Talmudic Descriptions of Menstruation

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Abstract

Texts in the Talmud concerning the concept of נדה, menstruation “forced” by an artificial trigger as opposed to biological rhythm, contain many puzzling statements – puzzling because they seem so easily falsifiable, such as the idea that menstruation might be caused by eating spicy food. The most obvious explanation, that the Talmud is indulging in male flights of imagination regarding the mysterious processes of women, does not stand up to scrutiny, as internal textual evidence points to an open social discourse around menstruation which remains unusual in its frankness by current Western standards. Rather, the puzzling texts can be clarified through two means: through contextualisation among folk medicine, especially abortifacients, and through an understanding of נידה (menstruation) as a social rather than a biological status.

When ancient texts discuss the human body, they bring extra measures of patience and generosity to the reading. The readers know not to be so mean as to harp on little inaccuracies, and as for more serious issues, they have answers for those too. Perhaps an idea, barren of scientific value, is nonetheless rich in social or emotional truth – black bile and the pan-curative properties of bloodletting come to mind. In any case, it is often advisable to forgive the authors, since they were committing no crime to be born in a time without microscopes.

Still, some statements draw the reader up short. Students of Talmud, no matter how committed they are to honouring rabbinic literature, may find themselves taken off-guard by its descriptions of the onset of menstruation. ה GridLayout i.e. rabbinic] literature often describes menstruation as something like the biological equivalent of an exclamation mark, occurring in response to spicy food (B.T. Niddah 63b), sexual desire (B.T. Niddah 66a), domestic violence (Tosefta Niddah 1:2), and leaping up and down (ibid). How is this explained? A state-of-the-art laboratory was not necessary to discover that biting a raw onion does not in fact induce menstruation. A pair of eyes and a brain will do, even in the Iron Age. In that case, what is going on?

Acknowledgements: My deep gratitude goes to מורי ורבי Dr. Elisha Ancselovits; his philosophy of halakhah and in particular of the laws of נידה is evident throughout this piece.

ISSN 1209-9392
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One explanation is that the authors of these passages were men, men uninterested in or perhaps even apprehensive about talking to women about their bodies. In the absence of direct experience, they guessed, and guessed incorrectly. This hypothesis is quick and tidy, but it is frustrated by numerous Talmudic passages, which describe the opposite social reality. For example, women in the Talmud approach sages, sitting among their students or colleagues, to ask them to examine and rule on their menstrual blood. Here is one such text:

Why did they call [R. Eleazar] “the authority in the land of Israel”? Because of a certain woman who brought blood to R. Eleazar. R. Ami was sitting before him as his guest. He [R. Eleazar] said to her, “This is blood brought on by sexual desire.” After she left, R. Ami joined her. She said to him, “My husband was on a journey and I desired him.” He applied the verse [to R. Eleazar] “The secret of God is revealed to those who fear him.” (B.T. Niddah 20b)

It is noteworthy to inquire in how many respects this passage troubles the “frightened men, isolated women” hypothesis above. A woman moves freely among the company of the rabbis and, as is typical of these passages, everyone speaks in a plain and direct manner about menstruation – here, even of sexuality. The woman is not overcoming a sense of embarrassment or modesty so that she can get rabbinic advice (“Like going to a doctor,” as the calming advice goes these days,2) because she also speaks about it conversationally with R. Ami, after her question has already been resolved. In addition, R. Ami finds nothing about this strange.

In M. Niddah 8:3, a woman publicly approaches a rabbi while he is in the middle of instructing his students in order to ask him about a menstrual stain:

2 For an example of a modern handbook on the laws of niddah, see Eider, R. Shimon, The Halachos of Niddah, xx. Lakewood: Feldheim Publishers, 1981, in which embarrassed women are urged to see niddah as “a serious condition” and the rabbi as “a physician.”

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It happened that a woman came before R. Aqiva and said to him, "I saw a stain." He said to her, "Perhaps you have a wound?" She said to him, "Yes, but it healed." "Perhaps you can scratch it to bring out blood?" She said to him, "Yes," and he ruled that she was tehorah. He saw his students looking at one another. He said to them, "What about this seems difficult to you, since the sages instituted [the teaching of menstrual stains] to be lenient rather than strict? As it says: 'And a woman when she becomes a zavah, blood will drip on her flesh' – [a flow of blood,] rather than a stain.”

Although the Mishnah is interested in the reactions of the students – showing their scepticism in response to their teacher's ruling – no surprise is apparent with regard to the woman and her question. The woman herself does not attempt to draw R. Aqiva aside to have the conversation in private. Conversely, modern arrangements among observant Jews can be found, where women often send their menstrual stains, even to a local authority, by post – with the option to anonymise the entire process should embarrassment persist.\(^3\)\(^4\)

Part of what drove the Talmud's culture of frankness was the impossibility in antiquity of making anything about the process of menstruation truly private. In B.T. Qidushin 80a, an expectation is seen that if a woman is menstruating, her neighbourhood will be aware of it. There are two main reasons for this. First, people owned comparatively few items of clothing, and removing menstrual blood from fabric was a laborious process which, even if performed perfectly, might only result in fading the stain, as described in M. Niddah 9:6.\(^6\) This meant that blood, from a current period or a previous one, was often visible on the clothes of

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\(^3\) Eider, *ibid*


\(^5\) As revealed by many Talmudic passages describing daily life, such as the discourse around the sharing and borrowing of clothes (e.g. M. Niddah 9:3) and biographical details regarding impoverished sages (B.T. Nedarim 49b).

\(^6\) *שבועה פסינין פ นอกจาก על החמה–ה睽ות, מי גרסיו, מי רגלים, גנת, בושרי, קומיסיון, אושלן, חותם* וועשה על גביו תומית עפעפי על השבעה פסינין. הגר—they do not need to immerse. If it was removed, or if it faded, it is a menstrual stain: the taharoth are impure, and there is a need to immerse.” See the following mishnah, M. Niddah 9:7, for a more detailed description of the laundering process.

*Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal Volume 13 Number 1 (2016)*

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menstruating women. Second, one must consider the very close quarters in which extended families would live together, often sharing a single bed. No private, clean bathroom existed where someone might discreetly change her sponge. The result was an environment in which familiarity among both males and females, from early childhood to old age, was inevitable.

The existence of an open public discourse between men and women on menstruation and its religious ramifications is itself important. But it must also be recognised that women were also originators of Halakhah, as most famously seen in B.T. Niddah 66a:

אמר ר. זירא בנות ישראל החמירו על עצמן שאפילו רואות טפת דם כחרדל יושבות עליה שבעה נקיים

R. Zeira said: the daughters of Israel have become strict on themselves, so that even if they see a drop of blood the size of a mustard seed, they sit seven clean days for it.

But if one cannot turn to the idea of an aloof and befuddled circle of male lawgivers, what idea can help then? It seems feasible to argue that the clearest way to read these texts is with artful generosity: to realise that what is being said made sense to the people who said it, and then to recover as much information as possible that will allow one to see the world from their perspective, and so come to understand their conclusions. In the words of Paul Barber, who made excellent discoveries in folklore by first and foremost trusting his sources to be saying something meaningful about their experiences,

If we just stand back and look at the folklore, without putting ourselves in the position of people creating it, we will get a very distorted view. What we must do is look at what they are looking at. Like Copernicus, we will find that when we change our vantage point, our data shift around and form an elegantly simple pattern.

The idea that spicy food can cause menstruation is mentioned in B.T. Niddah 63b:

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7 As seen in numerous Talmudic references to the family bed (e.g. multiple adult women in M. Niddah 9:3-4, unrelated adults, as well as parents and children together in B.T. Berakhoth 24a, adults with the children of their siblings in Avoth deRibi Nathan Recension A, Chapter 16). The bed was a multi-functional item of furniture, for example serving as a work site during the day (M. Niddah 1:1).

8 Use of a sponge for menstrual flow is mentioned in M. Shabbath 6:5; from B.T. Shabbath 65a, we see that it was used both internally and externally.

כון יツא בלחנ לאותו, מאו... אמר אביו לאותו, אוכל שומ וראתה אוכלת בצלים וראתה כוסה פפלים.

[The Mishnaic expression] “and things like that” -- what did it mean to include? Abayye said, “To include cases where she ate garlic and saw [blood, i.e. menstruated], or ate onions and saw, or nibbled peppers and saw.”

“Seeing” is the usual Talmudic idiom for describing a woman becoming aware that she is menstruating; hereafter it will be rendered simply “menstruated,” but the literal meaning in the above quotation as it indicates something critical will be discussed below, namely, that it is not the objective process of menstruation which bears primary halakhic significance, but the woman's own awareness of menstruating. Although sages are often involved in rulings on menstrual stains, in the Talmud they do so only at the invitation of women. If what the sage has to say on the subject is too out of line with the woman's own thoughts, it might be rejected altogether, as Yalta did with the ruling of Rabbah bar bar Hanah in BT Niddah 20b; thus, even in those cases where a woman requests a second opinion, as it were, it is her vision, which retains primacy of determination.

Back to the nibbled peppers of Nidah 63b. When this idea is given the dignity of investigation, it is not at all uncommon. As background, it must be noted that the difference between inducing menstruation and an early abortion is not clear, either from the perspective of pregnancy detection prior to the availability of reliable hormonal tests, or from the perspective of the motivations of a woman seeking the induction, i.e., to desire to menstruate with an urgency that employs medical intervention is most likely a desire not to be pregnant, and so the two are regularly conflated in sources such as early botanical compendia.

The first source comes from Soranus of Ephesus, roughly predating the Mishnah at about the second century CE, whose work Gynecology contains extensive descriptions of the effect of various substances on women's reproductive health. He recommends white pepper mixed with wine to induce miscarriage.¹⁰ Like the passage in Nidah 63b, he also expressly

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mentions garlic and onion, and explains the reasoning behind the posited conflict between spicy food and pregnancy:

[The pregnant woman] should avoid everything pungent, such as garlic, onions, leeks, preserved meat or fish, and very moist foods ... pungent substances cause flatulence and besides are solvent and attenuating, and hence we approve of them in chronic patients for the removal of callosities for instance. But it is absolutely illogical not to realize that things which irritate, attenuate, and wear down the whole physique, and which dissolve callosities, that all these things, apportioned by distribution to the various parts of the uterus, will soften the seed much more... ¹¹

This idea was not confined to antiquity. Spicy food is mentioned as an emmenagogue and abortifacient in John Gerarde's 1597 compendium of botanical lore, *Herball or General Historie of Plantes*. Of the “hot and drie” root of sowbread, whose spiciness he ranks just below that of the “ginnie pepper” (*i.e.* hot pepper), ¹² Gerarde writes

...it purgeth the belly being anointed therewith, and killeth the childe. It is a strong medicine to destroy the birth, being put up as a pessary. ¹³

Scottish physician Elizabeth Blackwell, writing in the Georgian era (c.1737), says of hot pepper ("*piper indicum*")):

Some commend a Decoction of this with Penny Royal as good to expel a Dead Child. ... It is much used as a sauce for anything that is flatulent and windy. ¹⁴

Of use here is Carol Lederman's description of the same phenomenon in Malaysian folk medicine. Especially valuable is the attention she pays to dual, interdependent systems of evaluating medicine: production of desired results, and broader resonance with cultural imagination:

Symbolically, this combination of hot and sharp should produce an effective abortifacient. Experience, in this case, supports belief. ...Taken in large quantities with yeast on an empty stomach, it can cause strong uterine contractions (Burkill 1966:152-13). Such empirical verification of symbolic truth is important for the

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¹¹ Soranus, 47
¹³ Gerarde, 695-696
¹⁴ Blackwell, Elizabeth. *A Curious Herbal Containing Five Hundred of the most useful Plants, which are now used in the Practice of Physick*, Volume 1. Note to Plate 229, text 33. Printed for Samuel Harding in St. Martin’s Lane. London: 1737
A vital nuance is that folk remedies do not necessarily need to produce consistent, foolproof results to sustain credibility; they need to make ("symbolic") sense, and ordinary people need some experience with the intersection of the remedy and a resolution of their problem.

In light of the preceding sources, a new reading of Nidah 63b presents itself: that it has in mind not a woman with an unexpected reaction to her dinner, but a woman who is deliberately ingesting garlic, onion, or hot pepper as remedies. Since she is anxious for her period to arrive, it is likely that she is already late or approximately due, which means the endometrium is already well into the proliferation process. It would be impossible to summon menstruation on an empty uterus, but once it is more or less full, it is not surprising to see that substances which produce a strong gastrointestinal reaction – as noted by Soranus and Blackwell above – may impact uterine muscles as well. That a relationship exists between gastrointestinal and uterine muscle contraction is medically well-established. When read in the context of other folk remedies, Niddah 63b's idea of “hot” food appearing to influence a woman's cycle ceases to be surprising.

A different set of puzzling menstrual triggers are listed in Tosefta Niddah 1:2:

One whose menstruation was forced need not worry that her period began prior to her notice. And what is meant by “forced”? If she coughed up phlegm and menstruated, jumped and menstruated, her husband struck her and she menstruated, she carried a heavy burden and she menstruated – that is what is meant by “forced,” and she need not worry that her period began prior to her notice.

Three scenarios are discernable in this passage: an ill woman, a woman subject to violence, and a woman under physical strain. Menstrual irregularities are not uncommon in

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times of stress. But another significant consideration is that all of these women may simply not wish to have sex, and are assuming the role of a niddah to avoid it. Unlike a woman privately refusing her husband, the whole community joins in buffering a niddah from sexuality by witnessing her status, and perhaps even administering punishment for transgression; while the sages condemn marital rape whether by physical force or intimidation (/אימה/), it is a private violation not easily accessible to public intervention. As well, the punishment for having sex with a niddah is much greater, as well as more familiar to those on the fringes of rabbinic teaching, being prohibited in the Torah itself and thus for example heard in public readings.

That a woman might assume or avoid the role of niddah irrespective of an objective biological process is raised directly by the Talmud. In B.T. Qidushin 80a, the identity a woman creates for herself in her community creates a binding legal reality for her husband, although she might not actually be bleeding:

אמר רב יהודה הוחזקה נדה בשכונתה בעלה לוקה עליה משום נדה

Rav Yehudah said, if one establishes herself as a niddah among her [female] neighbours, her husband [if he has intercourse with her] is whipped on her account on the grounds of niddah.

Particularly noteworthy in this passage is the woman's recruitment of her neighbours to witness her assumption of the role of niddah. This suggests a strategy of inviting public support into the otherwise discreet domestic sphere.

In B.T. Kethuboth 22a, the language used to express this voluntary entry into a state of prohibition to men is דאיסורא חתיכה لنפה שוויה -- “she equated herself to a prohibited piece of meat.” The image of a piece of meat is an apt reflection of the consumptive encounters the woman wishes to avoid. Her particular avenue to prohibition varies somewhat according to expediency; a woman is reported to have used this technique to escape “improper men,” who

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18 B.T. Nedarim 20b
19 M. Kerithuth 1:1
20 The Book of Exodus, Chapter 15, Verse 19
attacked her by presenting herself as married, and thus assuming the prohibitions of a married woman until she is restored to her former status by an explanation to the rabbis. However, niddah was also used against unrelated, hostile men. In B.T. Ta'anit 22a, a jailor splashes wine lees on the skirt of a female prisoner to protect her from the male prisoners. The woman is described as מארוסה, engaged; it is interesting that the taboo against niddah is presented here as more respected by her fellow inmates than her unavailable status as an engaged woman.

*niddah* of course is also the clearest way to prohibit oneself even to one’s husband. Its use in this capacity is not theoretical; J.T. Kethuboth 2:5 shows a wife declaring herself to be niddah in order to avoid sex:

Shemuel asked to have sex with his wife. She said to him, “I am *temeiah* [from menstruation].” The next day she said, “I am *tehorah*.” He said to her, “Yesterday you said *temeiah*, today *tehorah*?” She said to him, “I didn’t have the patience then.” He went to ask Rav. [Rav] said to him, “Because she gave a good reason for [the contradiction in] her words, she is to be believed.”

In the Bavli version of this story (B.T. Kethuboth 22a-b) the assumption of the role of *niddah* was not a one-time stress reaction on the part of Shmuel’s wife, but a regular feature of their married life, happening some forty times.

In light of this awareness on the part of the rabbis that a biologically false presentation of oneself as *niddah* is used by women, many descriptions of a “forced onset” of menstruation become richer. Perhaps the most vivid and intuitive example is the case in the Tosefta ofMichigan, the violent husband; it is readily understood why it would not be sufficient for the wife to simply assert herself. Similarly, those exhausted by heavy work (נסאה מבעד) might prefer one irrefutable denial which works for many days rather than a series of nightly negotiations, although the most obvious reading here is the possibility of miscarriage. The

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21 “Canadian researchers studying pregnant workers in 42 occupational groups found increased rates of miscarriages across all occupations for women whose jobs required heavy lifting, other strenuous physical

ISSN 1209-9392
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sick woman (_cutoff) works similarly, and there is an additional opportunity for investigation here as to how rabbinic sympathies might manifest via a more transparent halakhic process, _i.e._ ruling that women become _niddah_ by issuing fluids which, while clearly not menstrual, are signs of illness; see, for example, the position of R. Akavia ben Mahalalel that “green blood” is _tamei_ (M. Shabbath 2:6).

Of final interest is the concept of _דמ חימוד_, menstrual bleeding brought about by sexual desire, mentioned above by R. Eleazar in the text of Niddah 20b. In B.T. Niddah 66a, the issue arises again:

אמר רבא תבעוה לינשא ונתפייסה צריכהشتשב שבעה נקיים ... טעמא מאי埕 כיון דמחמדא

Rava said: “If she received and accepted a proposal, she must wait seven clean days [before a wedding]”... What is the reason? Because of her desire.

Whereas in Niddah 20b, _דמ חימוד_ was presented with physical vividness, as a substance handed over to a sage for visual inspection, in 66a no actual blood appears in the text; Rava's focus is on establishing the proper timeframe for wedding arrangements, not on determining if a bride-to-be has menstruated. It may be that Rava is unfolding a pre-existing concept (R. Eleazar operated one generation before him) to put respectable distance between a decision presumed influenced by physical appetite and that decision's considerable legal consequences. If this is so, Rava's concept of _דמ חימוד_ need not depend on regularly-observed physical phenomena, but rather works as an expression of social responsibility, best articulated in his community with the image of bleeding from desire.

Nevertheless, as per Lederman above, some corresponding physical reality is necessary for its symbolic use to maintain legitimacy. What, in the end, is the phenomenon here? That R. Eleazar can identify _דמ חימוד_ by looking at it of course suggests that it is visibly different from ordinary menstruation; this is also supported by the fact that his identification is presented as a ruling, meaning that a difference in law exists as well between _דמ נידה_ and _דמ חימוד_.

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in mind, a likely candidate for literal חימוד דם could be the mild breakthrough bleeding which sometimes occurs during ovulation due to the sudden drop in estradiol.\textsuperscript{23} A modest association has been found between the luteal phase and libidinal increase, although studies on this subject have been confounded by an overabundance of variables and social expectation.\textsuperscript{24}

While considerable work is needed to explain what are often considered inexplicable facets of the sages' conception of menstruation, this should not be taken as a sign that this investigation amount to little more than forced apologism. Rather, it is a natural consequence of how much background has fallen out of current discourse on menstruation; a reader no longer brings to the text a wealth of ideas and experiences, which were ordinary during that text's composition. An explanation exists for the earlier mentioned texts, and reading, in the words of Emmanuel Levinas, “can only consist in this violence done to words to tear from them the secret that time and conventions have covered over with their sedimentations, a process begun as soon as these words appear in the open air of history.”\textsuperscript{25} And what sedimentation has accumulated on the subject at hand! Presently, readers are quite removed from the broad, everyday encounters which allow to develop a robust intuition; the physical privacy of modern living space as well as cultural ideas of propriety mean that very few people have familiarity with more than one sample of a menstrual cycle, if that. It is therefore appropriate for readers of Ḥazalic literature to cultivate a sense of modesty regarding our first impressions of what seems reasonable. Such modesty makes room for artful generosity: the assumption of a responsibility to view no text as


self-evidently unworthy of serious thought, undertaking neither to dismiss the unexpected as pure ignorance, nor to defer to a sense of holy inscrutability – a response which, despite its potential to comfort the modern yet devout student, nevertheless relegates the text to incoherence and irrelevance with the same finality as a sceptical response.

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