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## In your blood, live: re-visions of a theology of purity

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### Abstract:

Menstruation is viewed with disdain in Jewish teachings and impurity is a concept that is often associated with women. Such view is not only discriminatory but irrational as well. A theology of purity that is prejudiced to women needs to be revised.

### Full Text:

Twenty years ago, as a young Orthodox woman, I began what became an influential essay with the words "All things die and are reborn continually." I was wrong. Sometimes we cannot repeat ourselves. We can only transform ourselves. Yet our moral responsibility for that earlier self and its acts lives on. Twenty years later, as a feminist Reform theologian I continue to be faced with an essay I wrote, an essay that continues to be quoted, cited, and reproduced, promulgating opinions and prescribing actions that I now cannot in good conscience endorse.

My essay, which was published both in the first Jewish Catalogue and in the first Jewish feminist anthology, *The Jewish Woman*, was called "Tum'ah and Taharah: Ends and Beginnings." It dealt with the ancient laws of purity whose major surviving form is the powerfully valenced body of law and custom concerning women's menstruation. Because this legislation governs sexual and social behavior and attitudes so pervasively, it can be said that menstrual impurity is constitutive of the religious selfhood of women in Orthodox Judaism. I undertook to justify this legislation by constructing around it a feminist theology of purity.

Confronting my essay, I have had to ask myself what is the responsibility of a theologian when she no longer believes what she taught to others as Torah? Merely to recant is insufficient, because theologians are not just theorists. They exemplify ways to live out Jewish commitments with integrity. What I owe to those who read and were persuaded by my theology of purity is not merely to outline abstractly my revised conclusions but to tell a richly detailed story about a particular process of rupture and transformation in a specific time and place.

My task is complicated by the fact that the earlier essay itself represents a kind of transformation--a reframing. Even the title of that project is eloquent: "Tum'ah and Taharah: Ends and Beginnings." It signals that I had defined my topic as a theological understanding of the entire ancient category, and not just the part of it pertaining to women. The title evades the words woman, sex, niddah [menstrual impurity~, menstruation, and mikveh [the ritual immersion by which purity is achieved~. It also eschews the common euphemism *taharat ha-mishpacha* [the purity of the family~, in which women are reduced to a nameless function whereby families are produced and maintained in purity.

In the essay I attempted to reframe the meaning of women's menstrual impurity [niddah~ by reintegrating it with the other purity regulations stipulated in the book of Leviticus rather than focusing upon it as a unique phenomenon. I interpreted all these regulations as ritual expressions of a single theology of purity equally relevant to women and men. I see clearly now how this generalized reframing reflected my awareness of and hopefulness about egalitarianism as a value in secular society. Probably, it was the discrepancy between my sense of self-worth and entitlement as a participant in secular and in traditional Jewish contexts that heightened my experience of niddah as a source of gender stigma. Egalitarianism seeks to normalize women by stressing their similarity to men. That is how I sought to neutralize the stigma of niddah: by emphasizing its kinship with the purity laws applicable to men. I maintained that all impurity ritual enacted a common set of meanings. Implicitly, this was a denial that any special "women's meaning" distinguished menstrual impurity from impurities contractable by men. The strategy I chose has been used extensively by secular jurisprudence to neutralize discrimination: Obscure or ignore the differences on which discrimination was predicated and stress instead the commonalities all are presumed to share. That the laws of pollution had once applied to men was therefore indispensable to my argument, even though men had not observed them for many hundreds of years.

It is important to understand that my concerns were as much theological as social. Existing theological justifications of menstrual impurity did not help me to make sense of myself as a God-created creature. They treated me, to use Kantian terminology, as a means to someone else's end, rather than as an end in myself. To have the observance of niddah and mikveh justified to me as the

instrumentality whereby my husband was entitled lawfully to cohabit was both inadequate and insulting.

Indeed, the otherness and the instrumentality of women were foundational presumptions of the men who wrote about these laws. What was significant about menstruation for them was that it made women uniquely capable of causing men to sin by transmitting pollution to them. They never asked themselves how it would feel to be someone to whom such a capacity had been assigned, or whether menstruation might have other meanings to those who menstruated. Their one educational goal was to persuade or terrify women to keep their pollution to themselves.

Some sources threatened nonobservers with death in child-birth or deformed children.(1) Others promised observers a honeymoon every month in compensation for the estrangement of niddah, on the dubious assumption that sex is most satisfying when the participants are unfamiliar.(2) The only rationale the sources did not offer was the rationale that motivates all sincere piety, the one held out to men: that observing the commandments would make one holier and bring one closer to God.

I required an explanation which acknowledged my personhood as intrinsically important and affirmed my capacity for spiritual growth. Even more urgently, I needed to understand how a body that menstruates, a body that pollutes, could be a holy body. The male writers were concerned about how women were to comport themselves in their impurity. I wanted to know what it might mean to be pure.

Intuitively, I sensed that the classical texts by themselves would yield no answers. The topic had not interested their creators because women as spiritual subjects had not interested them.(3) I took my questions into fields of secular learning: anthropology, literary criticism, comparative religion. These areas provided perspectives to focus upon the Jewish texts. They offered forms of discourse in which I could view myself as a subject and participant rather than as an object to be passively defined. The classic anthropological work of Mary Douglas taught me a new way to understand the categories of purity and pollution. Douglas argues that the body may be viewed both as a symbol and as a mirror of society. Upon it are inscribed the categories that make sense of the universe. Protecting the demarcation lines of those categories protects us from chaos or meaninglessness. Pollution is the punishment for violating those boundaries, and thus endangering the coherent world. Supplementing Douglas' theory of pollution with a literary reading of the texts in Leviticus, I theorized that the boundary crossed by all those who incurred impurity was the boundary between life and death. I maintained that all of the forms of impurity were regarded as encounters with death and were associated with conditions imaged as death-like or life- diminishing, such as the erosive skin diseases the Bible calls "leprosy" [tsara'at~, menstruation, and seminal emission, or from nexus situations that bridge the passage between life and death, such as childbirth and the purification ritual for corpse-impurity.

The comparative religion scholarship of Mircea Eliade provided me with an understanding of water as an ancient and universal symbol of regeneration and renewal and of cycles as markers of sacred time and affirmations of return and restoration. Using his formulation, I depicted the mikveh as the womb or the watery chaos from which Creation is elaborated, a life-giving fluidity in which forms can be repeatedly dissolved and made new.

Drawing on these sources, I formulated a theology of purity in which menstrual impurity and mikveh were relocated within a universal cyclical process in which all creation endlessly rehearses its death and rebirth. In the context of this theology, menstruation was not only normalized, it acquired powerful spiritual significance. While the theology justified the laws of menstrual impurity and supported their observance, it sought to reframe their meaning, to remove their stigma and to discover their spiritual value.

The sources I brought to my theology of purity, however, built their arguments upon assumptions very different from my own. In fact, some of the implications of these assumptions were incompatible with Orthodoxy: that diverse religions have comparable or analogous symbols, myths, and practices; that valuations such as pure and impure are socially constructed and not divinely proclaimed; that religious meanings are derived not merely from texts, but from how the words of the texts are lived out in communities. Rabbis who viewed my work as merely an effective apologia for getting educated women to use the mikveh had no interest in pursuing these disturbing implications. They regarded secular sources much the way they regarded women, as instruments, rather than as ends in themselves. But the more I came to understand the scholarly sources I had utilized, the deeper and more troubling were their implicit challenges to the work into which I had incorporated them.

What did it mean to formulate a theology of purity that was blind to gender difference and silent about gender stigma, when the only kind of impurity with behavioral consequences in Orthodox communities is gender specific--menstrual impurity? What did it mean to claim that the theological meaning of niddah had to do with symbolisms of life and death, when its impact on women's lives was obviously and concretely sexual? What did it mean to describe niddah as part of a cycle when, in the public life of the communities in which it was observed, women were always treated as if they were impure?

The social facts about impurity in living communities are about the impurity of women. Sexual relations with a niddah are forbidden. Also forbidden are physical contacts and expressions of affection, on the grounds that they could lead to sexual relations.(4) In all but the most left-wing Orthodox circles, the general presumption of niddah status is a reason for excluding women from conventional social courtesies like shaking hands, and for denying them access to the Torah.(5) In contrast, men experience themselves socially as pure. Although they may meet the qualifications for biblical impurity (having had a seminal emission, for instance, or contact with a corpse), there is no behavioral consequence. The only men who have to contend with impurity laws at all are kohanim, descendants of the priestly clan, who may not expose themselves to corpse impurity. Kohanim who obey these laws, although they probably bear some second hand impurity from polluted others, experience themselves as utterly pure. Socially, then, purity and impurity do not constitute a cycle through which all members of the society pass, as I argued in my essay. Instead, purity and impurity define a class system in which the most impure people are women.

Even a more rigorous literary analysis would have called into question my reading of Biblical purity law. The word niddah describes a

state which is neither socially nor morally neutral. Niddah, from the root NDD, connotes abhorrence and repulsion. In a recurring prophetic motif, it is associated with adultery, idolatry, and murder.(6) The icon for sinful Israel wallowing in its corruption is not the corpse-handler or the leper but the exposed niddah, her skirts stained with menstrual blood, shunned by passersby.(7)

I explained that imagery away, interpreting it as an expression of prophetic despair and loathing at societal impurity that refuses to be cleansed. Tum'ah [impurity~ is a stigma, I argued, only when it is divorced from the purification cycle. At some earlier time in Israel's history, I believed, there had been a Golden Age when the cycle had revolved smoothly and blamelessly for both women and men, and gender had not been a source of stigma. This belief informed my reading of the purity texts of Leviticus. But this belief is untenable.

In his cross-cultural anthropological study, *The Savage in Judaism*, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz argues convincingly that the stigma upon menstrual blood enables ancient Israelite religion to draw a crucial distinction between men's and women's capacities for holiness. The uncontrolled blood flowing from women's genitals is blood which has the power to contaminate. Its antithesis is the blood of circumcision deliberately drawn from men's genitals, which has the power to create covenant. Eilberg-Schwartz emphasizes that the symbolism of the body and its fluids as embedded in categories and rules does not merely reflect but is constitutive of the social structure within which it applies. The Israelite purity symbolism which associates masculinity with fertility and control and femininity with death and disorder constructs a culture in which men dominate women. This polarization of the symbolic meaning of gender is intensified by developments in rabbinic and post-rabbinic Judaism, in which purity laws affecting men become atrophied, while those affecting women are elaborated and made more stringent.

My theology claimed that impurity was universal. The social reality, since the rabbinic period at least, was that impurity was feminine. My theology claimed that impurity was normal and morally neutral. Literary and anthropological evidence, as well as that of contemporary social reality, identify impurity as deviant and a source of stigma and exclusion. In particular, all the meanings of menstrual impurity asserted by my theology are explicitly disconfirmed by historical precedent, by literary analysis, by linguistic usage and by communal practice. And yet women embraced this theology with great fervor and felt transformed by it.

What I had succeeded in creating was a theology for the despised, reminiscent of certain strains of early Christianity, where worldly power went unchecked, the slave remained a slave, the poor stayed poor, the woman subject to her husband, but the meaning of indignity was inverted and transfigured: humiliation was triumph, rejection was salvation, and death, eternal life. My theology upheld the rules and practices that sustained women's impurity by holding out to the impure a never before experienced sense of purity. For women who were touched by this theology, mikveh became not merely the water that made one sexually accessible once more, but water that cleansed the soul.

It became acutely painful to me to meet these women at lectures and conferences and have them thank me for a theology I had come to believe both intellectually and morally unjustifiable. It seemed inadequate to tell them I had changed my mind, now that my teaching had been so strongly integrated into their spiritual praxis. I did not know how to be accountable to the people who learned from me. I had never heard a theologian say that he or she had been wrong. In addition, I was left with questions of faith and practice, some of which are still unresolved for me. Is the mikveh usable for women's ritual? Should we ritually acknowledge our menstruation? Can we continue to regard the Holiness Code of Leviticus as sacred text? What does it mean to be pure?

When Jewish women who were not Orthodox appropriated my reframing of immersion in the mikveh to mark occurrences for which no ritual expression had existed, they taught me an important lesson about the possibility of salvage. They began using the mikveh to purify themselves of events that had threatened their lives or left them feeling wounded or bereft or sullied as sexual beings: ovarian tumors, hysterectomies, mastectomies, miscarriages, incest, rape. In waters whose meaning they had transformed and made their own, they blessed God for renewed life. The makers have imbued these rituals with a different understanding of what purity means.

They appear to agree with the writers of the ancient texts that impurity afflicts the embodied human self; it is not a malaise of disembodied soul. But for the feminist Jew, impurity seems to mean the violation of physical or sexual integrity, death by invasion. If purity is the mirroring of God's oneness in human wholeness, it is no less fragile and transitory than humankind itself. Our flesh is gnawed by disease, eroded by age, menaced by human violence and natural disasters. Our minds and our souls are subject to intrusions, exploitations, indignities. We keep breaking or being breached. We keep knitting ourselves together, restoring ourselves, so we can once again reflect God's completeness in our female or male humanity.

When I was Orthodox, I thought that God's Torah was as complete as God: inerrant, invulnerable, invariable truth. I thought that I, the erring, bleeding, mutable creature, had to bend myself to this truth. Whatever I was or saw that did not fit had to be cut off, had to be blocked out. The eye--or the I--was alone at fault. I tried to make a theology to uphold this truth, and as hard as I tried to make it truthful, it unfolded itself to me as a theology of lies.

I do not believe the laws of purity will ever be reinstated, nor should they be. The worlds reflected in such rules are not worlds we inhabit. Neither should we seek to replicate such worlds. They are unjust.

In the mind of God, according to a midrash, is a Torah of black fire written on white fire. In the hands of Jews is a Torah written in gall on the skins of dead animals. And the miracle is that the fire of God's Torah flickers through our scroll. I continue to learn the purity texts, hoping for some yet unglimped spark, but that is not enough. I must learn what purity can mean in my own world and in the most human world I can envision. For if ours is a Torah of and for human beings, it may be perfected only in the way that we perfect ourselves. We do not become more God-like by becoming less human, but by becoming more deeply, more broadly, more comprehensively human.

We must keep asking the Torah to speak to us in human, this crude jargon studded with constraints and distortions, silences and

brutalities, that is our only vessel for holiness and truth and peace. We must keep teaching each other, we and our study partner the Torah, all that it means to be human. Human is not whole. Human is full of holes. Human bleeds. Human births its worlds in agonies of blood and bellyaches. Human owns no perfect, timeless texts because human inhabits no perfect, timeless contexts. Human knows that what it needs need not be perfect to be infinitely dear.

Sacred need not mean inerrant; it is enough for the sacred to be inexhaustible. In the depths of Your Torah, I seek You out, Eheyeh, creator of a world of blood. I tear Your Torah verse from verse, until it is broken and bleeding just like me. Over and over I find You in the bloody fragments. Beneath even the woman-hating words of Ezekiel I hear You breathing, "In your blood, live."

1 A traditional source for this view is B. Shabbath 31b-32a.

2 A traditional source for this view is B. Niddah 31b. Its most noted modern promulgator is Norman Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses*, 4th ed. (New York: Philip Feldheim, 1972).

3 I discuss this point more extensively in, "I've Had Nothing Yet, So I Can't Take More" *Moment* 8 (Sept. 1983), 22-26.

4 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot 'Isure Bi'ah* 12:18.

5 Exclusion of menstruants from access to sancta is a matter of folk piety rather than law. See Shaye J.D. Cohen, "Purity and Piety: The Separation of Menstruants from the Sancta," *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*, edited by Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991).

6 Lam. 1:8, 17; Ezek. 7:19, 36:17-18; Zac. 13:1; Ez. 7:19-20, 9:11; II Ch. 29:5.

7 Lam. 1:8, 17.

Rachel Adler is a theologian and social ethicist who has written extensively about the inclusion of women in Judaism. This article will appear in *Life Cycles: An Anthology on Women and the Jewish Life Cycle*, to be issued in 1993.

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