

## Menstruation as a Primary Concern in the Ideas of Naḥmanides

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### Introduction

This paper focuses on three works by Naḥmanides: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* (The Law of the Eternal is Perfect), *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis and Leviticus*. In the first text, Naḥmanides conjugates the natural philosophy of Aristotelian influence and theology in an attempt to demonstrate that menstruating women are dangerous in themselves. In the other two, written in the last years of his life, he reinforces this argument with new ideas. In addition to his medical, philosophical, and theological explanations, he also turns to mysticism and the Kabbalah to interpret the Torah which, according to him, also had a mystical meaning.

During the Middle Ages, female bodies were considered different from male bodies based on anatomy and physiology. The most important difference was the uterus, the site of two physiological functions: menstruation and conception. These physiological differences were at the heart of the discourses of physicians, philosophers, and theologians in the Middle Ages. Natural philosophers and theologians engaged in debates about the functioning of the human body and endeavored to explain what the perceived sexual difference between the bodies of men and women consisted (Koren 2009, 36). They, who often based their arguments on medical theories on physiology, discussed concepts linked to “menstruation” and “conception,” while conveyed meanings for the female body.

Regarding the former, many cultures have a common fear of menstruation and menstrual blood. Paula Weideger (92) asserts that menstrual taboos are universal and that menstruation is almost always seen as an evil and polluting substance. However, while “the menstrual taboo” does not exist as a universal as such, it is near universal because most cultures share similar rules regarding menstruating women. On the other hand, in some cultures, menstrual customs give women autonomy, influence, and social power (Buckley & Gottlieb, 7). All menstrual taboos around the world introduce the idea that menstrual blood, and possibly the woman who is menstruating, is dirty and polluting. It has been argued that the menstrual taboo exists as a way to protect men from a danger that they believe to be real, the source of which is within women, and that its intention is to keep the fear of menstruating women under control. Medieval Islam, Christianity, and Judaism were united in their belief that a woman was impure during her menstruation, and that intercourse should be avoided during the time of her monthly cycle.

The negative interpretation of menstruation in Christianity and Judaism dates back to the story of the Garden of Eden (Gen: 3, 1-19), which portrays menstruation as the result of sin. However, the idea of menstruation as a consequence of original sin was seen as bizarre in the Middle Ages (de Miramon, 90). Eve ignored God and ate from the tree of knowledge. As a consequence, she was punished to suffer from menstruation and pain during childbirth. In contrast, Adam’s punishment was the obligation to work hard to gain his livelihood.

Traditionally, Judaism has shown great interest in menstruation, which is considered mainly in terms of menstrual impurity, due to its being a bodily secretion. The Book of Leviticus discusses menstruation, both in the framework of the Laws of purity (chapters 11-15) and other sexual laws (chapters 18 and 20), where a relationship between men-

struation and conception is established. In Leviticus 15, four cases of impurity due to the emissions of fluids from the body are listed; they specifically refer to fluids that emanate from the genitals of men and women (Ruiz, 21-22).

### The menstruating woman: “niddah”

Jewish law defines the status of a menstruating woman as *niddah*, one who is “ostracized” or “excluded” (Biale, 147). Studies and discussions on the etymology of *niddah* (menstruant) impurity have a long tradition. In the context of this discussion, scholars have attributed different meanings to the term *niddah* based on two different verbal roots (n-d-d or n-d-h.). The first root, n-d-d, belongs to the semantic domain of “to depart, flee, wander” and the second, “n-d-h,” means “to chase away, put aside” (Fonrobert, 17). In the Hebrew Bible, the term *niddah*, meaning menstruation, appears in Leviticus 15:19, 20, and 33. The biblical root is “n-d-h,” usually meaning “separation as a result of impurity,” although it is also connected to the root “n-d-d,” “to make distant.” Later, but still in the biblical corpus, the meaning was extended to include concepts of sin and impurity (Meacham 23). The *Targumim* (Aramaic translations of the Bible, such as *Onkelos*, *Pseudo-Jonathan*, and *Neofiti*) use a different root, “r-ḥ-q,” which means “to be distant.” Both roots, “n-d-h” and “r-ḥ-q,” reflect the physical separation of women from physical contact, or from certain activities in which they would normally engage at other times, during their menstrual period (Meacham, 26). In rabbinic literature, the term *niddah* generally signifies “a woman who menstruates.” There are no texts or statements that mention the segregation of a *niddah* in public (Fonrobert, 18). Of course, rabbinic discussions on menstruation are built on biblical law, not just biblical language. In the *Babylonian Talmud*, Rabbi Akiva said: “When I went to Gallia they used to call a *niddah galmudah*. What is a *galmudah*? She who is weaned from (*gemulah da*) her husband” (TB. Rosh Hashana, 26a). In this regard, the term *galmudah* means she who is separate from her husband but not from society (Fonrobert, 18).

Following the Bible, Naḥmanides adopted the root “n-d-h” for *niddah* in his commentary on Genesis and Leviticus. He also quoted the ancient authors, who believed that the *niddah* should be kept isolated and distant from people. Naḥmanides explains that menstruants were called *niddot* (literally, “excluded ones”), because they were isolated and did not approach men to speak to them (Ramban 1974, 158). Other medieval Jewish thinkers also believed that the term *niddah* referred to the woman who is separate, in connection with the preservation of purity in the Temple cult (Wasserfall, 4). Interestingly, no documents exist that support the restriction of menstruants in the synagogue, since the synagogue is not a holy place. However, most Jews considered synagogues sacred spaces (Marienberg 2004, 8).

One example of the restriction of women and the consideration of the synagogue as a sacred place appears in the *Baraita de Niddah*<sup>1</sup>: “The (menstruating) woman [...] will not put her foot in a house full of books, nor in a house prepared for a prayer [...] ‘And she shall not come into the sanctuary’ (Lev 12:4) she is not allowed to enter places of study and synagogues [...]” (Marienberg 2004, 9). To the contrary, some early authors believed

<sup>1</sup> *Baraita* is the term used in rabbinic literature to designate texts, usually from the tannaitic period (Palestine, first to third centuries C.E.), which for various reasons were not included in the Mishnah, the major rabbinic literary production of the time. Therefore, accepting the common title of this work, which looks at menstruation at face value (the prefix “de” in Aramaic means “of”), it would appear to be more or less contemporary with the Mishnah. In fact, this may not be the case.

Evyatar Marienberg, “*Baraita de niddah*,” *Jewish Women’s Archive* [December, 2015]: available at <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/baraita-de-niddah>

that menstruating women were permitted to enter the synagogue, although if they decided not to go inside when they were menstruating, it was considered an act of benevolence. (Marienberg 2003, 218)

*Mishnah Niddah* 7:4 states that the *niddot* should be kept in a special house during their period of impurity, a house of uncleanness or house of impure women (*beit hatum'ot*) (M. Nid 7:4). Some medieval authors such as Rashi (1040-1105) and the Italian Rabbi Bartenura (1445-1515) explained that these were special rooms, not houses, as established in the Mishnah (Greenberg, 114). For that reason, some medieval authors suggest that women were supposed to be separated from their people and wear different clothes to distinguish them from the others during their menstruation. Naḥmanides gives a reason for the rule regarding clothing in his work, *Hilkhōt Niddah* 8:8. He establishes that a good woman must use special clothes during her menstruation as a reminder to her a husband that during her period they are not allowed to have sexual relations.

A further example of *niddah* segregation appears in *Baraita-de-niddah*, in which menstruation is represented as a human suffering, a concept that had been incorporated into Ashkenazi practice by the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Wasserfall, 22). According to *Baraita-de-niddah*, a menstruant woman was not supposed to participate in rituals, even the lighting of the Shabbat candles (Wasserfall, 2). In addition to the restriction on participating in the Temple service, *Baraita-de-niddah* also prohibited women from having sexual relations during this period. However, the Talmudic Tractate *niddah*, which expatiates on the minutiae of ritual observance, does not demonize menstruants or restrict their movements. A menstruant was permitted to engage in all the same activities as non-menstruating women, with three exceptions: making her husband's bed, washing his feet, and pouring him wine (Koren 2009, 33).

### Jewish tradition and ritual impurity

In the main, the language of impurity in rabbinic literature is not used to indicate a particular ritual status, but to express the inaccessibility of sexual life with a wife. The prohibition of sexual relations during the menstrual period appears in Leviticus 18:19. This prohibition became an important issue in Judaism because these relations were considered religious transgressions and associated with death. The infringement of that prohibition could be penalized with isolation from their people or *karet*.<sup>2</sup> Judaism provided a purification ritual performed in a ritual bath called a *mikveh*. This bath can consist of the immersion of the entire body or a simple spray of water on the hands (Leviticus 15:18). Both men and women are required to attend a bath to recover ritual purity, once it has been lost through a transgression (Marienberg 2013, 247). Women also have to attend the *mikveh* after childbirth (Lev. 15, 18:19 and Lev. 20:18).

In his commentary on Lev. 18:19, Naḥmanides also forbade sexual intercourse between the menstruant and the holy seed,<sup>3</sup> until she immerses herself in water to purify her thoughts and become completely clean in body and mind. However, he also incorporated conceptions from contemporary natural philosophy in his commentaries. By his time, the influence of natural philosophy had become seminal in the explanation of the female

<sup>2</sup> *Karet*: A punishment at the hands of heaven mentioned in the Bible as the penalty for a considerable number of sins committed deliberately such as idolatry, desecration of the Sabbath, the eating of leaven on Passover, incest, and adultery, and for some forbidden foods, Ta-Shma, Israel M., "Karet," *Encyclopedia-Judaica* 11, (Jerusalem 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Metaphor for Jewish males, from Is 6:13 "But yet in it shall be a tenth, and it shall return, and shall be eaten: as a teil tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them, when they cast their leaves: so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof."

body. Perhaps the most influential theory at the time was that the female is colder than the male, a theory with a very long history originating in Greek philosophy.

### **Niddah in medieval medical ideas**

Subsequent ancient authors followed Aristotle's theories about the female body, seeing the nature of human beings as the element from which material entities are constituted (Flemming, 92). Hippocrates, followed later by Galen, developed the theory of the four humors (blood, phlegm, yellow or red bile, and black bile) and their correspondence to the four qualities (hot, cold, wet, and dry) (Green, 19). Health and disease depended on the (im-) balance of humors (Craik, 207). Thus, to prevent disease or regain health, this lost balance had to be re-established. Within the framework of this theory, menstruation was a necessary purgation that restored balance and kept the female body healthy (Green, 19). Based on the Hippocratic-Galenic theory of humors and qualities, medieval medicine considered menstruation a natural function of the female body to maintain humoral balance and, thus, keep women healthy (Miller, 6).

In his commentary on Leviticus 12:2, Nahmanides drew on his training as a physician to explain menstruation as a natural process, not a sickness, thus contradicting the arguments by two earlier commentators, Rashi (1040-1105) and Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1167), who thought that menstruation was a sickness. Leviticus describes menstrual blood as impure and dangerous and prohibits any contact with it in order to avoid pollution (Leviticus 15:24, 18:19 and 20:18). The two terms used by Rashi and Abraham ibn Ezra to relate menstruation to disease were *d'vothah* and *madveh*, which Nahmanides interpreted in the light of their attempt to prove that menstruation is a sickness and unnatural. According to these rabbis, menstruation was a sickness because women suffer from some symptoms while menstruating, such as head and body aches, which make them feel unhealthy. In contrast, in his Commentary to Lev 12:2, Nahmanides explained that menstruation was not a sickness but rather a natural mechanism to cleanse the superfluous the blood from women's bodies (Ramban 1974, Vol. III, 158). As explained above, this idea was not original, but was commonly accepted by medieval physicians, from both the Arab and Latin traditions. His apparent understanding of female physiology stemmed from the fact that he was a physician who seems to have also treated gynecological problems (Koren 2004, 326).

This discussion arises in his commentary on Leviticus 15:20-25:

And everything that she lieth upon in her separation shall be unclean: everything also that she sitteth upon shall be unclean. And whosoever toucheth her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even. And whosoever toucheth anything that she sat upon shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even. And if it be on her bed, or on anything whereon she sitteth, when he toucheth it, he shall be unclean until the even. And if any man lie with her at all, and her flowers be upon him, he shall be unclean seven days; and all the bed whereon he lieth shall be unclean. And if a woman have an issue of her blood many days out of the time of her separation, or if it run beyond the time of her separation; all the days of the issue of her uncleanness shall be as the days of her separation: she shall be unclean.

According to these verses, menstrual blood contaminates, but the menstruant does not. Menstrual blood pollutes everything that is touched by it. This idea is important to better understand Nahmanides' constant concern about the idea of ritual impurity of things and

people, specifically associated with menstruation. His main interest was to regulate when ritual impurity exists, which restrictions must be imposed upon the menstruant, and how to recover ritual purity. He deemed that not only is menstrual blood impure, but so is the bleeding during and after childbirth. In fact, after childbirth, a woman remains impure for thirty-three days in the case of a male child, and sixty days if the child is female.

In addition to advancing these ideas, Naḥmanides also recommended that a woman should stay in her house in order to cleanse her body, for during these days she emits the remnants of blood and the turbid, ill-smelling secretions accompanying the blood. Only then she would she become cleansed from childbirth, pregnancy, and conception and be allowed to come to the House of God (Ramban 1974, 162). During this long period, even when she is impure to enter the synagogue, she is pure for her husband because her husband is not a holy object. Naḥmanides discusses why the period of impurity is double in the case of a female child and quotes Abraham ibn Ezra who, in turn, noted the opinion of Rabbi Yishmael that the formation of a male child takes forty-one days. Moreover, Naḥmanides also mentions the opinion of the sages, who say that both males and females are completed in forty-one days. He uses his medical knowledge to clarify the reason for this number of days, explaining it in accordance to the theory of the humors and maintaining that the female body needs more time to cleanse. Naḥmanides notes that the nature of the female is cold and moist. In fact, when the mother's womb is exceedingly moist and cold, she produces a female child. For that reason, women need a longer time for cleansing. To prove this argument, Naḥmanides uses the example of sick people who suffer from cold and need more time to restore their vigor than those who are hot. Leviticus 18:19 also states: "Also you shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness during her menstrual impurity." This biblical verse is the base upon which the behavior of menstruant women has been regulated, and has resulted in numerous rabbinical interpretations and debate for centuries.

In his sermon, *Torat- ha Shem temimah*, Naḥmanides contributes a medical argument regarding this prohibition. According to him, doctors had written that a menstruant cannot conceive while she is menstruating (Ramban 1978, 109). Therefore, there is no reason to have sexual intercourse when, according to Scripture, the only purpose for sexual intercourse is procreation. This, however, is not the only argument offered by him, as he also recalls the belief expressed by the rabbis in *Bereshit Rabbah* that "a child born from a menstruant will be a leper" (Vayikra Rabbah 15:5 and Techuma Metzorah 1). Naḥmanides draws on the opinion of the Rabbis, who declare that even if a small part of menstrual blood remains in the fetus, the child will be a leper (Ramban 1974, 109). Moreover, Naḥmanides also claims that menstrual blood is poisonous and capable of causing the death of any creature that drinks or eats it. These arguments do not rely on contemporary medical theory, but have strong links to ancient and contemporary natural philosophy. Like other ancient thinkers, Naḥmanides believes that the menstruant woman is also capable of harm. He indirectly quotes Aristotle and his treatise *On Dreams*, without mentioning the title, to provide a well-known example of the negative powers of the menstruant gaze:

If a woman looks into a highly polished mirror during the menstrual period, the surface of the mirror becomes clouded with a blood-red color (and if the mirror is new on the stain is not easy to remove, but if it is an old one there is less difficulty). The cause of this is when the menstrual discharges occur because of a disturbance and bloody inflammation, the change in the eyes is not evident to us although it is present (for the nature of the discharges is the same as that of semen); and the air

is moved by them, and has a certain effect on the air on the surface of the mirror which is continuous with it, i.e. it makes that air affected in the same way that it is itself; and the air on the mirror affects the surface of the mirror (Aristotle *On Dreams*, 2:459b).

Nahmanides provides the example but attributes it to the knowledge of experienced physicians, who declared:

If a menstruant woman at the beginning of her issue were to concentrate her gaze for some time upon a polished iron mirror, there would appear in the mirror red spots resembling drops of blood, for the bad part therein [i.e., in the issue] that is by its nature harmful, causes a certain odium, and the unhealthy condition of the air attaches to the mirror, just as a viper kills with its gaze (Ramban 1974, 256).

This story was widely disseminated during the Middle Ages, especially thanks to Pliny who also claimed that menstruants could dull mirrors (Koren 2003, 328). During the 13<sup>th</sup> century, natural philosophers associated the menstruant woman with the basilisk, a poisonous serpent whose glance or breath was believed to cause death (Koren, 2003, 328-329). Both Nahmanides and Alberto Magnus regarded menstrual blood as a lethal poison and compared the gaze of the *niddah* with the gaze of the basilisk.

Menstrual blood was necessary for conception and during Antiquity and the Middle Ages, uterine blood was seen as the female seed, the parallel to male semen. Both female seed and male seed were required for conception to occur (Cadden, 94). This idea spread in the Ancient Near East and was clearly stated in both Greek and Roman medical texts. The idea itself is an attempt to explain female physiology on the basis of a male paradigm (Hiltmann, 28). Menstrual blood must, therefore, be the female contribution to conception.

Mishnah, Tractate Niddah 9:11 connect virginal and menstrual blood with fertility:

Women, with regard to their virginal blood, are like grapevines. There are vines, whose wine is red, and there are vines, whose wine is black, and there are vines whose wine is abundant, and there are vines whose wine is meager. Rabbi Yehuda says: every vine has wine in it; and that which does not have wine in it is dried up [i.e. infertile].

In *Niddah* 64b of the Babylonian Talmud, on the other hand, it is Rabbi Meir who makes a positive connection between blood and fertility: “Every woman who has an abundance of [menstrual] blood has many children.” These ideas were not bizarre during Antiquity because other intellectuals and philosophers, especially the Greeks, had expressed this in the same terms. Hippocratic medical texts argued that menstrual blood provides nutrients to the fetus and becomes milk, the optimal nourishment for infants and children, after childbirth (Cadden, 23). Aristotle also believed that menstrual blood ascended to the breast where it is converted into milk. This idea was followed by other authors and adopted as a truth.

### **Aristotle’s concepts in Nahmanides’ ideas**

Nahmanides explains the process of procreation by means of three Aristotelian concepts: “form,” “matter,” and “innate heat.” “Innate heat” is also known as basic heat or vital heat, the basic element for the formation of the embryo. Thus, “innate heat” is the principle of life and allows animals to develop and reach perfection. Interestingly, by nature, animals with a small amount of heat were considered weaker than hotter ones (Aristotle, *On the*

*Generation of Animals*, 726.b.30). Aristotle writes that “the weaker animal must produce residue that is more abundant and less concocted.” Accordingly, women are weaker.

Nahmanides adopted the concept of “innate heat” to phrase his ideas about the process of procreation. He did not just adopt these Greek philosophical ideas, but also a new terminology, as he used the term *hiyyuli*. In his sermon *Torat ha- Shem temimah* and his *Commentary on Leviticus*, he refers to this concept:

In the view of the [Greek] philosophers, the whole body of the child [is formed from the substance of its mother’s blood], the seed of the father being only the generative force, known as *hyly*,<sup>4</sup> acting in the mother (Ramban 1978, 110).

In the opinion of the Greek philosophers, however, the whole body of the child is formed from [the substance of] the blood of the mother, the father only contributing that generative force which is known in their language as *hyly*, which gives form to matter (Ramban 1974, 157).

The etymology of *hiyyuli* lies in the Greek term (*hylē*), and the primitive meaning was “matter.” For Aristotle, *hylē* was “matter” both in the figurative and metaphorical sense. After Aristotle, Greek philosophers incorporated this term as a “principle intelligent and formative” (Liddell and Scott, 1848). The translation of Aristotle’s work into other languages prompted the creation of new vocabulary. The term used in the medieval Hebrew text came from the Arabic *hayyula*, vocalized as *hiyyuli*. This term is attributed to Abraham Bar Hiyya (m.1136), as seems to appear for the first time in his work *Hegyon ha- Nefesh*. In this work, the term *hiyyuli* is associated with *tohu wa-bohu*, (Saéz, 323), as he identifies *tohu* with matter and *bohu* with form.

Nahmanides did not only use the term *hiyyuli* as “matter,” but also assigned it two new meanings, which were “generative force” and “form.” Some later authors believed that Nahmanides misinterpreted this term, because the original meaning of *hylē* was “matter.” Nevertheless, it appears that some Greek philosophers who followed Aristotle also understood the term *hylē* as “intelligent and formative principle” (Liddell and Scott, 1848). Nahmanides agreed with Aristotle’s opinion regarding the formation of the child, for which the mother provides the residue of blood (menstrual blood) and the father provides his seed, which carries the generative force or *hiyyuli* that brings the form to the matter. To support that idea, Nahmanides used a curious example:

For there is no difference at all between the egg of a chicken which is laid because it was fructified by a male, and the laid as a result of the mother rolling herself in the dust, except that the egg [that had been fructified by a male] germinates into a young bird, while the other is not sown, nor beareth [Deut.29, 22] because it is deprived of the element heat which is its *hyly* (Ramban 1974, 157).

In this text, Nahmanides sets forth his ideas about the male contribution to conception, which he considers instrumental, as semen possesses the generative force (*hiyyuli*), which is the “elemental heat.” Nahmanides used the term *hiyyuli* as matter, which he considered the perfect creation of God and, thus, he describes it as perfect (Ramban 1999, 27). For Greek philosophy, the generative force, also known as *pneuma*, was the main principle of life (Amo, 32). The term *pneuma* was related to “innate heat,” as Aristotle thought that the male seed was a combination of water and *pneuma*, the latter being hot air (2.2.736a1) (Mayhew, 37).

<sup>4</sup> The translator transcribed the term as *hyly* instead *hiyyuli*. Knowing that *hylē* was Greek, he did not treat *hiyyuli* as a new word in Hebrew.

Naḥmanides adopted Aristotle's arguments and explanation about generation in his commentary on Leviticus. According to Aristotle, the woman contributes matter to generation while the man provides form; and both elements mix to form the embryo. For Aristotle, matter and form cannot exist by themselves: matter is everything material, such as food and clothing, while form is everything linked with the spiritual part of life.

### **Conclusion**

In his earlier exegesis, Naḥmanides drew on rabbinical narrative and contemporary medical knowledge to assert that menstruation is a natural process. Menstrual flow functions as a purgation mechanism in the female body, and is defined as natural afflictions but not caused by an illness. In later writings, Naḥmanides contradicted himself by arguing that menstruation is noxious. Naḥmanides also provided social regulations based on the ritual impurity of menstruating; the idea that the polluter is not only the menstrual flow but the woman herself. Given the conceptualization of menstrual blood as ritually impure and noxious, sexual intercourse was prohibited during this period. Naḥmanides concluded that the consequences of such action would affect the embryo, which could be infected with leprosy or become inflamed, abscessed or even die. He stressed that transgressors should be kept away from their community forever. Consequently, the construction of the female body as noxious was mainly aimed at controlling female spaces, rather than producing social exclusion or expressing a ritual state of impurity.



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