected as a source of help and advice. Patients will, naturally, continue to need access to special information to deal with health problems that are often complex, but they may turn to other sources such as other health professionals who have more 'liberal' attitudes, or, increasingly, to written and electronic sources of information.” My personal thoughts about halakhic empowerment are similar and perhaps analogous.

¹⁵ In matters of "Jewish family life" one can hardly speak of a family *minhag*. In these intimate issues, much is concealed from the children (especially in the Ashkenazi family) and I doubt whether anyone is actually familiar with their parents' customs. I presume that the author did not intend to relate to the family custom, which obviously can not be determined by the rabbi.

¹⁶ Cf.: Aaron Kirschenbaum, "*Mara de-atra*: A Brief Sketch", *Tradition* 27:4 (1993), pp. 35–40. In n. 15, Dr. Kirschenbaum refers to much literature on the subject. Cf. also: Rabbi Rahamim Brakhiyahu, *Tal li-Verakha* (Jerusalem: Maaliyot, 1999), pp. 259–265 and Rabbi Shlomo Levi's remark in his approbation to Rabbi Brakhiyahu's book.

¹⁷ Cf. Haym Soloveitchik, “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Tradition*

internet websites. It seems that the historical debate between oral transmission and literacy has long been resolved in favor of literacy.¹⁷

Legally, when both facts and *halakhab* are known to a person, there are very few instances where he or she is required to acquire an explicit specific ruling from an independent halakhic authority. *Mishnah Nega'im* 2:5 mentions three cases where one has to seek halakhic authority, even when one is well informed with the details of the relevant *halakhab*: 1) where he has a *nega* (skin blemish possibly imposing impurity) 2) when he needs to nullify his own *nedar* (vow); 3) when he has a blemished *bekhor* (first-born) animal. The Vilna Ga'on (ad loc) interprets: "In all of the laws of Torah, one rules for himself, except for the

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Mishneh Torah or Shulhan Arukh the
advice to "ask a rabbi."*

three mentioned here: *nega'im*, *nedarim* and *bekhorot*, which depend on pronouncement (*ma'amar peh*).” Some halakhic authorities believe that even the permission to remarry subsequent to receiving a testimony on a husband's death does not require an official verdict from a halakhic authority or court.¹⁸

Accordingly, to the best of my knowledge, nowhere do we find in the *Mishnah*, in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* or in the *Shulhan Arukh* a ruling that ends with the now frequent remark among authors of halakhic manuals:

28:4 (1994), pp. 64–130; Moshe Rosman, "A Prolegomenon to the study of Jewish Cultural History", *JSIJ* 1 (2002), pp. 109–127.

¹⁸ See commentators on *Shulhan Arukh*, *Even ha-Ezer* 17:39.

¹⁹ However, this trait is very common in the *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* of R. Shlomo Ganzfried.

²⁰ On the possibility of women being *posqot*, see the sources cited by Ross, p. 255, n. 51. I am well aware that the graduates of the *Nishmat* program are called *yo'azot* and not *posqot*. However, like Ross (p. 233), I believe this is merely a tribute to Orthodox political correctness. See also the two sources cited by Ross in p. 304, n. 9.

²¹ See: Rabbi Yehiel M. Epstein, *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, *Yoreh De'ah* 242:63; *Inziqlopediyah talmudit*, VIII, p. 504; Rabbi Yekutiel Yaakov Halberstam, *She'elot u-Teshuvot Divrei Ya'aziv*, *Yoreh De'ah* 131; Yoseph Ahituv, "*Mi-pi sefarim ve-lo mi-pi soferim: le-sugyat hofesh ha-bora'ah*", *Sinai* 107 (1991), pp. 133–150 (I would like to thank Rabbi M.M. Honig for calling this article to my attention).

²² The edition published by Feldheim Publishers in 1995 has Hebrew and English on facing pages. It is a translation of

“ask a rabbi” or “ask your local rabbi.”¹⁹ When one is able to understand the relevant law, particularly when one has already grasped the basic fundamentals of the topic, it seems that one does not have to seek the supplementary guidance of a rabbinic authority. Consulting a rabbi is not a bad idea, but when you purchase a practical “lifetime companion to the laws of Jewish family life,” you expect it to prove useful for everyday life. The author also writes: “Another reason to consult one's own rabbi is that some of the halakhic opinions expressed here may not be those quoted in some other books—there are areas of disagreement in many areas of *halakhab*” (p. 17). But the author mentions that “the opinions expressed in this the book have the approval of the rabbis whom I consulted, Rabbis Reuven Aberman, Yehudah Henkin and Yaakov Warhaftig.” These rabbis and the author herself²⁰ are well competent to give halakhic decisions in matters of *hilkhot niddah*. When you decide to follow a certain halakhic book, in some way it becomes your rabbi.²¹ When the book is clear, there seems to be no reason to seek the specific guidance of another rabbi.

When the late R. Kalman Kahana published his bestseller manual of *Hilkhot niddah*,²² he wrote in the preface that one of his chief concerns was not to leave elementary issues unresolved and not to direct the reader to a rabbi in matters of everyday life. He stated that he was able to accomplish this policy because the *Hazon Ish*, with whom he was closely connected, was willing to give

conclusive decisions on debatable matters. Nevertheless, the authority of the *Hazon Ish* was not effective in preventing criticism directed at R. Kahana. In subsequent editions of the manual, R. Kahana revealed that he received a letter from a person who claimed that the author (R. Kahana) erred in seven rulings: he was too stringent in one and too lenient in the remaining six. The specifics of that debate are not of our current concern, but it is imperative to emphasize the foundations of this dispute. The critic claimed:²³

Our rabbis who have compiled halakhic manuals avoided deciding in halakhic discrepancies of the *ahronim* and thus ruled according to the stringent opinions or at most left the issue for a rabbi to decide. The rabbi can rely on the lenient opinion when needed. But to determine the *halakhab* in a practical manual according to one of the opinions, do we have the potency to deal with them?

The *Hazon Ish* himself decided to answer the criticism. He begins his short reply in a paradigmatic statement:

It is true that there are some matters which should not be disclosed in the presence of an *am ha'arets*, and there are matters that should not be publicized. But I did not see anything in the matters which were mentioned which ought to be concealed and not be written in a book.

The words of the *Hazon Ish*, which reject the assertions set by the anonymous critic and agree with R. Kahana's initial intent, draw

guidelines for all halakhic manual composers. They should provide the reader with practical halakhic solutions, unless they discuss matters that *halakhab* itself demands should not be made known for the general public.

If the author wishes to be humble and to avoid choosing between several legitimate opinions, she can bring the various opinions and leave it for the reader to decide which authority to follow.²⁴ Why would a personal rabbi be more qualified than the author or her own rabbis to decide which opinion it is right to follow? Naturally, I refer not to unusual and sophisticated halakhic cases that cannot be predetermined, but to conventional, mundane cases that the author hesitates to resolve.

The book *A Lifetime Companion to the Laws of Jewish Family Life* by Deena R. Zimmerman is an excellent book for English readers who wish to study the laws of *niddah* in a serious manner. It enables one to learn the *halakbot* from the original sources, placing them in a comprehensible framework. The companion is well structured and written in a clear and empathetic style. It discusses a number of practical medical issues that are not discussed in other popular manuals. There is no question that the book makes a serious contribution to the field of *hilkhot niddah*, specifically to the genre of theoretical books that teach the basic issues involved in keeping these *halakbot*. Nevertheless, it suffers from the same syndrome that is evident in many other manuals who time after time, direct the reader to a rabbi.

the sixth Hebrew edition: *Daughter of Israel: Laws of Family Purity* (English translation by Leonard Oschry).

²³ The citations are my own translation from the Hebrew edition.

²⁴ By analogy, I am sure that there are medical experts who believe that letting the patient decide which course of action to