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The first known proposal for a vernacular handbook on Jewish laws around menstruation was made by Rabbi Hayim Zarfati of Augsburg, in the 1420s. His project is known to us through its denunciation by the great Rabbi Jacob Molin, who bridled at the notion of women depending on a book to teach themselves these essential laws. Instead, women should rely on the tradition passed on to them by their mothers, and consult rabbis regarding anything out of the ordinary.\[1\] Was Molin’s concern that a handbook would be empowering for women in a way that might challenge rabbinic authority? Or, on the contrary, did he see women as more empowered by learning from each other, in a traditional oral culture, than by relying on material written for them by others?

After the development of printing in Europe, vernacular books of “women’s commandments,” with substantial portions devoted to menstrual laws, were among the “best-sellers” of the 16th and 17th centuries.\[2\] It seems that at least some women did feel empowered by being able to study written laws, as men did, despite lacking the education to engage with primary sources in Hebrew.

In the twentieth century, the disruptions of modernity, population migrations, and the shoah did irreparable damage to the old oral tradition in which rules were passed on from mothers to daughters. In this context, vernacular handbooks on the menstrual laws multiplied.\[3\]

Dr. Deena R. Zimmerman’s Lifetime Companion is surely one of the most thorough and user-friendly books of this kind ever published. It covers the textual sources of the menstrual rules, their applicability at various stages of the female life cycle from birth to menopause, and related medical issues. Some chapters are designed for in-depth study, others for handy reference. Written in clear English, with primary sources cited in Hebrew, this book – in contrast to many of its predecessors over the centuries – is written by an intelligent, highly educated woman and assumes an educated, intelligent female reader.

The intended reader must also be highly motivated, since this book deliberately eschews any inspirational content or any reasons for following the many rules it explains. Zimmerman notes (p. 15) that when she herself got married, “There was no question about my keeping the laws of Jewish family life (taharat hamishpachah) – after all, I did my best to keep Shabbat and Kashrut, so why should these be any different?” Only many pages later does she acknowledge that things might not be so obvious for every reader, noting, “Much has been written explaining the philosophy behind this practice and will not be repeated here. This… focuses on how to observe these halachot, and not why” (p. 81).

The intended reader is thus committed to living an observant Orthodox life and is most likely, by birth or by choice, living in a like-minded community. This makes Zimmerman’s book an interesting window into such communities for readers from other backgrounds. For example, the limits of expected knowledge within the Orthodox world are brought into sharp focus by the inclusion of chapters on basic sex education. As Zimmerman herself notes (p. 152), “Due to concerns with modesty, sex education is often not provided in Jewish education.” A modern woman, intellectually equipped for the serious study of both Jewish and medical material which this book offers, might still need to be told or reminded that “Sexual intercourse is the insertion of the penis into the vagina” and, more importantly, that desire and arousal are preconditions for comfortable intercourse (pp. 204, 205).

These chapters may in fact protect some readers from real distress. Zimmerman mentions unhappily childless couples who have not actually been having intercourse (p. 153); there are also women who have suffered great pain and physical damage through intercourse without arousal, when neither they nor their husbands realized that things could be any different.
Some committed Orthodox readers might, however, find that this book inspires doubts about their Orthodoxy through the information it provides – not about human physiology, but about the historical development of Jewish law.

On the one hand, Zimmerman’s perspective is hardly that of critical scholarship. This is signaled early on by her unreflective use of the term taharat hamishpachah (literally, “purity of the family”), an ancient-sounding phrase that is in fact a coinage of the late nineteenth century, steeped in the bourgeois idealization of the nuclear family.[4] Equally uncritical is Zimmerman’s use of the expression “biblical law” (p. 25 and frequently) to refer to laws not found in the Bible, but only in teachings of the Sages, who sometimes claimed for themselves the authority of the Torah.

On the other hand, in the interests of informed observance, Zimmerman provides ample information on the history of the menstrual laws. The picture that emerges is one of increasing complexity, restrictiveness, and invasiveness.

The book of Leviticus (15:19 and 18:19, cited on p. 23) appears to call for sexual abstinence, and precautions around ritual purity, during the seven days beginning with the onset of a woman’s period.

Over the centuries, as traced by Zimmerman, this law has been interpreted and amplified almost beyond recognition. These changes took place at the hands of rabbis as well as ordinary Jews, who “apparently found [the rabbis’ legal distinctions] confusing” (p. 26) and responded by playing it safe through additional strictness.

Today, there is a complex system in which, among other stringencies, any physical contact between husband and wife is forbidden for eleven days or more from the onset of her period. During at least eight days of this time, a woman is expected to check inside her vagina for any trace of blood, preferably twice a day. Readers will presumably be relieved to learn that if this checking is “painful, uncomfortable, or cause[s] her to feel that she is irritating herself, she should consult a rabbi” (p. 44). Likewise, it is undoubtedly important to inform readers that women who cannot become pregnant because their ovulation takes place within their prescribed time of sexual abstinence may consult a rabbi and a doctor for a prescription of clomiphene citrate, which delays ovulation (p. 154). Women not already fully committed to this system might well recoil, however, from giving men this degree of control over their bodies, based on rules whose basis in the Bible or even in ancient tradition is tenuous at best.

A reader finding doubts stirred up by information of this kind might also begin to wonder about the values of a system in which a woman’s immersion in a mikveh (ritual pool) at the end of her monthly abstinence is expected to be a closely guarded secret, from other women as well as men. “Untruths are permitted in these circumstances” (p. 105): one should lie rather than letting anyone know one is heading to the mikveh. This particular set of expectations must be a quite recent one, since the crowded conditions of Jewish life in many times and places throughout history would simply not have permitted women to keep their monthly cycle a secret from other women.

Today, the kind of secrecy advocated, without comment, in this book is one more nail in the coffin of the oral culture idealized by Rabbi Jacob Molin, in which women would primarily learn about menstruation and its rules from each other through personal communication. Zimmerman’s book, written by a thoughtful, learned woman for other modern women, still emphasizes at every turn the need to consult a rabbinic authority in any doubtful situation – while acknowledging, at one point, that “this is an area of hilchot niddah that makes many women very uncomfortable” (footnote, p. 29).

And though the book itself is written by a woman, it is founded on male authority: “The opinions expressed in the book have the approval of the [male] rabbis whom I consulted” (p. 17). Whether this innovative and intelligent publication represents an advance or a retreat in women’s empowerment is, at best, ambiguous.[5]


See Meacham, “Abbreviated History”, 32.