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## That other blood libel

**In this collection of theological explanations for women's monthly bleeding, the Jews were the first to see menses as a punishment of women for Eve's murder of Adam.**

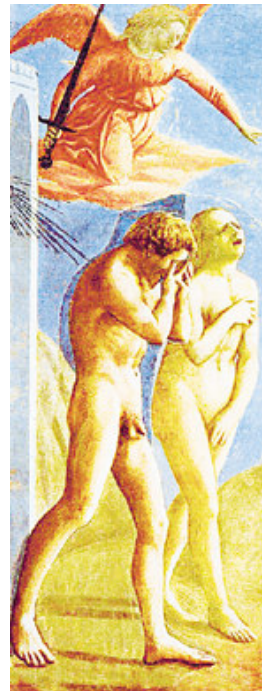
By Daniel Ben Simon

"Niddah: Lorsque les juifs conceptualisent la menstruation," by Evyatar Marienberg, Les Belles Lettres, 368 pages, 29 euros

Evyatar Marienberg has written a fascinating volume on the significance of the monthly bleeding that has been women's lot since the beginning of time. It appears that this phenomenon, even more than weighing on the women themselves, has given men no rest. Men have always expressed an interest in women's menses. What do they "say?" What message do they bring? What is their function? Who needs them? Are they a punishment for women? Or perhaps for men?

The author, an Israeli who worked on his doctorate on the intricacies of the menstrual cycle for many years in France, focused mainly on the Jews, but also studied the views of Christian theologians with respect

to the various sources concerning women's mysterious bleeding. In fact, his book is a collection of theological explanations for that bleeding. The Jews were the first to decipher it, and as expected, laid the blame for menstruation on woman herself.



Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden (in a 15th century depiction).

After the rabbis and scholars - all men, of course - delved into the subject, they arrived at the conclusion that the monthly event that occurs to women is a divine penalty for what Eve did. And what was Eve's crime? She was accused of murdering her husband, the First Man. This serious accusation was extended to include all women and that is why God mutilated women for all time, in order to punish them. The Christians could not understand why it was necessary to punish only the Jewish women. And what about the Jewish men, they who murdered the Second Man, Jesus? Don't they deserve to be punished for that?

It turns out that for hundreds of years, the Christians believed that Jewish men also bled, just like women. True, there was a little problem concerning the location of that bleeding, but that was quickly resolved. Christian scholars explained that Jews bled from different places in their body - the nose, mouth, anus and other places. "The Jews are born malformed, they suffer from hemorrhoids, and among them, the men, like the women, also menstruate."

Leon Poliakov described the prevalent relationship among Christians toward Jews in his book, "The History of Anti-Semitism: From the time of Christ to the Court Jews," which was published in France 40 years ago. "Consequently, men too are women, to wit, subhumans that are easy to hate, despise and mock... The descendants of the tribe of Simon bleed four days a year; the descendants of the tribe of Zevulun spit blood throughout the entire year and the right arm of descendants of the tribe of Asher is shorter than the left..."

As time passed, the Christians changed their minds and arrived at an ancient Jewish conclusion - that only women bleed and that it flows from their bodies as a punishment for Eve's murder of Adam. Even after the men's minds were put to rest, various versions continued to flourish regarding the source of "this curse," as it was termed in medieval literature. The Talmudic version was unequivocal, as it appears in Tractate Sabbath: "Adam was the blood of the world... and Eve caused his death. That is why the commandments of niddah [the laws that pertain to married women when they menstruate, such as the prohibition on marital relations at that time, the requirement to immerse in a ritual bath, etc.] were given to women."

That part is clear. Because Adam bled to death, women would be punished with bleeding. A similar explanation appears in Midrash Tanhuma: "... She caused his death and spilled his blood, as it says in the Torah, 'Whoever sheds a man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.' Let her blood be spilled and her state of niddah be preserved in

order to enable her to atone for the blood she spilled..."

### **Universal prohibition**

How did women respond to this accusation regarding their culpability for the murder of Adam? Did they know that the menstrual bleeding had its source in a mythological sin? Did they accept the decree? The author maintains that the voice of women in the Middle Ages remained mostly unheard. Only in the last few centuries have women entered the debate that was previously the exclusive purview of men. Jewish law requires that men, too, "punish" women, and it forbids them from engaging in marital relations during the time of the women's niddah, meaning that during that period of time, she is to be shunned and kept at a distance. The sources of this prohibition are universal and in all, there is a consensus that any man that deviates from it will ultimately be punished.

The punishments, meted out by God and the law, are rather serious and range from death to incurable diseases. As it says in the sources: "He who has relations with a woman in a state of niddah, even his wife, must fast for 40 days and be flogged each day and not eat meat or drink wine or eat warm bread."

Both Christians and Jews related very gravely to sexual relations during the time of a woman's menstruation. The atmosphere in the ancient Greco- Roman period was apparently more permissive and there were no sanctions on those who chose to have sexual relations during that time. The severest punishment - with the exception of death, of course - awaited those miserable wretches born as the result of a sex act that occurred during the forbidden time. The fate of these babies was to be born malformed and even turn into monsters, as sources in Jewish law caution. "Who is responsible for a newborn babe coming out a leper?" says one. "It is his mother, who did not observe the laws of niddah."

Another source says, "Anyone who has relations with his wife when she is in a state of niddah will ultimately have sons that are lepers." A third source provides a more descriptive picture: "The fountain creates a swamp that sullies all those who step in it. And thus the fountain of niddah flows to sully the child with leprosy." Yet another source says, "If your wife tells you that she is niddah, do not cause your body to sin by touching her. And do not tell the angel that is responsible for the form of the newborn baby, 'I did it unintentionally and I did not know.'"

The author tells us that there was no more effective means to deter men from enjoying their wives' bed during menstruation. The intimidation was based on the deep-seated human fear of blood and the frightening associations it awakens. In this respect, the difference between the lifestyles, if not to say the pleasures of life, of Jews compared to Christians becomes evident. While the Christians gave up their sexual satisfaction only during the actual days of bleeding, the Jews, as is their wont, got carried away and added an extra seven days, during which the women is supposed to clean herself of the remainder of her menses, and continues to be in a state of niddah.

### **Natural birth control**

Jewish and Christians also differed regarding the degree of severity they attributed to niddah. The Christians realized that having sex during menstruation serves as a very effective means of birth control because women cannot conceive at that time. Today, too, the Catholic and Protestant Churches take a lenient approach and do not view sexual relations during this time as a sin. They consider it a form of natural birth control that is consequently not forbidden. Among the Jews, however, there are no similar dispensations. And in order that the Jews realize that there is a reward for their restraint, the rabbis and experts in halakha (Jewish law) explain that the separation of a few days between man and wife actually intensifies their sexual passion and makes their renewed encounter each month all the more exciting. According to this view, the constant sexual accessibility of the husband and wife to each another dissipates their passion, diminishes their excitement, causing fatigue and indifference. In other words, if the laws of niddah did not exist, they ought to have been invented.

It is notable that this scholarly and in-depth volume began in an almost comic fashion. Marienberg complained to a female friend about how difficult he found it to have to shave every day. "You are exempt from this biological burden," he quipped. She looked at him incredulously. "You talk about a biological burden? How can a man have the nerve to complain?"

According to the author, this answer is what prompted him take an interest in the subject, and then to research the relationship between Jews and menstruation. The book is based on an academic study and this is evident on every page. Every statement is accompanied by a citation, and each citation by a source, in all, many hundreds of Jewish and Christian sources that delve into this universal phenomenon. The book also sheds light on earlier periods in Jewish life and tells us quite a bit about the inferior status of women in their

communities. Clearly, the very determination that menstruation is a divine punishment and its very association with the murder of Adam by Eve is indicative of how women were treated in those times.

The author did, however, have difficulty answering a number of questions - for example, concerning how many Jews today indeed still observe the commandment of niddah and most importantly, how religious Jews currently relate to these prohibitions and whether there has been any change in the attitude of modern Judaism to them.

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