

Over several weeks, Hannah interviewed a dozen women for her article about the women behind OU becoming the preeminent organization and the most recognizable symbol in kashrus supervision. But it took more than twice that many interviews to confirm her unexpected discovery that Minnie Mandel and Amy Davidson weren't anomalies. Orthodox women, even those who kept a scrupulously kosher home, had mostly abandoned the mikveh, immersing instead in swimming pools, so-called Russian or Turkish baths, but mainly in their own bathtubs. None had an in-home mikveh.

Not that Hannah would be writing about the fascinating finding. Indeed, the subject was never mentioned in public, and despite her considerable interrogation skills, nobody would say anything about observing the prescribed period of abstinence. It didn't matter that she was single; the topic itself was taboo.

"My friends can discuss their kitchen rituals endlessly and in great detail," one woman told Hannah. "But nothing that concerns the bedroom."

"It's too private to talk about," another explained. "And nobody wants to admit they don't fulfill that mitzvah."

Of course, Hannah thought. Any woman who didn't follow kashrus would quickly be found out and ostracized, but one could ignore niddah restrictions with complete confidence that no one else would know about it.

One woman bluntly stated what others hinted at. "Using a mikveh is medieval, a primitive relic left over from the olden days. It has no place in a modern Jewish woman's life."

Those few who went to the mikveh did so reluctantly, or even resentfully. "It's something a Jewish woman has to do," one said.

Another complained using a mixed metaphor: "A cross we have to bear."

Orthodox rabbis were apparently equally unwilling to talk about women's *personal* rituals, preferring to distribute pamphlets that extolled the practice but convinced few to adopt it. Many of Hannah's subjects still had the copy of *A Marriage Guide for Jewish Women* they'd received before their weddings, but few showed signs of use. One woman confessed that she kept hers only because she'd feel guilty throwing it out.

The more Hannah considered it, the more she understood and sympathized with these women. Even at best, visiting a mikveh was inconve-

nient, and unless they went to a Russian bath, they'd need to bathe in their own tub when they got home anyway. They would all know that secular, Reform, and most Conservative Jews didn't use a mikveh, with no apparent ill consequences.