Forsaken

Sharon Faye Koren

The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism
Forsaken
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Forsaken

The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism

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Waltham, Massachusetts
For
Atara Malka,
Talia Ora,
& Tamar Ariel:

May you find no barriers
as you journey along the path.
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In this compelling new examination of Judaic mystical approaches to women’s bodies and their functions, Sharon Faye Koren combines a mastery of rabbinic source materials with the tools of contemporary theoretical analysis, including gender theory. Her fresh approach reveals complex and often contradictory dimensions of Jewish intellectual life. For example, puzzling over the fact that Judaism—unlike Christianity and Islam—preserves few records of female medieval mystics, Koren offers Foucault’s famous dictum that “culture determines what counts as truth or knowledge within that society.” Whatever mystical experiences Jewish women may have had didn’t “count” in the societies they lived in. Women lacked textual expertise, and also by definition they did not inhabit the same world of study and behavioral obligation as Jewish men. Women’s contributions were thus effectively ignored by Jewish intellectual history, including intellectual mystical traditions. But while the rabbinic mystical tradition largely ignored flesh-and-blood women and their spiritual lives, the symbolic “female” became an object of fetishistic obsession.

Menstruation and niddah (a halakhic legal category that defines a twelve-day period during which women are sexually off limits to their husbands), in particular, were invested with a set of extraordinary symbolic meanings that enabled mystic scholars “to continue to have access to the divine in a post-Temple world,” Koren explains. She traces the notion of expelling in the linguistic roots for the term niddah, and reviews anthropological analyses of the “almost universal fear of menstrual blood.” During the actual Temple observances, both men and women were subject to impurity and isolation, and were given the opportunity to purge their impurity through Temple rituals. Post-Temple Judaism retained miqveh immersion for women after menstruation and a week of “clean” days (in some communities, this was true for male ejaculation as well). Koren builds on Fonrobert’s insight about the difference in language describing male and female “emissions”: the male is described as expelling his issue from his body, while the woman is described as having a discharge in her body. This perceived distinction—an interpretation that exaggerates physiological differences—had profound halakhic and symbolic valence. “Exterior” male impurity is understood as being ephemeral and having limited duration, while “interior” female impurity bars women permanently from mystical practice. Because a woman’s pollution is interior, even a
postmenopausal woman remains tainted, and thus, in medieval Jewish thinking, unable to attain spiritual heights.

Koren traces the fascinating departure from talmudic literature, in which “menstruants are prohibited only from performing domestic tasks that would promote intimacy between husband and wife,” to the very different approach within the Hekhalot literature and within Beraita d’Niddah. Both exacerbated separations between men and women, and assigned spiritual meanings (often negative) to female reproductive physiology. As Koren explains, mystics concerned with access to divine mysteries asserted: “When an adept wishes to learn the name of God, he must avoid looking at menstruants.” Convinced that the pure and impure realms must not mix, the Hekhalot authors invested women’s menstruation with both moral and ritual impurity that arguably had magical properties. The Hekhalot literature in general is entirely androcentric. Koren comments: “It is as if we are entering a world where wives do not exist.” The Beraita d’Niddah, a collection of materials dealing with women and menstruation, departed from mainstream talmudic law by isolating menstruating Jewish women from even the mitzvot (religious obligations) that are incumbent specifically upon women. Rabbinic law requires women to fulfill many legal obligations in addition to the three “women’s” mitzvot, stipulating that women must recite grace after meals and engage in personal prayer no matter the time of the month. However, unlike talmudic law, which requires women to continue all mitzvoth, such as praying, lighting candles, and “taking” challah, during and after menstruation, the Beraita d’Niddah forbids these activities and promises dire consequences should they occur. A menstruating woman “must not touch anything holy,” these texts warn. Why? “Because she would be guilty and would make her household guilty.” In these texts, unlike the approach of mainstream rabbinic Judaism, the very presence of the menstruating woman can pollute all around her.

Koren builds on the work of a broad array of important scholars to analyze these spiritualistic texts, noting that they reject the sublimation of Temple cult symbols that was typical of much rabbinic legal thinking. Instead, emphasizing cultic Temple practices and expanding their spiritual significance, the Beraita d’Niddah insists “that the menstruant is anathema to both God and man,” she writes, “and this is the understanding that is bequeathed to medieval Europe.” Koren accordingly proceeds to examine the development and elaboration of these ideas, by the German Pietists (twelfth and thirteenth centuries) and later the medieval Spanish kabbalists, into a complex intellec-
tual system that assigned semiotic significance to women’s bodies. The Beraita d’Niddah became the foundational document that “legitimized Jewish women’s exclusion from mystical practice,” influencing Ashkenazic communities to the north. In particular, once Hasidic Ashkenaz had formulated a vision of Godhead with a feminine as well as a masculine aspect, “female biology” had symbolic salience. For some mystical thinkers, the female taint extended even to the Shekhinah, the female emanation of the divine spirit.

In later chapters, Koren details the ways in which these mystical structures (and strictures) affected the lives of ordinary women. The connection between the spiritual world and quotidian human behavior became even more direct in the cosmos described by the Zohar, which many contemporary scholars place in the Castile of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. As Koren lucidly explains, thirteenth-century “theosophical kabbalists” believed that “they could learn about the inner processes of the divine realm through the esoteric interpretation of God’s own words” and that the reciprocal relationship between human beings and God would be powerfully affected—in both positive and negative ways—by the behavior and motivations of human beings. “Proper performance of all the commandments would foster unity in the divine realm, and conversely sinning could unleash the forces of evil in the sefirotic realm.” Finally, Koren contextualizes these developments in gendered Jewish intellectual history through a finely wrought consideration of diverse trends in Muslim and Christian theological writings.

Sharon Faye Koren makes a powerful case that opportunities for women’s spiritual development generally and mystical expression specifically opened up when concern with menstruation laws declined. Apologists who claim that esoteric intellectual structures have little impact on quotidian social mores should look more closely and deeply at both. This fascinating book, in addition to being a groundbreaking addition to the Hadassah Brandeis Institute Series on Jewish Women, enables just such critical scrutiny.

Sylvia Barack Fishman
I am thrilled to finally have the opportunity to publicly thank everyone who has helped me bring this work to its fruition. I first began studying mysticism as a graduate student in the medieval studies program at Yale University and I owe an enormous debt to my teachers. John Boswell (z”l) first ignited my passion for the study of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in medieval Spain and encouraged me to understand Jewish mysticism within its greater cultural context. Jaroslav Pelikan (z”l) was a devoted teacher who was as delighted to learn about modern Jewish rituals as I was to learn about Gregory of Nazianzus.

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My brothers David Koren and Edwin Koren force me to see the unintended humor in my craft. Unsere Eltern (our parents), Ruth and Benjamin Koren immigrated to the United States after World War II and worked tirelessly to ensure that we would attain all that was denied them — especially formal education. My father always says that an education is something that no one can ever take away from you. They instilled in me a love of learning, language, and literature. I could not have written this book without their love, support, and encouragement. Finally, my long-patient husband Matthew Aaron is, like his namesake Aharon, the embodiment of loving kindness. He fills my life with joy, laughter, and wild tales of marine life. I dedicate this book to our three wonderful daughters, Atara Malka, Talia Ora, and Tamar Ariel, with love.

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A section of Chapter 9 may be found in *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues* 17 (2009) in my article “The Menstruant as ‘Other’ in Medieval Judaism and Christianity.”


Introduction

Forsaken: “Niddah — de-Naddad lah El”

ZOHAR 3:226A (RM)

In the world of the Zohar, menstruation is antithetical to God. The biblical term for menstruant, *niddah*, has two possible roots, *n-d-h* and *n-d-d*, both of which imply expelling.¹ Perhaps menstruants were temporarily cast out of their communities; alternatively, the term may suggest, even more neutrally, the flow of blood from a menstruant’s body.² Many medieval Jewish mystics, however, saw menstruation differently. According to a section of the Zohar, the most popular work of medieval Kabbalah, the menstruant’s title of niddah tells us that “God flees from her.” God abandons menstruants because God cannot suffer impurity. The niddah repels the forces of the holy, and her spiritual vacuum is immediately filled by the forces of evil and impurity.

The niddah appears with stunning frequency in the Zohar.³ To be sure, menstrual laws appear prominently in medieval law codes and responsa literature as well. But the Zohar is not a legal work, and the focus on menstruation that emerged from the Zohar was different in kind from constraints in other religious circles, in part because it was not merely a set of laws or customs.⁴ Like all other Jewish traditions grounded in biblical text, Jewish mystics reinterpreted the laws of the Temple cult in ways that enabled them to continue to have access to the divine in a post-Temple world.⁵ The cultic restrictions on impurity were expressed anew in Kabbalah as a protection of the purity of the celestial Temple, one no longer confined by spatial boundaries. Breaching those restrictions allowed impurity to invade the holy realm. For many medieval kabbalists, therefore, the menstruant’s spiritual vacuum leads her to a demonic state, and a menstruating woman is often portrayed as the embodiment of the *sitra ahra*, the demonic other side. As such, she is not only dangerous but also forever to be excluded from the divine.
Indeed, of the three major religions in medieval Europe — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — only Judaism cannot boast a single female mystic. Medieval Jewish women’s exclusion from mystical pursuits cannot be ascribed simply to patriarchy or to fear of women’s sexuality: Christian and Muslim women faced the same obstacles yet were able to express themselves within the mystical tradition. This glaring absence has been noted by several scholars of medieval Jewish history and mysticism who offer varying explanations. Gershom Scholem attributes women’s absence to the association between women and the demonic in Jewish myth.6 Judith Baskin argues that Kabbalah is a highly intellectual enterprise, and medieval Jewish women never would have been able to attain the requisite knowledge to participate in mystical endeavors.7

Medieval kabbalists, however, offered their own rationale. In the medieval mystical texts beginning with Hekhalot literature (that is, early Jewish mystical literature) through pre-expulsion Kabbalah, women were not passively absent, but rather actively barred from mystical pursuits. Late-antique and medieval Jewish mystics were unique in their understanding of physical impurity as an insurmountable obstacle to divine communion. Even had a woman the education necessary to comprehend a Zoharic text, she would have been denied access to the divine realm because of her innate impurity. This presumed antagonism between the menstruant and the divine appeared in mystical praxis and contributed to the rise of a kabbalistic myth in which, just as the human menstruant was separated from man, the divine menstruant had to be separated from the holy aspects of God. Any contact between the pure male sefirot and the impure Shekhinah could infect the Godhead with the forces of the demonic realm. Menstruation became a nefarious force capable of polluting the divine realm. This symbolic understanding of the menstruant barred Jewish women from “normative” medieval Jewish mysticism — significantly impacting their spiritual status.

“NORMATIVE” JEWISH MYSTICISM

Modern studies of the psychology of mysticism have shown that women are more prone to mystical, or paranormal, religious experiences than are men.8 It is therefore likely that mystical experience was not unknown to medieval Jewish women. Yet it is also likely that this form of spirituality was not acceptable among acknowledged Jewish mystics: it did not “count” as mysticism.
among the male intellectual elite. Michel Foucault has argued that no knowledge exists outside the confines of a cultural context; to maintain power, the authority of a given culture determines what counts as truth or knowledge within that society. In *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Jantzen adapts Foucault’s theory to Christian mysticism, arguing that Christian mysticism is also socially constructed and that authority determines what shall count as mysticism and who the mystics shall be.\(^9\) Jewish mysticism, too, is socially constructed; those in power determine “what counts as mysticism.” Moreover, they determine the criteria for mystical experience. In Christianity, the path to true spirituality was virginity;\(^10\) in Islam, purity of heart. In Judaism, it was ritual purity.

Jewish practice, however, has never been monolithic. There is some evidence that Jewish women have long engaged in “alternate” forms of spirituality. They participated, for example, in magical practices in the late-antique period,\(^11\) and in early-modern Safed, Hayim Vital mentioned that spirits would possess certain women and speak through their agency. Women were active participants in the Sabbatian movement, and many functioned as prophets.\(^12\) Mizraḥi women, like their Muslim female neighbors, venerated female saints. And in Ḥasidism, some women — most famously the Maid of Ludmir — functioned as spiritual leaders.\(^13\)

These isolated examples of women’s spirituality in the late-antique and early-modern periods, however, only serve to highlight the glaring absence of female mystics in the medieval. After 1492, the spiritual and cultural needs of post-expulsion Jewry provided new avenues for women’s cultural expression. Safedian kabbalists in the sixteenth century democratized elements of Kabbalah in an effort to hasten redemption. Pious acts by all Jews — including women — were then believed to be instrumental in effecting changes in the cosmos, and consequently, women may have achieved new prestige.

**Alternate Forms of Female Spiritual Expression**

Jewish mysticism, however, was not immediately transformed into an egalitarian spiritual system. Rather, the accounts of these pre-modern women reinforce the notion of mysticism as a social construct because the opportunities for women in Safed, Sabbatianism, and early Ḥasidism perpetuated rather than abolished the patriarchal status quo. The women that Hayim Vital...
mentions in his diary were not kabbalists in their own right, but rather vessels for dispossessed (often male) spirits. They appear in the diary to buttress Vital’s prestige and to save suffering male souls. Tkhines literature, the vernacular expression of women’s spirituality in the early-modern period, similarly did not “count” as mysticism. As Chava Weissler has shown, these forms of devotion were meant explicitly for “women and [for] men who are like women in not being able to learn much.”

Ada Rapoport-Albert has argued that the Maid of Ludmir tradition also perpetuates rather than changes the status of women in the Jewish mystical tradition. Like many medieval Christian female mystics, the Maid of Ludmir denied her sexuality and led an ascetic, celibate life in order to pursue her spiritual and scholarly path. Although her following grew, contemporary religious leaders believed that she had either been possessed by an impure spirit or by the soul of a Tsaddiq (righteous man) who had transmigrated into her body as penance for some sin. Once she was persuaded to marry and assumed her “rightful” position as wife in the Jewish world, she lost her following and died in obscurity. Thus, according to Rapoport-Albert, far from promoting the equality of women, “Hasidism embraced unquestioningly all the conceptions of women produced by rabbinic Judaism, as well as the kabbalistic association of women with the demonic and the concomitant representation by women of negative, material sexuality.” These negative associations between women, matter, and lust are justified in kabbalistic theology through various understandings of gender and impurity.

WHY IMPURITY?

The human body has long been considered a barrier to the divine. This belief was expressed in Greek thought as a dichotomy between body and spirit. Those who sought spiritual success endeavored to free their soul from the confines of the material body. Such total rejection of God’s creation, however, was uncommon in Jewish thought, which was more inclined to ask how to honor the creator God and his creations. Over time, fleeting physical pollution came to block access to the divine. Impurity was the matter; purity, the form. Ritual purity became the Jewish way of “assimilating to God” on earth.

In Leviticus, God exhorts Israel to be holy because He is holy. The term employed, qedushah (holiness), has a twofold meaning. The word initially
connoted “separation” or “withdrawal.” This separateness does not imply remoteness, but rather separation from anything impure and polluting. Numbers and Deuteronomy assume that God (or his indwelling, the Shekhinah) rested on the camp of the Israelites. Physical purity was necessary to ensure that God inhered in the community. Deuteronomy 23:15 mandates purity: “[S]ince the Lord your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you, let your camp be holy.” Numbers 5:1–4 bars from the camp those with corpse impurity, scale disease, and genital discharges. Removal from impurity was the means by which the Children of Israel became like God and ensured their close connection with the divine.

The priestly authors of Leviticus held that these meetings were only possible at the tabernacle and its successor, the Jerusalem Temple — a unique juncture on earth where the divine and human realm might meet. Mircea Eliade taught that “for religious man, space is not homogeneous: he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others.” Many believed that the Temple mount was a point at which the barriers between the terrestrial and the divine could be breached. Physical purity was therefore essential for admission to the Jerusalem Temple.

Many religions in the late-antique period saw a loosening of the geographical requirements for divine communion in favor of more “mobile” religion. As Jonathan Smith explains in his essay “The Temple and the Magician,”

[the ancient books of wisdom, the authority — indeed the divinity — of the priest-king, the faith of the clergy in the efficacy of their rituals, the temple as the chief locus of revelation — all of these have been relativized in favor of the direct contact with a mobile magician with his equally mobile divinity.

For Judeans, this trend toward mobility began somewhat prematurely. After the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE, the prophet Ezekiel (1:1) imagined a mobile Temple chariot traveling through the heavens to the rivers of Babylon. After the return from the Babylonian Exile and the subsequent reconstruction, emergent Jewry responded to the new stationary Temple in many different ways. Some resumed the status quo, while others developed alternative rituals in response to their disaffection with the refurbished cult.

The experience of living without a Temple allowed for the possibility of extra-Temple ritual, but its symbols remained entrenched. Burgeoning Jewish imaginations contextualized new traditions through the lens of cultic rituals.
The Qumran sect believed that the Second Temple was polluted and anticipated the arrival of a messianic age in which the purity requirements of the Temple cult would extend in varying degrees throughout the land. Pharisees adapted the purity requirements of the Temple to their daily lives. Indeed, after the destruction of the Second Temple, the redactors of the Mishnah devoted approximately two-thirds of the work to the laws of the Temple cult, reformulating ritual into study. The symbolic relevance of the Temple began to transform to meet the spiritual needs of an evolving Jewry. It became a locus in time, space, or mind, where one could achieve proximity to God, a symbol that inspired all subsequent forms of Jewish mystical contemplation. The earliest Jewish mysticism is named for the vestibule in front of the Holy of Holies, Hekhal. German Pietists (c. 1100–1250) reimagined Ezekiel’s four-wheeled chariot as the divine name, and medieval Kabbalists understood the sefirot (divine potencies) as the merkavah. Jewish mystics, who desired to overcome the boundaries of their own physical nature in order to ascend to heaven, to achieve mystical union, to attain a mystical vision, or to affect the Godhead would first need to address the purity requirements of the Temple.

WHY MENSTRUAL IMPURITY?

Many cultures try to avoid various forms of pollution. Menstrual blood is among the most common taboos, and the word taboo may originate in the word tupua, Polynesian for menstruation. As noted, the roots for the term niddah (n-d-d, “depart,” “flee,” “wander,” and n-d-h, “chase away,” “put aside,” “drive out”) have the notion of expelling in common. Anthropologists have devoted much effort to uncovering the underlying reason for the almost universal fear of menstrual blood. Indeed, there is a vast literature on the meaning of menstrual impurity in the Bible. Scholarly opinion ranges from the neutral — Mary Douglas’s now classic (and disputed) theory of impurity laws as a means of establishing order — to the positive — David Biale’s most recent argument that the priests revered the fertility potential symbolized by menstrual blood. Many late-antique and medieval mystics, however, rationalized levitical purity laws and their need to separate menstruants from the sacred by calling on the dichotomy between life and death.

The notion of death governs fear of the menstruant in many cultures. Because menstrual blood signifies the death of a potential life, it is understood to be a source of danger to the living. Since “the life of the flesh is in the
blood” (Lev. 17:11), the loss of menstrual blood may be perceived as the death of a potential life.32 Within the context of the Israelite Temple cult this nexus between menstruation and death underlies the perceived need to separate menstruants from God. God is the God of life, and blood is the material means by which He vivifies. The association between menstrual blood and death implies that menstruants symbolize the opposite of the holy and must, therefore, remain separate from the sancta.33 Note that menstruants were not singled out for prejudice in the levitical system. Jacob Milgrom explains that in the Bible all three kinds of human impurity — corpse/carcass, scale disease, and genital discharges — share the notion of death. Scale disease gives the appearance of death; the loss of semen in men and of menstrual blood in women represents death.34

MENSTRUATION IN PRIESTLY AND RABBINIC LAW

In the purity laws of the ancient Israelite Temple cult, impurity was not specific to women, but a potential state of all Israelites. The menstruating woman was but one of four types of impure person with genital discharge who were barred from religious practice and could ritually pollute others.35 Only vestiges of the elaborate cultic purity system, however, survived the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. The menstruant was one such vestige, and rituals by which she could change her status and gain readmittance to the community of the holy were set forth in the Talmud, and justification for the continued observance of menstrual laws founded on cultic practice was provided in the Holiness Code. The niddah was banned not only from the Temple but from her husband as well. Sexual relations between a man and his menstruating wife are explicitly forbidden in Leviticus 18:19 and 20:18. Therefore, while the criterion of purity may be interpreted as a mark of an older system, this prohibition, which appears in a catalogue of forbidden sexual relations, extended beyond the cultic realm.

Leviticus deems the woman with a normal discharge (the niddah) impure for seven days. The woman who has had an abnormal issue (the zavah) must wait an additional seven “clean” days after the cessation of her flow before she may be considered pure and present a sacrifice.36 The Tannaim (the rabbis of the mishnaic period) made these definitions correspond to an eighteen-day cycle, allotting seven “days of niddah” for the menstrual flow and eleven “days of zivah,” when no flow was expected.37 Thus the “days of niddah” begin with...
the first flow of blood and end seven days later, irrespective of the actual length of the blood flow. After the end of this seven-day period, a woman would then immerse herself in a ritual bath. The “days of zivah” are counted for the following eleven days; all blood that flows during this time is considered abnormal. After the cessation of such a flow, a woman would immerse herself in a ritual bath. The Jerusalem Talmud records Rav Huna stating that “one who sees a drop [of blood] as small as mustard-seed waits and observes seven clean days on account of it.” Later, the Babylonian Talmud reported Rabbi Zeira’s ruling that the pious daughters of Israel self-imposed the command to wait seven clean days should they see a drop of blood the size of a mustard seed. This stricture came to eliminate the distinction between the zavah and the niddah, requiring all women to wait seven clean days after the end of any blood flow before ritual immersion. Thus Rabbi Zeira eliminated the levitical category of the niddah and deemed all menstruants technically zavot.

This understanding obligated Jewish husbands and wives to separate for at least twelve days, the five-to-seven days of actual flow and an additional seven “clean” days, allotting roughly fifteen days of the monthly cycle for marital relations.

The rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud upheld menstrual laws in order to observe the biblical proscription against illicit sexual relations. Thus during this twelve-to-fourteen-day period of separation, menstruants were restricted only in those aspects of their lives that immediately affected the male. According to BT Ketuvot, the menstruant was permitted to fulfill all her domestic responsibilities except filling her husband’s cup, making his bed, and washing his feet, three duties that might lead to intimacy between husband and wife. To ensure proper practice, rabbis undertook to discover the underlying reasons for the imposed separation, for in the absence of direct means of enforcing the laws of the niddah, which by their very nature were observed (or not) in the privacy of the bedroom, they had to fall back on the cogency of their interpretive powers. Rabbi Me’ir explained that a niddah was declared impure so that she might remain as beloved to her husband as on the day they married. The medieval commentator Rabbi Shlomo Yitshaqi (Rashi) adds that if a man has relations with his wife at will, she will begin to disgust him. For many rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud, the enforced seven-day separation protected against satiety and contempt. Palestinian Jews, by contrast, were more stringent in their observance of menstrual separation than Babylonian. In fact, Rabbi Zeira’s broader definition of menstrual impurity,
mentioned above, originates in a Palestinian source. Palestinian Jews restricted menstruants not only to deter illicit sexual relations but also to pay tribute to cultic practice.\footnote{47}

**THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE IMPURITY**

Leviticus lists four types of genital discharge that rendered one impure and consequently barred one from the Temple cult: abnormal male discharge (*zav*), normal male discharge (*baʿal qeri*), abnormal female discharge (*zavah*), and normal female discharge (menstrual blood, *niddah*).\footnote{48} The list is both symmetrical and balanced between male and female impurities: two discharges are specific to men and two to women; abnormal male discharge corresponds to abnormal female discharge; normal male discharge corresponds to normal female discharge. Milgrom notes that each impurity is described in the same fashion: the “impurity is defined, the consequences described and its purification prescribed.”\footnote{49} Both the language and the structure of the passage in Leviticus suggest equality between male and female issue. That both menstrual impurity and seminal pollution remain ritually relevant after the destruction of the Temple also suggests parity between male and female genital fluxes.

There is evidence, however, that the Tannaim excluded ejaculants from the sacred rather than menstruants.\footnote{50} According to the Mishnah and Tosefta, ejaculants and women who had sexual intercourse could not engage in sacred acts until they had purified themselves through ritual immersion. Men and women with a genital discharge, menstruants, and parturients, by contrast, were allowed to read the Torah, study holy texts, and recite benedictions even though they were “ritually” impure.\footnote{51} In the mishnaic period, seminal pollution alone raised a barrier to liturgical practice and Torah study.\footnote{52} Later, Babylonian and Palestinian Jews differed in their observance of the laws of *baʿal qeri*. Babylonian Jews did not immerse themselves after ejaculation, reasoning that they were already subject to corpse impurity and that they lived in an “impure land.” They submitted further that their impurity should not impinge upon prayer or Torah study because, according to Rabbi Judah ben Betayra, “the words of Torah are not subject to impurity.”\footnote{53} Palestinian Jews, by contrast, required ritual immersion after ejaculation of all those who wished to participate in the sacred.\footnote{54}
Later halakhists subscribed to the Babylonian tradition and did not require ejaculants to immerse themselves before observing religious rites. Jewish mystics, by contrast, believed that seminal pollution blocked mystical experience. Hekhalot literature, for example, prohibits contact with women in order to avoid any threat of seminal pollution. Medieval kabbalists enlarged these prohibitions, deeming onanites evil and teaching that spilled seed engenders demons. How then were male mystics able to assert that only they could achieve a level of purity sufficient to attain divine vision?

The answer lies in the essential difference between male and female impurity. The normal genital discharges of men and women can be compared, but they cannot be and were not equated. Normal male discharge can be controlled, and by controlling ejaculation, men gain mastery of their sexuality. Talmudic rabbis, in fact, defined masculinity in terms of self-restraint. Satlow explains that “to be a man” meant “to exercise self-control in the pursuit of the divine through the study of Torah or a life of the mind.” The tannaitic isolation of ba’alei qeri from the sacred reflects rabbinic ambivalence toward sexuality rather than any cultic nostalgia. According to PT Berakhot, requiring immersion after ejaculation keeps Israelites from behaving “like roosters who engage in sexual relations at all times.” Ejaculants were penalized in order to show that sexual activity was “incompatible with holy activity.” Menstruation, by contrast, is not libidinal and women cannot control their flow.

Length of ritual purification is another essential difference between male and female impurity. The ba’al qeri must bathe his body in water and wait only until the evening of his issue to become pure. Menstruating women are deemed impure for seven days in the Bible and for at least twelve days in the Talmud.

If biological difference and ritual purification were the only disparities between men and women before the law, women could have engaged in mystical pursuits during the half of each month when they were ritually pure. A third disparity precludes women altogether: the very definition of male and female impurity in Leviticus. Fonrobert has shown that male seminal pollution and the menstrual flow are parallel in every respect except one: a man becomes ritually impure when he has a discharge “from his body [mi-besaro (Lev. 15:2)], whereas a woman is ritually impure when she has a discharge “in her body” [bivsara (Lev. 15:19)]. In effect, male impurity is exterior, and female impurity is interior. Women are susceptible to impurity at all times and are therefore continually barred from mystical practice — a legal construction that
also accounts for the absence of post-menopausal women mystics. In fact, in the Middle Ages menopausal women were considered especially dangerous because they could never rid themselves of their impurity.62

The mystery of the laws of niddah was so deep that it could not be disclosed to the unworthy. One of the secrets of the menstruating woman is put into the mouth of the hero of the Zohar, Rabbi Shim‘on bar Yohai, who revealed this secret to his circle alone. His explanation is not recorded.63 I shall endeavor to disclose the significance of female impurity for Jewish spirituality in the following nine chapters.

Part 1 explores the importance of purity in mystical pursuits in early Jewish mysticism and German Pietism. In chapter 1, I describe how Hekhalot literature transposed the purity requirements of the Temple cult to the heavens and note that the ascetic requirements for Hekhalot mystical praxis emphasized seminal pollution over menstrual impurity — an understandable bias given the fact that the practitioners were male. The significance of menstrual impurity for early mysticism was only fully expressed in the Beraita d’Niddah and related traditions, the subject of chapter 2. In chapter 3, I trace these attitudes to medieval Europe and note a shift in emphasis. German Pietists broadened the command to avoid menstruants before engaging in mystical activity and adopted the strictures of the Beraita d’Niddah. I suggest that the Pietists’ heightened interest in menstruation was prompted by their esoteric theology.

The central section of the book focuses on medieval Spanish Kabbalah. Chapter 4 describes how medieval kabbalists superimposed the celestial Temple onto a sefirotic structure and in so doing made ritual and sexual purity essential for all adepts. These purity prerequisites substantially differed in degree from those in earlier mystical traditions because kabbalists had to struggle with impurity in a theurgic universe. In fact, the importance of menstrual impurity for mystical practice gave rise to the myth of the menstruating Shekhinah, the subject of chapter 5. Chapter 6 describes the role of the menstruating Shekhinah in kabbalistic theosophy and praxis. When pure, the Shekhinah promoted divine unity. When impure, she became a dangerous force of evil that had to be banned, literally niddah, from the divine realm. Chapter 7 demonstrates how kabbalistic understandings of menstruation directly affected the status of medieval Jewish women. Kabbalists appealed to natural philosophy and medieval medicine to justify their attitudes toward women.
Anathema to God and dangerous to man, medieval Jewish women were thus barred from “normative” mysticism.

Part 3 looks at the role of menstruation in medieval Muslim and Western Christian mysticism. Though medieval Muslims and some Christians maintained purity laws, menstruation was not a barrier for women in either religion during the high Middle Ages. Indeed, Christianity and Islam’s attitude toward menstruation highlights the different criteria for mystical success for each religion. Chapter 8 explores menstrual laws in Islam and argues that the quotidian nature of human impurity in Islam diminished the stigma of menstruation: purity of soul rather than purity of body is prerequisite for mystical success. Chapter 9 addresses the persistence of purity laws in the Latin West through the thirteenth century and demonstrates how the flowering of Christian women’s spirituality coincided with the diminishing interest in menstrual laws.
Early Jewish Mysticism
The theology that would become Kabbalah derived in part from the mystical experiences and ascetical practices that were preserved in the Hekhalot literature. Scholars vary widely in their dating of Hekhalot literature, some dating its origin as early as the second century CE, thereby situating the literature in the rabbinic period, and others extending its duration through the thirteenth century. These traditions likely originated in Palestine, then transmitted from there to Babylonia, Cairo, and Italy before many texts were eventually redacted in the twelfth through thirteenth centuries by the German Pietists.

Hekhalot literature, like much of subsequent Jewish mysticism, is informed by the Temple cult. The term Hekhal refers in temple architecture to the vestibule in front of the Holy of Holies; in the mystical tradition, this physical construct is abstracted to refer to the heavenly palaces through which the adept must pass to reach the throne of God. Those aspiring to achieve a mystical vision are often described as Merkavah mystics. The term Merkavah refers to Ezekiel’s vision of a mobile temple. Just as Ezekiel transformed the Holy of Holies into a mobile symbol of the connection to God to satisfy the spiritual needs of a people in exile, so too the Merkavah mystics moved the Temple to the heavens themselves, so that the mystic could become like a latter-day high priest and enter a celestial Holy of Holies. These mystics believed that they must actively pursue God, strengthening themselves for this task by adhering to ascetic prerequisites and undergoing moral and ritual purification.

Joseph Dan identified three types of merkavah mystical experience: (1) the heavenly ascent, (2) the adjuration of an angel to earth, and (3) contemplations on the measurements of God’s body (Shi’ur Qomah). The first two types are relevant here. For the heavenly ascent, the adept must first undergo
ascetic preparations, whereafter he may embark upon the dangerous journey to the divine realm. Inhospitable angels immediately attempt to bar his entry, but magical prayers and the powerful name of God aid his admittance to the heavenly palaces. If he is true to his task, he will eventually attain his goal: vision of the divine throne and participation in the angelic liturgy. For the second type of merkavah experience, the adjuration, the mystic uses magical incantations, similar to those found on Babylonian magic bowls and amulets. If the adjuration is successful, an angel known as the Prince of Torah (Sar Torah) will appear to divulge the secrets of Torah.

Access to this heavenly Temple and divine secrets, like access to the Jerusalem Temple, is, in the Hekhalot literature, restricted to the ritually pure. Seminal or menstrual pollution preclude the mystic from achieving his goal, thus the rationale for the observance of the laws of menstrual impurity and seminal pollution differs greatly from the talmudic. The rabbis of the Talmud were torn between the desire for marriage and children and the desire for Torah study. Many felt that sexual desire was inimical to divine pursuits and therefore prohibited ejaculants from performing sacred acts, such as reading the Torah and praying for the community, lest rabbis copulate “like roosters in a hen yard.” These prohibitions demonstrate the rabbis’ ambivalence toward sexuality and their seduction by Hellenistic and Christian asceticism, rather than cultic concerns. Indeed, the Talmud focuses on the sexual rather than the cultic aspect of menstrual isolation. Menstruants are prohibited only from performing domestic tasks that would promote intimacy between husband and wife. Hekhalot literature, by contrast, focuses on the cult, with many texts enlarging upon Temple cult rituals to create a celestial cult in a world without a terrestrial Temple. Physical purity therefore remains essential after the destruction of the physical Temple because human impurity disqualifies adepts from divine service and Torah knowledge.

In contrast to cultic ritual, however, the ascetic prerequisites of Hekhalot literature emphasize avoiding seminal pollution over menstrual impurity or menstruants. That is not to say that menstruation was marginalized or ignored. Rather, Hekhalot literature transvalues menstrual impurity and makes it the province of men. Indeed, some Hekhalot texts co-opt menstrual purificatory rituals and transform them into ascetic mystical techniques. Others privilege knowledge of menstrual laws as one of the goals of the mystical experience. Another text uses extra-rabbinic halakhic (legal) standards to transform menstrual impurity into a magical tool. This unique treatment of men-
strual impurity, which gives us insight into the culture and concerns of the authors of Hekhalot literature, highlights the perceived antagonism between the niddah and divine pursuits.

There is one noteworthy exception to this tendency to disassociate women from their bodily issue in Hekhalot literature. When an adept wishes to learn the name of God, he must avoid looking at menstruants. Because the knowledge of the name of God became one of the most essential aspects of medieval Jewish mysticism, this single ascetic regimen would outweigh others in its significance.

**Pursuing God through Purity**

The underlying assumption of Hekhalot literature is that impurity represents the antithesis of heavenly sanctity. The pure and impure realms cannot mix. A mystic who undertakes an ascent while impure would incur the wrath of angels; an adjuror would not succeed in calling down the Prince of Torah. Hekhalot literature, like the Qumran Scrolls, expands the cultic definition of purity to include both moral and ritual impurity. He who wishes to descend into the chariot (yored merkavah) must be “clean and free of idol worship, illicit sexual relations, murder, slander, perjury, conceit and groundless hatred and perform all the positive and negative commandments.” Similarly, one may use the formulae required to adjure an angel only if one approaches God in “awe, fear, purity, after immersion, in honesty, asceticism, humility, and fear of sin.”

The emphasis on the need for physical purity for divine vision marks a dramatic shift in the possibilities for a divine–human encounter in a post-Temple world. The Bible presents two types of divine–human interaction. The priestly writers and the Deuteronomist present the Temple in Jerusalem as God’s office on earth. Through elaborate preparatory rituals, the high priest may enter God’s office in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. An unqualified or ill-prepared high priest could kill himself and wreak havoc on his fellow Israelites. Classical prophecy is the other prominent form of divine–human encounter in the Hebrew Scriptures. In contrast to the activity of the high priest, the classical prophet is essentially passive. There are no prerequisites for classical prophecy. God chooses the prophet, and he must obey the call.

After the destruction of the Temple, these two means of divine interaction were erased. The Holy of Holies was destroyed, and the Second Temple never achieved the same cachet as the first. The rabbis suggested that the Shekhinah,
God’s indwelling, never rested upon the Second Temple,¹⁷ and they negated the possibility of prophecy, stating that prophecy ceased in the days of Haggai and Malachi.¹⁸

How then to achieve divine communion? Unlike the classical prophet Ezekiel, who could passively wait for the Merkavah to appear to him, these heroes actively pursue God, strengthening themselves for this task through ascetic prerequisites and moral and ritual purification.¹⁹ Merkavah mystics use purity as a magical tool to call God by combining the purificatory requirements of the high priesthood and the ecstatic experience of the prophets.²⁰

Indeed, according to one passage, divine communion is achieved not by “prophets and seers but by means of purity and cleanliness.”²¹ Like the tenets of sympathetic magic, mystical practitioners must be pure to approach a pure God,²² or they must be in a state of purity to use his pure name for magical purposes.²³ Both the Hekhalot mystic and the magician aspire to discover mysteries and to have their desires fulfilled: the Hekhalot mystic yearns for the secrets of Torah while the magician hopes to learn the ways of the demons in an attempt to control their actions.²⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the purity rituals in magical texts are strikingly similar to those found in Hekhalot literature.²⁵ For example, a magician who wants to make a request of an angel must undergo an elaborate three-week cleansing process, during which he must avoid certain foods, “may not approach” a niddah (menstruant), a corpse, a leper, or a zav (man with an abnormal discharge), and must guard himself from qeri (semen) and the emission of semen.²⁶ Note that the language employed evokes the biblical usage: the magician, like the male Israelite in Leviticus 18:19, must “not approach” a menstruous woman.

As these formulae make clear, both seminal and menstrual pollution hindered magical endeavors. Not only was purity prerequisite for divine pursuits, but menstrual impurity could be used to suspend a heavenly vision.

The association between purity and divine pursuits is not unique to Hekhalot literature and magical formulae, but appears as well in rabbinic material. For example, in the Beraita of Rabbi Pinḥas ben Yaʿir:

It is taught: “Be on your guard against anything untoward” (Deut. 23:10): A person should not have impure thoughts during the day, lest he encounter impurity at night. From here R. Pinḥas ben Yaʿir says: “Heedfulness leads to cleanliness, cleanliness leads to abstinence, abstinence leads to purity, purity leads to holiness, holiness leads to modesty, modesty leads
to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to saintliness, saintliness leads to the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit leads to the revivification of the dead.”

This ladder to spiritual success appears in the middle of a rabbinnic elaboration of the biblical purity requirements for military camps. God’s indwelling (Shekhinah) accompanied Israelite soldiers to battle and rested upon their camp. To maintain the high level of purity necessary for God’s indwelling, ejaculants were barred from the military camp. According to the beraita, purity from seminal pollution constitutes the first rung in the ladder toward spiritual success. Men must first be “heedful” to avoid impure thoughts that could lead to ejaculation. (The term “untoward” in Deut. 23:10 refers to impure and lustful thoughts [hirhurim] that would cause a soldier to ejaculate.) Success in this endeavor would lead first to cleanliness from sin and then to abstinence. Because sexual abstinence would free men of the possibility of seminal pollution in sexual intercourse, they could progress to the next level: purity. The state of purity would then help them acquire a level of holiness that would ultimately lead to the revivification of the dead. The difference between this rabbinnic text and the Hekhalot material is primarily one of explicitness in specifying that purity leads men to God.

The Ba’al Qeri as Niddah

Some rabbinic dicta forbid ejaculants to engage in earthly liturgy and Torah study; Hekhalot literature bars ejaculants from the divine Temple liturgy and Torah secrets. The rationale for the antagonism between ejaculants and the holy, however, varies. The rabbis barred only ejaculants from sacred acts because they believed that sexual activity was incompatible with holy activity; the ritual purity status of the ejaculant was not at issue since the Temple had been destroyed. Hekhalot mystics, by contrast, imposed the purity requirements of the Temple cult upon the heavenly realm and barred the ejaculant from mystical activity because he was ritually impure.

All of the possible rabbinnic definitions of ba’al qeri are found in Hekhalot literature. In the ascension report and adjuration of Rabbi Aqiva, for example, the unmarried adept is cautioned against becoming an onanist, while the married mystic is told to separate from his wife lest he become an ejaculant in sexual intercourse. Some texts refer to other forms of ejaculation; for example, if a mystic should “see qeri, even during the day,” in the midst of his
ascetic preparations, he must begin all of his efforts anew.\textsuperscript{35} The addition of the phrase “even during the day” indicates that the text refers to both nocturnal emissions and to conscious ejaculation.

The prescribed period of isolation from seminal pollution varies in the Hekhalot materials. Seclusion for three days or seven days is most common and clearly invokes biblical and mishnaic precedents. The need to separate from women for three days to prevent seminal pollution alludes to the imposed period of separation before the granting of Torah at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:15).\textsuperscript{36} Seven-day separations may refer either to the levitical purification period for the man with an abnormal genital issue (zav)\textsuperscript{37} or more likely to the high priest’s seven-day period of isolation before Yom Kippur.\textsuperscript{38} Just as the high priest separates from the community in order to purify himself before entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, the mystic, high priest of the heavens, purifies himself for seven days before entering the celestial hekhal.

\textit{The Mystic as Niddah}

Explanations for other time requirements are less obvious. Several texts call for a twelve-day period of fasting, prayer, and seclusion.\textsuperscript{39} For example, a practitioner who suspects that he may have become polluted by qeri while preparing to adjure the Sar Torah must remain in seclusion for twelve days. Why twelve? A close reading of the instructions provides the answer:

Whoever [wants to] be bound up with the Prince of Torah
let him wash his clothes and undergarments,
let him immerse in a strict bath because of the doubt of having had an
emission of pollution.
And let him enter and sit for twelve days in a room or in an upper chamber.
And let him neither leave nor eat nor drink except from evening to
evening.
In order that he might eat his bread with a clean (pure) hand, and drink
pure water, and not taste any type of vegetable.\textsuperscript{40}

The suspected ba‘al qeri is told to wash and immerse himself in a “strict bath,” which I assume refers to full immersion in a river or stream rather than to the more lenient option of washing with only nine qav of water.\textsuperscript{41} Yet the aspiring adjurator is not purified by immersion alone. The means of achieving complete purification of this exclusively male form of pollution are framed in
decidedly female terms. The ba’al qeri must first “sit” for twelve days, a period of isolation identical to that required of the niddah, who must separate from her husband for a minimum of twelve days — at least five days of actual flow and seven additional clean days. Thus, the impure adept becomes a niddah; he must separate from the divine just as menstruants must separate from their husbands.

The references to female biology continue in the description of the site of confinement. The adept must remain in a chamber (heder) or an upper chamber (aliyah). These words refer not only to rooms in a home but also to reproductive organs in a woman’s body. The rabbis often described female anatomy by the architectural terms ḥeder, prozdor (hallway), and aliyyah. According to the Mishnah, blood from the chamber is always impure, while blood from the hallway is of doubtful purity. Confining the mystic to a chamber is therefore a symbolic act: the niddah-like adept must reside in the metaphorical place of origin of impure blood.

The aspiring mystic longs to cross the boundaries of the terrestrial world in order to communicate with the divine. The anthropologist Van Gennep defined this moment of transition from one realm to the other as the liminal state — “a moment of suspension of normal rules and roles, a crossing of boundaries and violating of norms, that enables us to understand these norms.” In medieval Europe, male saints would often describe their liminal states, that is to say, their key moments of transition or conversion, in symbols that reverse societal structure. Caroline Bynum has shown that “chief among these images [of reversal] is woman — as fact and as symbol. For example, when Francis of Assisi renounces his father, he prays to Mary and claims, like her, to give birth to his first child — his first disciple. The adept in Hekhalot literature undergoes a similar symbolic transformation. In the midst of his metamorphosis from adept to mystic, he undergoes a symbolic reversal in which he becomes impure like a menstruant — an image underscored but his twelve-day confinement in the chamber or the upper chamber. Only then may he emerge purified and spiritually reborn.

Avoiding Women

That the initiate becomes like a menstruant does not suggest an underlying sympathy for women in Hekhalot literature. Indeed, Hekhalot literature’s use of female symbols not only reaffirms but intensifies rabbinic understandings.
A mystic can only achieve his quest by breaking free of the impure womblike chamber — that is, by completely separating from women. Some rituals require complete separation and demand that the initiate eschew women before adjurations or ascent;\textsuperscript{48} others simply prohibit looking at women.\textsuperscript{49} These prescriptions may refer either to women in general or to menstruants in particular. Given the great concern about seminal emissions in the ascetic rituals and the absence of any explicit mention of menstruants, it seems likely that the proscriptions belong to a general effort to prevent seminal pollution. Avoiding women obviates the possibility of sexual intercourse and prevents seminal pollution; not looking at women would prevent sexual arousal that could lead to nocturnal emissions or masturbation.\textsuperscript{50}

By contrast, many of the food restrictions standard to the mystic’s ascetic regimen directly reflect a concern for avoiding food prepared by menstruants. Before an ascent or adjuration, the mystic must fast during the day and eat specially prepared foods at night. He must abstain from vegetables, eat bread only with a pure hand, and drink only pure water. He must be just as vigilant about what goes into his body as he is about issue. While abstention from meat and vegetables reflects other concerns, the many restrictions on bread and water are directly related to purity.\textsuperscript{51} Mystics are told to eat bread made by their own hands and to drink water that they have poured.\textsuperscript{52}

This emphasis on food preparation reflects cultic purity concerns. Priests were expected to partake of “pure” food in a ritually pure state. They were given their cereal in pure vessels, and impure persons were barred from contact with their meals (Jud. 11:13).\textsuperscript{53} The Pharisees extended these requirements beyond the Temple Mount and ate only “pure” food in a ritually pure state. Palestinian rabbis maintained this custom after the destruction of the Second Temple, barring menstruating women from all manner of food preparation because their touch could pollute any food, drink, or utensil. Hekhalot mystics who saw themselves as latter-day high priests carried on these cultic purity concerns in their warnings not to eat bread made by women\textsuperscript{54} or drink water that they pour.\textsuperscript{55}

**RECOGNIZING MENSTRUAL IMPURITY IN HEKHALOT LITERATURE**

Hekhalot mystics not only wanted to avoid menstrual impurity but wanted to understand all of its nuances. Rabbis of the Talmud believed that they had the
ability to determine pure and impure bloods on the basis of color or smell: just as the high priest would differentiate between pure and impure skin lesions on the basis of color, his successor, the rabbi, “as an expert on purity and impurity [was] trained in the differentiation of colors.” Hekhalot mystics, as high priests of the heavens, wished to attain the ability to recognize different types of impure blood in order to help women determine their purity status. Indeed, one passage states that God is aware of the Hekhalot mystic’s desire for this ability.

The successful adept not only recognized impure bloods but was granted the ability to identify those who observe the laws of niddah:

The greatest thing of all is the fact
That he sees and recognizes all the deeds of men, even those that they do in the chamber of chambers, whether they are good or corrupt deeds

If a man steals, he knows [it] and recognizes him;
If one commits adultery, he knows [it] and recognizes him;
If one has murdered, he knows it and recognizes him;
If one is suspected of having intercourse with a menstruating woman, he [the adept] knows it and recognizes him.

Greatest [power] of all is the fact that all creatures before him are like silver before the smith, who perceives which silver has been refined, which is impure, and which is pure. He even sees into the family — how many mamzerim [bastards] there are in the family, how many sons were sired during menstruation.

As Schäfer has shown, the Hekhalot mystic as silversmith differentiating the pure from the impure is derived from the image of messiah in Malachi 3:23. The ability to recognize menstrual impurity facilitates a mystical experience, and is a mark of personal salvation.

HALAKHIC MAGIC?

In Hekhalot literature, menstrual impurity is not only a symbol, or divine secret, but a powerful force, inimical to the divine realm. This understanding of menstrual impurity is born out in one of the most famous episodes from Hekhalot Rabbati, the recall of Rabbi Nehunyah ben Haqanah from a heavenly vision. While in the midst of a mystical trance, Rabbi Nehunyah ben
Haqanah recounts his vision to his students. They are unable to understand his description of the gatekeepers to the sixth palace, and because they live in precarious times under Roman rule, they are afraid to wait for an explanation until their master emerges from his trance. They ask Rabbi Ishmael to recall Nehunyah from his vision to immediately clarify his account. As the heavenly journey is an intense experience fraught with peril, Rabbi Ishmael must find a way to call Nehunyah from his vision without endangering him. Because impurity is not suffered in the heavenly realm, he finds his means of recall in a menstruating woman.

Rabbi Ishmael enlists the aid of a woman whose purity status has been called into question on two counts. First, she is suspected of improper immersion in the ritual bath. (Immersion is valid only in the absence of all barriers between a woman’s body and the purifying water). Something precluded this woman’s full immersion, and she is therefore considered one who immersed herself “but whose immersion has not been successful.” She returns to the miqveh (ritual bath), successfully immerses herself, and should have become ritually pure. But Rabbi Ishmael and his followers doubt her purity status. They ask a servant to place a clean piece of white woolen cloth beside her. No contact with the cloth is suggested. According to normative rabbinic law, a menstruant can convey impurity by carrying or sitting on an object but not through mere physical proximity. Here, by contrast, it seems clear that the cloth, lying next to her, is understood to have contracted some measure of impurity.

The rabbis then explore the second reason her purity is suspect. A woman with fixed periods should conduct an internal examination with a clean white cloth upon the scheduled onset of her flow (veset). This does not refer to the actual commencement of the flow, only to the expected time of arrival. Because this woman did not conduct the initial examination, her purity status is uncertain. She must, therefore, describe the events surrounding her fixed period of flow to the company so they may determine her status. According to the majority opinion in the Talmud, if a woman with fixed periods fails to examine herself at the scheduled onset of her period, but does so subsequently, when the flow actually begins she will be considered ritually pure. Consequently, most of the rabbis in the company consider her pure. Only one dissenting voice supports the minority position in the Talmud. Because the terrestrial legal system is based on majority rule, the woman, as far as halakhic status is concerned, is deemed pure. The group (havurah), however, is not con-
cerned with earthly affairs but the divine realm, which, according to tradition, upholds minority opinions. Consequently, the havurah upholds the dissenting opinion and deems the woman ritually pure on earth, impure in relation to the heavens.66

Once declared impure from the mystical perspective, the woman is asked to touch the piece of cloth that lies beside her lightly with her middle finger so as not to convey leaning (midras) impurity.67 The cloth is then placed on a bough of myrtle that has been soaked in balsam.68 The group lays this treated cloth upon Nehunyah ben Haqanah's knees, exposing him to a measure of impurity discernible in the heavens alone. Ritually pure on earth but no longer sufficiently pure in the divine realm, he is immediately recalled from his vision.69

This text is significant to this study on two counts: for its insight into the function of menstrual impurity in early Jewish mysticism, and for the clues it offers into the character of the authors of Hekhalot literature.70 In the late-antique world, menstrual impurity was considered a powerful magical force in its own right.71 It is clear that menstrual impurity is here being used for magical praxis, and some scholars argue that this story illustrates the purely magical and extra-halakhic character of merkavah mystics.72 But the purity system is so central to Judaism that it seems imprudent to consider menstruation apart from its levitical significance in Jewish texts. The first part of this discussion is clearly informed by halakhah. Magic is not incompatible with either rabbinic Judaism or with Hekhalot literature; it inheres in both.73 This nexus of rabbinic Judaism, cultic purity concerns, halakhah, and magic has led several scholars to believe that the practitioners of Hekhalot mysticism were a group on the fringes of rabbinic society who were familiar with talmudic and midrashic literature.74 Rachel Elior more specifically identifies these non-rabbinic mystics as Zadokite priests influenced by the ascetic traditions at Qumran.75

Indeed, the role of menstrual impurity in Hekhalot literature in general strongly supports both of these understandings. Hekhalot texts emphasize seminal pollution over menstrual impurity as the principal barrier to sacred acts. In fact, it is striking that, given the myriad of ascetic prerequisites for mystical vision, there is only one explicit prohibition against menstruants in Hekhalot literature — and this involves seeing rather than touching. One could argue that avoiding menstruants could be subsumed under the restrictions against seeing or speaking with women. Yet given the specific nature of

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most of the prerequisites (e.g., not eating onions and garlic, not eating anything green), it is unlikely that the authors would have neglected details. Moreover, one cannot argue that, as men, the Hekhalot authors focused exclusively on male impurity. For cultic practice, men needed to avoid menstrual impurity as well; husbands had to know the purity status of their wives not only to avoid sexual relations but also to avoid contracting secondary forms of impurity. The authors of Hekhalot literature had no such concerns. The rabbinic tension between asceticism and family life is absent in Hekhalot literature. It is as if we are entering a world where wives do not exist — a world where it is possible to separate from society for forty days and nights without worrying about marital obligations; a world where it is possible to fast for twelve consecutive days including Shabbat; a world of ascetics on the fringe of rabbinic society, unconfined by marital obligations, who desire only the merkavah.

Such a separate life would necessarily give rise to purificatory rituals for baʿalei qeri and to exhortations to avoid women in general — menstruants per se would not need to be identified specifically. I have found only one example of a ritual that specifically refers to avoiding menstruants: before learning the mysterious name of God, an initiate may not gaze upon a zav, a zavah, a metsora, or a niddah. The concern is not touch: ostensibly the practitioner is already separated.

THE MYSTERIOUS NAME OF GOD AND THE MENSTRUANT

The power of the name of God is one of the central themes in many passages of Hekhalot literature. Knowledge of the divine name empowers the mystic to ascend to the heavens, to summon an angel, and to guard against forgetting Torah knowledge. Moreover, because God’s essence was identified with his name, contemplating his name became a way of knowing God. Therefore, though there is only one known direct proscription to avoid menstruants in Hekhalot literature, the fact that it appears amid the requirements to learn the names of God is significant. Menstrual impurity is so antagonistic to heavenly pursuits that merely seeing a menstruant would impede learning the most holy of secrets.

Merkavah mystics enlarged upon the cultic purity system in order to engage in the divine service of the heavens. In contrast to priestly law, however, Hek-
halot literature emphasized avoiding seminal pollution over avoiding menstrual impurity or niddot. Most references to menstrual impurity are completely detached from biological woman. It is the symbol, the knowledge, or the power of the impurity that is at issue. The only Hekhalot ritual that I have found that specifically refers to avoiding menstruants involves learning the divine name. This absence, however, has more to do with the identity of the Hekhalot mystics than with unconcern with menstrual impurity. The authors of Hekhalot literature were likely ascetics informed by priestly custom and rabbinic law who were not bound by family concerns and, consequently, were unfettered by family purity laws. When Hekhalot literature becomes absorbed into “mainstream” Judaism, the balance changes, and menstrual impurity surpasses seminal impurity as the major barrier to heavenly pursuits.
The Mysticism of the Beraita d’Niddah

The Beraita d’Niddah (BdN) is a collection of niddah laws and traditions traditionally dated to Geonic Palestine that isolates menstruants from ritually pure human beings and from all things sacred. Although we do not have a definitive text or known authors,¹ many traditions in the BdN emphasize the antagonism between menstruants and the sacred and therefore strongly suggest an enduring affinity with the Temple, rather than with the contemporaneous rabbinic house of study. Classical rabbinic texts do include, as we have seen, restrictions on marital intimacy during menstruation, but the restrictions of the BdN are very different in their emphasis and scope. Many assume that purity is the prerequisite for engagement with the divine in a post-Temple world and justify these assumptions by enlarging upon the dangers of the menstruant. Indeed, the BdN’s traditions are similar to the cultic conception of purity in contemporaneous Hekhalot literature. The two traditions feature common heroes, similar linguistic style, and magical practices. But while the Hekhalot practitioners emphasized seminal pollution, the BdN’s even stricter precautions focus on menstrual impurity.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN RABBINIC HALAKHAH AND THE PRECEPTS OF THE BERAITA D’NIDDAH

The authors of the BdN emulated the much earlier rabbinic style of the Tosefta of the mishnaic period, and like Hekhalot literature, many of the BdN’s laws are attributed to well-known talmudic scholars.² The similarities to normative rabbinic literature, however, are solely limited to style and attributions. Where the Talmud calls for the separation of menstruants from their husbands to preclude the possibility of illicit sexual relations, the BdN demands the complete isolation of menstruants from all pure human beings and from all things sacred.
Rabbinic law prohibits menstruants from performing only three acts: filling her husband’s cup, washing his feet, and making his bed — three domestic responsibilities that might lead to sexual intimacy. Menstruants are permitted to engage in all other sacred and domestic activities. They are obligated to separate hallah and light Sabbath candles and to recite the attendant blessings — two of three commandments specific to women and traditionally believed to ward off death during childbirth. They are permitted to pray and, according to one Tosefta, they are permitted to read from the Torah. There are only two passages in the entire Babylonian Talmud that suggest fear of menstruants, and these may reflect Zoroastrian influence. Sexual enticement, rather than impurity and danger, is the rationale for menstrual separation in the Talmud.

The traditions of the BdN, by contrast, assume that that menstruants are dangerous and that menstruants must be barred from the sancta. For example:

She who observes the laws of niddah neither cooks nor bakes for her husband. And she does not sift flour nor shake out the bed, nor draw water for him from an earthenware container. Why? Because she is impure and she pollutes by necessity. Rabbi Ḥanina said, “even the saliva that she spits out unto the mattress [pollutes her] husband and sons.” They (menstruating women) are forbidden entrance to the synagogue until they immerse themselves. She who has relations with her husband while a niddah will cause her sons to disinherit the Torah; and that is not all, for she will cause them to be afflicted with leprosy for one hundred generations.

A woman who is menstruating may not tend to the hallah nor may she light Sabbath candles. Why? Because she would be guilty and would make her household guilty.

Rabbi Levi said, “one must not set one’s eyes upon a menstruant.”

A menstruating woman ought not take out her dough or her baking, nor should she carry it to the oven, lest she pollute it and a learned scholar eat it and behold his mind gets mixed up and he forgets his Talmud.

A woman may not touch a dry utensil nor may she set one foot into a house that is filled with books nor a house that is prepared for prayer for she is impure and she pollutes by necessity.

She must not touch anything holy. She does not have permission to ascend to her husband’s bed, for there is nothing as holy as her husband’s bed.
may not enter a holy sanctuary. She does not have permission to enter houses of study or synagogues until she is purified. According to the BdN, a niddah must separate from her husband because she is polluted and dangerous. She has the power to cause scholars to forget their Torah — a great danger in an oral culture — and can inflict her progeny with leprosy — a living manifestation of corpse decomposition. Menstruants were not only perceived to be a potential threat to human beings but were also antinomic to the holy. They could neither separate the hallah nor light Sabbath candles, and they were denied entry to synagogues or to homes designated for prayer. They were likewise barred from houses of study and from homes merely filled with Hebrew books. The menstruant’s mere presence had the power to annul the priestly blessing and to confuse Torah scholars. She was therefore barred from reciting public and private prayers.

Rabbinic law requires all women to recite grace after meals and engage in prayer, and allows all impure persons to engage in silent benedictions. The BdN, by contrast, explicitly forbids menstruants to pray in public and in private because of her potential threat to God. Forbidding the impure to pray silently represents an unambiguous shift from rabbinic ideas that cannot be explained by the BdN’s equation of the synagogue with the Temple. Menstruants could conceivably be barred from the synagogue as Temple but not from prayer, a convention that developed independently from cultic practice. The BdN provides a rationale for the shift in the following.

Rabbi Yoḥannan said, “It is forbidden to inquire about a menstruant’s [literally, a sitting menstruant’s] welfare, lest she reflect and say ‘amen’ and blaspheme the name of God.” Rabbi Yodan said, “It is forbidden to pronounce a blessing in front of a sitting menstruant lest she think and say amen and blaspheme.”

This “law” seems puzzling at first glance. How could asking about someone’s welfare blaspheme the name of God? The answer lies in the interpretation of the polyvalent word shalom. In addition to its more common usages, the term may also mean the name of God, as in “the Lord is peace” (Judges 6:24). For this reason, BT Shabbat 10b forbids men to inquire about people’s welfare in bathhouses. One is not permitted to think about God in a bathhouse or in the toilet. There is, of course, an essential difference among these parallels. In the Jewish tradition, urine and excrement are considered unclean but
not ritually impure. The BdN, however, does not make a distinction in this case. One must not inquire about a menstruant’s welfare lest she blasphemy reflect upon God in her state of impurity.

The BdN does make a distinction between the actual menstrual flow and the prescribed week of separation after the flow ends (known as the white days). In the excerpt above, it would at first appear that Rabbi Yoḥanan and Rabbi Yodan repeat the same statement, but a significant detail is missing in the second instance. In the first, the menstruant is described as “sitting,” that is, actually bleeding. In the second, she is described merely as a menstruant, presumably in her seven clean days. Note the different effects on God: when bleeding, she blasphemes the divine name; when she is in the period of her seven clean days, she desecrates ha-maqom. This Hebrew term, often used to refer to God, may also literally mean “the place” and may therefore refer to his dwelling. The menstruant’s degree of impurity affects the degree of her blasphemy.

The polluted words of the menstruant are distinct from the pure words of God, whose “every utterance . . . is one of holiness and purity.” Because her very speech was considered impure, she could not utter the holy divine name. She was not only barred from reciting prayers but also from listening to those of others lest she meditate and say “amen,” a response tantamount to actually saying the blessing itself. The Talmud, by contrast, allows menstruants to pray at all times — seminal pollution alone raised a barrier to public prayer and Torah study. Whereas rabbinic niddah restrictions are meant to preclude the risk of illicit sexual relations, the BdN is driven by a perceived need to protect male worshippers, sacred sites, and God from menstrual impurity.

The Talmud categorizes the niddah as one of ten fathers of impurity. Of these, the rabbis deem corpse pollution the gravest form, “the Father of the fathers of impurity.” The Talmud associates corpse impurity, rather than menstrual impurity, with magical practices and impure spirits. In keeping with Leviticus, the rabbis forbade priests all contact with corpse impurity because this priestly prohibition extends beyond cultic boundaries. Kohanim (priests) continued to avoid corpse impurity after the destruction of the Temple, and even now, many descendants of priests will enter neither cemeteries nor homes containing corpses. Priests did not need to be as vigilant in avoiding menstrual impurity, according to rabbinic sources. For example, according to the ninth-century rabbinic Midrash Tanḥuma.
“Their ways are like menstrual impurity unto me.” Like menstrual impurity and not corpse impurity. If there is a corpse in a home a priest may not enter, but if a menstruant [is in a house], a high priest may enter the house. The high priest may enter the house with her, and sit with her on [the same] couch solely that she not be expelled.27

While priests must always avoid corpse impurity, in classical rabbinic texts like this one, they can approach menstruants because menstrual separation for cultic ritual was no longer necessary.

Contrary to rabbinic sources, the texts in the BdN establish a nexus between corpse impurity and menstrual impurity:

If a Kohen were to raise his hands [to recite the priestly blessing] when his mother is impure or his wife is impure or one of his daughters is impure, behold the prayers of Israel would become an abomination and he would cause himself to be lost from the world. Moreover, he would not exempt Israel from the fulfillment of their duty.28

A rationale for the severity and restrictiveness of the laws of the BdN may be found in the following:

Rabbi Yoḥannan said, “a man may not walk behind a menstruant and step upon the dirt (upon which she passed) which is impure. Just as she is impure, her dirt is impure and one may not benefit from the work of her hands.”

This statement is based on a talmudic idea that men should refrain from walking behind women to defray possible sexual excitement.29 Yet the BdN alters this focus, concentrating instead on danger of the menstruant. This shift is even more explicitly articulated in a textual variant that reads:

Rabbi Yoḥannan said, “a man is forbidden to walk behind a niddah and step upon her dust because just as she (or possibly he that walked over her ashes) is impure like a dead person, so too are the ashes upon which she treads impure . . . menstruants, parturients, those who have had miscarriages, and those who nurse, are thought to have corpse impurity, the ohel (overshadowing impurity) and sherets (creeping things). They cannot become purified until they have immersed themselves in a miqveh [ritual bath]. Priests are therefore not permitted to eat their food. We have made the laws more strict upon ourselves, and we do not eat food out of the same platter, nor food made by her hands.”30
In the Second Temple period, many sectarians maintained the priestly practice of refraining from food that had been touched by impure persons outside the Temple precincts; and the Jews of Palestine continued to eat “pure food” after the destruction of the Temple and excluded menstruants from food preparation. The BdN justifies their continued exclusion from food preparation by equating menstrual impurity with corpse pollution. Another BdN tradition also conflates the flux and corpse purificatory rituals. Leviticus requires sprinklings of water mixed with the ashes of a red heifer (*mei niddah*) to purify corpse impurity; Rabbi Higyaa, however, mourns the destruction of the Temple because priests can no longer purify zavim, zavot, and parturients “with sprinklings of water or with the red heifer.” Here the menstruant is given the same status and purificatory requirements as the father of the fathers of impurity, death itself.

The great link between death and menstruation may also provide the etiology of the BdN’s warning that sexual relations with a menstruating woman will result in leprous children. The association between sexual relations with menstruants and leprosy first appears in the Jewish tradition in Leviticus Rabbah, but is repeated many times in the printed version of the BdN. One pronouncement alts the focus significantly: “Come and see how harmful menstrual impurity is before the Holy One blessed be He. Anyone who does not guard himself from a menstruant will contract tsara’at.”

The phrase “come and see” is a midrashic idiom that announces sinful behavior. For example, Midrash Tanḥuma on Korah reads, “Come and see how harmful it is to sow the seeds of dissent: whenever anyone foments dissent, the Holy One blessed be He erases his memory.” Other midrashim use the “come and see” formula to demonstrate the evils of desecrating God’s name, gossiping, and dissension among judges. This BdN tradition uses a midrashic convention to illustrate the dangers of the menstruant. The pronouncement sets up a dichotomy between the menstruant — symbol of death — and the God of life. Any man who does not respect this distinction will be struck with tsara’at, the human manifestation of corpse decomposition.

The identification of corpse pollution with menstrual impurity had three major consequences for subsequent Jewish practice. First, spirits of impurity that had been associated with death in near-eastern and late-antique sources are transferred to the menstruant in the BdN. Second, it becomes impossible for latter-day priests to approach menstruants. And third, the menstruant as death becomes the opposite of the God of life.
The BdN’s antipathy towards menstruants suggests a priestly connection. Though Leviticus suppresses a common ancient near-eastern belief in the demonic possession of menstruants, an association between menstruation, death, and evil remained entrenched in the priestly imagination. Milgrom notes the association between menstruation and death in Leviticus: since “the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev. 17:11), the loss of menstrual blood may be understood as the death of a potential life. This nexus between menstruation and death may underlie the perceived need to separate menstruants from God in the Israelite Temple cult. Yahweh is the God of life and blood is the material means by which he vivifies. Menstruants represent death and must, therefore, remain separate from the sancta.

Priestly sources used the term niddah as a symbol of evil — a metaphor to describe total separation from the sacred. Lamentations explains that after the destruction, “Zion spreads out her hands, and there is none to comfort her: the Lord commanded against Jacob, adversaries round about him. Jerusalem is like a menstruous woman” (1:17). Verse 1:8 describes Jerusalem “like a niddah” because of her sins. In Babylonia, Ezekiel compared idolatry to menstruants, stating, “you will treat as impure the silver overlay of your images and the golden plating of your idols. You will cast them out like a menstruous woman” (7:19–20). And after return, Ezra, scribe and priest, described the land of Israel as a “land of niddah,” polluted by the menstrual deeds of the people of the land (9:11). The post-exilic priestly source Second Zechariah, dated to the fifth century BCE, most explicitly attests to the aversion between menstruation and the divine. Zechariah 13:1 explains that the spirit of impurity will only flow from the land at the eschaton, when “a fountain shall be open to the House of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem for hatta’at u-le-niddah. Despite the priestly aversion to near-eastern demonology, these biblical priestly sources reflect a perennial distaste for the menstruant.

Qumran sectarians, who claim priestly descent, similarly equated menstrual impurity with the unholy. The Qumran community describe themselves as Zadokites, the authentic heirs of the Solomonic priesthood, and they developed an alternative purity system based on their own maximalist interpretation of the purity laws of Leviticus. Fragment 4Q 274, on ritual purity and dated to the first century BCE, urges menstruants not to “mingle (with others) during her seven days so as not to contaminate the ca[m]ps of the
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sanct[ities of] Israel; also she is not to touch any woman with a blood flow lasting man[ys] days.” Some Qumran sources envisioned barring all women access to an impurity-free Jerusalem in the messianic age. The ideal Temple would extend well beyond Mount Moriah to the borders of the city of Jerusalem itself. Because God would dwell within this expanded area, only the ritually pure would be granted entry. The priests in the Temple Scroll bar menstruants and those with niddah-like uncleanness from the idealized Temple just as the biblical priests barred those with corpse impurity, scale disease, and genital discharges from the camp (Numbers 5:1–4).

Moreover, where priestly sources in the Bible had metaphorized menstrual impurity as sin, Qumran literature equates menstrual impurity with sinfulness. Because man is born of women, he is the “mystery of carnality and the source of menstruation” and he is bound to “human impurity.” Sins “are like menstruation in His (God’s) eyes.” The pure seek justice, possess pure thoughts, and “separate themselves from all manifestations of menstruation.” Purity/holiness and impurity thus became a means of self-definition and eventually became bound up with their dualistic mythology. Indeed, afflicting demons were often described as spirits of impurity. For example, the “Plea for Deliverance 19 (11QPsa),” entreats “Let not Satan rule over me, nor an impure spirit.” The War Scroll describes evil spirits as committing “works of menstrual impurity.” The Rule of the Community identifies the impure spirit with menstrual deeds and describes sinners “wallowing in a spirit of niddah.” Exorcism through prayer became a means of defense against these impure demons. In one liturgical text, the sage adjures the power of God to frighten and to terrify all “spirits of the angels of destruction, and the spirits of bastards . . . to prevent all polluted sin.” These spirits of bastards are significantly described as “impure as their menstruation.” Another liturgical text attests to the exorcism of “bastards, and the spirits of impurity” (mamzerim ve-ruḥot ha tumʿah). Thus impurity is reified into an ungodly source in Qumran literature.

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, late-antique Judaism was not limited to the rabbinic tradition. Pagan motifs in Galilean synagogues and priestly imagery in liturgical poetry attest to late-antique Jewry’s diverse spirituality. The BdN’s traditions emerge in this chaotic post-Temple period in which all Jews needed to forge new identities. The rabbis, for example, metaphorized Temple cult practice into Torah study and prayer, and devoted two-thirds of the Mishnah to legal explication of cultic laws. Hekhalot

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literature transferred Temple cult rituals to the heavens in an elaborate set of mystical and magical narratives. The BdN similarly focused on the enduring relevance of purity and the Temple cult for engagement with the divine, but its focus is primarily legal. Nevertheless, the BdN’s many discussion of priests and purity speak to its specific interests in the antinomy between menstrual impurity and all things sacred and suggest an enduring affinity with the Temple cult. Just as menstruants had been barred from the Temple Mount, they were now barred from all forms of Jewish spirituality in the post-Temple world. The Torah Scroll, Jewish books, and houses of study became new holies of holies. These sacred objects were a means of knowing God and, as such, a means of communing with God. Consequently, the BdN required its readers to obey purity rituals that had once been limited to priests.

THE BERAITA D’NIDDAH’S SIMILARITY TO HEKHALOT

The BdN’s priestly emphasis on purity and the sacred most closely corresponds to that found in Hekhalot literature. The need to separate the menstruant from the sacred as Temple is similar to the need to bar her, or those polluted by her, from a heavenly realm designated as the Holy of Holies. As we saw in chapter 1, merkavah mystics conceived of themselves as latter-day high priests whose physical purity was the essential prerequisite for ascent to the celestial throne or to adjure an angel to teach the secrets of Torah.62 Saul Lieberman was the first scholar to associate the strict purity laws of the BdN with the legal philosophy formulated in Hekhalot literature,63 and Michael Swartz and Rebecca Lesses have noted a connection between the BdN and the ascetic rituals required for Sar Torah adjurations.64 I believe that there is an even stronger connection. The BdN not only informs the ascetic rituals in some Hekhalot texts but also independently reflects a mystical consciousness. The authors of the traditions in the BdN, like the authors of Hekhalot literature, were trying to discover a viable spiritual solution to a Judaism without a Temple. The rabbis had their Talmud. But the authors of the BdN and Hekhalot materials were “ambivalent” toward rabbinic halakhah. They did not sublimate Temple cult symbols, but enlarged upon them, making the Temple and the Torah the essential aspects of religious life. Indeed, traditions in the BdN focus on priestly contact with menstruants, offer anecdotes about high priests, and endow Jewish ritual objects with sacred status. The BdN’s authors, like merkavah mystics, were likely a scholarly group with a strong
priestly base who were informed by rabbinic culture but not bound to it.\(^\text{65}\) Palestinian liturgical poets in the seventh century and later medieval mystics certainly assumed a connection between the two,\(^\text{66}\) for when Hekhalot and BdN traditions were transmitted to Europe, mystics employed the ascetic requirements of the BdN for the pursuit of merkavah.

The BdN and Hekhalot literature represent two faces of the same coin with respect to ritual purity. There is, however, one essential difference in their attitude toward impurity. Hekhalot literature assumes no demonic aspect to impurity. Impurity only affects man’s relationship with God. Physical pollutions disqualifies the adept from divine pursuits and can imperil the mystic while on a heavenly journey, but it poses no danger to other human beings. The BdN, by contrast, propounds that the menstruant is anathema to both God and man, and this is the understanding that is bequeathed to medieval Europe.

THE HEROES OF THE ḤAVURAH STORY IN THE BERAITA D’NIDDAH

Part One — Rabbi Ishmael

Many scholars have explained the magic and halakhic ethos of the ḥavurah story in Hekhalot Rabbati in light of the BdN. Yet there is an even greater overlap between these traditions. The heroes of the ḥavurah story, Rabbi Ishmael the high priest and Nehunyah ben Haqanah figure prominently in the BdN, and comparing these traditions will throw light on the many similarities between the literatures and their one essential difference.

Rabbi Ishmael, the member of the ḥavurah who conceives of the method of safely extracting Nehunyah ben Haqanah from ecstasy is often associated with female purity in rabbinic sources. Traditions of his birth are based on folk wisdom about influencing the fetus. Sexual position, state of mind, modesty, purity, and perceptions that entered the body by the eyes were all believed to be especially important for the conception of healthy and learned children.\(^\text{67}\) Observing the laws of purity contributed to that effort,\(^\text{68}\) but those who observed ritual requirements were not immune to danger. Women would guard their eyes upon their return from the miqveh, because anything they saw would affect the fetus they were going to create. For example, it was thought that should a woman see a dog, the child she conceived would resemble a
Alternatively, should a woman see a beautiful and learned man, she would conceive a handsome and wise son. The talmudic scholar Rabbi Yohanan would intentionally sit at the gates of the miqveh so that women leaving the ritual bath might see him and conceive children with both his knowledge and his good looks.

According to a BdN tradition, Rabbi Ishmael’s mother had the misfortune always to encounter unsightly objects upon her return from the ritual bath. Afraid to inflict harm on any child she might conceive, she apparently abstained from sexual relations. God pitied her and sent Metatron, “the heavenly angel par excellence” and hero of much of Hekhalot literature, to sit outside the miqveh so that she might gaze upon his face and conceive a son with his beauty and his merits. Consequently, she bore a son named Ishmael, who was both handsome and wise.

Metatron maintained an interest in young Ishmael long after preparing his conception. According to one account, Metatron held Ishmael on his lap during the ritual of circumcision (sandaq), thereby becoming his spiritual parent or godfather. As spiritual guide, Metatron not only facilitated Ishmael’s entrance into the covenant of Abraham but also taught him the divine name, the key to the supernal realm, which Ishmael would use before he ascended to the heavens or adjured an angel. Several versions conclude with an account of Ishmael’s adjuration of Hadraniel, Sar ha-Panim.

Rabbi Ishmael was often described as vigilantly separating himself from menstrual impurity. And he was associated with purity concerns not only in birth and life, but in death. Among the ten tannaitic martyrs executed by the Romans, Rabbi Ishmael was imprisoned with Rabbi Shim'on, who was troubled by their impending execution. Shim'on explained that although he did not fear death, he did not wish to be executed “like murderers and Sabbath breakers” (several texts include idol worshippers and sexual transgressors in this list). Rabbi Ishmael responded that they no doubt deserved their fate because there was certainly a time during which they were not free to answer a woman’s questions concerning her menstrual impurity.

Rabbi Ishmael’s spiritual success is directly related to his mother’s observance of niddah laws. The perceived causal relationship between proper observance of family purity and mystical vision is therefore the subject of several of the statements attributed to him in the BdN. For example, he claims that menstrual impurity is so damaging that exposure will lead men to hell and that the wise woman will discourage her husband’s approaches during her menstruation.

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menstrual flow in order to facilitate his entry into paradise. Yet the term paradise is vague. Does it mean mystical practice? May these virtuous men follow Ishmael’s example and enter the celestial realm while living, or must they wait until after death?

Rabbi Ishmael clears up this confusion in a subsequent statement, explaining that the secrets of Torah will be granted to men who observe the laws of niddah. These “secrets,” which include the ability to distinguish between the impure and the pure and to discern inner meanings, parallel the knowledge acquired by successful adjurants of the Sar Torah. This statement therefore introduces a preparatory ritual neglected in most Hekhalot techniques. According to the BdN, scriptural secrets, a veiled allusion to mystical knowledge, may only be achieved by strict isolation from the niddah. Such an antagonism between menstruants and the attainment of wisdom echoes a text in the Geonic Sefer ha-Miqṭṣoṭ, in which Rabbi Aqiva is said to have believed that he had attained glorious wisdom by three practices: he did not harbor sinful thoughts, he did not look upon priests while they were chanting the priestly blessing, and he did not speak with women while they were menstruating.

In Hekhalot literature, as noted by Michael Swartz, Rabbi Ishmael’s own “‘enlightenment’ not only consists of spiritual or intellectual insight, or encompassing wisdom; he has also been blessed by the angel with an exceptional memory.” Swartz has emphasized the role of memory in Hekhalot writings and has shown that “one of the Sar Torah’s most precious gifts to the practitioner is a spectacular memory.”

Forgetfulness was particularly debilitating in cultures that depended on memory rather than the written word. Here, too, Rabbi Ishmael’s scrupulousness about purity concerns may be part of what is seen to protect him, as the BdN emphasizes that menstrual impurity poses a threat not only to Torah knowledge but also to memory. Eating food polluted by a niddah is said to cause a scholar to forget his Torah.

Part Two — Ḥanina/ Nehunyah

A tradition in the BdN, also enlarges upon the bearing of the most prominent figure in the ḥavurah story, Nehunyah ben Haqanah. While out walking, Ḥanina, a probable reference to Nehunyah, encountered a woman and immediately hid his face. The woman drew back three cubits and asked the rabbi whether blood that resembles the fluid of garlic or onions renders women
impure. Ḥanina/Neḥunyah replied that she ought to spread dry mustard on the blood. If the fluid rises above the mustard she is a niddah; if not, she is pure.86

In keeping with the talents of Hekhalot mystics, Neḥunyah/Ḥaninah is able to discern people’s purity status by sight and smell.87 Realizing she was a menstruant, he immediately covers his eyes — thereby trying to follow the Hekhalot precept that one who wishes to learn the holy name of God should not look at a menstruant.88 Perceiving his discomfort, she immediately withdraws a significant distance but does not leave. She continues to question Ḥanina because she knows that successful Hekhalot mystics, like the rabbis, were endowed with the ability to “recognize bloods and to show menstruants what to do.”89 Because she was uncertain of her purity status, she was obliged to describe her discharge so that he might determine whether she was niddah.

The woman’s comparison of her flow to a household item or vaginal discharge to foodstuffs was common in rabbinic literature. To distinguish between the pure and impure, the Rabbis took pains to give precise and recognizable descriptions of the five colors of impure blood.90 They compared blood to common fluids, ranging from black ink to a diluted form of a wine grown in the Sharon Valley. It is interesting, however, that she compares her discharge to the liquid of onions and garlic in particular. Hekhalot mystics may have been forbidden to eat vegetables because of their strong scent.91 Presumably such strong smells would annoy angels, who could not suffer the stench of man.92 Garlic and onions are pungent, and menstrual blood may have been perceived as equally pungent. Indeed, according to BT Niddah 63b, onions stimulate the menstrual cycle.93 Moreover, certain rabbis in the Talmud were able to determine the purity status of blood through smell alone.94 Just as angels immediately discern the scent of man, Ḥanina/Neḥunyah perceives that the woman is niddah before she speaks. The association between the two in the passage suggests another rationale for heavenly travelers to avoid menstrual blood.

THE MENSTRUANT AND THE NAME OF GOD IN THE BERAITA D’NIDDAH

The story of Ḥanina/Neḥunyah demonstrates familiarity with Hekhalot mystical practices, as well. Mystical practitioners would adjure a Sar Torah or
ascend to heaven by means of one of the most potent magical tools known in antiquity — the divine name. Yet in addition to its ritual function, the name of God is also identified with God himself. According to the macroform Ma'aseh Merkavah,

He [is] his name
and his name is he [is]
“he [is]” in “he [is],”
and his name in his name.

Significantly, the sole reference to avoiding menstruants in Hekhalot literature occurs in the description of an ascetic technique to learn the holy name of God. In order to learn the divine name, the adept must “not look at the face of a menstruating woman, nor eat the bread, nor drink the water of women . . . He must not eat onions and garlic or vegetables.” That this regimen contains the three basic components of the Hanina/Nehunyah story — averting the face of menstruants and onions and garlic — suggests a direct connection between Hekhalot literature and the BdN.

The divine name is the mystical focus of the BdN. In chapter 3:2, “God” states that men may come closer to “my name” only through vigilant observance of menstrual laws and self-purification. While the phrase “closer to my name” may refer to apprehension of the divine name for mystical praxis, it more likely refers to divine vision. Elliot Wolfson has shown that in Hekhalot literature “the form of God is subsumed under the names of God, such that knowledge of the name replaces the vision of the glory as the goal of the mystic.” Hence, according to Wolfson, “to behold the King in his beauty — to gaze upon the enthroned form of God — is effectively to have a vision of the divine names.” Thus, in the BdN, one can draw close to the name of God, that is, achieve a mystical vision, only through self-purification and observance of menstrual laws.

An anonymous compiler of niddah laws underscores the importance of this idea in an exegesis of Leviticus 20:26, where he explains that God exhorts the faithful to observe menstrual laws in order to be “holy to me.”

“What is ‘to me’ to my name. Just as my name is holy so too must you be holy because I am holy.”

This text not only identifies God with his name in the context of separating from menstruants but also describes the need to separate from menstruants
as a form of *imitatio dei*. Man must separate from menstrual impurity and be holy, just as God must separate from menstrual impurity because he is holy.\textsuperscript{103}

The BdN’s emphasis on the antagonism between God’s name and menstrual impurity foreshadows an important development in Jewish mysticism that will have far-reaching implications for menstruants’ access to the sacred. The tetragrammaton was equated with God’s ontic nature; his place (*maqom*), with the Holy of Holies. This identification rationalizes the BdN’s need to sacralize all objects that contain the holy name. Holy books containing God’s name are like the Holy of Holies in a world without a Temple. They demand purity and menstruants must be barred.

The antagonism between menstrual impurity and divine pursuits suggested in Hekhalot literature is most fully expressed in BdN traditions. The BdN combines two distinct understandings of menstrual impurity: (1) the importance of purity for divine pursuits and (2) the notion that menstruants are possessed by an impure spirit.\textsuperscript{104} The importance of purity for divine pursuits is akin to the understandings of impurity in Hekhalot literature. Indeed, if we understand the authors of the Beraita as informed by Hekhalot literature, the ferocity of its laws become more comprehensible. Its authors are envisioning not only an earthly but a heavenly Temple. These latter-day high priests of the heavens must avoid niddot at all costs because their impurity rivals corpse impurity and will bar them from their ultimate goal — vision of the divine name.

The sole proscription against seeing menstruants in Hekhalot literature appears in an ascetic regimen for learning the divine name. The BdN enlarges upon this proscription and justifies it through reinterpretations of rabbinic law. Hence, like the authors of Hekhalot literature, the authors of the traditions of the BdN are likely a group informed by rabbinic halakhah and priestly traditions but not bound by the beit midrash. Later medieval mystics did not differentiate between the different literatures and incorporated both Hekhalot material and the BdN into normative Jewish tradition. In medieval Jewish mystical contemplation, for example, the four-wheeled merkavah retains its significance and becomes identified with contemplation of the tetragrammaton. Knowledge of the divine name is not only a magical means to attain a vision but is also itself the object of contemplation. Thus, the traditions of the BdN become prerequisite for achieving mystical vision, and the BdN became the document that legitimized Jewish women’s exclusion from mystical practice.
Menstruation and the Mystics of Ashkenaz

The emphasis on human purity for mystical pursuits characteristic of the originally Palestinian traditions recorded in Hekhalot literature and the Beraita d’Niddah (BdN) influenced Jewish exoteric and esoteric piety among the burgeoning Jewish communities of the Mediterranean basin. Jews, who moved farther north to pursue economic opportunities in the Frankish empires, retained their Temple nostalgia and described their communities in cultic terms. These Ashkenazic communities maintained purity laws often ignored by their brethren in the East. The mystics among them were particularly vigilant in the observance of sexual purity laws. The German Pietists or Ḥasidei Ashkenaz, a revivalist and mystical group in the Rhineland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were particularly vigilant in their observance of menstrual laws; indeed Ḥasidei Ashkenaz incorporated its non-rabbinic stricture into their halakhic treatises and mystical praxis. The stricture of their niddah practices were not only a sociological phenomenon; it also reflected a new development in their mystical theology. Against the backdrop of the traditions of the BdN, Ḥasidei Ashkenaz cultivated a bisexual conception of the Godhead, an innovation that would eventually influence theosophical Kabbalah. Once mystics conceive of an aspect of God as feminine, female biology can become significant in both the human and the divine realm.

THE BDN ON THE MEDITERRANEAN

We have precious little evidence for the history and theology of Jews in early medieval Europe. But the evidence that we do have strongly suggests that they were influenced by Palestinian Jewish culture and early Jewish mysticism. The ninth-century southern French bishop, Agobard of Lyon, describes
the beliefs of his Jewish neighbors in terms identical to those found in Shīʿur Qomah literature and Merkavah mysticism.\(^1\)

The eleventh-century *Scroll of Ahimaʿats (Megillat Ahimaʿats)*, an Italian family history embedded in a string of fabulous tales,\(^2\) describes Merkavah traditions as an integral part of elite Byzantine Jewish culture, and the narratives, though not historical, teach us significant aspects of early medieval mystical practice.\(^3\) Indeed, Ahimaʿats offers one of the earliest examples of the influence of the ethos of the BDN on European soil — an ethos that would directly influence Ḥasidei Ashkenaz.\(^4\) After a discussion of his illustrious ancestors Ammitai, Shefatiah, and Abdiel, Ahimaʿats describes the demise of his relative Barukh as follows:

Abdiel had a son whose name was Barukh, who was not as learned in the Torah as his fathers had been. In his home, Barukh kept Sefer ha-Merkavah (Book of the Chariot) which R. Shefatiah had used all his life. One day, as darkness fell on the eve of the Sabbath, [the day] on which God rested from all His work, there was no one to kindle the light before Sefer ha-Merkavah. A woman who was cursed, she was niddah, kindled the light before the Torah — may she be blotted from the book of life and kept out of the world to come. [Consequently] the wrath of God fell upon that family. Many died of plague; only a few survived. There was a Jew among them who was an expert; he recognized and understood the significance of the event. He seized the book, put it into a leaden case and [went to the sea] in order to cast it into the abyss. [As he stood near the shore] the water immediately receded a mile. The Jew then threw the case into the sea. The waters returned to their bounds, the evil decree was immediately annulled, and the plague ceased. But the memory of Barukh perished; his lamp was extinguished; he left no one to engage in Torah study.\(^5\)

The tale justifies the end of the line of Barukh — euphemistically named “blessed” in Hebrew — the undeserving offspring of a scholarly family, and the author’s notion that a menstruant’s approaching a holy book could bring about a catastrophe perpetuates an important theme found in early Jewish mysticism. Ahimaʿats’s ancestors were students of Jewish mysticism who “knew the secrets and uncovered the principles of Hokhma (Wisdom) and Binah (Understanding); they were enlightened by Sefer Yashar and saw the secrets of the divine chariot.”\(^6\) As adepts, they were certainly familiar with the importance of purity within the mystical and magical system. Ahimaʿats’s juxtapos-
tion of the menstruant and a Sefer ha-Merkavah is not accidental. Rather, it deliberately frames a family tragedy in the cultural terms of Hekhalot literature and the BdN.

The menstruant in the Scroll causes the plague by performing two acts: She kindles a light on the Sabbath eve and she approaches a work of merkavah mysticism. Aḥimaʿats does not describe the first act clearly. The niddah may either have kindled the Sabbath lamp or lit a type of eternal lamp (ner tamid) near a Sefer ha-Merkavah. If she lit Sabbath candles, one of three acts specifically required of women in rabbinic law, she transgressed a precept of the BdN. But Aḥimaʿats says nothing of Sabbath lights or of the recitation of a blessing. Further, according to the BdN, a niddah who kindles Sabbath lights incurs guilt and inflicts guilt upon her family, but the niddah of the Scroll unleashes a catastrophe. Her offense, it would seem, may have had more to do with the Sefer ha-Merkavah than with Sabbath lights. The Sefer ha-Merkavah is described as a holy book, meaning the taboo against menstruants in the presence of the divine that is prominent in the Hekhalot literature and in the BdN could apply here. Just as the slightest taint of menstrual impurity could interrupt a heavenly vision and cause bodily harm, so too the menstruant’s performance of a ritual act in the presence of a holy book could have the power to cause a plague.

The menstruant in the Scroll may have sinned by approaching the Sefer ha-Merkavah and lighting an eternal flame or some other type of lamp customarily lit before the Torah. The practice of the eternal flame began in talmudic times as a reminder of the continuously lit Temple menorah. Originally placed in the western wall of the synagogue, like the menorah, the ner tamid was soon moved to the front of the Torah ark. The faithful gradually expanded the custom and began to illuminate the Torah in all places as a sign of the “light” of the law. In the Scroll, Aḥimaʿats may have extended the practice of the ner tamid to the Sefer ha-Merkavah. Significantly, he uses the terms Torah and Sefer ha-Merkavah interchangeably here. In a culture in which esoteric lore and magic were highly valued, a Sefer ha-Merkavah may have been accorded the same honor as or even greater honor than the canonic Torah. Hai Gaon, for example, describes Hekhalot Zutarti as a mishnah. This elevation of the status of mystical texts appears in the Hekhalot literature itself in many references to books of mysteries as “torah” or “mishnah.”

Among medieval mystics, mystical books were thought to capture the divine essence. They could be considered as sacred as the Torah scroll because
they contain divine names often identified with God’s ontic nature and describe divine theophanies to be reexperienced by the adept. As such, they function as the Holy of Holies in a world without a Temple, becoming the locus of divine sanctity and providing the hope of divine communion. Ritual purity in their presence is essential. In *Hekhalot Zutarti*, Suria, the angel of the countenance (ṣar ha-panim) taught Rabbi Ishmael, “If one is careful because of this book and purifies himself, angels, assemblies of serafim, stars and constellations, and the throne of glory will all love him. And the righteous and upright and the fathers of the world will pray for his life and bequeath the garden of Eden to him.” A niddah who approaches a Sefer ha-Merkavah is neither “careful” nor “purified.” The BdN forbids a menstruating woman even to set foot into a house that is filled with books that contain the divine name. The menstruant in the *Scroll* would therefore have violated the spirit of the Hekhalot adjuration and the laws of the BdN when she kindled a lamp before a Sefer ha-Merkavah. According to the BdN and Hekhalot mysticism, a menstruating woman was not only forbidden to light Sabbath candles, she was also barred from the sancta. In a system where purity is the key to the divine realm and pollution a barrier, a menstruant’s performance of a ritual act in the presence of a Sefer ha-Merkavah would bring impurity into the proximity of a holy book.

Ahima’ats’s description of the epidemic and its cure reveals the terms in which menstrual pollution was understood in southern Italy. The wise man cures the plague by placing the Sefer ha-Merkavah into a lead casing and throwing it into a body of fresh water. This act strikingly echoes another story in the *Scroll*, in which a demon is exorcised with a very similar procedure. In that story, Basil I asked Ahima’ats’s ancestor Rabbi Shefatiah, the first owner of the Sefer ha-Merkavah, to cure his daughter who was possessed. Rabbi Shefatiah took the princess to a pure, secluded place. He then invoked the divine name, and the demon “immediately came forth and tried to escape but he [Shefatiah] caught it and put it into a leaden chest. Shefatiah covered the chest on all sides and sealed it with the name of his Maker. He then dropped it into the sea, and let it sink into the mighty waters.”

Illness and physical pollution were commonly attributed to possession by evil and impure spirits in the Middle Ages, and exorcists attempted to heal the sick by freeing their bodies of malevolent and impure forces. The BdN similarly suggests a belief in the possession of menstruants by spirits of impurity. We may therefore infer that the niddah in the *Scroll*, like menstruants in
the BdN, was considered possessed by a spirit of impurity, and this polluted the Sefer ha-Merkavah. Exorcism was the only means to cast out that spirit and to stop the plague the spirit had unleashed. Following the exorcism ritual of Rabbi Shefatiah, the “expert” placed the polluted Sefer ha-Merkavah into a lead casing, considered impermeable to demons, and in a frontal attack upon evil spirits, threw it into a body of fresh water, a purificatory agent for man and a means of neutralizing magical states. The water receded for almost a mile, and the plague was stayed.

The menstruant in Megillat Aḥima’ats’s tale combines the cultic purity concerns of Hekhalot literature with the need to separate menstruants from the sancta that is characteristic of the BdN. But the equation of the Sefer ha-Merkavah with the Torah scroll, indeed, by analogy with the Holy of Holies in the Temple cult, brings the need to separate menstruants from the sacred in the realm of the everyday. And more importantly for this study, the tale shows rabbinic Jews and mystics believing as early as 1054 that the failure to separate menstruants from the sancta had dangerous consequences.

THE TEMPLE IN ASHKENAZ

When some Italian Jews left Italy for Northern Europe in the early Middle Ages, they disseminated their cultic focus and mystical beliefs. Ashkenazic Jews, like their forebears in Palestine, harbored a “cultic nostalgia.” They considered their community holy and associated the synagogue with the Temple. It is therefore not surprising that sexual purity and worship are of primary concern in several of the halakhic works compiled by the students of the great talmudic and biblical commentator, Rabbi Shlomo Yitsḥaqi (Rashi) after his death in 1104. For example, although Ashkenazi legal compendia are famous for their disorganization, Sefer ha-‘Orah, begins with the laws of seminal emissions, and the contemporaneous Sefer ha-Pardes begins with menstrual laws. These and other collections of laws from the school of Rashi record that many niddot would neither enter synagogues nor touch the Torah. Though the anonymous authors admit that women need not act in this way since the synagogue is not the same as the Holy Temple, they nonetheless laud the women’s piety, stating “[the synagogue] is a place of purity, and they, therefore, act properly.” In fact, one manuscript fragment of the Sefer ha-Pardes admires women who would not even look at the Torah scroll while a niddah. Although these twelfth-century Ashkenazi sources clearly state that

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there is no halakhic basis for this practice, separation from the sacred is nonetheless described as a laudable expression of women’s piety.26

Contemporaneous Sephardi communities, by contrast, did not accept the isolation of menstruants from the sancta.27 In fact, Nitronai Gaon believed that menstruants who refrain from prayer contradict talmudic law because according to BT Bekhorot 27a, menstruants must separate the ḥallah — an act that requires a blessing. Nitronai concludes that though a menstruant is forbidden to perform certain household functions, she is not exempt from her duties to God.28 Moreover, the Geonim of Babylonia under the influence of the dominant Muslim culture imposed short-lived additional regulations separating husbands and their menstruating wives, such as barring menstruants from food preparation and from family meals. They do not restrict menstruants’ spiritual opportunities — an omission that is particularly striking because Islamic menstruants not only refrained from certain domestic duties but were barred from mosques and ritual prayer.29 The eleventh-century North African halakhic codifier Isaac Alfasi explicitly states that a niddah must pray.30 Maimonides does not even mention the practice of excluding menstruants from the sancta in his Mishneh Torah, and he explicitly condemns the practice of isolating menstruants in his Guide of the Perplexed.31

The contrast between medieval Ashkenazim and Sephardim regarding the isolation of menstruants from the sancta is noteworthy. On the whole, Ashkenazi women enjoyed greater freedom than their Sephardi sisters. Moreover, Sephardi Jews were familiar with the purity rituals ubiquitous in Islamic culture and must have known that menstruating Muslim women were barred from mosques and from ritual prayer.32 Why then, did Sephardi Jews permit menstruants to engage in sacred acts, while Ashkenazi Jews, living in Christian society where menstrual laws had lost much of their significance, isolate menstruants from the holy?

The answer lies partly in the Ashkenazi focus on the Temple cult, a legacy of their Palestinian origins, but the divergence in menstrual customs between Ashkenaz and Sepharad must also be understood within the context of the Jewish mystical tradition. As noted above, the founders of the Jewish communities in Ashkenaz inherited Hekhalot and BdN mystical traditions from their Italian forebears that, together with the importance of purity for divine pursuits, became an ingrained part of Ashkenazic culture.33 Because custom in Ashkenaz was often given the force of law, even halakhists who were not necessarily mystics lauded menstruants who separated themselves from the
Menstruation and the Mystics of Ashkenaz

Menstruation and the Mysticism of Hasidei Ashkenaz

The spirit of the BdN is clearly expressed in the writings of the German Pietists, direct descendants of the Qalnimides, a prominent family of Italian Jewish scholars that migrated to the Rhineland in the early Middle Ages. Though the German Pietists thrived in the Rhineland for a relatively short period, their influence on Jewish mysticism extended far beyond the span of their active period. Not only did their esoteric theology (torat ha-sod) profoundly influence the development of Spanish Kabbalah, but their penitential practices indirectly influence Jewish piety to this day.

The German Pietists were influenced by their Italian ancestors and acknowledged the debt in their foundation legend:

They received the esoteric traditions about the arrangement of the prayers as well as other esoteric traditions, rabbi from rabbi, all the way back to Abu Aaron, the son of R. Samuel the Prince [ha-nasi], who left Babylonia because of a certain incident and he was therefore required to travel all over the world [as a penance]. He came to the land of Lombardy, to a certain city called Lucca. He there found our Rabbi Moses who composed the liturgical poem “emat nora otekha,” and he transmitted all of his esoteric traditions. This is R. Moses bar Qalnimos, son of Meshullam b. R. Qalnimos b. R. Judah. [Now R. Moses] was the first who emigrated from

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Lombardy, he and his sons, R. Qalonimos and R. Yequtiel, and his relative R. Itiel, as well as the rest of the people who counted. All of them were taken from Lombardy by King Charles who resettled them in Mainz. There they grew to prodigious numbers until 1096 when the Lord visited His wrath upon the holy communities. Then were we all destroyed, utterly destroyed, except for a few of our relatives who survived including R. Qalonimos the Elder. He transmitted [the esoteric traditions] — as we have written — to Rabbi Eleazar Ḥazan of Speyer. R. Eleazar Ḥazan transmitted them to R. Samuel the Pietist and R. Samuel the Pietist transmitted them to R. Judah the Pietist. And from him did I, the insignificant one [ḥaqatan], receive the esoteric traditions about the prayers as well as the other traditions.42

The antagonism between menstruants and the sacred expressed in the Scroll of Ahimāʿats was one of these esoteric traditions.

In fact, Hasidei Ashkenaz borrowed the motif of the niddah from the Scroll to explain Judah the Pietist’s move from Speyer to Regensburg in the twelfth century. Asher ben Yeḥiel, or another student of the German Tosafist, Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg (1215–1293),43 records the Pietist tradition as follows:

Rabenu Samuel the Pietist, Holy One, and Prophet, who begat Rabenu Abraham of Speyer and Rabenu Judah the Pietist of Speyer who was exiled from the land of his birth to the district of Regensburg on account of a certain incident. His wife touched his case. He had warned her: “Do not come near the case when you are not pure.” She forgot and touched it. The case contained holy mysteries written on notebooks.44

Aware of both the menstruant’s power and the need for purity in the vicinity of sacred books, R. Judah cautioned his wife not to approach the box in which he had placed his holy book of mysteries while she was a niddah. She did not heed his warning, and her indiscretion is described as the cause of the rabbi’s move. Once again we find that a menstruant’s proximity to a mystical work brings about a disaster.45

Historians have suggested both positive and negative motivations for Judah the Pietist’s relocation from his ancestral homeland, Speyer, to Regensburg. He may have been motivated by a “lack of popularity in Speyer,”46 by a desire
to establish schools in nearby Poland, or by a combination of the two. He may have also pursued economic opportunity in Regensburg, which was then a growing city with many commercial opportunities that attracted many Jews, including some prominent Tosafists. But in the tradition that Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg’s student records here, the niddah motif was not an arbitrary borrowing. Rather it indicates the continuing prominence of concerns with menstrual purity among the Hasidei Ashkenaz.

THE NIDDAH IN THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY OF HASIDEI ASHKENAZ

The German Pietists were not only heirs of merkavah traditions but also largely responsible for their preservation. They understood the importance of purity for mystical pursuits in the early tradition and adopted these notions into their own practices, but with the major difference that they focus on menstruation rather than ejaculation.

Thus, although Hekhalot traditions formed a basis for the esoteric theology of Hasidei Ashkenaz, their purity practices were largely influenced by the BdN. Hasidei Ashkenaz are, significantly, the first group in Europe to quote from the BdN. They incorporate its strictures into their everyday practices and give them a prominent place in their penitential literature.

Some scholars might argue that the Pietists’ use of the BdN reflects their general ambivalence toward women, an ambivalence that Judith Baskin suggests may have been influenced by surrounding Christian culture. Monasticism may have seemed very attractive to some Pietists who wanted to escape from the opposite sex, but celibacy was not an option for Jewish men, who had to fulfill the obligations of marriage. Customs advocating separation from women and the intensification of menstrual laws may have been a means of leading a relatively “celibate” life within the constraints of Jewish law. The Pietist would sublimate his feelings for his wife to intensify his love of God. Yet this “erotic theology” was dictated not only by the Christian cultural context but also by Pietist theology. Both the purity requirements necessary for divine vision and the Pietists’ esoteric theology caused them to emphasize the antagonism between menstruation and mysticism; they fused the practices of Hekhalot traditions with those of the BdN to promote a more sweeping separation of the menstruant from the holy.
PURITY REQUIREMENTS AMONG HASIDEI ASHKENAZ

The German Pietists drew from Hekhalot beliefs and practices and imbued their mystical theology with merkavah symbols. Physical purity was essential for a mystical vision of the heavenly Temple, but Pietists needed to adapt the purity requirements of merkavah mysticism. Some Hekhalot preparations required separating from society for up to forty days. Long periods of separation may not have posed a problem for non-rabbinic Hekhalot mystics not bound by halakhic conventions, but such techniques would have proved very difficult for a rabbi whose family obligations included satisfying his wife sexually. The German Pietists’ position within rabbinic Judaism precluded the possibility of such extended isolation. Unlike Hekhalot practitioners, they could not completely separate from women to protect themselves against all possibility of seminal or menstrual pollution. Instead, they strove to attain this kind of isolation within society, and as a result Pietists hoping to attain a divine vision were vigilant observers of all purity laws.

Pietists, somewhat like talmudic rabbis, believed that human sexuality was antithetical to heavenly pursuits. For example, Eleazar of Worms states in *Sefer ha-Shem* that “the unique name is not revealed except to one who has nullified the lust for women.” To avoid sexual arousal, Pietists were advised to refrain from looking at women in the belief that men who observed this precaution would be granted a vision of the divine glory. Although a Pietist could ignore women in general, he could not avoid his own wife, with whom he had both sexual and procreative responsibilities. This social and cultural reality may be reflected in the Ashkenazi definition of ba’al qeri. While the term continued to refer to men who had either masturbated or had a nocturnal emission, Ashkenazi halakhists no longer applied the term to those who experienced ejaculation in conjugal intercourse. A mystic could fulfill his conjugal obligations and participate in mystical activity. Non-procreative emission of semen, by contrast, inhibited spiritual success. According to Eleazar’s halakhic work, *Sefer ha-Roqeah*, a ba’al qeri (narrowly defined) would need to immerse himself before prayer — one of the most important means of attaining mystical vision of the celestial merkavah.

But marital life also posed the risk of menstrual pollution. Thus, for a Pietist to maintain the level of holiness needed for his mystical pursuits, purificatory rituals were bound to include avoidance of menstruants. Pietists therefore adapted ideas nascent in Hekhalot literature and made explicit in the
BdN. For example, as noted, the sole reference to avoiding menstruants in the Hekhalot literature occurs in connection with learning the mysterious name of God.64 The BdN elaborates upon this motif, and Eleazar of Worms adopted it into his mystical praxis. Contemplation of the divine name became one of the most essential aspects of Pietist esoteric theology, since the image of the name was tantamount to an image of the divine chariot. Separation from menstruating women became a prerequisite for attaining this vision.65 Moreover, the Sefer ha-Malbush urges mystics who wish to learn the secret of the divine name to avoid even eating food prepared by a niddah.66 Eleazar rationalizes such separation by associating menstruants with murder, explaining that women experience a monthly blood flow because Eve shed the blood of Adam, and he identifies the five types of impure menstrual blood in women with the fivefold appearance of the phrase “shedding blood” in Ezek. 22:1–10. Those who engage in sexual relations with niddot would similarly be associated with murder and are therefore banned from any experience of the divine.67 In adopting the strictures of the BdN, the Pietists maintained the greatest possible degree of separation within marriage.

The Pietists’ focus on menstrual laws is apparent in their penitential literature.68 Most Pietist private penitentials have a uniform tripartite structure.59 Penances begin with sexual matters, then proceed to murder, apostasy, oaths, and slander, and finally address the desecration of God’s name and the violation of negative precepts.70 The general outline of the first section usually corresponds to the following pattern:

1. Sexual intercourse with an unmarried ritually impure woman
2. Sex with an engaged or married woman
3. Sex with a Christian woman or an animal
4. Kissing and fondling without sexual intercourse
5. Sex with one’s ritually impure wife
6. Stealing
7. Inflicting monetary, physical, or verbal harm

Menstrual transgressions constitute two of the seven listed violations. Sex with a menstrual, the first sexual transgression for which one must perform penance, is clearly of primary concern to the Pietists.71 The fourth transgression, sex with one’s wife who is a niddah, comprises three different possible prohibitions: having sex with one’s wife who is niddah, erotic physical contact, and kissing or hugging one’s wife prior to her statutory immersion.72
The penitentials proclaim that any Pietist who has physical contact with his menstruating wife must undergo a forty-day expiatory exercise that includes lashings; abstention from meat, hot foods, and wine; daily confessions; and ablutions in cold water. Though a man is permitted to be alone with his menstruating wife, he may not discuss lascivious matters, engage in any physical acts of affection, or eat or drink with her. These restrictions are lifted as soon as the woman has immersed herself in the miqveh.

The sins that require penance, in this and similar texts, are, as Ivan Marcus has noted, the same as those listed in Hekhalot Rabbati that prevent “the mystic from being in a state of necessary purity for achieving a mystical vision.” Strikingly absent from most Pietistic penitentials, however, is any mention of seminal pollution, which in Hekhalot texts had been so strongly emphasized over menstrual impurity and which would later cause so much anxiety in Kabbalah. The stress on menstrual laws in the first section of the penitentials highlights the Pietists’ reformulation of the merkavah prerequisites in light of their theology and cultural needs.

The new concern about menstrual laws is most explicit in Pietist halakhah. For example, in Sefer Hasidim, Judah the Pietist explains that infants die when their mothers do not observe niddah laws. He warns men to avoid looking at menstruants and to reject any food they might offer them. Judah’s disciple, R. Eleazar of Worms, includes the first Hasidei Ashkenaz quotation from the BdN in his Sefer ha-Roqueah:

I have found written in the work, Ma’aseh Geonim: Said Rabbi Hiyya in the name of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa: you will find that when the matriarchs observed menstrual laws they immediately went into labor. Rabbi Yoḥannan said: the niddah is dangerous; all women who do not observe the laws of niddah cause their sons to be afflicted with boils. Rabbi Ishmael: the menstruant is dangerous, she causes her husband to inherit hell . . . A woman who is careful about her status as a niddah may not cook for her husband, nor bake, nor sift flour, nor lay out the bedding, nor pour water from any vessel to an earthenware vessel, for she is impure and renders others impure. Moreover, she is forbidden [emphasis mine] to enter the synagogue until she immerses herself in water.

Where Rashi and his students cite the practice of menstruants avoiding the synagogue as a laudable custom, Eleazar makes it a law. Moreover, where the school of Rashi believed that purity is not the rationale for the practice
because “the synagogue is not the same as the Holy Temple,” for Eleazar, to a certain extent, it is. Just as menstruants were barred from the Temple in Jerusalem, they are barred from its contemporary incarnation, the synagogue. Shaye Cohen offered a similar explanation for the isolation of menstruants and ba’alei qeri from the sacred in the BdN. But as we have seen, the equation of synagogue with Temple in the BdN also has its foundation in early Jewish mystical practice, and it is this heritage that influences Eleazar’s writing. Rather than attribute the laws to the BdN, however, Eleazar cites them in the name of the Ma’aseh Geonim, a collection of laws based upon the late-eleventh-century Ashkenazi compendium Sefer Ma’aseh ha-Makhiri. Yet the niddah passages are absent in the printed version of Ma’aseh Geonim, and later, an anonymous halakhist misattributes them to Sa’adia Gaon.

**SEXUALITY IN PIETISTIC THEOLOGY**

The introduction of the BdN into the precincts of normative halakhah profoundly influenced later Ashkenazi piety. Yet Eleazar’s own interest in the BdN was likely a reflection of both mystical praxis and the role of sexuality in his esoteric theology. Because contemplation of the supernal merkavah continued to be a central aspect of Pietist theology, purity remained essential for mystical vision. Pietism however, adds a sexual dimension to merkavah theology, and this emphasis elevates the import of the Beraita.

Consider his reformulation of M Hagigah 2:1 in his Sefer ha-Shem. The Mishnah states that one should not discuss the laws of sexual relations in the presence of three, the account of creation in the presence of two, and the account of the chariot in the presence of one, unless he is wise and understands his knowledge. The limitations imposed upon these three disciplines reflect both their difficulty and their importance. Generally, kabbalists and historians of Jewish mysticism have identified the account of creation as the mysteries of creation represented in part by Sefer Yetzirah and the account of the chariot as the vision of the supernal throne of God. The mystical significance of the arayot (forbidden sexual relations) is more difficult to ascertain. The arayot are clearly described as secrets in the Talmud. Rashi asserts that they were called secrets because several prohibitions in degrees are not expressly mentioned in the Torah. But once they appeared in this list, it is likely that mystics would have associated the secrets of sexual relations with the two other forbidden subjects of study described in the Mishnah. Hence the arayot, like
the account of creation and the merkavah, would be a means of understanding the nature of God and the world. The order and limitations imposed in M Hagigah would compose a hierarchy of knowledge: the secrets of forbidden sexual relations are the first rung of the ladder that ascends toward perception and communion with God, the second is the account of God’s creation, and the third the vision of God himself as represented by the merkavah.92

The mysteries of the arayot represent the first step toward greater understanding of the divinity. It is significant that in his Sefer ha-Shem, Eleazar of Worms reformulates the Mishnah in the following way: “The account of the creation may not be expounded on by three, nor the laws pertaining to forbidden sexual relations, and the secret of the name is not revealed to three but to only one or two.”93 Wolfson has observed that Eleazar exchanged the account of the chariot mentioned in the Mishnah for the secret of the name. Thus, the divine name becomes equivalent to the secret of the merkavah.94 It is also noteworthy that Eleazar rearranges the hierarchy of the Mishnah, placing the account of the chariot before the laws of forbidden sexual relations. As the order of the items still seems to imply ascending significance, Eleazar increases the importance of secrets of sexual relations by placing them after the secrets of the chariot.

Eleazar’s prioritizing of the arayot as one of the chief mysteries points to his elevation of sexuality in theology. The conception of the divine that would make menstruation a subject of theological importance for the Pietists, as well as for later generations of mystics, appears in the super-esoteric doctrine known as the Sod ha-’Egoz, or the Secret of the Nut. This doctrine was the first to explicitly describe male and female aspects of the Godhead, opening the door for the idea that menstrual impurity is not merely a fact of human biology but is also an element in the divine realm. The roots of these beliefs may go back to Hekhalot literature,95 or to another early antecedent, but Ḥasidei Ashkenaz are the first to record it explicitly. Its exposition and significance are both consistent with the interest they display in the theological importance of purity and sexuality.96

The Secret of the Nut takes its image from Canticles: “I went down into the garden of nuts,” and in keeping with it, makes the fresh walnut a symbol first for the chariot of Ezekiel and ultimately for a bisexual view of the divine.97 The anatomy of the exterior and the interior of the nut corresponds perfectly to the prophet’s vision. The fresh walnut has four external shells: a green fuzzy outer coat, a woodlike shell that remains on the dry nut, an interim layer, and
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a thin sheath that covers the fruit. These correspond to the first four objects witnessed by Ezekiel: the storm wind, a great cloud, a fire flaring up, and the color of the electrum. The interior of the nutshell is composed of four chambers divided by a softer membrane. These chambers represent the four living creatures, (ḥayyot ha-qodesh), and the raised center ridge symbolizes the divine throne.98

At first glance, these correspondences hardly suggest an erotic theology. But the nut was already a symbol of earthy sexuality. It had, for example, been infused with sexual symbolism in the blessing for bridal virginity, a prayer not attested to in the Talmud but acknowledged in the BdN. The Halakhot Gedolot, the Geonic source of later Ashkenazi versions of the blessing, instructs the groom to say the following prayer after consummating the marriage:

He who placed the walnut in the Garden of Eden, the lily of the valley, so that no stranger shall have dominion over the sealed spring; thus the loving doe preserved her purity and did not break the law. Blessed are You, Lord, who chooses the descendants of Abraham.99

The walnut clearly stands for the bride. “The symbolism of the walnut, with its multiple layer of shell guarding the meat, is particularly apt for the virgin bride, whose hymen has guarded her virginity,” Ruth Langer explains.100 The Sod ha-Egoz enhanced these sexual meanings and applied them to the divine realm. The nut as merkavah becomes an image of the divine described in both masculine and feminine terms. Indeed, the most explicit version of the “secret” describes the nut as comprising five parts: “four are femaleness (niqvut) and one maleness (zkharut). These correspond to the four ḥayyot and one ḥayyah above them.”101 Alexander Altmann translated the literal term maleness as the “membrum virile,”102 yet this explicit reading should not be limited to the male aspect of the divinity. The term niqvut, like the masculine zkharut, denotes the female genitals. This possibility is further supported by the division of the female aspect of the merkavah into four parts. Since the male has only one penis, it is logical that his sex be symbolized by one part of the nut. The association of the female reproductive system with the quadripartite structure of the nut has similar biological coordinates.103 According to BT Niddah 17b, women have four reproductive organs: “The chamber is within, the vestibule is without, the upper chamber is built above them, and a pathway connects the upper chamber and the vestibule.” Another talmudic passage asserts that women have four more parts to their body than men.
Where a man has 248 parts, a woman has 252 parts “because Scripture adds two hinges and two doors in her case.”104 According to this interpretation of the merkavah, the high ridge would represent the male throne of glory surrounded by four supporting female figures, the ḥayyot ha-qodesh.

The “energy” (hashmal) that surrounds the divine throne provided the Pietists with an additional source of sexual imagery. The term appears in the masculine form, hashmal, in Ezekiel 1:4 and 1:27, but in the feminine, hashmalah, in 8:2. Pietist exegetes resolved this discrepancy by endowing the “energy” with an additional gender. These male and female energies unite in the Godhead.

Eleazar of Worms more frequently interprets the divine throne as female and the image upon the throne as male.105 For example, he demonstrates the bisexual nature of Ezekiel’s merkavah with the shape of Hebrew letters. He compares the shape of the seat of glory (kisse) to the very letter that begins the Hebrew word for seat. Just as the Hebrew letter kaf is round with an opening, like a woman, so too the divine throne.106

By contrast, the enthroned figure, described as the king (melekh) is signified by the lamed, a phallic symbol in the Ashkenazi world.107 Divine enthronement becomes a ceremony of sexual union, in which masculine glory sits on a feminine throne.108 Uniting the male and female aspects of God by contemplation of the divine name becomes the goal of Hasidei Ashkenaz super-esoteric speculation.109

Pietists therefore encountered the female not only on earth but in vision as well.110 For Hasidei Ashkenaz, female sexuality becomes an inherent part of the divine realm. Once an aspect of God is conceived as specifically feminine, certain qualities of the human female may come to the fore. Male mystics must deal with their own biology — and women’s, too. The bisexual theology of the divine chariot and the purity necessary to attain mystical vision led to a heightened awareness of the laws of niddah.

THE PRACTICAL IMPACT
ON ASHKENAZIC SPIRITUALITY

This correlation had a profound impact on later expressions of Jewish spirituality such as the Keter Shem Tov, an eclectic mix of mysticism and philosophy written by Eleazar’s student Abraham of Cologne.111 In the opening, Abraham explains that a pure soul may ascend to the heavens to have a direct vision of
the divine glory. But if the soul “is in the place of her sitting” because “she has not been purified of her flow, she shall sit alone sadly . . . She must reside outside the camp for the duration of her affliction.” When “she is purified of her flow,” she may return and no longer be forsaken. She may then ascend to the heavens and enter the inner chamber in order to assume her “familiar position” with her husband.¹¹²

Belief that the soul, grammatically feminine in both Latin and Hebrew, was female was commonplace in medieval thought.¹¹³ She was thought of as the divine element in man and the female counterpart to the male God. Neoplatonists believed that only pure souls could attain divine unity. Rather than yield a more positive interpretation of the niddah, Abraham of Cologne combines this essentially philosophical understanding with Jewish law and mystical beliefs. The feminine soul may not ascend to the heavens because she suffers specifically from the impurity of the woman with an abnormal issue.¹¹⁴ Her impurity not only excludes her from the inner chamber but also bars her from sexual union with her husband. Only when ritually purified may she join her husband in her “familiar” position.¹¹⁵

The purity prerequisites for mystical practice in Hekhalot literature emphasize avoiding seminal pollution over menstrual impurity. Yet as we have seen, the BdN and Hekhalot literature express many of the same purity concerns, and by the eleventh century, Italian scholars assumed that Hekhalot literature and the BdN were directly connected. Their heirs, the German Pietists, incorporate the strictures of the BdN into their halakhic system when they commit Hekhalot traditions to writing. In order to adapt the Hekhalot traditions to a lifestyle that advocated family life, Ḥasidei Ashkenaz had to draw from the laws of the BdN.

As we have seen, two implicit assumptions govern the laws of the Beraita de Niddah: (1) that menstruants need to be barred from the sancta and (2) that menstruants are possessed by a spirit of impurity.¹¹⁶ Rather than focus on the demonic strand of the BdN, however, these mystics emphasize the need to separate women from the sancta. In order to attain a mystical vision of the divine chariot, Ḥasidei Ashkenaz had to avoid menstrual impurity, and by the thirteenth century, the strictures of the BdN had become an essential part of Jewish mystical praxis.

Emerging from the charged matrix of the dangers of the niddah posed to the sancta, menstruation was not only a purity concern but also a theological
one for the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz, and in response they developed a bisexual understanding of God, articulating both male and female aspects of God and bringing all aspects of human biology come into play. These two elements developed by the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz — purity for mystical practice and a belief in a feminine aspect of God — appear in heightened form in thirteenth-century Kabbalah, and theosophical kabbalists add a third element derived from the BdN and contemporary medical science. Indeed, some theosophical kabbalists, building upon the two strands of the BdN, would find such cosmic danger in menstruants that the door to any possible women’s engagement in mystical practice would be ever more fully shut as the period’s thought emerged.
Medieval Kabbalah
Menstrual Impurity and Mystical Praxis in Theosophical Kabbalah

Kabbalah emerges in southern France at the end of the twelfth century in response to the challenge of medieval Aristotelianism. Provençal rabbis were first introduced to Aristotelian philosophy by Sephardim fleeing the Almohad and Almoravid persecutions in the 1140s. After Maimonides’ works reached Provençal shores, introduction gave way to controversy. Traditional scholars who had been accustomed to midrashic modes and the Neoplatonism embedded in them, were now challenged by what was for them a new, foreign, and inauthentic perception of God. Who was this unmoved mover? Why interpret the anthropomorphisms of the Bible allegorically? In response, they synthesized late-antique and Ashkenazi Jewish mystical traditions, and enlarged upon them to create a type of indigenous Jewish philosophy.

Isaac the Blind, son of the famous Jewish legist Abraham ben David, wrote kabbalistic commentaries on Sefer Yetsirah and the statutory prayers. He shared his teachings with students Ezra and Azriel of Gerona, who along with Jacob ben Sheshet developed the distinctly philosophical form of Geronese Kabbalah. Moses ben Nahman, the leader of the Jewish community of Barcelona, disapproved of these Geronese innovations and insisted that kabbalistic speculation remain traditional and esoteric. He only alludes to kabbalistic secrets in his Torah commentary. Ironically, in so doing, he popularized Kabbalah, alerting the uninitiated to the existence of an esoteric meaning to the Bible and unwittingly inviting kabbalists to bring to light that which he had chosen to keep hidden.

In the last quarter of the thirteenth century, Jewish mystics flocked farther south to Castile, where a cultural renaissance sponsored by Alphonso the Wise facilitated what Moshe Idel has called “the flowering of Kabbalistic symbolism,” culminating in the Zohar. The Zohar is a pseudepigraphic work attributed to
the second-century Palestinian scholar Shimon bar Yoḥai, but its origins were actually in late-thirteenth- and early-fourteenth-century Castile. Moses de Leon of Guadalajara was long considered to be the sole author of the Zohar, but recently scholars such as Yehuda Liebes and Ronit Meroz have shown that the work is too multifaceted to be the product of a single person. They suggest that the Zohar is a compilation by a circle of scholars with Moses de Leon at the helm. Indeed, this collaborative effort is suggested by the Zohar’s frame narrative — the circle of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai and his compatriots in the Galilee parallels the mystical circle in Castile/Leon. Members of this esoteric group include many kabbalists known by their independent works: Joseph Gikatilla, Joseph Hamadan, Avner of Burgos, and Joseph Angelet.\(^7\) Mystics throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries collected these traditions until they were ultimately canonized by the printing of the Zohar in Italy in the sixteenth century.\(^8\)

Many kabbalists were frustrated by the Aristotelian assertion that God is unknowable — an unmoved mover unresponsive to his believers — but nonetheless attracted to the notion of an omnipotent and immutable power. Building upon Jewish tradition and the Neoplatonic philosophy regnant in their day, they described a God that is both “hidden and manifest” in our world.\(^9\) God is said to have ten knowable attributes, known as sefirot, with one aspect lying beyond the realm of human cognition, the Ain Sof (without end).

Theosophical kabbalists believed that they could learn about the inner processes of the divine realm through the esoteric interpretation of God’s own words. Mystical contemplation of the Torah rather than philosophical speculation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* was their path to God and his cosmos. Moreover, thirteenth-century kabbalists believed that human beings and God enjoyed a reciprocal relationship. Men and women were sustained through God’s beneficence, but God was invigorated through people’s actions. Proper performance of all the commandments would foster unity in the divine realm, and conversely, sinning could unleash the forces of evil in the sefirotic realm. Few laws escaped their notice, including the long defunct laws of the Israelite Temple cult.

The symbols of the Temple cult — priesthood, the Holy of Holies, the throne of the cherubim, sacrifice, the chariot of Ezekiel — that had been so central to Hekhalot literature and German Pietism take on even more symbolic importance in twelfth and thirteenth century Kabbalah. The priestly authors of the Bible considered the tabernacle and the Holy of Holies in the Solomonic Temple...
ple to be God’s office on earth. After the destruction of the First Temple, Ezekiel envisioned a mobile Temple in the form of a chariot (merkavah) that brought God’s glory into Exile. Hekhalot literature fixes this Temple in the heavens, and German Pietists make this celestial merkavah the site of their mystical contemplation. Kabbalists enlarge upon these traditions and imagine the attributes of God that inhere in our world — the sefirot — as the celestial Temple resting on an angelic merkavah. In so doing, certain medieval kabbalists identify the Temple and Temple cult with God. Rather than entering into a physical structure, or a celestial construct, kabbalists imagine that they are entering into God, and therefore infinitely increasing the sacrality, danger, and prerequisites for admittance.

In his dissertation, “Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Heights,” Seth Brody explains:

If the world is a tapestry woven out of the fabric of intersecting Sefirotic powers, whose innermost structure is mapped in detail through the ordinances and enactments of Torah, then the cult standing at the heart of Sinaitic revelation must embody and manifest the mystery of revelation to the highest degree imaginable. Every aspect of the cult, its rituals, participants and offerings, find its distinctive locus on an elaborate Sefirotic grid.

The sefirotic realm is described as the holy Hekhal, the vestibule in front of the Holy of Holies. High priests represent Hesed, the Levites, Gevurah, and the Israelites, Tiferet. Shekhinah, the lower female aspect of the Godhead, is symbolized by Jerusalem, the Temple, the outer Hekhal, and the outer altar; Binah, the upper mother, is the inner Hekhal, the inner altar, and the Holy of Holies. The seven-candled menorah represent the seven lower sefirot. Ezekiel’s chariot, itself an adaptation of Temple cult rituals first for Babylonian exiles, then for merkavah mystics, and still later for German Pietists, becomes an essential aspect of sefirotic imagery. Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen, Joseph Gikatilla, and Moses de Leon, among others, wrote commentaries of the first chapter of Ezekiel throughout the thirteenth and early fourteenth century. Indeed, nearly all the extant kabbalistic commentaries on the first and tenth chapters of Ezekiel date to the second half of the thirteenth century; the authors refer to themselves as Hakhmei ha-merkavah (those who know the wisdom of the merkavah). Analysis of the merkavah figures prominently in several sections of the Zohar and is the major motif in Tiqqunei Zohar. Some of these analyses build upon the popular image in Bereshit Rabbah that posits

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that the patriarchs are the merkavah. The sefirot Ḥesed, Gevurah, and Tiferet represent Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who, along with Malkhut (David) represent the four-wheeled merkavah. Other descriptions depict Shekhinah as the divine throne and the patriarchs — sefirotically symbolized as Ḥesed, Gevurah, and Tiferet — as the image of the divine glory.

In addition to superimposing Temple architecture onto the sefirotic tree, some kabbalists saw themselves as latter-day priests, who in the absence of a physical Temple contemplate cultic rituals rather than perform actual sacrifices at a physical altar. A Catalonian kabbalist enlarged upon the long-established rabbinic substitution of prayer for sacrifice, and posited that “the righteous ones, the pious, and those who engage in profound concentration” unite the divine name by grasping hold of the fire kindled upon the altar of their hearts.” The kabbalist thus replaces the priest, and kabbalistic prayer replaces cultic ritual in a world without a physical Temple. As Brody explains, “[I]t is the souls and intentions of the officiants which are offered to God.”

Sacrifice serves a dual function: it draws the kabbalist/priest closer to the sefirot realm and draws the sefirot in closer harmony with each other. This theological understanding is reaffirmed by language. Sacrifice (in Hebrew, qorban) shares a root with qarov (closeness). The Castilian kabbalist Joseph Gikatilla explains that “you already know that the mystery of sacrifice is the proximation (qeruv) of the sefirot, the ordering of the rungs, and the repair of the channels. Consequently, qorban (sacrifice) derives from qeruv (proximity). If so, prayer stands in the place of sacrifices.”

MAINTAINING PURITY FOR MYSTICAL PRAxis

Thirteenth- and early-fourteenth-century kabbalists similarly imbue priestly purity laws with cosmic significance. In the case of the menstruant, however, many kabbalists blur the distinction between cultic restrictions of Leviticus 15 and the sexual prohibitions of Leviticus 18 and 21. That is, the purity concerns of the Temple cult are here being merged with the fundamentally separate purity concerns of marital sexuality. Menahem Recanati, for example, explains that transgressing niddah laws causes a defect in the supernal merkavah. Others equate sexual relations with menstruating women with idolatry. The Raʿaya Meheimna (RM), a later stratum of the Zohar, compares a man who has sexual relations with a menstruating woman to Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron who offered an improper sacrifice to God. Elsewhere, Gikatilla

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enlarges upon this Temple imagery and compares Shekhinah to the Hekhal, proclaiming that one who has sexual relations with a menstruating woman introduces impurity into this supernal hekhal.\textsuperscript{27} The later \textit{Sefer ha-Qanah} similarly explains that proper sexual relations will foster divine union, while sexual relations with impure women will introduce impurity into the Hekhal, that is, the Shekhinah. Moreover, the laws of the niddah embrace all other acts of forbidden sexual relations which introduce impurity into the realm of the holy.\textsuperscript{28} According to the Zohar, sexual relations with a menstruant are one of “three acts that drive the Shekhinah away from the world and prevent the Holy One, blessed be He, from dwelling in the world, so that people cry out and their voice is not heard.”\textsuperscript{29}

These kabbalistic ideas developed out of biblical and rabbinic traditions. The close association between God’s indwelling, sexuality, purity, and the Holy of Holies, implicit in the Bible, is enlarged upon in the Talmud. The Israelites believed that the God’s indwelling rested upon the throne of the cherubim. Later rabbinic interpreters suggested that when Israel performed divine commandments, the cherubim would turn toward each other — presumably in sexual intercourse — and when Israel sinned, they would turn apart.\textsuperscript{30} Rabbinic tradition also supposed that when a married couple engaged in licit sexual relations, the Shekhinah rested upon them. Moshe Idel suggests that

this parallel between the presence of the Shekhinah on the two cherubim found in a sexual union in the Holy of Holiest on the one hand, and Her dwellings on the pure human pair in sexual content on the other hand, is, in my opinion, conspicuous. It seems as if the religious role of the cherubim, according to some rabbis, has been transferred to human pairs according to others. The logic of this transfer seems to be as follows: When the Temple was destroyed, its cultic function was partially preserved by the human sexual activity when performed in purity.\textsuperscript{31}

Kabbalists received and reinterpreted these earlier rabbinic traditions, then wed them to Hekhalot traditions to create (or perhaps vivify) a divine marriage chamber symbolically expressed as the Holy of Holies.\textsuperscript{32} In so doing, they made the association of purity, Temple cult, and sexuality into a prerequisite for kabbalistic practice.

In theosophical Kabbalah, the purity prerequisites for mystical success not only persist, but they increase because the mystic must struggle with impurity in a theurgic universe. Failure to enter the holy Temple, as Shekhinah, in a

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state of ritual impurity is not only dangerous to the individual mystic, as in the case of Hekhalot literature, and to the success of divine contemplation, as in Hasidei Ashkenaz’s Sefer Ha-Shem, but now can wreak havoc upon the cosmos. The Children of Israel were ordered to banish all lepers and those with flux impurity and corpse impurity from the camp to create a hospitable environment for the tabernacle. Later, priests vigilantly observed purity laws to fulfill their functions in the Temple, God’s office on earth. Theosophical kabbalists who wish to cleave to the celestial tabernacle and Temple, or to enter into her holy precincts, must similarly ensure their own purity. The Zohar explains that Abraham planted a tree of faith. “Whoever was pure the tree would welcome; whoever was impure it would not.”

Purity was essential for mystical vision and divine communion among theosophical kabbalists. The Zohar describes visionaries as the enlightened ones (maskilim) and the Holy Spirit was believed to rest upon them. Because neither the Holy Spirit nor the divine presence will approach an adept who is impure, he must purify himself of all pollution and sanctify himself in order to attain a “prophecy.” Purity was also a necessary precondition for study because the very act of interpretation and reading the text was a key to divine vision. Elliot Wolfson explains that “interpretatio itself became a moment of revelatio, which in the language of the Zohar, further involves the process of devequt, ‘cleaving to God.’” The intensity of this mystical experience is determined by one’s level of purity.

According to the Zohar, the patriarch Abraham, the personification of the sefirah Ḥesed, “observed the laws of purity and impurity so vigilantly that an impure person could not even approach: immediately Abraham would realize that he was impure and have him undergo immersion (if an ejaculant) or have him wait seven days fittingly in his house (if a zav).” Abraham ate pure food in a state of ritual purity and refused cakes prepared by menstruating Sarah. Abraham and Sarah would purify all human beings “from the aspects of idolatry and from the aspect of defilement” so that all who approached them were entirely pure.

Forms of human defilement defy the designations of gender in the Zohar, for not only must mystics avoid menstruants, but they are also compared to niddot when spiritually impure. For example, the Zohar compares the male and female community of Israel when living under the dominion of sitra ahra in Egypt to menstruating women. Their symbolic flow ceased when they came
forth from Egypt, but like the zavah and the niddah, they had to wait seven clean days before becoming pure. According to the Zohar’s interpretation of the Exodus story, these seven days become seven weeks, corresponding to the omer, the period between Passover and Pentecost (Lev. 23:15). The Israelites were then purified by the dew of the sefirot and able to receive the Torah.44 Like the example of the aspiring Hekhalot mystic who remained isolated for twelve days, the community of Israel had to observe the cosmic laws of niddah to receive the Torah and unite with Tiferet and Shekhinah,45 and the Zohar concludes that mystics must remain separate from menstruants and avoid the state of niddah themselves.

All niddot and those polluted by them are excluded from divine interaction. The RM asks, “How is one privileged to see the face of the Shekhinah?” and answers, “When one guards himself from the niddah. Concerning this it is written, ‘do not come near a woman during her period of impurity to uncover her nakedness’ (Lev. 18:19).”46

This antagonism between menstrual impurity and divine vision is based on the Beraita d’Niddah’s assumption that menstrual impurity is so despised by God that it will drive him away. The BdN states, “Come and see how extreme the impurity of the menstruating woman is before the Holy One blessed be He. All who do not protect themselves from her will be afflicted with living leprosy.”47 Elsewhere, God “states” that only men who are vigilant in their observance of niddah laws may approach his name.48 Since in Hekhalot literature the form of God was often identified with his name, the BdN proposes that one can draw closer to the name of God — that is achieve a mystical vision — only through self-purification and observance of menstrual laws.49 In the Zohar, the vision of God is often identified with the vision of the Shekhinah. Thus Zohar 2:3a–b explains:

There are three who thrust the Shekhinah away from the world, preventing the Holy One from dwelling in the world. Human beings cry out and their voice is not heard.

These are: One who lies with a menstruant [the first of the three] — for no defilement in the world is as potent as that of menstruation. The defilement of menstruation is more severe than any defilement in the world. He is defiled and all who approach him are defiled along with him. Wherever they go, Shekhinah is repelled by them.50
just as menstrual impurity distanced the mystic from God in the BdN, the niddah exiles the Shekhinah from the holy sanctuary and prevents the mystic from achieving his spiritual goals.51

MENSTRUATION AND THEURGY

Mystics are enjoined to understand the cosmic import of their own observance of family purity laws, for in Kabbalah, all liturgical and ritual acts affect both the terrestrial and heavenly realms. Proper performance of the commandments promotes divine harmony while their violation promotes cosmic discord. Failure to perform ritual purity laws, therefore, will not only result in an unsuccessful mystical encounter but also empower the forces of the demonic other side. Sanctioned sexual intercourse is a particularly effective means of establishing divine union; illicit sexual relations introduces impurity into the Holy of Holies and drive the Shekhinah from her abode. Licit sexual relations performed in purity, by contrast, would not only beckon the Shekhinah and facilitate divine union but also enable the mystic to partake in the divine wedding ceremony as well.52 Indeed, the Zohar explains that “when a man’s wife undergoes days of impurity and he waits for her fittingly, supernal coupling couples with him all those days, so he is male and female. Once his wife is purified, he should delight her anew — joy of mitzvah, supernal joy.”53

When performed under proper conditions, physical intercourse between husband and wife fosters both divine and mystical union, for the act enables both Tiferet and the male mystic to unite with the Shekhinah.54 Many texts elaborate upon the conditions necessary for a mystically significant sexual encounter.55 Perhaps the most famous primary work devoted to the subject is the Iggeret ha-Qodesh (The Holy Letter), the popular kabbalistic text erroneously ascribed to Nahmanides, which discusses not only the correct thought and time for intercourse, but also physiological concerns, such as the appropriate diet to ensure healthy offspring.56 The author justifies his regimen with a common refrain from Leviticus. In the Holiness Code, God exhorts the children of Israel to avoid sexual abominations in order to become holy. Sexual propriety is understood to be an essential means of imitatio dei: man imitates the creator of all life by creating life through sanctioned sexual reproduction.57 In the Iggeret ha-Qodesh, sexual conduct also becomes a means of “sanctifying” or “desecrating” God’s name.58
Kabbalists also identified God with his name. Each of the four letters of the tetragrammaton, YHWH, corresponds to a specific sefirot. Any act that sanctifies or desecrates the name of God takes on cosmic significance. Illicit sexual relations violate the name of God on both the sefirotic and the physical level. Kabbalists believed that the first letter of the tetragrammaton, yod, was engraved on a boy’s penis during circumcision. The name of God thus becomes a partner to any male sexual act. Moshe de Leon therefore warns that

[op]ne must be constantly vigilant so that he might not sin against his flesh and wander and place the engraving of God in an evil place. For the individual who inserts the covenant, the mark of God, in another place (maqom aher) causes a blemish in that place and deceives the mark of God.

Consequently, circumcised men must avoid menstruating women, lest they pollute the sign of the earthly and supernal covenant.

The “holy yod” engraved on the human penis also signifies the sefirot Yesod. Significantly, Yesod represents both the Tsaddiq, righteous man, and the divine phallus. Sexual propriety and circumcision are therefore directly related to righteousness. In Sheqel ha-Qodesh, Moses de Leon explains that “anyone who guards the covenant of this place earns the right to be called Tsaddiq.” The righteous man on earth must guard the seal of the supernal Tsaddiq by observing sexual laws, and observance of purity laws and appropriate sexual behavior become the means of achieving true sanctity. Because menstrual laws represent both purity and sexual concerns, their observance becomes a particularly effective means toward this end. The verse “you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I the Lord am holy” (Lev. 11:44) is directly associated in the Zohar with proper observance of niddah and other sexual laws. Indeed, the fifteenth-century kabbalist Natan the Physician specifically states that mystics must separate from menstruants in order to emulate God.

Only those who are like God — sexually righteous, ritually pure, and circumcised — may enter the holy Hekhal. In the Zohar, the uncircumcised are denied divine entry, for the foreskin has become a symbol of all that is other, impure, polluted, and evil. As such, only the circumcised mystic, the earthy incarnation of Yesod, may penetrate the sefirotic realm.
Kabbalists understood the male aspect of Yesod to have its female counterpart in the Shekhinah. Yet while the adept and Yesod share an actual or symbolic phallus that ensures a spiritual connection, the sex of the Shekhinah defines her as other. Her physiology can facilitate or repel divine vision. Thirteenth-century kabbalists, like German Pietists, often described divine vision in terms of the merkavah and its analog the nut. In contrast to Ashkenazi mystics, however, medieval kabbalists build upon Neoplatonic associations between the shell and evil to create a dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual, exoteric and esoteric, profane and holy. Catalanian Kabbalist Azriel of Gerona compared the shells (qelippot) to the waste and void that preceded creation (tohu), and described the external shells as an evil barrier to divine access. In a variation on this trope, Castilian kabbalists Moses de Leon and Joseph Gikatilla ascribe the foreskin and female physiology to the qelippot.

In his commentary on the first chapter of Ezekiel’s vision, Moses de Leon uses the image of the nut as merkavah as a prototype for kabbalistic vision. In order for either Ezekiel or the contemporary kabbalist to reach the fruit (i.e., the supernal merkavah), he must first pass through the four external shells of the walnut, corresponding to the first four objects seen by Ezekiel: (1) the storm wind, (2) a great fire flaring up, (3) a brightness about it, (4) the color of the electrum (1:4). The prophet Ezekiel was not completely successful in his initial attempt to pierce through the outer shell. De Leon explains that the defective spelling of the Hebrew word va-‘ere (“and I looked”) in verse 1:4 signifies that Ezekiel’s vision is also defective (the letter heh is missing from the common conjugation pattern of the verb). The prophet was only able to see the mystery of the external qelippah, described, in feminine terms, as “the Mystery of the Entrance to the Land.” Because Ezekiel “saw her, he could not have a complete vision and prophecy.” The feminine pronoun “her” refers to the external qelippah and the entrance to the land. The term “land” alludes to the Land of Israel, a symbol of the Shekhinah, the feminine attribute of God. In other words, de Leon equates the Shekhinah with the external qelippah — an extremely negative image.

The Hebrew term used by de Leon, mavo, commonly denotes an entrance or an introduction. The Shekhinah, the last of the ten emanated attributes of the Godhead, functions as an entry between the divine and the human realm.
Because she alone provides access to the sefirot, the Shekhinah is the means through which the adept may achieve his vision.\(^75\) When referring to anatomy, the word takes on the similar meanings of “meatus,” “introitus,” or an “inlet.” As noted, in rabbinic literature, women’s bodies were often compared to houses; the “door” into a woman’s body usually meant the vagina.\(^76\) The entrance to the supernal land may thus refer to the vagina of the Shekhinah.\(^77\) The entry point to God, like the entry point for sexual ecstasy, is symbolized by female anatomy.

Indeed, entry into the Land of Israel was related to sexual activity in Geronese and Castilian Kabbalah in two different ways. The sexual union of Tiferet and Shekhinah was often described as the act of inheriting the Land of Israel. Just as the Children of Israel could “inherit” the land only when they had been circumcised at the Jordan (Joshua 6), mystics could “enter” the divine feminine only when circumcised. They could then unite with the Shekhinah and achieve a vision of the supernal sefirot.\(^78\) In the “Mystery of the Entrance to the Land,” however, it is not the status of the male mystic that inhibits vision but the purity status of the Shekhinah herself that acts as a qelippah, blocking access to the divine.\(^79\) Kabbalists believed that like the human female, the Shekhinah menstruates. When in a state of niddah, she must remain “outside” the heavenly realm and may therefore be compared to the external shell.\(^80\) Just as a human niddah may wrest a man from a heavenly vision, the supernal menstruant may pollute the adept and prevent accession to true prophecy. Ezekiel’s prophecy was thwarted because his first sight was the polluting image of a menstruating Shekhinah.\(^81\) The letter heh, missing in the beginning of the prophecy, represents the flight of the holy aspects of God during “the period of her menstruation.” Just as a husband separates from his menstruating wife, God separates from the menstruating Shekhinah. And just as menstrual impurity can preclude mystical success, the Shekhinah’s menstrual impurity can impede mystical entry.

Joseph Gikatilla similarly ascribes Ezekiel’s incomplete vision to the Shekhinah’s purity status. However, in keeping with his enduring interest in the divine names, he focuses on the symbolic absence of the letter heh in va-‘era. Like de Leon, he emphasizes the defective spelling of “and I saw” to signify the prophet’s incomplete vision. In Ezekiel 1:1, the prophet sees a full vision of God — signified by the grammatically correct term ve-‘ereh with a heh. His incomplete vision of the northern storm wind is underscored by the absence of the heh in va-‘era. The final aleph represents the Shekhinah, the speculum
that does not shine. She functions as a veil (parokhet) that divides the visionaries from their visions. Though she had resided within the holy Hekhal, illuminated by the effluxes of Yesod, she now lives in exile, under the dominion of the demonic other side who polluted her with the forces of impurity.82

A later strata of the Zohar, printed as Zohar Ḥadash, describes the sefirotic impact of the Shekhinah’s impurity. 83 In Zoharic Kabbalah, the letters of the tetragrammaton, yod, heh, vav, heh, correspond to specific sefirot. The sefirah Ḥokhmah is yod; Binah, the upper heh; Tiferet (beauty), the vav; and the Shekhinah, the lower heh.84 Proper observance of certain commandments would unite these letters and facilitate vision of the name of God.85 The defective spelling of the verb va-erekh signals to us that the vision was incomplete. Ezekiel’s vision was incomplete because the Shekhinah was niddah. Her impurity caused the upper heh of Binah to flee pollution. Since only three letters remained, Ezekiel could not successfully unify the name of the tetragrammaton, precluding the possibility of complete vision.86

The pure Shekhinah is the mystical portal; the menstruating Shekhinah, the barrier. The aspiring mystic must avoid both the terrestrial and the supernal menstruant in order to achieve divine vision. But as in the case of Ḥasidei Ashkenaz, purity requirements reflect theological considerations. Ritual purity must be addressed not only on earth but in the heavens as well.
The Myth of the Menstruating Shekhinah

As the “Mystery of the Entrance to the Land” makes clear, kabbalists conceived of menstruation as both a terrestrial and a supernal force that must be avoided in order to have a successful mystical encounter. Kabbalists saw the sefirotic realm as an organism whose processes reflect our own. The divine body, like the human body, eats food and expels waste. Primordial man, like terrestrial man, may become impure. It is striking, however, that of the many forms of impurity at its disposal, the male circle of the Zohar so frequently mentions the uniquely female impurity of niddah. In fact, thirteenth-century kabbalists believed that the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of the divine male, menstruates. Although kabbalists derived their understanding of the Shekhinah’s cycle from female biology and rabbinic halakhah, they posit the reverse. For kabbalists, the flow of the supernal woman became the archetype for human experience; conversely, female biology was understood to be a reflection of a cosmic reality.

**The Roots of the Symbol**

Kabbalists were not the first to conceive of an aspect of God as menstruating. Gershom Scholem suggests the gnostic myth of Sophia as one source for the symbol of the Shekhinah. In his treatise *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (120–202), describes how one gnostic sect conceived the fall of Sophia in terms that reflect the biological functions of the human female. According to Irenaeus, Sophia, “having engaged in an impossible and impractical attempt” to unify with the One, “brought forth an amorphous substance, such as her female nature was able to produce.” This inviable substance, described as matter devoid of the male form, was the cosmic equivalent of menstrual blood, the result of an unfertilized ovum. Although Sophia was eventually
reconciled with the Father, this substance remained and could pollute the spiritual realm.\(^2\) This sect also transferred the gospel story of the woman with a flux to the divine realm. The woman is no longer a mortal afflicted with an issue of blood but rather a heavenly aeon suffering from a loss of power.\(^3\)

Early Jewish sources, too, interpret menstruation as a divine process. Consider, for example, the interpretation of the verse, “the mandrakes give forth fragrance, and at our gate are all manner of precious fruits, new and old, which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved” (Song of Songs 7:14) in BT Eruvin 21b. According to Rava, each phrase in the verse has a unique referent. “The mandrakes who give forth fragrance” refer to Jewish men who are unspoiled by sin, and “the precious fruits” at the gates refer either to “the daughters of Israel who tell their husbands about their doors” or to those “who close their doors for their husbands.” The final phrases in the verse, “new and old, which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved,” is spoken by Knesset Yisrael, a female being who represents the Community of Israel.

Given the erotic intention of the verse, the phrase “precious fruits” likely refers to sexual pleasure. These delights lie at a wife’s gate or door, a euphemism for her vagina. The possibility of entry turns on women’s purity status. During their menstrual flow, the pious daughters of Israel either tell their husbands about the state of their “doors” or they close their “doors” to their husbands.\(^4\) The phrase “precious fruits at the gates” refers to the possibility of sexual pleasure with ritually pure women.

At the end of the verse, Knesset Yisrael, the rabbinic prototype for the kabbalistic Shekinah, explains that she, too, has offered both “new and old” fruits to her “beloved.” These “fruits” were traditionally interpreted as laws performed by the Knesset Yisrael for her “beloved,” God; the old fruits refer to biblical law and the new fruits to talmudic law. Moshe Idel offers a different interpretation, proposing that Knesset Yisrael’s “old and new fruit” be understood within the context of the discussion of menstrual laws.\(^5\) According to the priestly purity code, the menstruant is impure for only seven days, after which she is deemed pure. The zavah alone must wait seven additional days after the cessation of her flow to sacrifice a sin offering and be deemed pure.\(^6\) Only later, in the Talmud, did “the pious daughters of Israel” incur the obligation to wait an additional seven days after the cessation of their menstrual flow.\(^7\) In BT Eruvin, Knesset Yisrael explains that she, like the pious daughters of Israel, offers her husband both the old and the new laws: the levitical nid-dah laws and the extra-biblical purity requirements imposed in the Talmud.
Knesset Yisrael would then presumably wait an additional seven days after her menstrual flow before engaging in sexual relations with God.

By the thirteenth century, the symbol of the menstruant had become a very powerful element of the Zoharic understanding of the cosmos. Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai, the hero of the Zohar, disclosed the mystical significance of menstruation to his disciples alone. Subsequent generations did not deserve to receive this esoteric knowledge, and those privy were afraid to share the mystery with anyone unworthy of it.

**The Shekhinah as Menstruant in Kabbalah**

In the Kabbalah, where the two sexes and their relations on earth are but counterparts to the divine world, the mythic possibilities of the Talmud become actualized and the functions of the human female appear in the feminine aspect of God. The Shekhinah engages in sexual relations and may become pregnant; she also menstruates. Just as menstruation suspends sexual relations on earth, the Shekhinah’s menstruation interrupts divine union. She may resume relations with the sefirot of Tiferet or Yesod only after immersion. Thirteenth-century kabbalists identified the purity requirements of women with those of the Shekhinah to such an extent that they supposed the cycle of the supernal female determined halakhah.

The circle of the Zohar used the symbol of the menstruating Shekhinah in its exegesis and adjusted the length or frequency of her menses to correspond to and prove its interpretations and practices. For example, certain texts describe the Shekhinah as having a weekly cycle: during the week, the supernal female menstruates and is therefore niddah, banned, from her husband, the sefirotah of Tiferet or Yesod. When her flow ends on Friday, she may purify herself and resume relations with the male aspects of God on the Sabbath. This divine union served as a model for mystical praxis. Mystics were exhorted to have relations on Friday nights alone, while other married couples were permitted to engage in sexual relations throughout the two weeks of the month the wife is considered ritually pure.

Another Zoharic text associates the Shekhinah’s cycle with the omer in order to give cosmic significance to this seven-week period between Passover and Pentecost (Lev. 23:15). Israel, that is to say, the Shekhinah, was represented as a niddah during the captivity in Egypt, a country often interpreted as the sitra ahras. Her flow ended as soon as she was freed from the impure

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power. Yet like the zavah and the niddah, she had to wait seven clean days before she could resume relations with her spouse. According to the Zohar’s interpretation of the Exodus story, these seven days become seven weeks, corresponding to the omer. At the end of that period, the Shekhinah was purified by the living waters of Binah. She could then adorn herself and resume relations with the King, the sefirah of Tiferet.

In Sefer ha-Rimmon, Moses de Leon describes the union of Shekhinah and Tiferet on Shavuot in astrological terms. Though emancipated from Egypt, the Shekhinah, here designated as the moon, needed to wait until Pentecost to become full and thus a fitting sexual partner for the Sun (Tiferet). The Shekhinah as moon is one of the most common symbolic associations in the Zohar, an association that grew out of the kabbalists’ close identification of the divine and human female. The four phases of the moon — new, waxing, full, waning — represent birth, burgeoning life, fullness, and death. The full moon represents the most fertile period, ovulation, while the fourth phase corresponds to menstruation. To this correspondence, observed by many cultures, ritual purity laws add a layer of special significance to Jews. As noted, husbands and wives separate for at least twelve days, leaving approximately fifteen days of the monthly cycle for marital relations. This division perfectly matches the waxing and waning of the moon. Many medieval Ashkenazi sources observed that “just as a moon waxes for half a month and wanes for half a month, so the woman is close to her husband for half a month and lonely in her impurity for half a month. And as the moon is accessible at night, so is the woman, as it is written, ‘in the evening, she would come (Esther 2:14).’ This association is the basis for the belief that the first day of the new lunar month (Rosh Ḥodesh) is a holiday meant specifically for women.

Kabbalists adapted these earlier beliefs to create their own lunar symbolism. Like terrestrial women, the Shekhinah, the supernal moon, has a twenty-eight-day cycle that coincides with the lunar month. Clearly, they came to this description by observing biological experience. But the kabbalists’ understanding of it reverses the equation. They see the biological and ritual requirements of terrestrial women as being mere visible manifestations of the supernal experience. The divine realm causes, and when understood explains, the material realm. As such, the kabbalistic understanding of the Shekhinah’s cycle is adduced as the rationale for the observance of the laws of the menstruating woman.
Joseph Hamadan, the kabbalist who provides some of the most sexually explicit interpretations of the inner workings of the divine realm, offers an extensive example of this reasoning in his *Sefer Ta‘amei ha-Mitsvot* (Book of Rationales for the Commandments). Hamadan begins his discussion of the commandment to refrain from sexual relations with menstruating women by citing the biblical proscriptions and several rabbinic incentives for observing the laws of niddah. Then, disclosing part of the cosmic mystery of the law, he observes that the ultimate purpose of Temple sacrifice is to unite the bridegroom Tiferet with his bride the Shekhinah when she is “full.” But the supernal woman, like her human counterpart, is not always “full.” There is a time when she is “whole” and may unite with the King, and a time when she is “blemished” and may not receive the efflux of the sefirot Tiferet. Hamadan expatiates, using the example of the sun and the moon. Like man, the lower sun, Tiferet, the supernal sun, is always whole because he never menstruates. The moon, by contrast, is defective. Like women, she waxes and wanes each month.

Hamadan derives her cycle not from the human condition, but rather from a creation myth. In Genesis 1:16, God is said to have created “two great lights.” The end of the verse, however, refers to a “great light to rule the day” and a “lesser light to rule the night.” How did the power of one of the “great lights” become diminished at the end of the verse? The Talmud provides an answer and Kabbalah elaborates. The moon was diminished as punishment for her hubris. Initially, the sun and the moon were equally brilliant. Not content with parity, the moon asked God if it were “possible for two kings to wear one crown.” Angered by her presumption, God retorted, “Go then and make thyself smaller.” She was humbled and forced to rely on the sun for her light.

The Shekhinah’s condition corresponds to this event. Hamadan ties the defect in the lower moon to a stain in the supernal one. The term used for stain (*ketem*) is the legal term for blood spots that could render a woman impure. Accordingly, the moon is “stained” precisely when the Shekhinah is impure; one may ascertain the Shekhinah’s condition by the phase of the moon. Eve’s sin and “curse” are a later reflection of a cosmic event.

Where earlier authors saw a parallel between the waxing and waning of the moon and the pure and impure states of women, Hamadan found a basis in it for the law. The Shekhinah is purified and whole at the beginning of the full moon. She may then engage in marital relations with her husband, Tiferet.
This intimacy may last for precisely fifteen days. When her flow begins, she must separate until she can immerse herself in the ritual bath.

Kabbalists also see the conditions of the Shekhinah’s immersion reflected in the terms of the human law. According to Jewish law, terrestrial women must bathe in a ritual bath filled with forty se’ahs of water that meets certain requirements. Spring water, rain water, and melted snow may be used to fill the miqveh. This water may not be drawn. “Pure” water that has been collected in any type of receptacle is considered drawn and would render the ritual bath invalid. Special pipes are attached to the exterior of the miqveh to conduct water to a main pool. Because these channels are structurally connected to the building, they are not considered separate containers but a part of the bath itself. This water may then be channeled to satellite baths.

Insufficient or misappropriated water, of great halakhic concern, becomes a divine concern in Hamadan. The conveyance of undrawn purificatory waters to the miqveh reflects the emanative processes within the sefirotic realm. Divine energy flows from the upper to the lower sefirot through channels or pipes. These energies meet at Yesod and are filtered down to Shekhinah. Yesod acts as a supernal ritual bath, purifying the Shekhinah with his supernal effusions. Like undrawn water that fills a ritual bath, these flowing emanations fill and purify the Shekhinah.

There is an overt sexual dimension to this analogy, for Yesod also represents the divine phallus. Hamadan enlarges upon this analogy and compares the method of conveying water to the ritual bath to ejaculation. Like the penis, the sefirotic channels and miqveh pipes convey purificatory water to Yesod, who, in turn, purifies the Shekhinah with his sperm-like efflux. Similarly, terrestrial woman is first ritually cleansed by the miqveh water and then is further purified by the sign of the covenant, her husband’s circumcised penis.

The issue of both the supernal channel and the earthly channel must be like undrawn water. And if valid water is like a husband’s semen, foreign or drawn water will represent extramarital relations. Should this “water” be contaminated or come from some other source, the “immersion” would not be legitimate. On earth, this would point to a wife’s promiscuity; in the heavens, the Shekhinah would remain impure and come under the dominion of the demonic sitra ahr. The quantity of water is no less important than its quality. Just as a miqveh must contain forty se’ah of undrawn water to purify terrestrial women, Yesod

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must emit forty se’ahs of efflux to purify the Shekhinah.\(^{33}\) This measure determined the number of days that Moses remained on Mount Sinai. He waited on the mountain for forty days to learn the mystery inherent in each efflux.\(^{34}\) When the Shekhinah was eventually filled by Tiferet, she gave birth to the Torah. This “child” of Tiferet and Shekhinah weighed forty se’ahs. The Shekhinah then gave her offspring to Moses in the form of two, twenty-se’ah tablets as a gift for Israel. The written Torah may therefore be compared to a valid mikveh,\(^{35}\) empowered to purify both men and women of their sins by their immersion in study.

Joseph Hamadan, more than any other medieval kabbalist, richly elaborated the analogy of biological function and ritual observance. The menstrual cycle of the Shekhinah determined the auspicious times for supernal union. When niddah, she was banned from her husband. She could resume conjugal relations only when purified. The flow of the supernal woman became the archetype for human experience. These ideas inspired the works of the fourteenth-century kabbalist Menahem Recanati and later the anonymous Sefer ha-Qanah.\(^{36}\)

**Isolating the Menstruating Shekhinah**

Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century kabbalists not only drew from female biology to determine the menstrual cycle of the Shekhinah, but also derived the manner of separating the Shekhinah from her divine husband from human law — specifically, from rejected customs and from the Beraita d’Niddah. For example, according to the Ra’aya Meheimna (RM) a later stratum of the Zohar, the menstruating Shekhinah must isolate herself in a house of forbidden women (bet ‘assurot).\(^{37}\) Such a dwelling recalls the reference to a house for impure women (bet ha-teme’ot) found in a manuscript variant of Mishnah 7:4.\(^{38}\) There is no halakhic or archeological evidence for a talmudic practice of physically separating menstruating women from the community, such as one finds, for example, in Zoroastrian culture or among Ethiopian Jews.\(^{39}\) Indeed, Rabbi Aqiva specifically limits the isolation of the menstruant, describing her as a gemulda, that is to say gemul da mi-baal, isolated from her husband and not from the community at large.\(^{40}\) The standard version of the Mishnah describes a “beit ha-tum’ot,” a house of impurities, that would function as a storehouse for items that had contracted impurity.\(^{41}\) The mishnaic reference to a bet ha-teme’ot likely derives from a utopian desire to separate all polluted...
people from the community of the holy, or it may arise from an orthographic error.42 This variant reading, however, was known to Rashi, and consequently, both he and Nahmanides believed that the practice of separating menstruants was historical.43 The author of the RM probably based his own understanding of niddah practices on Nahmanides’ tradition and must have believed that menstruants had inhabited houses of impurity in the mishnaic period. He may have found his authority in this custom and banished the menstruating Shekhinah to the forbidden house, reasoning that if menstrual impurity was not acceptable to the earthly community of Israel, it would certainly be barred from the divine realm.

Other separations take the form of restrictions in practice rather than actual physical removal. For example, some rabbis denied menstruants all forms of adornment so that they might suffer during their flow and discourage sexual advances.44 Rabbi Aqiva, by contrast, permitted niddot to wear makeup and jewelry lest they disgust their husbands.45 Most rabbinic Jews adhered to Rabbi Aqiva’s decision, but the earlier prohibition was codified in the BdN.46 Observing the strictures of the BdN, German Pietists and early kabbalists had forbidden menstruants to adorn themselves.47 Now, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century kabbalists transferred this ritual practice to the divine realm and denied the menstruating Shekhinah all forms of ornamentation. The Shekhinah might adorn herself only after she was purified by the supernal ritual bath in preparation for divine union.48

Unattractive clothing was another means of diminishing sexual attractiveness. While the Talmud nowhere requires menstruants to wear different clothes, the Geonic Halakhot Gedolot attests to the custom, and Sefer Miqtsotot specifically forbids menstruants to wear nice clothes.49 Later, in twelfth-century Ashkenaz, several works of the Rashi school enlarge upon this prohibition and require menstruants to wear unattractive clothing during their flow in order to discourage their husbands’ advances. They may resume their normal mode of dress after purification.50

The Shekhinah must also wear different clothes when menstruating. According to Joseph Hamadan, the Shekhinah always dresses extremely modestly, exposing only her eyes.51 Nonetheless, she commands an extensive wardrobe of many colors — white, light blue (tekhelet), red, black, ink, green, and a mixture of white and light blue — which she wears to attract her husband Tiferet. When “blemished,” she wears other clothes and does not adorn herself.52 She may resume wearing her attractive clothing when purified.
The force of this prohibition is apparent in the surprise the RM registers when it was violated. The author of this later stratum of the Zohar explains that the sacrifice of the second paschal lamb was instituted to enable those who were impure during Passover to fulfill their sacrificial obligation a month later. Yet how could the Shekhinah, the recipient of the sacrifice, remain decorated and in divine service for an entire month? Wouldn’t her menstrual cycle interfere with this capacity? The answer may be found in a lenient interpretation of human law. The author of Sha’arei Teshuvah permits brides to wear jewelry for the full month after their wedding. The divine bride, the Shekhinah, like the human bride, may remain decorated for a full thirty days during Passover.

The Shekhinah’s clothing not only reflects her menstrual status; it also discloses the force and nature of the efflux she receives. When under the influence of judgment she wears its color, red, and is described as a blood-filled vessel of evil. This description coincides with BT Shabbat 152a, where woman is said to be “a vessel filled with excrement and her mouth is filled with blood, yet all run after her.” Because the term “mouth” commonly refers to the vagina, the phrase probably denotes a menstruating woman. When the Shekhinah is filled with the powers of excess judgment, she becomes “blood filled” and must menstruate. Her purity status is manifest in her red clothing.

Representations of the Shekhinah as menstruating are therefore not only biological or halakhic analogies to the terrestrial female, but also descriptions of her moral change within the sefirotic realm. The Shekhinah actually becomes a force of evil with the onset of her flow. This metamorphosis is the subject of my next chapter.
The Ontic Metamorphosis of the Menstruating Shekhinah

The correspondence between the terrestrial and the supernal menstruant is not merely biological. It also has a moral dimension. When pure, the Shekhinah promotes divine unity. When impure, she becomes a force of evil that must be banned, literally niddah, from the divine realm. That kabbalists understood that an aspect of the divine realm as evil was a response to a religious need — to explain the existence of evil in our world. However, that kabbalists constructed the myth of the menstruating Shekhinah out of largely peripheral traditions that demonized impurity — traditions in which the divine female would ontically change into an evil force by means of a quotidian female biological cycle — had dire consequences for women’s spirituality. For if the Shekhinah could suddenly change like “a revolving sword” from good to evil, it is inconceivable that terrestrial women could ever attain or sustain the purity necessary for divine union. The menstruating Shekhinah thus became a means of justifying women’s exclusion from divine pursuits.

Impurity in the Sefirotic Realm

In the prophetic literature, impurity is used as metaphor for evil and sin. Impurity represents evil; purity, good. Kabbalists, however, did not rest with this essentially descriptive image. Rather, they took the image of impurity to a new level by infusing it with ontological status. Whereas in the Bible, Jerusalem may be compared to a menstruant because the city’s inhabitants are polluted by sin,¹ in Kabbalah, Jerusalem, representing the Shekhinah, actually becomes a niddah. The metaphor becomes a myth.²

This shift may be attributed in part to the kabbalists’ dissatisfaction with the philosophical approach to the problem of evil. Believers in one benevolent God are perennially confronted with the existence of evil in the world.
How could the ultimate Good “make peace and create evil?” The answers of kabbalists and neoplatonists were diametrically opposed.

While philosophers rejected the reality of evil, Castilian kabbalists embraced it. Neoplatonists argued that as the final element in the chain of being, evil did not really exist: it was completely divorced from the divine realm. By contrast, the kabbalists employed the neoplatonic approach to a different end. Evil became an essential element within the emanative process of divine attributes known as the sefirot. Early kabbalists based their understanding of evil on the prophetic verse, “from the north shall evil break loose” (Jer. 1:14). That the evil, in the form of the Babylonian enemy, came from the north was a historical fact; the kabbalistic innovation lay in equating this evil with an aspect of God. Kabbalists believed that the Godhead was composed of ten knowable attributes and one, the \textit{Ain Sof}, which lay beyond human cognition. Beginning with the earliest kabbalistic treatise, the \textit{Sefer ha-Bahir}, we see evil located in the sefiarah of \textit{Pahad} (fear; \textit{Gevurah}, or Judgment, in later Kabbalah).

The kabbalistic perception of evil was enhanced through the symbolism of impurity. As early as the twelfth century, the Provençal kabbalist Isaac the Blind (1165–1235) had equated impurity with evil. He explained that “all things that come from the left side of God are dominated by impurity, as it is said, ‘from the north shall evil break loose’” (Jer. 1:14). Later, when Castilian kabbalists developed the notion of an independent realm of evil known as the \textit{sitra ahra} (the other side), they enlarged upon the association between evil and impurity. The Zohar asserts that “just as there are levels and palaces on the side of holiness, so also on the side of impurity.” The \textit{sitra ahra} became the side of impurity (\textit{sitra mas’ava}) that mirrors the holy sefirotic realm. Indeed, the Zohar identified impurity and evil to such an extent that it uses the terms \textit{sitra mas’ava} and \textit{sitra ahra} interchangeably.

Kabbalists do not only consign impurity to the realm of Judgment or the \textit{sitra aḥra}. As we have seen, Jewish law stipulated that one could become impure not only by means of one’s actual physical condition but also through proximity to a polluting source. Impurities were therefore graded according to degree. The highest grade of impurity, known as “the father of the fathers of impurity,” was corpse impurity and was followed by the nine remaining fathers: creeping things, carrion, semen, the waters of purification, sin offerings, the zavah, the niddah, the zav, and those subject to scale disease. Exposure to these fathers of impurity results in impurity to the first degree; exposure to a first-grade impurity results in impurity to the second degree and so through...
the third- and the fourth-grade impurities. The Geronesec scholar Jacob ben Sheshet transposed this purity system to the heavenly realm. In his *Sefer ha-’Emunah ve-ha-Bitahon*, he explains that just as impurities are graded according to degree in rabbinic literature, impurities are assigned different grades in the sefirotic realm. The sixth sefirah, Gevurah, is the locus of the father of the fathers of impurity, corpse impurity; the fifth sefirah, Tiferet, the fathers of impurity; the fourth, Netsah, impurity in the first degree, and so on to the final sefirah, Shekhinah, which is home to impurity in the fourth degree. The seventh sefirah, Hesed (Lovingkindness), represents the supernal ritual bath that will purify all the lower sefirot in the messianic age.7

The sefirot could suffer from impurity because the sefirotic world was viewed as an organic whole with functions that mirrored our own. Indeed, the entire sefirotic tree could also be described as the limbs of primordial man (*Adam Qadmon*).8 As such, the different limbs could carry out assorted functions that would engender waste and pollution. The Godhead, therefore, like the body, must purge itself of refuse to maintain homeostasis.9

The perception of the Godhead as an organism needing to rid itself of pollution to maintain existence may have some affinities to the so-called grotesque genre of literature epitomized in the works of Rabelais. Mikhail Bakhtin explained that the grotesque body “is cosmic and universal” in so far as the emphasis on bodily orifices and excretion underscores its limitless nature. Bakhtin attributes the development of the grotesque to “cosmic terror.” This fear is not, he says,

> mystic in the strict sense of the word; rather it is the fear of that which is materially huge and cannot be overcome with force. . . . The struggle against cosmic terror in all its forms and manifestations did not rely on abstract hope or on eternal spirit, but on the material principle in man himself. Man assimilated the cosmic elements: earth, water, air and fire; he discovered them and became vividly conscious of them in his own body. He became aware of the cosmos within himself.10

This perception of the universe may have been very appealing to kabbalists when dealing with an issue as ominous as evil. Bodily waste and impurity became evil reified. Reducing aspects of God to human terms made evil less terrifying. Indeed, the waste of primordial man was conceived as a means of exuding evil.11 The most common sources of evil in the sefirotic realm — the attributes Binah, Gevurah, and Shekhinah — are consequently often described
as eliminating waste. When Gevurah is understood to be the locus of evil, the sefirah is filled to overflowing with impure powers. The fires of Gevurah must separate holy judgment from these polluted forces. This refining process results in an overabundance of unnecessary and wasteful power akin to excrement. Since Judgment was often described as gold, evil was compared to the dross and filth engendered during the purification of this precious metal. In other instances, waste matter is depicted in bodily images, such as the “letting of bad blood” or “foul waters flowing from the waste of semen from which Primordial Man was made.”

When the Shekhinah undergoes catharsis, kabbalists offer a more explicit analogy to human biology. Like the terrestrial woman, the Shekhinah must purge herself of unnecessary blood and menstruate. Several kabbalists combined this organic analogy with an existing belief in the nefarious power of impurity to make of menstruation an example of reified evil. Kabbalistic mythology incorporates female biology, and in the sefirotic realm, unmitigated Judgment and the sitra ahrã, not the pituitary, occasion the Shekhinah’s flow.

The Dual Nature of the Shekhinah

Kabbalists believed that the Shekhinah possessed both good and evil qualities. Gershom Scholem locates the source of her dual nature in the Bible: kabbalists endowed the Shekhinah with the contrasting qualities of divine wisdom and “riotous woman folly” of Proverbs 9:13ff. Another source for the duality is the Talmud. Israelis believed that God dwelt first in the Tabernacle and then later in the Holy of Holies. According to BT Yoma 69b, the Shekhinah did not reside alone; the evil inclination, the root of lasciviousness and idolatry, lived in the adytum with her. After their return from Babylonia, the Jewish community undertook to expel the grammatically “male” evil inclination from the Holy of Holies by means of communal prayer and fasting. Their leader ordered his followers to exorcise that particular demon in the same way that the “female wickedness” had been expelled in Zechariah 5:8. Accordingly, they cast the evil inclination into a leaden pot and sealed the opening with lead “because lead absorbs the voice, as it is said: ‘that is wickedness; and thrusting her down into the tub, he [Zechariah] pressed the leaden weight into its mouth.’” This identification of the male evil inclination with the female “wickedness” contributed to a belief in the evil nature of the Shekhinah.
Islamic qisas literature (tales of the biblical prophets) may also attest to this belief. The Arabic term sakina, etymologically related to the Hebrew Shekhinah, differs in meaning according to context. In a Muslim context, the Arabic term connotes “calm, peace, safety, security, and tranquility”; when these Islamic qisas refer to a Jewish context, however, the term sakina connotes black magic and demons. While this distinction may simply reflect religious polemic, it may also be based in contemporary Jewish belief. For example, al-Thabolabih explains that when Abraham and Ishmael prepared the foundation of the sanctuary, “the sakina wound itself upon the original foundation as if it were a serpent, saying: ‘Build upon me, O Abraham!’” Brinner relates the image of the sakina as a “serpent that winds itself” to the Leviathan, the twisting serpent described in Isaiah. Such identification of the Shekhinah, who dwells in the place of the sanctuary, with the Leviathan or twisting serpent is consistent with a belief in the dual nature of the aspect of God that inhabits the sanctuary in BT Yoma 69b.

Kabbalistic representations of the Shekhinah’s dual nature enlarge upon mythic possibilities in the earlier sources. The Shekhinah receives the effluxes of the higher sefirot and disperses them to the world below. When under the influence of these benevolent forces, the Shekhinah is filled with divine powers and bestows blessings upon the world. When she comes under the influence of harsh Judgment or the sitra ahra, however, she becomes evil and serves as a conduit for their punitive powers. Hence the Shekhinah is described as good or evil, permitted or forbidden, leavened or unleavened, bride or concubine, male or female. Her dual nature is made to correspond to her cycle: as a purified bride, the Shekhinah becomes an image of good; as an impure menstruant, the Shekhinah becomes a symbol of evil.

Menstruation as Evil

Women were associated with the left side of God and believed to originate within the sefirah of Judgment. (Women’s monthly flow of blood was easily compared to the overflow of the red powers of Judgment, the source of evil in the sefirotic realm.) For example, Zohar 3:54a identifies the niddah with restrained Judgment, and the zavah, whose flow is excessive, with unmitigated Judgment. In her dynamic nature the Shekhinah is often compared to a revolving sword, turning from good to evil, mercy to judgment, peace to war.
When this sword is “filled with blood” (Isa. 34:6), that is to say, filled with the red effluxes of unmitigated Judgment, the Shekhinah becomes evil.28

Castilian kabbalists, who often entertained a dualistic vision of evil, point to the sitra ah ra, rather than to Judgment, as the cause of the menstrual flow. For example, the fourteenth-century kabbalist Joseph Angelet claims that the side of the spirits of impurity fills the “revolving sword” with blood.29 His use of the term “spirits of impurity” to identify the sitra ah ra reveals a kabbalistic belief, rooted in rabbinic and Zoroastrian thought, in the close relationship among menstrual blood, impurity, and the demonic realm.

The Source of Impurity: The Serpent Who Instills Filth

Genesis states that God struck Eve with painful labor as a punishment for allowing herself to be influenced by the serpent; it makes no mention of menstruation.30 Passages in BT Eruvin and Avot d’Rabbi Natan, however, enlarge upon the scriptural punishment and claim that menstruation was the first of ten curses with which God punished women for Eve’s sin.31

It is also possible to understand the serpent, rather than God, as the author of menstruation. According to several passages in the Talmud and midrash, the serpent “instilled his filth (zohama)” in Eve while persuading her to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Because serpents are often construed as phallic images, many exegetes have deciphered the act of “instilling” as sexual intercourse.32 “Filth” could therefore refer either to seminal pollution or to a desire for illicit sexual relations.33 But the filth that the serpent instilled in Eve may also refer to menstruation, since the term zohama is used in the Talmud with reference to menstrual blood.34

Finally, some rabbis may have derived a connection between “foul menstrual blood” and serpents from contemporary Zoroastrian dualism.35 Purity was a central concern in the practice and mythology of this dualistic Iranian religion. Maintaining physical purity strengthened the forces of the benevolent deity Mazda, while impurity aroused the evil god Ahriman. As human forms of pollution were believed to take on great importance in the cosmic battle between good and evil, Zoroastrians scrupulously observed menstrual laws as a means of averting the forces of Ahriman.36

Babylonian rabbis knew Zoroastrian menstrual terms and taboos. For example, according to BT Ta’anit 22a, a jailor in a Persian town who was familiar
with Zoroastrian purity laws protected a betrothed Jewish girl from rape by pouring wine lees on her skirts and calling her a distana, Middle Persian for menstruant. Presumably, Zoroastrian rapists would be deterred by menstrual impurity. Beruriah’s sister similarly identified herself as a distana to deter would-be clients when trapped in a brothel. Samuel Secunda suggests that the term distana may have been a common Aramaic term in Sassanian Persia used, like the Hebrew phrase “ki teme’ah ani” (I am impure to you), to deter undesired sexual advances.

Zoroastrian menstrual terms may have influenced Jewish practice. Rav Ashi, for example, claimed the term distana for Jewish practice, attempting to prove its Hebrew origin by its resemblance to the biblical locution, “the way of woman is upon me.” Moreover, the term appears in the Talmud in one of only two explicitly disparaging characterizations of menstruants: women are advised to identify themselves as Persian distana rather than as Hebrew nid-dah to deter the sexual advances of snakes — an association that suggests the rabbis were acquainted not only with the Zoroastrian impurity laws but also with the Zoroastrian menstrual myth.

According to Zoroastrian cosmogony, the female power Geh (literally, “whore”), “the personification of the impurity of menstruation,” tried to strengthen the weakened evil god Ahriman during his cosmic battle with the benevolent deity Ahura Mazda. After two failed attempts, she managed to arouse the evil deity by professing a plan to wage war on Ahura Mazda and the world. These words “delighted” the “evil spirit” and he “kissed Geh upon the head, and the pollution that became menstruation became apparent in Geh.” In another version of the myth, the spirit of menstruation went on to become Ahriman’s demon whore and chief of all “whore demons.” Her explicit mission was to “defile females; and the females, because they were defiled, might defile the males, and [the males] would turn aside from their proper work.” She was “the most grievous adversary of the Righteous Man.”

According to some midrashim, the serpent, identified with Satan, instills impurity into Eve just as Ahriman makes menstruation apparent in Geh. Menstruation is neither the creation of a benevolent God nor a divine punishment; rather, it is ab initio the product of evil.

These mythological underpinnings of menstruation, rarely mentioned in the Talmud, appear prominently in Kabbalah. Just as the terrestrial serpent instills filth in Eve, the filthy primordial serpent instills menstrual impurity in the Shekhinah. For example, Isaac of Acre explains that “the evil inclination...
is the primordial serpent who cast his filth upon the woman [Shekhinah] and this is the blood of menstruation.”47 In the Zohar, Rabbi Shim’on bar Yohai formulates a dualistic version of this idea. He explains that when the Shekhinah is weakened by the sins of the world, she cannot protect herself from evil.48 Samael, the leader of the forces of impurity, is then drawn to her innate qualities of Judgment and impurity, and instills in her the polluting powers of the sitra ahra in the form of menstrual blood.49 She is then declared impure and is considered an unfit mate for the pure supernal male. The menstruating Shekhinah remains attractive to Samael, and, in keeping with a basic rule of Zoharic magic whereby elements are drawn to their own kind,50 she becomes his concubine.51 She attracts the spirits of impurity and becomes a source of danger to all who approach her.52 The Shekhinah may then be called Lilith, the demon consort of Samael, and compared to a concubine (pileenegash), maidservant (shifah), or harlot (zonah).53 Just as the Zoroastrian Geh becomes the “demon whore” of Ahriman, the Shekhinah becomes Samael’s impure concubine.

It is impossible to conclusively prove any direct Zoroastrian influence on kabbalists. Given their predilection for mythological interpretations, they may have independently enlarged upon the Talmudic story of the serpent instilling his filth into Eve to create the image of the Shekhinah as impure concubine. However, some medieval Jewish halakhists were certainly aware of Zoroastrian menstrual laws. Maimonides, for example, explains that among the “remnants of the Magians,” the menstruating woman “remains isolated in her house; the places upon which she treads are burnt; whoever speaks with her becomes impure; and if a wind that blows passes over a menstruating woman and a clean individual, the latter becomes impure.”54 Moshe Idel has suggested that ninth-century French Jews entertained a belief in the evil thought of the deity that was adapted from Zoroastrian myth,55 and in the thirteenth century, kabbalists may also have been influenced by Joseph Ha-madan, a member of the literary circle that created the Zohar, who may have been acquainted with Zoroastrianism.56 In Hebrew, Joseph is named R. Yosef ha-ba mi-Shushan ha-Birah (Rabbi Joseph who came from Susa the Capitol). Susa was an Iranian city, popularized in the Book of Esther, that came to be known as Hamadan in the Middle Ages. Shlomo Pines suggests that Joseph’s “appellation was not gratuitous, that it meant to point to some kind of connection between him and Susa; he may have been a native of that city or have sojourned in it.” Following this line of thought, Joseph may have become

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acquainted with Zoroastrianism while in Hamadan and later transmitted its precepts to the Circle of the Zohar in Castile.57

The Shekhinah as Impure Concubine

Thirteenth-century kabbalists framed the notion of relations between the Shekhinah and Yesod or Tiferet in terms of biblical descriptions of the relationship between God and Israel, who when faithful is a loving wife and when unfaithful is an adulteress.58 The conjugal images of terrestrial Israel were eventually applied to supernal Israel, the Shekhinah, and used to describe her dual nature. Some kabbalists add purity status to the myth. When pure, the Shekhinah is the divine consort of Yesod or Tiferet; when impure, she attracts the powers of impurity and becomes a polluting concubine.59

Moses de Leon conflates purity status and marital status in his Mishkan Edut, where he explains that wisdom and her enemy, the alien woman (Proverbs 7:3–4), are one in the Shekhinah.60 Her nature turns upon her purity status. When pure, the Shekhinah is wisdom; when menstruating, she is the “alien woman.”61 The male (Tiferet) and female (Shekhinah), who are usually united, separate only when “her adulteries are between her breasts” (Hos. 2:4), that is, when she menstruates. For when niddah, the Shekhinah is banned by her true spouse, attracts the attention of Samael, and becomes “his woman.” This sexual union is considered “impure as menstrual impurity” because the Shekhinah behaves “like a harlot who abandons her ancestral guide”62 and has gone “astray in her own evil works.”63 Menstrual blood, like a chemical reagent, effects an ontic change in the Shekhinah, and she enters into a new combination.

The Possession of the Menstruating Shekhinah

Other kabbalists believed that the menstruating Shekhinah did not actually change into an evil adulteress at the onset of her flow, but rather was displaced by an evil maidservant. Ecclesiastes 5:8 literally reads “a king controls a field that is cultivated” (melekh le-sadeh ne’evad). The Zohar suggests an alternate interpretation by which the Hebrew ne’evad modifies the king rather than the field.64 According to this reading, “the king becomes subject to the field.” The king represents the pure Shekhinah (malkhut), who fears the Lord, like the woman in Proverbs 31:30. The field represents her impure
mirror image, the strange woman of Proverbs 7:5. Thus the mystical sense of Ecclesiastes teaches that when impure, the Shekhinah becomes subject to this alien woman and is then plunged into darkness, and “the handmaid becomes heir to her mistress” (Prov. 30:23). She may only regain her rightful position in the supernal realm upon purification.

The RM similarly finds the menstruating Shekhinah and the evil maidservant in Proverbs 30:23.65 The mistress is the Shekhinah; the handmaid, an evil maidservant.66 When the Shekhinah menstruates, the text explains, her holy aspect, the good inclination, represented by the letter heh, wanders away.67 No longer the unblemished mistress, she becomes possessed by the impure handmaiden. The exegete gives his interpretation levitical authority by adducing the quotation “like a plague in the house” and relating the “plague,” originally a reference to leprosy, to “the impure blood of menstruation.”68 The menstrual plague enters the “house,” a commonplace euphemism for the female reproductive organs, and transforms the Shekhinah from pure bride to evil maidservant. The Shekhinah can become purified and be restored to her original state only when she, like a house infected with leprosy, is purged of all impure elements. Purification from the menstrual flow is thus the only means of exorcising the evil maidservant.

The RM also relates the image of the handmaid heir to her mistress to lunar symbolism.69 The Shekhinah as moon is considered good when she is full and pure, and bad when she is incomplete and impure. These external states reflect internal changes. When the moon is full, she is able to join with the third patriarch, Tiferet, and with the Righteous One (Tsaddiq), Yesod. When she is in darkness, however, she becomes possessed by the maidservant. The handmaid usurps the good aspect of her lady and exiles her to a prison under the dominion of Samael.70

Menstruation as Exile

The nonsequential concurrent explanations of the menstruating Shekhinah by the maidservant or concubine also become a means of explaining the popular myth of the exile of the Shekhinah. According to Talmudic legend, the Shekhinah accompanied the community of Israel into exile. In the Kabbalah, this myth is transferred to the sefirotic realm, and the Shekhinah herself is exiled from the other divine sefirot.71 Tishby describes four different versions of her exile: (1) the Shekhinah, like a concerned mother, goes into exile to
protect her children; (2) God sends the Shekhinah into exile to protect her children; (3) God sends the Shekhinah into exile as a form of punishment; (4) the Shekhinah goes into exile when dominated by the forces of the “other side.” Some kabbalists assimilate this latter formulation into the concept of the menstruating Shekhinah.

When the Shekhinah is niddah, her holy aspect departs, and she becomes evil. She is banned from the divine sefirot and must remain in exile. In his “Mystery of the Exile of the Shekhinah,” Joseph Angelet explains that the Shekhinah goes into exile when she is forced to separate from her husband and “nurse” exclusively from the attribute of unmitigated Judgment. This sefirotic representation appears in rabbinic literature among discussions of the ten types of impurity in man and the ten degrees of holiness in the land of Israel. The land of Israel represents the Shekhinah; the ten degrees of holiness, the divine sefirot; and the ten impurities, the side of impurity. The land of Israel, that is, the Shekhinah, may be revealed when she is able to receive effluxes from the ten sefirot, the ten degrees of holiness. When she becomes polluted by the forces of the side of impurity, however, she is exiled and an evil maidservant assumes her position.

This close association between exile and menstruation bore directly on halakhic practice. In the Zohar, men are warned against violating the laws of niddah lest they bring about the exile of the Shekhinah. In Leviticus, God warns Israel not to commit sexual transgressions lest they defile the land (Lev. 18:25). Kabbalists interpret this verse as referring not merely to the terrestrial land of Israel but to the supernal land as well. Sexual relations with menstruating women on earth have the theurgic power to pollute the Shekhinah. Once polluted, the Shekhinah is niddah, banned from the holy sefirot, resulting in her exile.

The Secret of the Serpent

In his “Secret of the Serpent” (Sod ha-Nahash), Joseph Gikatilla offers a different spin on the opposition between impure menstrual blood and the holy Hekhal. He argues that menstrual laws are a theurgic means to maintain boundaries between the polluted serpent and the sefirotic realm, and as such they serve a positive function. Gikatilla believed that everything in the world, including evil, has a purpose. “There is no evil that does not contain some good . . . there is nothing evil in its proper place.” Harmony will
prevail as long as the boundaries between good and evil are maintained. If barriers break down and “the externals enter the internal, or the internals [enter] the externals,” however, then “all orders will be corrupted.” For Gikatilla, observing menstrual separation is an essential means of maintaining temporal boundaries. Women are forbidden for approximately twelve days a month. Trespass over this temporal restriction violates the boundaries between the pure and impure realms and enables the serpent to enter the divine sanctuary.

Female impurity, like the impurity of the first fruits, is time-bound. The term for first fruits (orlah) derives from the same root as the term for foreskin (orlah). According to Eilberg-Schwartz, this suggests that both immature fruits and the penis must wait a requisite amount of time and be “pruned” in order to be sanctified and productive. Leviticus Rabbah extends this analogy to the menstruant:

“Three years it shall be forbidden for you” (Lev. 19:23), after which is written, “You shall not eat anything with its blood” (Lev. 19:26). Now what connection is there between this text and that? The Holy One, blessed be He, in effect says to Israel: “You wait three years in the case of forbidden fruit, yet you do not wait for your wife to observe the period of her impurity.”

According to Leviticus, a niddah is biblically forbidden for the first seven days, orlah for the first three years. After the established waiting period, however, both are permitted and their use is blessed. Gikatilla gives cosmic significance to this analogy. Women, like the serpent, are beneficial as long as they respect their boundaries; while the serpent is bound by place, women are bound by time. Sexual relations during the period of purity are a blessed act because they foster divine and mystical union. Sexual relations during impurity are illicit because the act breaks the barriers between the holy and the impure in the cosmos. Menstrual laws are therefore necessary to maintain the proper boundaries between the pure and the impure, good and evil.

Gikatilla’s analysis of menstruation foreshadows Mary Douglas’s now classic anthropological treatment of Leviticus in *Purity and Danger*. Douglas describes purity laws as a means of imposing order on a chaotic world. She believes that “dirt is essentially disorder” and that societies construct purity laws to impose order on “untidy experience.” Purity rituals, however, are not universal:
The power in the universe is ultimately hitched to society, since so many changes of fortune are set off by persons in one kind of social position or another. But there are dangers to be reckoned with, which persons may set off knowingly or unknowingly, which are not part of the psyche, and which are not to be bought or learned by initiation and training. These are pollution powers which inhere in the structure of ideas itself and which punish a symbolic breaking of that which should be joined or joining of that which should be separate. It follows from this that pollution is a type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure cosmic or social are clearly defined.88

Maintaining proper boundaries between purity and impurity thus not only reflects but also maintains the social order. Douglas suggests that the Israelites’ belief in the impurity of bodily issue reflects their political situation. “The threatened boundaries of their body politic,” she writes, “would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity, and purity of the physical body.”89 This understanding, which Douglas has since refined, applies to the position of Jews in medieval Castile. To be sure, Castilian Jews benefitted from a cultural renaissance in thirteenth-century Castile. Alfonso the Wise fostered the intellectual environment that facilitated Gikatilla’s spiritual expression. However, the king also needed to create a cohesive state out of disparate communities with longstanding regional differences. Christianity became the means of uniting people with different customs and dialects. Reinforcing boundaries between Christians and all others was an essential part of what Flory has called Alfonso’s “devotional statecraft.”90 His Siete Partidas (1265) required that Jews wear distinctive clothing, in an effort to forestall miscegenation between Jews and Christians; Jews responded by reinforcing boundaries between Jews and Christians, pure and impure.91

THE SEX OF THE MENSTRUATING SHEKHINAH

Up to this point, I have argued that the Shekhinah’s menstrual flow occasions a profound change in her state of being. Some representations of the Shekhinah, however, suggest that her flow brings about no essential change in a nature that is fundamentally sinister. Rather, it is when the Shekhinah is not menstruating that she changes — from female to male.92
The Zohar often describes the benevolent Shekhinah in male terms or as a grammatical masculine. She is the “angel that is sometimes male and sometimes female. When it bestows blessing upon the world it is male and it is called male like a man who bestows blessings upon a woman. When it stands in Judgment upon the world it is called female.” Moreover, Elliot Wolfson has shown that some kabbalists not only make the female male, they also make the male female: positively perceived female biological functions, such as pregnancy and nursing, become functions of the male. For example, Binah, considered the supernal mother of the seven lower sefirot, and Shekhinah, the lower mother, are denoted by masculine pronouns or described in phallic terms when lactating or pregnant; parturition and lactation are compared to ejaculation. Because medieval kabbalists perceived the menstrual cycle as evil, menstruation is the one female process that remains securely feminine. Indeed, when menstruating, the supernal woman separates from her male counterpart with no possibility of divine union.

In his Sefer Ta’amie ha-Mitsvot, Joseph Hamadan provides several other examples of the Shekhinah’s versatile gender. In a discussion of the need to send the impure out of the camp of the Shekhinah, he explains:

when the Shekhinah rests upon the Temple, he is the supernal Glory (Kavod), and there is no need for impurity in the face of the power of impurity that enters [the sanctuary] because it is not in his [the Shekhinah’s] nature to rest within their four cubits.

When the Shekhinah is completely pure, she becomes a he. When the Shekhinah is “blemished,” however, she remains a she. The menstruating Shekhinah is consistently of feminine gender in Hamadan’s rationale for not engaging in sexual relations with menstruants. In his Sefer Tashaq, he alters the gender of the Shekhinah according to her purity status: “When she is blemished, she wears different clothes . . . she does not adorn herself or wear jewelry before the Holy One blessed be He, as when he is whole.” The Zohar likewise compares the purified Shekhinah to a masculine king.

Thirteenth-century kabbalists conceived the Shekhinah as living the life of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde that turns, like a revolving sword, according to her purity status. In the next chapter, we turn to the impact of this mythology on scientific and religious attitudes toward women.
The Interplay between Myth, Science, and Law

Medieval kabbalists derived some aspects of their understanding of menstruation from contemporary science. Medieval physicians and natural philosophers used ancient Greek philosophy to justify women’s physical inferiority. Certain thirteenth-century kabbalists adapted these ideas to prove Jewish women’s spiritual inferiority. These mystical ideas filtered into sermons and ethical literature to the detriment of medieval Jewish women.

Science and faith were inextricably intertwined in the Middle Ages. Clerics would attend to both spiritual and physical needs because the need to care for the body coincided with the need to care for the soul. Until the rise of universities in the twelfth century, monasteries were the centers of scientific knowledge, and even after the professionalization of medicine in the thirteenth century, Christian physicians continued to look to the Bible, in addition to their license, as the source of their authority. Indeed, many Christian physicians who received medical degrees went on to pursue higher degrees in theology. It is not surprising that several Christian theologians used medical theories in the service of theology.

This nexus between science and faith was not limited to Christianity. Although Jews were excluded from universities, some aspiring physicians studied medicine unofficially with members of the medical faculty while others studied privately. Just as many Christian physicians were theologians, many Jewish doctors were also rabbis who could employ scientific theories in support of theological and legal arguments. In fact, Kabbalah emerges contemporaneously with the rediscovery of Galen and Aristotle in the Latin West, and some thirteenth-century kabbalists endeavored to discern divine secrets with the aid of the “new” Greek knowledge.

There is, however, no such thing as knowledge in the abstract. Michel Foucault has taught us that no knowledge exists outside the confines of a given
cultural context. And medieval culture was patriarchal. Thus, when a misogynist theology is wedded to scientific theories that justify female inferiority, the results are devastating. The kabbalistic understanding of the laws of the menstruating woman is a prime example of this failed marriage. In Leviticus, menstruants were deemed ritually impure for cultic practice (15:19) and prohibited to their husbands in a catalog of forbidden sexual relations (20:18). After the destruction of the Temple, sexual relations with menstruants continued to be forbidden on the basis of Leviticus 20:18. Isaac the Blind (1165–1235), one of the first kabbalists in Provence, and Nahmanides (1194–1270), the leader of the Jewish community in Barcelona, both used medieval natural philosophy and science in the service of kabbalistic theology to explain the mystical secret inherent in this prohibition. Isaac the Blind adopted a Galenic model of menstruation to locate the menstruating woman within the sefirot of Judgment, the locus of evil in the sefirotic realm. Nahmanides, by contrast, used, with far more devastating results, an Aristotelian model in which medieval medicine, natural philosophy, and Kabbalah reinforce one another to create an image of the menstruating woman as the human incarnation of the demonic other side (sitra ahra). The restrictive laws of the Beraita d’Niddah (BdN) were the only means to forestall her dangers.

ISAAC THE BLIND AND THE ORIGIN OF MENSTRUAL BLOOD

The Mishnah identifies five different types of impure menstrual blood. These flow from the “room” or “fountain” (maqor), terms traditionally used for the uterus. In one of the earliest kabbalistic discussions of gynecology, Isaac the Blind refines this anatomical description by defining the term maqor as the left section of the uterus. According to this reading, impure menstrual blood flows not from the entire womb but rather from the left section alone. Isaac explains that only sinister blood is impure because “all things which come from the left, the side of stern Judgment, are governed by impurity, as it is written, ‘from the North shall evil break loose’” (Jer. 1:14). The menstrual flow is the material manifestation of the powers of stern Judgment; its red hue reflects the fiery color of its source.

Isaac the Blind’s theology of menstruation demonstrates an intersection of kabbalistic theosophy, medicine, and natural philosophy governed by ancient Greek science and philosophy. The low esteem in which women were held in
ancient Greece expressed itself in contemporary gynecology in a dichotomy of left and right. In his article “On the Pre-eminence of the Right Hand,” Robert Hertz explains that dualism was essential to the social organization of developing societies. “On the one side, there is the pole of strength, good, and life, while on the other there is the pole of weakness and evil . . . All oppositions presented by nature [including the opposition of male and female] exhibit this fundamental dualism.”

A dichotomy between the right and left sides of the body was a natural outgrowth of this worldview. The right represented everything sacred, strong, and male, while the left represented the profane, weak, and female.

This assumption was implicit in Greek culture and became the basis of Hellenistic medical conceptions of sexual differentiation. For example, the Hippocratic *Superfetation* explains that the right and left testicles emit semen independently. Semen emitted from the left testicle engenders females, and semen from the right, males. Other Hippocratic writings suppose that sex is determined by the placement of the seed in the uterus. If seed is placed on the left side of the uterus, the child will be female; if placed on the right, male. Later, Galen supplies physiological justification for Hippocrates’ understanding of sexual differentiation. Hippocrates assumed that the human womb, like the wombs of other mammals, contained two or more pockets. Aristotle compared the womb to testicles and concluded that the uterus must also be made up of two parts. Galen believed that the chambers of the uterus correspond to the number of teats. Since women have two breasts, the human uterus has two distinct cavities, a right and a left. The right side of the uterus receives cleansed blood from the large blood vessels, the vena cava and the “artery from the great artery,” while the left side of the uterus receives bloods that “do not start from the great vessels themselves, but from the vessels passing through the kidneys.” Galen explains that

the left testis in the male and the left uterus in the female receive blood still uncleaned, full of residues, watery and serous, and so it happens that the temperaments of the instruments themselves that receive the blood become different. For just as full blood is warmer than blood full of residues, so, too, the instruments on the right side, nourished with pure blood, become warmer than those on the left.

The sex of the child is determined by the conditions in which the seed grows. If a seed from the right testicle grows on the right chamber of the uterus, the
embryo will be nourished by warm blood and become male; if the seed from the left testicle is implanted in the cold and wet left section, the embryo will become female. Qualitative differences between men and women therefore begin in utero. Males are engendered from superior material, in warm and dry conditions, on the highly valued right side of the uterus, while women are created from residue in the cold and wet left. Women’s inferiority is justified “biologically.”

These Hippocratic and Galenic ideas on sexual differentiation are absent in the Talmud.18 Rather, the rabbis present an understanding of sexual differentiation more akin to Democritus’ and Aristotle’s. Many ancient physicians believed that both men and women possess generative seed that combines to create a fetus. Male seed is semen, while female seed is either menstrual blood or the vaginal fluid emitted during sexual arousal.19 Democritus asserts that sex is determined by which of these seeds prevails in the uterus after sexual intercourse.20 Aristotle maintains Democritus’ essentially “combative model” of sexual differentiation, yet denies the existence of generative female seed.21 Semen alone generates the form of the fetus, while menstrual blood merely provides the material. Aristotle compares this process to making cheese: just as rennet curdles milk to create cheese, male seed creates the child out of female matter. Rather than attribute sexual differentiation to the interaction of two types of seed, Aristotle attributes it to the kind of nourishment available to the child in utero. Semen, being form, will strengthen the fetus and create a male, while menstrual blood, being material, provides nourishment sufficient only to create a female. Gender depends upon which type of nourishment prevails. “If the male semen gains mastery, it brings [the material menstrual blood] over to itself,” engendering a male. “If it [semen] gets mastered, it changes over either into its opposite [a female] or else into extinction.”22 The Talmud explains that if a woman emits her seed first, the child will be male, while if the male emits his seed first, the child will be a female. Although the rabbis cite a biblical proof text as their source, they seem to present a simplified version of the theories of Democritus and Aristotle. When the first emission of seed is overshadowed by the second, the second sex prevails.23

Isaac the Blind uses this biological theory to interpret theosophical mysteries. Sefer Yetsirah (Book of Creation), for example, classifies the Hebrew letters aleph, mem, and shin as the “three mothers of the alphabet.” God seals the male with the combination emesh (אמש) and the female with ashem (אשם). Commentators undertook to explain why the male is identified with the
combination *aleph, mem, shin* and the female with the *aleph, shin, mem* — that is to say, why the inversion of the letters should determine a change in gender. Isaac the Blind finds his answer in the talmudic theory of sexual differentiation. Just as a woman’s seed is the first component emitted in the production of a male child, the female element *esh* (fire), associated with the letter shin, is the first element in the creation of a male, producing the term *ashem*. Just as a man’s seed is the first component emitted in the production of a female child, the male element, *mayim*, associated with the letter *mem*, is the first element in the creation of a female, producing the term *emesh*.

Isaac the Blind offers another interpretation of the rabbinic theory of sexual differentiation to justify the purity laws of the parturient. He compares the struggle between the male and female seeds in the uterus to the conflict between Judgment and *Hesed* in the sefirotic realm. When a woman emits her impure red seed first, the pure, white, male seed will prevail. White will prevail over red, right over left, *Hesed* over *Judgment*, and a male child will be born. Because purity triumphs, the parturient remains impure for only seven days. When a man’s pure white seed comes under the domination of impure, red, female seed, red will prevail over white, impurity over purity, *Judgment* over *Hesed*, and a female child will be born. The parturient will remain under the influence of the dominant impure forces for fourteen days.

The Talmud was not Isaac the Blind’s only source of medical knowledge. He also drew upon contemporary scientific theory. Though not a physician himself, Isaac the Blind lived near one of the greatest centers of medical learning in medieval Europe, the College of Montpelier. Although Jews were officially forbidden to matriculate, many Jews studied with members of the faculty independently. Moreover, his father, Abraham ben David, had written *Ba’alei ha-Nefesh*, a guide to proper sexual behavior influenced by contemporary Christian attitudes toward sexuality. It is likely that Isaac was familiar with popular medical ideas.

Greek medicine remained influential long after the ancient period. After the fall of the Roman empire, Syrian Christians began to translate Greek medical texts and the Septuagint into Aramean. Expelled by the Byzantine Church, Nestorian Christians from Syria found refuge in Iran, where they quickly built a school and a hospital. The Muslims who captured Persia in 636 appreciated the Nestorian effort and encouraged translation of Syriac medical works into Arabic. Galen exerted greater influence on Arabic medicine than Hippocrates, Soranus, or Aristotle. His gynecological theories were systematically codified.
in Arabic medical treatises and later transmitted to medieval Europe by means of Latin translations.  

Constantine the African was the first to introduce Galenic gynecology to the Latin West in his *Pantegni*, a translation of al Majusi’s *Al Kunnas al Maliki*. By the twelfth century, Galenic gynecology was the standard in medical education, and the opposition between the right and left chambers of the uterus became established in the medieval scientific imagination.

Since a number of the translators were Jewish (the most notable being the Provençal physician, Moses ben Samuel ibn Tibbon), Jewish physicians were certainly familiar with Galen’s bicameral theory of the uterus. Indeed, we have manuscript evidence that at least three gynecological texts, including *Sefer ha-‘Em shel Galynus* (Galen’s Book on the Womb) were available in Hebrew as early as 1199. The opposition between right and left became so prevalent in Jewish medicine that Maimonides, who had ridiculed Hippocrates’ and Galen’s belief that sexual differentiation depends on the right or left origin of generative forces, conceded that “male fetuses, in most cases, are conceived by a woman on the right side [of the uterus], whereas the female [fetus is conceived] on the left side. The reverse of this situation only happens exceptionally.”

Just as Isaac the Blind used talmudic medicine to support his theosophical exegesis, he adapted medieval gynecological theories to fit his kabbalistic needs. Isaac’s student, Ezra of Gerona, followed suit. In his commentary on the commandments, he explains:

Another matter that you need to know is that five things are impure because their coloration tends toward red — but that which tends toward white is pure. The H. akhamim were experts, proficient in recognizing whether its hues (resulting from vaginal discharge) were from the source (*maqor*), and thus presumed to be from the left side — this is the blood that comes from the chamber (*hedem*) and the upper chamber (*aliyah*) — or whether they tended toward white, and are thus presumed to be of the right side, and thus pure.

The sages of the Mishnah described vaginal blood as ranging in color from black to red to yellow. Ezra of Gerona is blind to these distinctions, and considers all vaginal discharge the fiery product of the left.

The dichotomy between right and left is ubiquitous in Kabbalah. The left was denominated feminine, impure, and evil, while the right was denominated male, pure, and good. The Galenic theory of the bicameral uterus offers
biological evidence for this kabbalistic precept. Isaac the Blind fuses Galen’s anatomical theory with talmudic tradition and restricts the rabbinic definition of the term maqor, the source of impure menstrual blood, to the left section of the uterus. The sinister sefirah of Judgment, like the left chamber of the uterus, becomes the repository of uncleansed, impure blood that contributes to the engenderment of female children. Just as the flawed medical theory that women are produced on the left side of the uterus supports philosophical conceptions of female inferiority, the belief that women and menstrual blood originate in the left chamber of the uterus supports the kabbalistic belief in the evil nature of the niddah.

**NAHMANIDES**

Like Isaac the Blind, the medieval polymath Nahmanides (1194–1270), incorporates contemporary gynecological theories into his understanding of the nature of menstruants. In his commentary on the levitical interdiction against approaching menstruants, Nahmanides explains that God permits man to engage in sexual relations for procreative purposes alone. A fetus can be created only out of pure female blood. Menstruating women cannot contribute to the material creation of a fetus because their blood is impure. Indeed, “how could menstrual blood create a fetus when it is itself a deadly poison that can kill any living being who drinks or eats it?” Any fetus that actually eats menstrual poison will die; any trace of menstrual blood in the uterus will inflict either leprosy or boils. The Torah therefore forbids sexual relations with menstruating women because they cannot engender healthy offspring.

Nahmanides then shifts the emphasis of his commentary from the “medical risks” of menstrual blood to the dangers of the niddah herself. Nahmanides reports that a menstruant who gazes into a ferrous mirror at the beginning of her flow will cause red drops, like drops of blood, to appear on the metal. “For the harmful and evil nature of the issue produces an odor and this foul air attaches to the mirror just as a basilisk kills with its gaze.” This evil influence may infect a man just as it does a mirror and contaminate his mind and body. Nahmanides reads this notion into his Torah commentary, interpreting the levitical phrase “her niddah will be upon him” as biblical proof for menstrual contagion.

Nahmanides supports his claim on the basis of empirical evidence, stressing that these powers are not folkloric fantasies but “actual experiences.”
He considers the menstruous gaze “one of the most miraculous works in nature” and warns of the very real danger of menstrual pollution. In his commentary on Leviticus 20:18 — If a man lies with a woman in her infirmity and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow and she has exposed her blood flow — Nahmanides explains that the menstruating woman is like a fountain (maqor) of blood that must not be exposed lest she spew forth her evil and destructive waters. She is taboo to “the holy seed” (Isa. 6:13) for all the days of her impurity, until she immerses herself in water, for only then she will be purified in her mind and body and become completely clean.

Nahmanides’ focus on the dangers of the menstruant in his Torah commentary is in stark contrast to the original intent of the priestly writers, who sought to distance impurity and danger from the menstruant. Leviticus lists four categories of people with issue — the zav, ejaculant, niddah, and zavah — who are barred from the Temple cult because of the demands of ritual purity. The priestly authors, however, only explicitly describe the zav, ejaculant, and zavah as ritually impure (tamēh). This absence of the niddah is not an oversight. Rather, it likely reflects the priestly authors’ reaction to the practices of other Near Eastern cults that believed menstruants were dangerous because they were possessed by impure spirits. Indeed, according to Leviticus 15:20–25, menstrual blood contaminates, not the menstruant. She renders impure only what lies beneath her — that is, objects that could become polluted by menstrual blood. In contrast to other Near Eastern cultic leaders who concentrated on exorcising spirits of impurity from the polluted, Israelite priests distanced impurity from the menstruant herself to the items that she touched, partly in order to suppress the notion that her impurity constitutes any kind of possession or contagion.

Nahmanides’ Torah commentary is unusual among his writings in its treatment of niddot. His Laws of Niddah (Hilkhot Niddah) and his Novellae on the Tractate Niddah (Hiddushim al Massekhet Niddah) show no disparagement of menstruating women. Moreover, Nahmanides was a physician, and we know that he treated gynecological problems. Elsewhere, he describes the menstrual flow as a natural “cleansing of surpluses [of blood]” and disagrees with Rashi and Abraham ibn Ezra, who suggest that menstruation is a sickness. How could Nahmanides, a physician with experience treating patients, subscribe to a notion as fanciful as the ocular powers of the menstruant?
Nahmanides’ scientific education introduced him to the concept of the menstruous eye. During the course of the thirteenth century, gynecological theory shifted from the Galenic tradition to the Aristotelian, with unhappy consequences for the status of women in both Jewish and Christian society. And Nahmanides, thirty years Isaac’s junior, incorporates these new ideas into both his Torah commentary and his sermon “Torat ha-Shem Temimah” to support his theology.

Aristotle believed that females were “incomplete males.” Maleness was the norm and femaleness, a “lack of maleness.” Men represented active, spiritual form and women, passive, material matter. Among ancient authors, Aristotle alone denied that women produce seed. Aristotle also construed menstruation differently. Most Greek physicians believed that menstruation had a purgative function. Hippocrates, for example, believed that women, being spongier than men, cannot expel fluids easily and must menstruate. Men can expel waste by other means. Galen similarly explains that men are warmer than women and better able to purge themselves of superfluous fluids through physical activity, perspiration, and excretion. Women, whose humor is cold, must menstruate in order to excrete excess fluid and maintain their humoral balance. Here, too, the menstrual flow is purgative. Aristotle, however, takes a different approach. He understands blood as a bodily nourishment and deduces that blood not used as nourishment becomes bodily residue. Men, who are hot and dry, are able to convert this residue into a generative force, semen, while in women, who are cold and wet, it remains “unconcocted” and must be excreted in the form of menstrual blood. Menstrual blood is a manifestation of female incapacity.

The “menstruous gaze” that Nahmanides reports emerges from this Aristotelian view. In Aristotle’s treatise On Dreams, we read that menstruation afflicts the entire female body. Because the eyes contain so many blood vessels, they are particularly susceptible to this “feverish disorder of the blood.” Hence, a fiction about the ocular powers of the menstruant: just as that which is heated and becomes hot may heat something else in turn, not only does one see, but the very act of seeing creates an effect. Therefore,

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 a new one the stain is not easy to remove, but if it is an old one there is less difficulty) . . . The reason for this is that . . . when
menstruation takes place, as a result of a feverish disorder of the blood, the
difference of condition in the eyes, though invisible to us, is none the less
real; and the eyes set up a movement in the air. This imparts a certain qual-
ity to the layer of air extending over the mirror, and assimilates it to itself;
and this layer becomes the surface of the mirror.  

This fiction was a fruitful one. Pliny, for example, claimed that menstruants
could dull mirrors. In the Middle Ages, the menstruant was explicitly asso-
ciated with the basilisk, a poisonous serpent whose glance or breath was be-
lieved to cause death. As the basilisk is filled with venom, the menstruant is
filled with blood, and by analogy, the menstruant’s blood becomes venom-
ous. Both the basilisk and the menstruant emit their poison through their
eyes and corrupt the air. The air then transmits the poison into the eyes of
others.

After the thirteenth-century rediscovery of Aristotle in the Latin West,
natural philosophers confl ated the popular association of the menstruant and
the basilisk with the account of the menstruant in On Dreams. Albertus Mag-

nus, for example, explained that because the eye is a very passive organ, the
menstrual flow can easily infect the eyes of a menstruant and emit a vapor
that infects everything she sees. Associating menstruants with basilisks, he
warns his readers to “to beware of every woman as one would avoid a venom-
ous serpent and a horned devil.” The Secrets of Women, a popular treatise
erroneously attributed to Albertus Magnus, expatiates upon the dangers of
the menstrual eye:

It should be noted that old women who still have their monthly flow, and
some who do not menstruate, poison the eyes of children lying in their
cradles by their glance. . . . This is caused in menstruating women by the
flow itself, for the humors first infect the eyes, then the eyes infect the air,
which infects the child. This is the opinion of the philosopher in the book
on Sleeping and Waking.  

The text goes on to associate the menstruant with the basilisk, remarking that
menopausal women are particularly venomous because they cannot purge
themselves of their bodily toxin. All women are said to emit menstrual poi-
son through their eyes, corrupt the air with noxious vapor, and transmit
venom. This method of transmission corresponds to medieval notions of con-
tagion, believed to be an effect of corrupted air. Menstruation thus becomes
a communicable disease to which the menstruant alone is invulnerable, for she, like the basilisk and other snakes, is immune to her own poison. Thus by the thirteenth century, the focus of physicians and natural scientists has shifted from a purgative to a polluting function of the menstrual flow.

This understanding informs Nahmanides’ Torah commentary. While the Talmud often associates women, menstruants, and snakes and mentions magical ocular powers, Aristotelian natural philosophy influenced Nahmanides’ commentary on Leviticus. In his only other disparagement of menstruants in his Torah commentary, he cites “ancient philosophers” as his source for the menstrual eye. He explains that Rachel does not rise to greet her father Laban because “in ancient days menstruants kept themselves very isolated. They were described as niddot (the banned ones) because they neither approached nor spoke with people. For the ancients in their wisdom knew that their breath is harmful, their gaze is injurious and makes a bad impression, as the philosophers have explained. I will mention their experience in this matter in the future.”

Moreover, in his famous sermon “The Law of the Eternal God Is Perfect,” in which he justifies the use of science for the service of Torah, Nahmanides states that the laws “prohibiting marital relations with his wife — that is, in the days of her menstruation — is due to natural law.” And, at the end of the section on menstruants, he quotes from his biblical commentary and specifies Aristotle as the author of the menstrual eye, stating:

There is also a natural manifestation of the [harmful effect of menstrual blood]. Aristotle has written in his book — and it is a true experience — that if, at the beginning of her issue, a menstruant woman were to intently concentrate her gaze upon a glass mirror, there would appear on the glass a red spot resembling a drop of blood as large as a grain of mustard. Now if [the image of the blood] cleaves to the glass, how much more will it cleave to the child, the power thereof being as that of a viper which slays by sight.

Nahmanides not only identifies Aristotle as his source but, like Albertus Magnus, draws upon medieval folklore to call menstrual blood a lethal poison and compare the gaze of the niddah to the gaze of a basilisk.

This notion contributes to an etiology of leprosy. Both Jewish and Christian traditions had long associated menstruation with inflammatory skin conditions, but no previous Jewish source offered an explicit physiological explana-
tion for the correlation. Once menstrual blood is understood to be a poison, the link becomes clear; a dose of poison will kill an embryo and the slightest trace will affect fetal development. The exterior skin illness becomes nature’s way of ridding the body of the dangerous blood and poison. Moreover, medieval physicians did not distinguish between leprosy and venereal disease because leprosy was perceived as a punishment for sexual excess. Sexual relations with menstruants, a form of sexual deviance, would therefore transmit “leprosy,” that is to say, venereal disease to the male partner as well. Women, by contrast, were relatively immune to sexual diseases and leprosy because they were immune to their own poison.

The science historian Tzvi Langermann characterizes Nahmanides’ attitude toward science as one of both acceptance and devaluation. He explains that “scientific knowledge — defined here as that knowledge that is grounded in observation of the phenomena, especially as this stands in contrast to knowledge that is received through the Jewish tradition or extracted from the very texts of Torah — has a certain validity. However, empirical study of the natural world, detached from any metaphysical, other-worldly considerations, is in the opinion of Nahmanides, simply not a very worthwhile undertaking.” Why, then, does Nahmanides adopt contemporary medical and scientific conceptions of menstruants, and why do these conceptions figure only in his Torah commentary and in his Sermon “The Law of the Eternal God Is Perfect”?

THE MENSTRUOUS EYE AND KABBALAH

Nahmanides believed that the Torah contained divine secrets. Consequently, his Torah exegesis, rather than his legal writing, became the main venue for his kabbalistic interpretations. This methodology explains his unique treatment of menstruants in his exegetical works. In his halakhic and medical material, Nahmanides interprets menstruation literally (as peshat) and portrays menstruation as a natural state of being; in his Torah commentary and in his sermon, by contrast, he incorporates Aristotelian natural philosophy and folklore in the service of his mystical theology to allude to the kabbalistic mystery of menstruation.

Nahmanides directly associates the need for menstrual separation and mystical pursuits in his sermon “The Law of the Eternal God Is Perfect,” where he immediately follows his discussion of the ocular power of menstruants with
a discourse on “the wisdom ‘that is hidden from the eyes of all living and is broader than the sea,’” that is, the Kabbalah. In his Torah commentary, Nahmanides, quotes from the Beraita de Massekhet Niddah. Thus, his understanding of menstruants is not solely a product of his adaptation of Aristotelian natural philosophy. Rather, his incorporation of medieval scientific ideas dovetails with notions about menstruants already extant in the Jewish tradition, and he uses both in his Torah commentary to throw light on the mystery of the menstruating woman.

Nahmanides usually introduces a kabbalistic tradition with the words “by way of truth.” In his commentary on Leviticus 18:19, however, he compares the power of the menstrual eye to a miracle, describing it in the terms of Job 37:16 as one of the “wondrous works” of “him who is perfect in knowledge.” Nahmanides believed that miracles demonstrated divine knowledge, providence, and creatio ex nihilo, and these he considered divine mysteries. For example, he believed that creation out of nothing refers to creation from Ayin (nothing), the “Divine Nothing” through which creation emanated. His classification of the menstrual eye as a miracle may likewise refer to a divine secret.

Moreover, Nahmanides believed that the laws of forbidden sexual relations — which include sexual relations with menstruants — were kabbalistic mysteries. The Bible states that a man who has sexual relations with a menstruating woman is punished by karet, a technical term that literally means extirpation, but which the rabbis interpret as premature death. Kabbalists believed that the punishment refers instead to the destruction of the soul. Most of the thirty-six transgressions that carry this penalty are sexual in nature. Because sexual misdeeds bring forth inviable offspring, the sexual transgressor is repaid in kind: just as he extirpates the life of a potential soul, his own soul will be extirpated through karet.

Nahmanides alludes to an association between sexual misdeeds and karet in his Torah commentary. Leviticus states that those who engage in forbidden sexual relations are exiled from the Land of Israel. Why sexual transgression should be punished by exclusion from the land becomes clear when the verse is deciphered kabbalistically. Nahmanides interprets the Land of Israel in two ways: literally and kabbalistically as the Shekhinah. One who engages in illicit sexual activity is literally expelled from the Land of Israel and symbolically from the Shekhinah. He who engages in sexual relations with a menstruating woman, the last of the catalog of illicit sexual relations, is punished by the far more serious penalty of karet, extirpation. Exile allows the possibility of
return; karet is permanent. By analogy, we may infer that Nahmanides would consider one who engages in sexual relations with menstruants as forever cut off from communion with the Shekhinah.85

NAHMANIDES’ STUDENTS

Nahmanides hoped that his uninitiated readers would be satisfied with his references to the Kabbalah, and he forbade the uninitiated to delve into the text’s deeper meaning. This, of course, was an invitation. The prohibition aroused the curiosity of so many scholars and laymen that it created “a major kabbalistic activity of interpreting those passages on which Nahmanides specifically prohibited further speculation.”86 Nahmanides’ own students heeded their master’s desires and transmitted kabbalistic traditions only orally. Their students, however, enlarged upon Nahmanides’ exegesis in writing.87 Four students of Rabbi Solomon ibn Adret wrote supercommentaries on Nahmanides. Many other exegetes, such as Isaac of Acre, Bahya ben Asher, and Menahem Recanati, wrote biblical commentaries based upon Nahmanides’ work. All these exegetes assume that Nahmanides revealed the “mystery of the separation from the niddah” in his exegesis on Leviticus 18:19.88

The supercommentaries convert Nahmanides’ references to natural philosophy into the terms of kabbalistic myth. For example, Bahya ben Asher and Shem Tov ibn Ga’on explain that a menstruant’s gaze will cause blood spots to appear not only on a mirror but also on other forms of polished metal, such as a dagger blade. Rather than attribute this power to bad air (ruah ra), as in Aristotle’s theory of contagion, Bahya ben Asher and Shem Tov ibn Ga’on read ruah ra mythologically as “bad spirit.” They explain that evil spirits of impurity transfer menstrual impurity from its origin on the divine left to terrestrial women by possessing women at the onset of their flow.89 Impure spirits empower the niddah, enabling her to alter the nature of a mirror or a sword.90 These kabbalists explicitly formulate the long expurgated belief that spirits of impurity possess menstruants.

For the Catalonian kabbalist Bahya ben Asher, for instance, the issue of the niddah proves her affinity to impure forces. The Mishnah describes impure menstrual blood in terms of grapes and wine.91 Bereshit Rabbah identifies grapes as the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: Eve sinned when she squeezed these grapes and gave them to Adam.92 Thirteenth-century kabbalists associate Eve’s sin of squeezing the grapes with the flow of impure blood. They explain
that there are two types of grapes: white grapes represent the benevolent se-
firot, and red or black grapes represent stern Judgment. Eve sinned by squee-
zing the red or black grapes of the left side. In so doing, she attached herself to
evil and introduced death and destruction into the world. Her punishment,
menstruation, fits her crime: Eve’s blood must spill because she spilled both
human blood and the red juice of the grapes of Judgment. Bahya ben Asher
applies this analogy to all menstruants, explaining:

Eve was punished with the blood of menstruation because it has the same
appearance [as the wine, the symbol of harsh Judgment] and it is dis-
charged from her with the same appearance. And this is the mystery of the
Scripture’s language when it described a kind of wine in terms of blood. As
it is written, “and from the blood of the grape you drank foaming wine”
(Deut. 32:14). And it is written, “he washes his garments in the blood of
grapes; and his vesture in the blood of grapes” (Gen. 49:11). . . . This is
the reason that the sages, may their memory be blessed, said that man
produces white [seed], while woman produces red [seed]. The sin of the
mother [Eve] and her daughters is similar with respect to the wine, which
causes the evils of the world.

Wine, grapes, and the color red are all symbols of stern Judgment in nondual-
istic presentations of evil. Menstrual blood is the external mark of women’s
affinity to the sinister sefirah. Just as Judgment is the seventh sefiarah, Leviti-
cus deems menstruants impure for seven days; just as Judgment secretes
wine lees, women discharge menstrual blood.

ECHOES OF NAHMANNIDES IN CASTILE

Nahmanides and his interpreters directly influenced Castilian attitudes to-
ward menstruants. Rationalizing the laws of niddah in Sefer ha-Rimmon, Moses
de Leon paraphrases Nahmanides’ Torah commentary and then adds one sig-
nificant sentence to his summary: within the laws of niddah “lies a secret.
[There is] another deep issue in the mystery of the law of the niddah and the
need to separate from her, and what I have said is sufficient.”

We may infer his meaning from a similar discussion in the Zohar.

There is no defilement in the world greater than that of menstruation. The
defilement of menstruation is more severe than any other type of defile-
ment. The man [who has such intercourse] becomes impure himself, and renders impure all those who are near to him. Wherever they go they drive the Shekhinah away. Furthermore, he brings a grievous illness upon himself and the child that he begets, for once a man has relations with a menstruant, the impurity takes hold of him and remains in every part of his body. At that moment, a spirit of impurity is cast upon the child that is begotten, and he will live all his days in a state of defilement for his very foundation rests on a defilement that is greater and stronger than any other, for as soon as a man approaches a menstruant woman, the impurity takes hold of him, as it is written, “her impurity is communicated to him” (Lev. 15:24).99

For Aristotle, menstruants are contagious because they have bad air; for de Leon, menstruants are contagious because spirits of impurity possess them.

Elsewhere, the Zohar further mythologizes this understanding and refers to menstrual pollution as “the mystery of the primordial serpent.”100 Rabbi Shim’on bar Yohai explains:101

We have learned that one hundred and twenty-five different types of impurity descended to the earth, which are united with the side of the powerful serpent. We have learned that twenty-seven of the greatest ones unite with women and cleave to them. Woe is he who approaches her at this time. For he who approaches a menstruant will cause a defect above. Because through this sin the powerful serpent is awakened, and he casts his filth in a place that does not need it. And he unites with the female (the Shekhinah). And the hair of the male grows, and the female is polluted and her hair and nails grow. And at this point stern Judgment is awakened in this world and all are polluted. As it is written, “because he has defiled the Lord’s sanctuary” (Num. 19:20). The sanctuary of the Lord is polluted by the sins of men. We have learned that which is written, “and I will put enmity between you and the women” (Gen. 3:15). The serpent cast twenty-four different types of impurity into the woman when he united with her, as in the numerical equivalent of the word “and enmity.” Twenty-four types of [impurity] are aroused above and below. Her hair and nails grow and [through this] Judgment is awakened in the world. And when a woman wishes to purify herself she must cut the hair that has grown during the days of her impurity. And she must cut her nails and all similar filth.102

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Samael, the leader of the demonic other side (sitra ahra) of impurity, is responsible for the one hundred and twenty-five different types of human pollution. He instills women with the twenty-four gravest forms. These spirits of impurity possess women and occasion their menstrual flow. Menstruating women become the terrestrial incarnation of the demonic realm.

**The Possession of the Niddah in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah**

Many Castilian kabbalists represent terrestrial menstruants as vessels possessed by the force of evil at the onset of their flow. This understanding significantly differs in degree from the assumptions of the BdN, where menstruants are only tacitly possessed by spirits of impurity. In the Zohar, by contrast, the menstruant is possessed by the spirit of impurity, Samael, who replaces her particular soul with his own impure spirit. Consequently, Samael’s different manifestations determine the character of the niddah. When Samael is a sorcerer, the niddah becomes a witch; when Samael is the evil inclination, the niddah becomes sinful; and when he is the Angel of Death, the niddah becomes a killer. The Zohar conceives of a niddah far more dangerous than the menstruant presented in the BdN because the powers of the niddah are limited only by the particular character of Samael that she assumes.

**Niddah and Magic**

Many cultures associate menstrual blood with sorcery. Ancient Greek and Roman authors believed that menstrual blood could be used for both good and evil; it could cure disease and drive away stormy weather and vermin, but it could also cause abortions and kill crops. The Talmud also attests to a belief in the magical power of menstrual blood. Menstrual blood was kept for magical purposes, and blood-soaked rags were traded for their powers. Moreover, some rabbis considered women to be particularly skilled magicians. For example, Rabbi Shim'on claims that “most women engage in sorcery.” These perceived magical powers may have been related to women’s impure status.

The Talmud describes magic in terms of a dichotomy between purity and impurity. Sanctioned magic is performed by means of the pure name of God, and unsanctioned magic is performed by means of the names of impurity and
impure spirits. The rabbis, moreover, believed in the tenets of sympathetic magic, whereby like elements attract. Thus, in order to perform illicit and, therefore, impure magical acts, the male magician must visit a polluting area, such as a graveyard. A sorceress, by contrast, would not need to travel, because the belief in the magical power of menstrual blood promoted an association between the ritually impure menstruant and impure magical acts. For example, in a discussion of magical practices, the Talmud relates that a menstruant who passes between two men has the power to kill one at the beginning of her flow, but at the end of her flow she will only have the power to cause strife between them. The strength of the menstrual flow determines the strength of women’s magical powers.

Thirteenth-century kabbalists reveal the fear of menstruants implicit in this rabbinic teaching. Kabbalists believed that Samael empowers all acts of sorcery and necromancy. They describe the sitra aḥra as the ten crowns of sorcery and impurity that correspond to the ten crowns of faith. In order to gain access to these impure powers, practitioners of unsanctioned magic must physically pollute themselves. Bilḥa, for example, would empower himself through seminal emissions; women become empowered through the female analog, the menstrual flow.

According to Midrash ha-Neḥelam Ruth, menstruation is the source of all witchcraft. The Torah states that “you shall not suffer a sorceress to live” (Deut. 18:10–11). The Talmud explains that the term “sorceress” appears in its feminine form to demonstrate that “most women engage in sorcery.” Midrash ha-Neḥelam Ruth, by contrast, explains that the term is feminine because the serpent instills the filth of sorcery, physically manifest as menstrual blood, into Eve, not into Adam. Sorcery is the province of women alone.

The Zohar on Genesis states that all women originate on the left side of harsh Judgment, black magic, and impurity. Among women, menstruants are most closely associated with the side of impurity through the laws of sympathetic magic; consequently, they become more powerful magicians than their ritually pure sisters. Midrash ha-Neḥelam Ruth makes the relationship between menstruant and magic explicit in a reformulation of BT Pesahim 111a.

It is taught: If one passes between two women who are menstruating, he will be overtaken by a demon. It will not leave his body unless something is done for him; mortal danger or murder is in store for him. And if they are not menstruating, the evil eye holds sway over his body or his wealth.
Both menstruating women and ritually pure women can harm through magic. Menstruating women, however, are far more powerful sorceresses. They infect others with their own spirit of impurity and thereby endanger both body and soul. The possessed individual will be freed of the impure spirit only if “something is done for him,” that is, if the spirit is exorcised. Ritu- ally pure women, by contrast, afflict only the material realm by means of the evil eye. The Zohar warns men to guard themselves from woman during her days of impurity because she is then linked to the spirit of impurity. If she should perform magic during this time, she is likely to be more successful than when she is ritually pure. Therefore anything that she touches [during this time] or anyone who approaches her will become polluted. Happy is Israel that God gave them the Torah and said to them, “do not come near a woman during her period of impurity to uncover her nakedness” (Lev. 18:19).

Male mystics may shield themselves against menstruants and impurity with sanctioned magical techniques. In Hekhalot literature, adepts who had successfully adjured the Sar Torah could distinguish between different types of blood in order to help women determine their purity status. They could also recognize “all the deeds of men, even when they do them in the chamber of chambers, whether they are good or bad. . . . If one is suspected of having intercourse with a menstruating woman, he [the adept] knows it and recognizes him.” Kabbalists could divine one’s sexual improprieties through the arts of physiognomy and chiromancy. After a man has had sexual relations with a menstruant, a red eagle appears on his forehead and other marks appear on his arms. Should he repent, the sign on his face will darken, and the mark on his right arm will disappear. The mark on his left side, the side of Judgment, however, remains permanently engraved.

The Niddah and the Evil Inclination

In the Bible, ritual impurity is usually represented as a state of being. Ritual impurity was used as a metaphor for sin, but the ritually impure Israelite was not considered sinful or immoral. By contrast, the Bible presents a second category of impurity, moral impurity, in which one becomes morally polluted through grave sins, such as idolatry, murder, and especially sexual sins. These acts defile not only the sinners, but also the sanctuary and the land of Israel.
Leviticus 18:27 exhorts Israel to refrain from sexual sin, lest “the land spew you out for defiling it” — an image directly invoked by Jeremiah in his account of the expulsion. Although, by the rabbinic period, tsara’at impurity has come to be the mark of the sin of gossip, the rabbis maintain the distinction between ritual and moral impurity. In Kabbalah, however, there is no distinction between ritual impurity and moral impurity. Physical impurity is the mark of moral pollution (and vice versa) because the polluting agent Samael is both the source of immorality and the spirit of impurity.

From the tenets of sympathetic magic, Castilian kabbalists concluded that the morally impure attract the evil inclination. Because the evil inclination is also the spirit of impurity, he physically pollutes them upon contact. Conversely, the physically impure attract the spirit of impurity who, by virtue of his evil nature, inclines them toward sin. The Zohar explains this process as follows:

Samael comes to man with deceit and treachery in order to turn him aside from the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He. Just as it seduced Adam and brought death to the whole world, so too it seduces mankind and causes them to become defiled, and whoever becomes defiled attracts the spirit of impurity and becomes attached to it.

Many thirteenth-century Kabbalists, therefore, portray menstrual impurity as a mark of moral pollution. For example, the RM remarks that the five types of impure menstrual blood “inflict guilt.” The Geronese kabbalist ibn Shue’ib describes the precise nature of this guilt:

all states of tum’ah are polluted because they derive from the evil inclination, etc. . . . Anyone who deals with it [the evil inclination] is impure and so the corpse [is impure], because death does not come without sin, and the emission of semen in vain [is impure because it] comes from the side of the evil inclination. The niddah, zavah, and parturient [are impure] because the bloods come from Eve who brought death upon herself.

The Niddah and the Angel of Death

Ibn Shue’ib builds upon an association between menstruation and death already suggested in Leviticus. Since “the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev. 17:11), the loss of menstrual blood may be perceived as the death of a potential...
That the rabbis of the Talmud made such a correlation is evident in the rabbinic pejorative for the uterus, grave (qever). This connection took on ritual significance after the demise of the Temple cult, when corpse pollution lost its cultic relevance and many of the taboos that had been associated with death were redirected toward the menstruant. Thirteenth-century kabbalists enlarge upon the traditional association between menstruants, spirits of impurity, and death, for in Kabbalah, the menstruant is not merely associated with generic spirits of impurity, but rather, she is thought to be possessed by the spirit of impurity, also known as the Angel of Death.

The Talmud identifies Satan with the Angel of Death. Isaac of Acre introduces women into this equation, explaining that women and the Angel of Death both derive from the attribute of Stern Judgment. Their common origin bears upon their common purpose: both women and Satan are responsible for death in this world. Some Castilian kabbalists add that the menstrual flow is the source of women’s mortal powers. Samael, in the guise of the Angel of Death, possesses women at the onset of their flow and transforms them into agents of death. For example, as the Zohar explains, when Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, she separated life from death, thereby introducing the autonomous powers of death into the world. Menstrual separation reenacts this primeval separation of life and death. Man, the symbol of life, must separate from his menstruating wife, the autonomous force of death.

Some texts attribute the menstruant’s lethal powers to the female demon Lilith the infant slayer rather than to the male Samael. The RM describes the five different types of impure menstrual blood as the mark of the evil maidservant Lilith, who monthly infects women with her “strange blemish” (mum zar). When possessed, menstruants assume her qualities and become infant slayers rather than the more powerful Angel of Death.

THE BERAITA D’NIDDAH AND KABBALAH

The BdN had an elaborate pedigree within the Jewish mystical tradition. As we have seen, the traditions of the BdN display a mystical consciousness very similar to that found in Hekhalot literature. They were then adopted by the German Pietists, and adapted by medieval kabbalists. Castilian mystics chose BdN traditions because they understood them as a part of mystical tradition first through Ashkenaz and then through Nahmanides. Having concluded that these mystically influenced halakhot fulfill the requirements for
mystical practice, several kabbalists integrated them into their own theosophical ideas and symbolic structures, applying them to the Shekhinah in their mystical speculation and to terrestrial women in their halakhic choices.

The BdN has two major emphases: separating menstruants from the sacred and the possession of menstruants. In contrast to earlier Jewish mysticism that had generally adopted the strictures of the BdN with regard to the sancta but largely ignored the demonic component, kabbalists conflate the two and justify the need to isolate the menstruants from the sacred by means of an elaborate demonology.

There is an implicit connection between isolation from the holy and possession by a demon. Menstruants must separate from the sancta because menstrual impurity is anathema to God. Abandoned by the holy, they may become susceptible to ungodly, demonic influence. Thirteenth-century kabbalists make these tacit assumptions explicit and substantiate them with kabbalistic myth. At the beginning of her flow, the menstruant becomes possessed by excess Judgment (Din) or by the demonic other side (sitra ahra). She is transformed into an ungodly agent of evil and becomes a source of danger to both man and God. Kabbalists thus give theological justification to a belief in the possession of menstruants and the need to separate them from the sancta. Kabbalists therefore conceive of a niddah even more dangerous than the menstruant presented in the BdN and these conceptions impinge on women’s social and spiritual opportunities.

The traditions of the BdN were known to the earliest kabbalists in Provence. Isaac the Blind affirms the existence of “a great deal of material regarding the strictures of the niddah,” including the beliefs that her “name was niddah,” that “her words were forbidden,” and that “they are completely polluted.”147 Nahmanides, the first kabbalist to explicitly name the text now known as the Beraita d’Niddah, describes its strictures in detail:

as they mentioned in the Beraita of Massekhet Niddah, a scholar is forbidden to inquire about the welfare of the niddah.148 Rabbi Nehemiah stated that even the words that come forth from her mouth are impure.149 Rabbi Yodan said that a man may not walk behind a menstruant and step upon the dirt [upon which she passed], which is impure as death. [Just as she or possibly he that walked over her ashes is impure like a dead person] so too are the ashes upon which she treads and it is forbidden to derive any benefit from the work of her hand.150

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Nahmanides incorporates laws into his Torah Commentary that isolate the niddah from the community at large because of her perceived danger. Many other kabbalists follow suit. Bahya ben Asher, for example, mentions that menstruants’ spittle and smell are destructive and that menstruants render impure the dust upon which they tread. Later kabbalists, such as Moses de Leon, Menahem Recanati, Joseph Hamadan, and Menahem Tsioni, not only cite the BdN, but also justify its strictures by means of kabbalistic mythology. For example, the BdN expatiates upon the physical dangers posed by the menstruating woman. Sexual relations with a niddah during her blood flow will engender lepers, cripples, and children with boils. Proximity to a menstruant will cause great scholars to forget their studies. The Zohar explicitly ascribes the root of these effects to Samael, here described as the spirit of impurity. Sexual relations with a niddah are dangerous because the act “causes the Spirit of Impurity to take hold of him [her partner] and remain in every part of his body.” This same spirit is cast upon the child that is begotten, and he will live all his days in a state of defilement, for his very foundation rests on a defilement that is greater and stronger than any other, for as soon as a man approaches a menstruant woman the impurity takes hold of him, as it is written, “her impurity is communicated to him” (Lev. 15:24).

The BdN also warns menstruants to neither cut their nails, “lest one [paring] fall to the earth and cause whoever steps upon it to break out in boils,” nor brush their hair near their husband’s bed lest any stray strand pollute their husband and children. The Zohar rationalizes these fears. Shim’on bar Yohai explains that the powers of evil that grow in menstruants inhere in the growth of their hair and fingernails. Although possession formally ends after twelve days of separation, vestiges of demonic power still remain in these newly grown parts of her body. Women must therefore cut their nails and their hair before ritual immersion to remove all traces of demonic pollution before purification.

KABBALAH AND IBERIAN JEWISH CULTURE

Kabbalistic traditions met with an eager audience in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Iberia. Castilian mystics collected and copied Zoharic traditions. The Zohar, Joseph Gikatilla’s Sha’arei Tsedeg, Abraham ben David’s Ba’alei
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...and the book Bahir are explicitly mentioned in a recently discovered early fifteenth-century inventory of twenty-six Jewish libraries in Jaca (Aragon). Moreover, the Zohar’s ethos informed several pre-expulsion ethical works and popular halakhic treatises. These popular texts were part of an innovative effort by pietistic scholars in Spain to educate laymen and reform Jewish practice in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Mystical traditions on menstruation provided a powerful arsenal for rabbis bent on promoting observance of menstrual separation.

Me’ir ibn Aldabi (Toledo, 1310–1360) quotes extensively from the BDN and cites Nahmanides’ “scientific” theory that menstruants dull mirrors, in his Shevilei ha-Emunah. The fourteenth-century Sefer ha-Hinukh blesses God who removed from His people, whom He chose, all things that harm the body, because it is an instrument for the soul that knows its maker. Similarly he removed us from the parturient, the niddah, and the zavah on the days she is counting, until they are cleansed from the excess within them which is a bad thing and causes illness.

Isaac Abo’av devotes an entire chapter to the dangers of menstruants in his Menorat ha-Ma’or, an ethical and halakhic treatise completed in the beginning of the fourteenth century. Abo’av begins his excursus paraphrasing Nahmanides’ commentary on Rachel and the idols. He explains that the ancients completely isolated menstruants because — as philosophers have explained — menstruants are dangerous. Menstruants would sit alone in tents; no man would dare enter. That is why Lavan immediately understood his daughter Rachel’s meaning when she stated “the way of woman is upon me.” Lavan did not even respond; the ancients did not speak with menstruants because their words were polluted. The complete isolation of menstruants fell into desuetude because of ignorance and lust. Abo’av explains that the holy Torah resuscitated menstrual separation to sanctify Israel, to separate them from the nations, to distance them from “zohama” and to guard them from this danger so they can produce their seed sacredly. Aware of the secret of generation, of injury, of repair, of impurity, and of purity, the Torah commanded us to observe the laws of niddah and the days of zivah (which are stricter than those of niddah) . . . The Blessed One who knows all secrets, who in his kindness acts as the healer of Israel, in his wisdom, arranged these (laws) as he deemed necessary.
And the sages of Israel who understood the mystery of separating menstruants, said in the Beraita de Massekhet Niddah “a Talmid Ḥakham may not inquire about a menstruant’s welfare.” Rabbi Neḥemiah said “her words are impure.” Rabbi Yoḥanan said “a man may not walk behind a niddah nor step upon her dust, it is as impure as the dead. And one may not benefit from the work of her hand.”

Aboʿav’s repeated use of the term “mystery” (sod, nistarot) and his use of the term zoharot within the context of menstruants strongly suggest his familiarity with mystical teachings about the menstruant. Aboʿav describes the authors of the BdN as sages privy to the hidden meaning of menstrual laws. This appeal to secrecy does not allow for dissenting opinions; it does not matter that the laws of the BdN do not cohere with other rabbinic treatments of menstrual laws. The authors of the BdN have had special insight into God’s laws, and their interpretations must be observed.

Israel al Nakawa (d. 1391) wrote an ethical work also entitled Menorat ha-Maʿor in which he translates the Zoharic mystery of the primordial serpent who instills twenty-seven of the greatest types of impurity into women in the name of Midrash Yehi Or. “Woe is he who approaches her at this time. For he who approaches a menstruant will cause a defect above.”

Abraham Saba (d. 1508) reads Leviticus 15 through a Zoharic lens in his Torah commentary Tsror ha-Mor. He explains that the laws of menstruation, discharges, and scale disease appear in the same biblical portion because human pollution originates in the side of perfidy and impurity. Adam and Eve introduced genital flux impurity into the world when they sinned. The zav and baʿal qeri are drawn from Adam’s sin; the zavah and niddah are drawn “from the side of Eve’s impurity. Female impurity, however, is doubly potent, because God told Eve that “I am doubling and redoubling your toil (Genesis 3:16).” The side of the spirit of impurity overpowers menstruants and inflicts them doubly.

The Zohar’s influence extended beyond the borders of the Iberian peninsula even before the expulsion in 1492. The Ashkenazi biblical exegete Menahem Tsioni incorporates the Zohar into his commentary on menstruants in his Sefer Tsioni. The Italian kabbalist Menahem Recanati cites Zoharic traditions about menstruants in his Commentary on the Torah and in his Rationales for the Commandments. He asserts that one who engages in sexual relations with menstruating women causes a defect in the supernal merkavah. The later
Byzantine *Sefer ha-Qanah* similarly explains that proper sexual relations will foster divine union, while sexual relations with impure women will introduce impurity into the Hekhal, the vestibule in front of the Holy of Holies that symbolizes the Shekhinah. The laws of the niddah embrace all other acts of forbidden sexual relations, which introduce impurity into the realm of the holy.175

Menahem Recanati and the anonymous author of the *Sefer ha-Qanah* also assert that the souls of those who transgress the laws of the arayot will transmigrate into impure creatures that befit their crime. Recanati explains that a man who has relations with a menstruous woman will transmigrate into a Gentile woman, one who has sexual relations while niddah.176 The author of the *Sefer ha-Qanah* offers an alternative and suggests that one who has sexual relations with a menstruating woman may transmigrate after death into the body of a leper, a punishment particularly suited to the crime:

> when a woman is a niddah, she is outside and distanced. When one has relations with her, he causes all the impurities to enter the Hekhal. He will therefore return to earth as a leper who sits alone, banned like a niddah, outside of the camp. One who transgresses any of the laws of forbidden sexual relations is liable to the punishment of karet and the niddah comprises all of the arayot.177

Lepers and menstruants are both banned, niddah, from the community of the holy. A man who has sexual relations with a menstruating woman may, instead of undergoing a gender change and becoming a menstruant in his next life, become the male equivalent — a leper.

Kabbalists draw upon natural philosophy, medieval medicine, and folklore in order to understand the mystery of the menstruating woman. In Kabbalah, women’s status is not only determined by terrestrial concerns but also by the myth of the menstruating Shekhinah. When these theological predispositions dovetail with the existing biases within the medical and scientific community, it creates a misogyny that affects women’s home life, health care, and heavenly aspirations. In medieval folklore, the menstruant is likened to a snake filled with venom. In Kabbalah, the primordial serpent fills the menstruant with his own venom and transforms her into a demonic force. The dangers that she can pose and the means by which kabbalists hoped to deter these dangers filtered into popular Jewish culture and had an impact on the spiritual opportunities of Jewish women in medieval society.
Mysticism & Menstruation
in Islam & Christianity
Building upon Temple cult traditions, physical purity became prerequisite for mystical vision in the late-antique and medieval Jewish tradition. This emphasis on purity not only barred women from “normative” forms of mystical expression but also contributed to the understanding of menstruation as an ungodly, demonic force. Thus, of the three major religions in medieval Europe — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — only Judaism cannot boast a single female mystic. Medieval Jewish women were barred from rabbinically sanctioned mysticism because of their innate impurity.

Purity rituals, however, were present in medieval Christianity and continue to be a fact of life in Islam. Why, then, wasn’t menstruation an obstacle to women’s spiritual expression for medieval Christian and Muslim women? The answer lies in the different function of purity in Christianity and Islam and in the distinct requirements for mystical success.

Although all mystics share the similar goal of divine gnosis, their paths to God differ — mystical practices are contextualized by religious experience. To have a successful encounter with the divine, the mystic must embody the qualities that are most highly esteemed by their religious tradition. Moreover, the mystic’s visionary experience will reflect their religion’s iconography and symbolism. While a Hekhalot mystic would purify himself from all physical and moral impurity in order to enter a heavenly Temple, the virgin Catherine of Siena would fast in order to see an image of the Virgin Mary. Analysis of the function of menstruation in Christian and Muslim mysticism not only sheds light on women’s spiritual opportunities but also serves as a means to distinguish what mattered most to the each religious tradition.
Menstrual Impurity and Sufism

Do not prevent the maid-servants of Allah entering the places in which he is worshipped.
SAHIH MUSLIM, 4:886

In Islam, laws of menstrual purity are part of a vast system of purity laws that govern Muslims’ daily lives. Because of its quotidian nature, impurity is not an unusual state for Muslims; consequently, menstruation loses much of its stigma, particularly within the Sufi tradition. Sufis enlarged the symbolism of impurity and designated spiritual, rather than physical, impurity the major obstacle to divine union. A pure-hearted Muslim menstruant could therefore engage in dhikr, remembrance of God, one of the most essential aspects of Sufi devotion. Purity of heart matters most for Sufi practice.

IMPURITY AND MENSTRUAL LAWS IN ISLAM

There are five central aspects or pillars of Islam. These are: (1) bearing witness to the unity of God and Muhammad as his prophet, (2) performing ritual prayer five times daily, (3) fasting during the month of Ramadan, (4) giving charity, and (5) pilgrimage to Mecca. Ritual purity is a precondition for the performance of all but the fourth pillar, charity.

The Qur’an describes three types of impurity — two that affect people, known as minor (hadath) and major (janaba), and one that inheres in things (najasa). Male and female Muslims may contract minor impurity by excretion, passing gas, sleeping deeply, and engaging in skin-to-skin contact with members of the opposite sex. Some juridical opinions hold that Muslims may become impure by vomiting, bleeding, and laughing uncontrollably. Those subject to minor impurity may purify themselves through wudu’, a ritual washing of the face, hands, and feet, and wiping of the head.
Male and female Muslims may contract major impurity, janāba, by ejaculation (sleeping or waking), menstruation, or parturition. Those affected by janāba (junub) purify themselves by ghusl, lustration, a ritual pouring of water over the body. These cleansings are meant for ritual rather than hygienic purposes. Indeed, the impure ejaculant, menstruant, and parturient do not need to wash their genitals to become pure. Moreover, should no water be available, both wuḍū’ and ghusl may be performed with sand or dirt (tayammum).

The third type of impurity, inherent impurity, or najāsa, refers to polluted things rather than people. Things that are najis include blood (except the blood of martyrs), dogs, pigs, dead animals, and wine. Muslims can never become inherently impure, but they can be affected by inherently impure things. For example, parents’ clothes may become soiled by their infant’s excrement. Simple washing of the affected area is the means to rid oneself of the najāsa impurity. There is no ritual ablution or lustration.

**MENSTRUAL IMPURITY IN ISLAM**

The laws for menstrual impurity, a form of janāba, are set down in the Qur’ān as follows:

They ask you about menstruation. Say, “It is a harmful thing; keep away from women when they are menstruating, and do not approach them until they are pure again. When they have purified themselves, have intercourse with them as God has commanded you.” Indeed God loves the repentant and He loves those who purify themselves.

This terse passage seems misogynistic. The Qur’ān defines menstruation as a harmful thing, and the verse is teaching men, rather than women, how best to observe the laws of menstrual purity. Indeed, the phrase “do not approach” recalls the Levitical commandment “not to come near” a menstruating woman for the purposes of sexual relations. Written for men, the Sura 2:222 emphasizes the way in which menstruation interrupts men’s sexual opportunity rather than how it preempts women’s religious obligations. According to Islamic law, however, menstruating woman cannot (1) say the five canonical prayers, (2) fast, (3) tarry in a mosque, (4) circumambulate the Ka’ba, (5) touch the script or recite the words of the Qur’ān. Given the all-encompassing nature of purity laws in Islam and the fact that Muslim menstru-
The Uniqueness of Muslim Purity Laws

In contrast to the Temple cult–based purity rituals in Israelite religion, purity rituals in Islam were never limited to a certain place or to certain persons. Rather, they are but one of an all-pervasive and comprehensive purity system incumbent upon all Muslims. Sleeping, defecating, and sexual relations — all of these daily human functions render Muslims impure. Purity and impurity factor into every aspect of observant Muslims’ lives, from the moment they wake up in the morning to the moment they go to sleep at night.

Because ritual purity is required to engage in most acts of Islamic ritual, both male and female Muslims must undergo daily purification. Purity laws in Sunni Islam further differ from medieval Judaism and Zoroastrianism because the impure person is not considered contagious or dangerous. As the historian Ze’ev Maghen explains, even the contraction of impurity does not render the “essence” of a human organism impure. Thus whatever defilement is “encountered” in the case of janāba is not “absorbed”: it somehow fails to penetrate or in any essential way alter one’s person.”6 Muhammad is reported to have said. “A believer is never contaminated/never contaminates.”7

MENSTRUAL LAWS IN ISLAM, REDUX

Indeed, if we revisit Sura 2:222 we may infer a very different understanding. Menstruation is defined as “a harmful thing” — misogynist?8 Perhaps at first glance, but not within the context of the Islamic purity system. Menstruation is a blood and, like all other bloods (including male blood),9 is considered inherently impure — najis; the menstruant, by contrast, is not considered inherently impure or dangerous.10 As soon as a woman’s flow ends, she purifies herself and may revert to all normal activities. There is neither the waiting period (or white days) nor the unique methods of purification that one finds in rabbinic Judaism. Rather, the Qur’ānic stipulation is very similar to laws of niddah propounded in Leviticus 15:19.11 Like the niddah in Leviticus, the menstruant in the Qur’ān must refrain from sexual intercourse for seven days, and menstrual blood, rather than the menstruant herself, is deemed impure. Marion Katz has shown that by virtue of “the Muslims’ special covenantal

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relationship to God [which] is grounded in their observation of His commands and prohibitions,” purity laws become a means by which women can actively participate in the new covenant. Muḥammad treated menstruants in an equally liberal manner. (His evenhandedness was likely born of his own experience — Muḥammad had many wives and fathered four daughters.) Just as Muḥammad became impure through ejaculation, the women in his family became impure through menstruation. And this practical approach is evident in the many traditions about menstruation recorded in Muḥammad’s name in hadīth literature. The hadīth on menstruation can be categorized in three ways: sexual matters, menstruating women’s proximity to the sacred, and the limits posed on menstruants’ observance. In all aspects, Muḥammad harbors no special prejudices against menstruants. Moreover, he is extremely liberal with respect to sexual relations. For example, because the Qurʾān explicitly prohibits only sexual intercourse with menstruants, Muḥammad permits other forms of physical intimacy. In one tradition, Umm Salama narrates:

While I was lying with the Prophet under a single woolen sheet, I got the menses. I slipped away and put on the clothes for menses. He said, “Have you become impure?” I replied, “Yes.” He then called me and made me lie with him under the same sheet.13

And Āʾisha and several of the Prophet’s lesser known wives reported that:

Whenever Allah’s Apostle wanted to fondle anyone of us (his wives) during her periods, he used to order her to put on an izār (waist wrapper) and start fondling her.” Āʾisha added, “None of you could control his sexual desires as the Prophet could.”14

Muḥammad strictly construes the Qurʾānic prohibition against engaging in sexual intercourse with menstruating women — with a lenient result. Sexual intercourse alone is forbidden; all other forms of intimacy are permitted. He orders his wives to don an izār, a garment tightly wound from a woman’s navel to her knees, which allows for physical intimacy but makes Qurʾānically proscribed sexual intercourse impossible.15

Muḥammad treats menstruants leniently in the public sphere as well. He allowed his menstruating wives to be near him while he was engaged in ritual prayer, permitted them to comb his hair while he recited from the Qurʾān, and instructed them to enter mosques to retrieve items for him.16 When his
wives expressed surprise at his liberality, he replied, “menstruation is not in your hand,” that is to say, neither communicable nor dangerous. Indeed, according to Uma, Urwa narrated:

A person asked me, “Can a woman in menses serve me? And can a junub woman (woman in a state of janāba) come close to me?” I replied, “All this is easy for me. All of them can serve me, and there is no harm for any other person to do the same.”

For Muḥammad, menstruation is just a state of being that precludes women from doing certain rituals and engaging in sexual intercourse. His matter-of-factness can be seen in the following report of ‘Ā’isha:

The Prophet said to me, “Give up the prayer when your menses begin and when it has finished, wash the blood off your body (take a bath) and start praying.”

Muhammad explains that women must only wait out the flow, wash the blood off of the affected area, and remove any stains from her clothes with water or by scraping in order to say her ritual prayers.

Muḥammad’s attitude toward menstruation can perhaps best be seen in the following hadīth:

‘Ā’isha [recounted] that the Prophet came to see her and found her weeping, having started to menstruate in Sarif before entering Mecca [on the Hajj]. He said “What’s the matter; have you gotten your period?” She said, “Yes.” He said, “This is something that God has decreed for the daughters of Adam. Perform all the rites of the Hajj, except that you may not circumambulate the House.”

Nonplussed, Muḥammad strictly construes the Qur’ānic prohibition and allows ‘Ā’isha to perform all of her religious responsibilities save the one explicitly forbidden — circumambulation of the Ka’ba. Moreover, he significantly describes menstruation as “something God has decreed for the daughters of Adam” rather than as the punishment of Eve. As Marion Katz explains, “This statement gently but unmistakably implies that menstruation is not an extrinsic product of female desire imposed as a result of transgression, but an integral part of God’s plan. It is not imposed on the daughters of Eve (presumably, as a result of her sin), but decreed for the daughters of Adam — that is, for the females of all humankind.”

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Muḥammad’s sympathy for women enabled menstruants to have a much more active role in Muslim life. For example, according to ḥadīth, a pious woman reported that she had heard the Prophet saying,

“The unmarried young virgins and the mature girl who stay often screened or the young unmarried virgins who often stayed screened and menstruating women should come out and participate in good deeds as well as the religious gathering of the faithful believers but the menstruating women should keep away from the Muṣallā (praying place).” Hafsa asked her surprisingly, “Did you say the menstruating women?” She replied, “Doesn’t a menstruating woman attend the Hajj and such and such (other deeds)?”

There is no presumption of stigma in this text or in many other ḥadīth. The menstruant is not dangerous or defiling. Menstruation, like ejaculation and all other forms of ritual impurity are “something God had decreed” for the children of Adam. Muslims — male and female — undulate daily between states of purity and impurity, and all impure Muslims are prohibited ritual prayer and circumambulation of the Ka’ba, but this restriction does not indemnify the impure. Rather, purification rituals are another means by which Muslims can participate in a covenantal relationship with God because he “loves those who purify themselves.”

Impurity Leads to Alternate Forms of Devotion

The ubiquity of purity laws in Islam contributes to the spiritual opportunities of Muslim women in two ways. First, it removes the stigma of menstruation, and second, the preponderance of impurity and the concomitant ritual prohibitions make other forms of devotion necessary.

Impurity precludes performance of salāt, the ritual prayer incumbent upon Muslims five times daily. There are, however, other types of prayer that do not require ritual purity: (1) free prayer — unscripted personal supplications and devotions; (2) pronouncements of love and yearning for God (munājāt); and (3) remembering God through meditation on his name or on Qur’ānic passages (dhikr). Of these three additional forms of prayer, only dhikr, remembrance, is a divine commandment incumbent upon both men and women, as is salāt. In contrast to salāt, however, dhikr can take place at any time and in any place, whether adherents are “standing, and sitting, [or] lying on their sides” (Sura 3:191). And although dhikr is not required five times daily, the

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Qur’ān instructs believers to “remember God often!” (33:41). Those who remember God will gain “forgiveness and a great reward (33:35),” and “their hearts will find rest” (13:28).

Ḥadīth literature enlarges upon the importance of dhikr. ‘Ā’isha reports that the Prophet mentioned/remembered Allah at all times of the day and night. Moreover, according to a tradition recorded in Malik’s Muwatta:

Yahyā related to me from Malik that Ziyād ibn Abi Ziyād said that Abu’ d-Dardāhad said, “Shall I not tell you the best of your deeds, and those that give you the highest rank, and those that are the purest with your King, and are better for you than giving gold and silver, and better for you than meeting your enemy and striking their necks?” They said, “Of course.” He said, “Remembrance (dhikr) of Allah ta ala.”

Thus, in ḥadīth literature and in the Qur’ān, ritual prayer is portrayed as the minimum obligation, and dhikr is the means to come closer to God.

Early Sufis built upon these extant spiritual traditions to make of dhikr one of their central mystical practices. Medieval Sufis envisioned their spiritual journey as a path filled with steps one needs to climb to reach the ultimate goal — divine union. Sufi writers in different periods enumerate these stages in different ways. These maqāmāt, as they are called, can range in number and may include repentance, abstinence, patience, poverty, humility, fear, piety, sincerity, gratitude, trust, satisfaction, certainty, recollection, intimacy, and nearness. They ultimately yield the “mystical” states of union, love, detachment and separation, and ecstasy. Meditation upon different divine names enables the mystic not only to embark upon the path but also to ascend from one stage to the next. Following the Qur’ānic command that states, “Allah’s are the fairest names. Invoke him by them” (7:180), the Sufi attempts to come closer to God by invoking and meditating upon his names.

The practice of dhikr became more ritualized over time. In the early stages of Sufism, the adept had the freedom to engage in dhikr at will; as Sufi practice developed, different dhikrs were matched to different stages of the Sufi path, and teaching the correct dhikrs became an essential aspect of a shaykh’s (master’s) instruction. Typically, adepts begin their journey meditating orally or silently upon a certain name in order to eschew all profane thoughts and to focus exclusively upon God. Once embarked on the path, they will invoke different names to rise through the different maqāmāt to God. Sufis believe that each divine name conveys a different attribute of God. Every step
of the Sufi path becomes a means of knowing a different aspect of God. Mastery of all the names is a means of attaining true gnosis. Indeed, al-Qushayrī (d. 1072), one of the most important medieval Egyptian Sufis, wrote that “[d]hikr is a strong pillar in the path toward God, nay the most important.”

It is worth emphasizing that physical purity is not a strict requirement for dhikr. Muslim menstruants did and do engage in this most acute form of prayer. Indeed, according to Muhammad ibn Khalifa al-Washtānī (1424 CE):

Menstruating women are allowed to engage in meditation (lit., “recollection of God” dhikr) and Qur’anic recitation — which is equivalent to prayer — and perform all the rites of the pilgrimage except circumambulation [of the Ka’ba]; a woman engaging in a pious retreat [who begins to menstruate] can do everything that she was doing before except pray and remain in the mosque, according to the two opinions current in our school.

Thus impurity does not preclude women from the dhikr, the type of spiritual devotion most esteemed in the Qur’ān and the central pillar of Sufi practice. Moreover, the Egyptian Sufi al-Qushayrī explains in his commentary on the aforementioned Sura 2:222 that engaging in dhikr enables menstruating women to achieve spiritual heights impossible in ritual prayer:

Everything that requires shame and modesty is not from the free will of the abd, and one of the deficiencies that is not the fault of the abd, is not an act of choice, and it is not the principle of Allah’s rule, and from this is what Allah has determined regarding women in this situation (menstruation). Then they are commanded to refrain from prayer during times of that situation, and prayer is the salvation of the master, and the fact that they do not come to the place of salvation (prayer) is a decree from Allah and not a sin of women . . . And in this there is an ishāra: If they are prohibited from prayer that requires bodily attendance, they are not prohibited from continual dhikr in the heart and on the tongue, and this lays out the prayer of carpet of nearness to Allah, as He has said: “I am the companion of him who remembers me.”

Some medieval Muslim legists were concerned that menstruating women would be penalized for not saying the salāt. According to al-Qushayrī, however, there were two reasons that menstruating women should not be considered spiritually inferior. First, menstruating women observe God’s command
when they avoid the prayers proscribed to them. Second, they are prohibited only from performing salāt — a prayer that al-Qushayrī defines “as requiring bodily attendance” — and not from “continual dhikr in the heart and on the tongue.” Because Sufis desire to free themselves of the confines of the body, any prayer that requires bodily attendance is by definition inferior to prayer that takes place in the heart. Menstruating women are not only the spiritual equal of men engaging in salāt but may actually spiritually surpass them when remembering God.

**WOMEN IN SUFISM**

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam is a patriarchal religion. The Qur’ān states that women “have rights similar to those (of men) over them in kindness, and *men are a degree above them*. Allah is Mighty, Wise.” Many Muslim theologians have interpreted this Qur’ānic assertion to women’s detriment, and folk literature is filled with negative characterizations of women. Though one may interpret the Qur’ān literally and assert that men are above women in body, one cannot make the same claim about the spirit, for the Qur’ān states that men and women are created from the same soul. Within the spiritual realm, men and women are equal. Indeed, some scholars suggest that medieval and modern Muslim women enjoy more spiritual freedom in Sufism than in mainstream Islam because “the credentials of mysticism are by definition of another order, from the grace of God, and therefore, the boundaries of sex, and of literacy and formal education do not apply.”

But Sufism is not antinomian. Although Sufis may imbue laws with additional spiritual symbols, they do not flout their prescribed observance. As we have seen, the quotidian nature of impurity in Islam led to the development of alternate forms of spiritual expression that were not regulated by one’s purity status, and to the absence of legal or purity barriers to menstruants’ engagement in dhikr, the central pillar of Sufi practice.

There is also a conceptual explanation for women’s involvement in Islamic spirituality. Sufis desire to leave the physical world to become one with God. When one puts off the corporeal being, physical purity is no longer an obstacle; the soul is pure. Thus, bodily impurity is not perceived as an obstacle to divine union. Moreover, according to the Persian mystic Rūmī (d. 1273), God is “independent of all purity and impurity.” Sufis internalize purity — making it a metaphor for the purification of the soul from anything other than

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God, rather than a description of a corporeal state of being. For example, the Persian Sufi Rûzbehân Bakli (d.1209) explains that “the true meaning of purity is to be separate from creation and to be characterized by the attributes of Reality.” Purification becomes a spiritual rather than ritual process. The fourteenth-century Persian poet Hâfiz Shîrâzî elaborates:

Whenever God appears to the heart that is witnessing Him, God’s purity purifies that heart of every fault and obstruction. Once the devotee’s heart has become purified, his intellect becomes liberated from subject to trial. Then because of this purity, his spirit becomes liberated from attention to the creation. Finally, his inner consciousness, having witnessed the Loved One, becomes purified through the enjoyment of loving-kindness.

When purity prevails in the foundation of the devotee’s nature, it affects his senses and limbs; spiritual purification radiates throughout his being, externally and internally. Whoever sees him, observes the majesty of God’s purity in him, for he is the mirror of God in the world, “Indeed, God loved repenters and those who are clean (Sura 2:222).”

The prophet said, “Purification is a part of faith.”

The Gnostic said, “Purification is the emergence of the inner consciousness from the darkness of stray thoughts so that it joins the light of God’s attributes.”

It is purity of heart rather than purity of body that is the key to Islamic mystical success.

It is noteworthy that Hâfiz Shirâzî underscores his symbolic reading of purity by choosing an excerpt from Sura 2:222, the Sura on menstruants, as his proof text. His predecessor Rûmî similarly emphasizes the need for spiritual purity for mystical pursuits against the backdrop of a woman with an excessive blood flow. In his magisterial Mathnawi, Rûmî describes God’s acceptance of praise:

as an indulgence (which he grants), like (the indulgence granted in the case of ) the prayers of a woman suffering from an excessive blood flow.
Her prayers are stained with blood; your praise is stained with assimilation and qualification.
Blood is foul, and (yet) it goes (is washed away) by a little water; but the inward part (the inner man) hath impurities.
Which fail not (are not removed) from the interior (the heart) of the man of work except by the water of the grace of the maker.41

Just as Jesus healed the woman with a flux, God accepts the prayers of a woman with an excessive blood flow (menorrhagia). Rûmî describes the acceptance of her prayers as an act of indulgence. But in truth, his acceptance of all prayers are acts of indulgence because our prayers are tainted with impurities far more foul than blood. Human impurity washes away easily. Impurity of spirit is more intransigent — it is the true hindrance to prayer.

These conceptual and legal understandings of menstruation facilitated women’s involvement in Islamic spirituality, and women have figured prominently in Islamic devotion since the time of the prophet Muhammad. His daughter Fâtima was venerated for her piety, and many other female descendants were also noted for their devoutness. In fact, there are many parallels between Shiite veneration of Fâtima and Catholic veneration of Mary.42

The best known female Islamic mystic is Rabî’a al-’Adawiyya of Basra, credited with transforming the harsh asceticism of early Sufism into love mysticism in eighth-century Iraq.43 She led an ascetic life and eschewed the traditional female roles of wife and mother in order to devote herself entirely to serving God. Rabî’a, however, was not the only Islamic female mystic in eighth-century Basra — only the most famous.44 Indeed, it is likely that Basra and Syria were centers of female asceticism from 700 to 800 CE. For example, according to as-Sulami’s tenth-century biography of early Sufi women, Shabaka of Basra “specialized in the ways of scrupulousness.” She built underground cells in her house to accommodate her female students, “where they learned the ways of self-denial and spiritual practice.”45 Āfriyya of Basra “was constantly enraptured and lost in the love of God. Most of her time was spent in remembrance of God, and she seldom associated with anyone.”46 And Sha’wâna would preach and recite the Qur’ân to her male and female disciples. She was known for her uncontrollable weeping, a practice common to many early female mystics. In defense, she would say: “Can an eye be separated from its Beloved and yearn to be united with him without weeping? This is not right!”47

Women as Men

Even though these female mystics were admired and followed, their gender was often denied. Some scholars argue that Rabî’a and her compatriots were
able to succeed along the Sufi path precisely because they were unfettered by traditional female obligations. In fact, Rabī’a and many of the early Sufi women in Basra were freed slaves, and this experience informed and facilitated their spiritual paths. Living on the margins, free of social attachments, they were able to eschew the traditional “female” roles of mother, daughter, and wife, and transpose their experience of human servitude into their service of God. Because they were not defined in relation to any being other than the creator, these women were as socially independent as any man.

Later biographers drew this analogy on the basis of holiness rather than social status. For example, in his biography of Sufis, ibn Attār classifies Rabī’a among men rather than women because “when a woman walks in the way of God like a man, she cannot be called a woman.” The early Indian Chisti order described the pious Fātima of Indarpat as “a man who was sent to earth in the physical form of a woman.” Jami describes one pious woman in Mosul as “man-like,” and writes that one Egyptian female ascetic should not be called a “‘woman’ — for even one strand of her hair is still better that a hundred men.” Some scholars suggest that some female mystics may have desired to deny their bodily sexuality and used asceticism as a tool “to ‘become’ men.” Regimens of fasting and lack of sleep deny the body essential fats needed to ensure menstruation. Elias argues that amenorrhea “may have been a desired goal for female ascetics, because menstruation is the most tangible justification used in Islamic thought and society to assign an inferior role to women. By ridding themselves of menstruation, they essentially rid themselves of the sign of women’s categoric spiritual inferiority to men.”

Philosophers and religious thinkers have used the dichotomy between male and female to connote the opposition between spirit and body since the ancient period. This gendered duality is a societal construction rooted in prejudice against women that has far-reaching ramifications. The gender theorist Susan Bordo explains that

the cost of such projections to women is obvious. For if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, the body is the negative term, and the woman is the body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence, fear of will.

Yet gender identity in Sufism did not fit into these neatly defined categories. When a male Sufi describes a spiritual woman as a man of God, he is
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not directly commenting on her gender but using a societal convention to describe her spiritual state. Manliness is godliness, femaleness is materiality. Schimmel cites a Persian proverb that says, “Not every woman is a woman, not every man a man; God did not make identical the fingers of one hand.” According to Schimmel,

the concepts “man” and “woman” are earthly, bound to the ephemeral form made of dust. When man and woman have finally attained the state of complete “debecoming” they no longer have an individual existence any more.

Female Sufis pursued an ascetic path in order to free themselves from the confines of the body — societally constructed as feminine. According to the logic of Muslim purity laws and Sufi practice, however, they need not physically attempt to cross the boundaries of gender by becoming amenorrheacs. Menstruation was not an impediment to mystical union because the physical self could not partake in spiritual ecstasy. While there are, to be sure, negative characterizations of menstruation in Islam, the state of menstruation does not preclude women from spiritual devotion. According to tradition, Rabīʿa, “the crown of men,” menstruated.

Consider the following excerpt from the twelfth-century Persian Sufi ibn Attār’s Conference on the Birds:

Rabīʿa, on the way to the Kaʿba seven years
Rolled on her sides. Ah! The crown of Men!

When near the Sanctuary she got, gratified,
She said, At last I have accomplished a perfect Pilgrimage.”

She aimed for the Kaʿba the day of the Pilgrim rites.
Manifest came upon her that which debars women.

She returned by the road and said, “O Lord of Glory,
I have rolled along this road seven years.”

When I had undergone days in mortification such as this,
He dropped in my path a thorn such as this!

Either give me, in my home, peace,
Or otherwise admit me to Thine.”

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So long as there is no lover like Rabī‘a,
Who might experience the Power of the Master of the Event?

As soon as you become the meddler in this ocean,
Waves will rise, pushing you back and gathering you forward in their embrace.

Sometimes they'll repulse you from the Ka’ba’s front;
Sometimes within the Temple of the infidel secrets to divulge.

If from this whirlpool you can lift yourself out,
Every moment you will increase in collectedness [union with God].

But if in this maelstrom you stay caught,
Your head’ll be revolving as fast as a millstone.

You’ll find no hint for a moment of concentration’s composure;
Your time [with God] will be, by even a single fly, distracted.57

After many fruitless attempts to make pilgrimage to Mecca, Rabī‘a finally reaches her destination. But just as she is about to circumambulate the Ka’ba, her menstrual flow begins, forcing her to abort yet another attempt at fulfilling her religious duty. Rather than disparage Rabī‘a for menstruating, ibn Attār celebrates her and makes her flow an opportunity to teach all Sufis a lesson about the symbolism of impurity. Although Rabī‘a was unable to perform her religious obligation because of her physical impurity, she retains her unique status among lovers of God, demonstrating that any Sufi — male or female — can become derailed from their pilgrimage to God because of the impurity of extraneous thoughts,58 but that purity of soul and mind, rather than purity of body are the prerequisites for spiritual success in Sufism.

Sufis as Wives and Mothers

Not only did female mystics menstruate but not all women followed Rabī‘a’s model of celibacy and extreme asceticism. Many women devoted themselves to God while wives and mothers.59 For example, Sarī-as-Saqatī (d. c. 867) had a son; Fātima of Nishapur (d. 849) may have influenced her husband’s spiritual path;60 and Rabah al Qays’ wife would adorn herself in the evening and inquire if he desired her — if not she would resume her prayer vigil. Later Sufis, such as ibn Abbās, advocated marriage as part of the Sufi path, for women
as for men, stating that the “asceticism of the ascetic is incomplete until he marries.”

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Just as women in Christianity enjoyed greater involvement in church ritual before the full organization of the church, and Jewish women functioned more actively in the ancient synagogue, women in Islam enjoyed greater freedom in the developing periods of Islam than during the medieval and modern period. For example, as-Sulami’s recently rediscovered tenth-century biography of Sufi women is filled with accounts of Sufi women who were the spiritual equals or betters of men. Once Sufism was institutionalized, however, women were pushed to the periphery and were often only portrayed as either facilitators of or obstacles to men’s spirituality.

Although the Sufi path may have become more difficult for female Muslims, they were not formally denied access. In contrast to the silence in medieval Jewish sources, there is evidence of Muslim women’s active participation in Islamic mysticism. Indeed many persevered and found willing teachers. Beginning in the twelfth century, women began to establish their own convents throughout the Muslim world. These ribats provided shelter and education for independent women (such as those who had divorced or been widowed) who stood outside the established status quo. Some were led by well-educated shaykhas, who instructed the inhabitants in Islamic law and, in some cases, Sufism. In addition, several male Sufi teachers taught women independently. The Andalusian mystic Muhyî ’l-Dîn ibn al-‘Arabi (1165–1240), championed women’s spiritual opportunities, and his teachings continue to facilitate women’s involvement in Sufism today. Ibn al-‘Arabi believed that women could reach the highest levels of sanctity and that the sakina, an aura of spirituality, would rest upon both men and women alike. Ibn al-‘Arabi taught both women and men. Indeed, of the fifteen people to whom he gave a khirqa (Sufi robe), fourteen were women. Moreover, he argues that menstruating women should engage in mystical prayer because women are precluded from salât.

Ibn al-‘Arabi’s appreciation of women may be a result of the great influence women had over his own spiritual path. His wife had mystical aspirations; two of his own teachers, Shams and Fâtima of Cordova were women; and the beautiful Nizam inspired him to write his The Interpreter of Desires, a
collection of mystical love poetry in which he describes compassion as the feminine element in God. Ibn al-\'Arabī’s appreciation of women has current resonances because the contemporary Syrian Sufi Qadiri Shaykhah instructs her menstruating female disciples to perform the minor ablutions and to participate in the dhikr “according to the school of ibn al-\'Arabī.”

Modern Muslim women are still able to devote themselves to Sufi orders, albeit often not in as exalted a position as men. Many women are attached to Sufi houses without becoming full members, and orders do exist — such as the Khalwati-Jarrāhi and the Bektāshi in Turkey and the Darqawi in Morocco — that allow women full membership. In the case of the Darqawi, women may also hold offices. And perhaps in response to the decrease of opportunities in Sufism, women have developed alternate forms of devotion, such as veneration at saint’s shrines.

The unique nature of the Islamic purity system facilitated the development of female spirituality in two major ways. First, all Muslims — male and female — undulate daily from states of impurity to purity. In a religion in which pollution and purification form, according to Katz, “the background rhythm of ritual life,” menstrual impurity carries no special stigma. It is neither contagious nor dangerous. It is but one type of pollution. Second, because all impure Muslims are barred from ritual prayer, alternate forms of devotion are necessary to enable the ritually impure faithful to express their love of God. When the Qur’ānic prescription to remember God, dhikr, became one of the essential pillars of Sufi practice, women could pursue the mystical path in all physical states because the prayer was not limited to any time, place, or purity status. Indeed, ibn al-\'Arabī believed that menstruating women should engage in mystical pursuits precisely because they are precluded from ritual prayer. Menstruating women are neither polluted nor are their words taboo to God.

Ritual purity is a lens through which one can see the differences between Sufism and Jewish mysticism. Although Jewish mystics and Muslim mystics may share similar goals, defined as gnosis or divine union, their means of achieving that goal is contextualized by their cultural experiences. Jewish mysticism developed after the destruction of the Temple, when Jews had neither a national homeland nor a religious center of worship. Jewish mystics imagined a meta-Temple in which they could envision God and engage in heavenly liturgy, and they transposed the purity requirements of the terres-
trial Temple to the heavenly realm. When this heavenly Temple became a leitmotif in medieval mysticism, menstruating women were denied entry.

Sufism, by contrast, developed in an age when Islam was the dominant religious and political force. Indeed, several scholars believe that the asceticism of early Sufism was a reaction to Islam’s territorial expansionism. Early Sufis desired to flee the physical world rather than to transpose its strictures to another realm. Moreover, in addition to its political power, Islam has a religious center, the Ka’ba. Given that pilgrimage to the Ka’ba is a pillar of Islam incumbent upon all Muslims, and circumambulation can only be achieved in a state of physical purity, Sufis may have felt that they could more freely afford to divorce themselves from physical symbols. In contrast to the Temple-centeredness of Jewish mysticism, early dhikr devotion was not confined to any time or space, nor was it framed as some type of celestial Ka’ba. In other words, it is as if the existence of a physical religious center with attendant demands for physical purity diminished the need for physical purity in purely spiritual worship. The goal of the Sufi is to abandon the physical world in an effort to achieve fanā’, the complete annihilation of the self into the divine — an ecstatic state not defined as a celestial Ka’ba, because the physical one still stands. Remembering God’s manifold name alone is sufficient to transform a soul unencumbered by physical concerns to a state where assimilation to the divine is possible.
Menstrual Impurity in Medieval Christianity

INTRODUCTION

Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity emerge as siblings from a common parent—Israelite religion. The rituals that Jews and Christians derived from the Temple cult not only throw light on their differences but also underscore that which mattered most to each culture. Early Christians conceived of themselves as the “true” Israel and as such had to respond to their cultic heritage. Paul encouraged Gentiles to abandon outward ritual acts and serve God through faith alone. Consequently, many church theologians abandoned levitical laws completely and used the story of the woman with a flux to prove Christian indifference to Jewish purity laws (Mark 5:25–34, Matthew 9:20–22, and Luke 8:42–48). Patristic exegetes rarely commented on Leviticus.¹

Menstrual taboos, however, remained entrenched in Christian imagination and, like their Jewish contemporaries, some Christian legists adapted levitical purity laws to conditions of a post-Temple world. Like many Jews, these Christians distinguished between the prohibition against engaging in sexual relations with a menstruating woman (Lev. 18:19) and the perceived need to separate menstruants from the sacred (Lev. 15). Often, Christian legists focused on one or the other. Some theologians fashioned the church as the true Temple and transposed the Temple purity requirements of the menstruant and the parturient to the church. Others maintained the sexual prohibition against engaging in sexual relations with menstruants and ignored the purity stipulations. These two strands wove their way through Christian law and penitential literature through the eleventh century.²

Close analysis of Christian rationales for menstrual separation throws light on an essential difference between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. Where the rabbis advertise maintaining abstention to enhance marital libido,³ Chris-
tians advocate menstrual separation as a means of sexual restraint. Throughout the early Christian Middle Ages, we see an ever-increasing suspicion of sexuality in general and a concomitant exaltation of virginity. Priestly celibacy — mandated by the fourth-century Council of Elvira — was actively required of the clergy during widespread church reforms of the eleventh century. These Gregorian reforms divided the Latin West into two classes in relation to the divine: celibates who could lead Christian ritual and achieve spiritual heights, and the rest of the population who could not. Virginity — real or reclaimed — became prerequisite to spiritual success, and concupiscence — rather than physical impurity — became antithetical to the sacred. But rather than ignoring ritual purity, the medieval Latin church broadened its scope and redefined impurity as lust. Menstruation, a natural bodily purgation, was no longer a barrier to the sancta.

This new attitude toward menstruation contributed to Christian women’s spiritual opportunities. The lenient treatment of menstruants in twelfth-century Bible commentaries, theological treatises, and canon law coincides with the flowering of female mysticism in Western Europe. At the very moment that menstruants were unhesitatingly permitted church entrance, parturients were encouraged to undergo the new ritual of churching. Chastity was the new purity.

SEPARATING MENSTRUANTS FROM THE SACRED

While early Christians may have used the Gospel story of the woman with the flux to announce their indifference to Jewish purity laws, menstrual taboos nonetheless remained fixed in the imaginations of many early adherents and were manifested in two distinct ways: some Christians avoided engaging in sexual relations with menstruants; others distanced menstruants from the sacred sites and sacred rituals. Just as menstruants were deemed invalid for ritual activity and barred from the Jerusalem Temple, some members of the true Israel barred menstruants from its contemporary incarnation Ecclesia in the early Middle Ages.

Church as Temple

After the Christianization of the empire in 329, Christians reimagined Palestine as terra sancta. The term holy became the most common adjective used to
describe Palestinian pilgrimage sites, religious figures, and sanctuaries, and Christians transposed Temple art, architecture, and symbols to churches. Indeed, Branham suggests that church chancel screens were developed to respond to the hierarchical structure of the Jerusalem Temple: the altar area where the Christian priest gave the Eucharist was separated from the rest of the church to emulate the Holy of Holies.

By this time, the notion of the church as Temple had already been used as a rationale to deny women church access. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria (c. 195–264), wrote:

The question concerning women in the time of their [menstrual] separation, whether it is proper for them when in such a condition to enter the house of God, I consider a superfluous inquiry. For I do not think that if they were believing and pious women, they would themselves be rash enough in such a condition either to approach the holy table or to touch the body and blood of our Lord. Certainly the woman who had the discharge of blood twelve years’ standing did not touch (the Lord) Himself, but only the hem of his Garments, with a view to the cure.

For to pray, however a person may be situated, and to remember the Lord, in whatever condition a person may be, and to offer up petitions for the obtaining of help, are exercises altogether blameless. But the individual who is not perfectly pure in both soul and body shall be interdicted from entering the Holy of Holies. Men who had a nocturnal emission, by contrast, were permitted to decide independently whether or not to enter a church, guided by “the testimony of their own conscience.” Dionysius’ hesitation reveals that he would prefer that ejaculants refrain from church entry, but he does not demand it; he does not equate male and female genital issue. Dionysius’ position, however, was not universal.

The Didascalia Apostolorum, an anonymous third-century Syrian manual for church discipline, presents a very different scenario. Rather than enforce menstrual separation, the author denounces women in his community who believe that they must refrain from praying, studying scripture, or from taking the Eucharist during the seven days of their flow. Despite the Didascalia’s protestation, however, laws prohibiting menstruants access to the sancta persisted in the Eastern church throughout the Middle Ages and were later adopted by the Orthodox Slavs. Indeed, Byzantine churches architecturally
reinforced women’s separation from the sacred through the construction of side aisles and second-story galleries.\textsuperscript{10}

In the West, by contrast, the status of menstruants and the sacred wavered between the very different opinions attributed to Pope Gregory in the \textit{Libellus Responsionum}, written to Archbishop Augustine of Canterbury in 601, and that of Augustine’s successor, Archbishop Theodore.\textsuperscript{11} Pope Gregory had sent Archbishop Augustine to England to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons and to encourage the few existing British Christians (residing in what is now Devon and Cornwall) to conform to Roman Catholic custom. Upon arrival, Augustine found that menstruants, parturients, and ejaculants would neither enter a church nor receive communion, and ejaculant priests would not perform the mass.\textsuperscript{12} Unfamiliar with these practices that were likely informed by Irish customs, Augustine asked the pope for advice, and Gregory the Great purportedly responded with the \textit{Libellus Responsionum}. The most popular account of the ruling is found in Bede’s \textit{Ecclesiastical History}.\textsuperscript{13} For our purposes, we will focus on Augustine’s eighth (multi-part) question to the pope:

1. Should a pregnant woman be baptized?
2. And when a child has been born, how much time should elapse before she can enter the church?
3. And after how many days may the child receive the sacrament of baptism so as to forestall its possible death;
4. And after what length of time may her husband have intercourse with her;
5. And is it lawful for her to enter the church if she is in her periods or to receive the sacrament of holy communion?

All these things the ignorant English people need to know.

Of these five items, all but one (4) deal with the relationship between impurity and the sacred. Gregory’s method of interpreting Leviticus in his response hinges on his ambivalence toward sexuality.\textsuperscript{14} Fundamentally, he establishes a strict dichotomy between the body and the spirit. When church access is at question, he contrasts the literal interpretation of Leviticus with a more figurative reading. When he construes levitical impurity to be rooted in sexuality, he offers a literal interpretation of the Old Testament. Leviticus decrees parturients forbidden both to their husbands and to the Temple. Gregory reads the Temple interdiction figuratively and the sexual prohibition literally: parturients are to be considered pure with regard to the sancta — ‘even
at the very hour of her delivery, for the purpose of giving thanks’ — but they are forbidden to their husbands until a baby is weaned.

The dichotomy between the sexual and the sacred undergirds Gregory’s treatment of menstruants as well. In his answer to item 5, he states:

For apart from childbirth, women are forbidden from intercourse with their husbands during their ordinary periods; so much that the sacred law condemned to death anyone who approached a menstruous woman. Nevertheless (5) a woman must not be prohibited from entering a church during her usual periods, for this natural overflowing cannot be reckoned a crime; and so it is not fair that she should be deprived from entering a church for that which she suffers unwillingly. For we know that the woman who was suffering from the issue of blood humbly came behind the Lord’s back and touched the hem of his garment and immediately her infirmity left her. So if she, when she had an issue of blood could touch the Lord’s garment and win commendation, why then is it not lawful for a woman in her periods to enter the Lord’s church?” . . . A woman ought not to be forbidden to receive the mystery of Holy Communion at these times. If, out of deep reverence she does not venture to receive it, that is praiseworthy; but if she has received it she is not to be judged . . . A woman’s periods are not sinful, because they happen naturally. But nevertheless, because our nature is itself so depraved it appears to be polluted without the consent of the will, the depravity arises from sin and human nature itself recognizes its depravity to be a judgment upon it; so mankind having willfully committed sin must bear the guilt of sin unwillingly. Let women make up their own minds and if they do not venture to approach the sacrament of the Body and the Blood of the Lord when in their periods, they are to be praised for their thinking; but when as the result of the habits of a religious life, they are carried away by the same mystery, as we have said before. For even in the Old Testament it is the outward deeds that are observed so in the New Testament careful heed is paid not so much to what is done outwardly as to what is thought inwardly . . . Why should that which a pure-minded woman endures from natural causes be imputed to her as uncleanness.15

Describing menstruation neutrally as a natural physiological process that is free of the stain of concupiscence,16 Gregory prohibits sexual relations during menstruation but allows menstruants church access.17 He is ambivalent about communion but leaves women to their own discretion.
Gregory is consistent that concupiscence rather than physical impurity is the impediment to the sacred in his discussion of ejaculants in intercourse, urging them to wash before entering a church and admonishing that “even when washed he ought not to enter immediately.” He explains:

Now the law commanded the ancient people that when a man had intercourse with a woman he ought to wash himself and should not enter the church before sunset (Lev 15:16); but this can be understood in a spiritual sense. A man has intercourse with a woman when his mind is united with her in thought in the delights of illicit concupiscence, so unless the fire of concupiscence is first quenched in his mind he should not consider himself worthy of the company of his brethren while he sees himself burdened by the sinfulness of depraved desire.\(^{18}\)

Lust, rather than physical impurity, impedes ejaculants and parturients.\(^{19}\)

Theodore of Tarsus (602–690), Augustine’s successor in Canterbury, assumed his position after a devastating plague that killed all but one of the Roman church leaders in England.\(^{20}\) The pope had hoped that his new appointee would ensure papal hegemony in the English church, but Theodore did not slavishly follow the dictates of the *Libellus Responsionum*. In his canons, we read:

Women shall not in the time of her impurity enter into a church, or communicate, neither nuns nor laywomen; if they presume [to do this] they shall fast for three weeks.

In the same way shall they do a penance who enter a church before purification after childbirth, that is, forty days.\(^{21}\)

This reversal of Gregory’s opinion demands explanation. Why would a new archbishop charged with ensuring Roman custom annul or ignore the opinion of a pope?

Although some scholars argue that Theodore was unfamiliar with the *Libellus* and was therefore not contradicting the pope when he issued his own opinion,\(^{22}\) Rob Meens, who has done extensive research on Theodore and Gregory, explains that it is highly unlikely that Theodore of Tarsus did not know the *Libellus Responsionem*. He suggests that the new archbishop consciously ignored Gregory’s ruling because of the enduring influence of Irish customs in British Christianity and because of the influence of Greek customs on his personal practice.\(^{23}\) Theodore was born in Tarsus in 602 and
was thoroughly entrenched in the cultural traditions of his native Greek- and Syriac-speaking world, where it was customary to bar menstruants from church ritual. Moreover, Theodore’s approach to scripture may have influenced his legal writings. Theodore studied the Bible using the literal and philological approach of the Antiochene school popular in his native Tarsus. This approach, in vogue among Irish biblical exegetes, facilitated comparatively literal interpretations of the Leviticus holiness code. Firey suggests that,

in the world of Theodore, himself a philological and historical exegete . . . Christians could follow Levitical prescriptions as sacral rituals that were readily and suitably adapted in a rural, tribal, and converting culture, that still had a keen sense of the sacrality of the universe and the need for ritual negotiation of that universe.

In contrast to Gregory, who favored an allegorical approach to scripture, Theodore prioritized the menstrual purity prohibition over the sexual prohibition. Indeed, as Pierre Payer has observed, Theodore mentions abstinence during the menstrual period and after childbirth within the context of prohibiting women church entry, rather than vice versa. Moreover, Theodore not only forbids women church entry but mandates a three-week penance for sinners.

These two competing views filtered down into early medieval penitentials—reference manuals for spiritual leaders listing sins and their accompanying penances—and, later, into legal literature; often these diametrically opposed views were copied into the same manuscripts! Although Rob Meens has shown that ultimately, Gregory the Great’s opinion enjoyed the greater authority, with these two diametrically opposed traditions as legal precedents, an administer of penance or a legist in the Latin West could pick and choose, depending on his religious, legal, or social agenda. For example, the ninth-century Poenitentiale Vindobonene contains some of the most restrictive rulings regarding church access for both men and women. Meens explains that the text emphasizes church holiness—of the clergy, of the service, and of the physical structure—thus echoing the Temple cult and its attendant purity requirements. It is not surprising that a penitential written during the Carolingian reform movement, shortly after the installment of Charlemagne as the Holy Roman Emperor, would resurrect the notion of church as Temple. The purity requirements of the Temple cult made sense for the Carolingian structure. The penitential Canon of Regino of Prüm (840–915), by contrast, rec-
ommends sexual abstinence during menstrual period but does not explicitly restrict menstruants’ church access. It does forbid parturients’ church access: forty days after giving birth to boys, eighty days after girls.

Why would a penitential pick and choose between Theodore and Gregory? Why would the Latin West eventually come to emphasize the prohibitions against sexual relations and the sancta yet deemphasize menstrual separation from the sacred? We will explore these prohibitions and their cultural contexts in the following section.

**SEXUAL RELATIONS DURING MENSTRUATION**

The levitical interdictions against sexual relations with menstruants were maintained in early medieval law codes in both the eastern and far western bastions of Christendom — Byzantium and the British Isles. Orthodox canon laws forbade sexual relations with menstruants for the duration of the blood flow and barred menstruants from church ritual. The British and Irish churches similarly upheld the levitical interdictions against sexual relations with menstruants and recorded the interdictions in the penitentials. These handbooks of penance also became popular on the continent. As with all legal texts, we cannot be certain whether the penitentials accurately reflected Christian practice. Pierre Payer suggests that the “the persistence of certain regulations, selective borrowings, modifications made to previous canons, and new additions all indicate that the penitentials were living documents used for the practical ends which they frequently claim for themselves.” As such, they form the basis of early medieval sexual morality.

The seventh-century penitential of Cummean states that

He who is in a state of matrimony ought to be continent during three forty-day periods and on Saturday and on Sunday, night and day, and in the two appointed week days (Wednesdays and Friday) after conception, and during the entire menstrual period.

In the tenth century, calls for abstention during menstruation most often appeared alongside other calls for sexual abstention during holy days. Just as Moses required the Israelites to separate for three days before receiving the Torah at Sinai, authors of penitentials declared sexual activity inappropriate during sacred times. Such categorization suggests that these menstrual prohibitions had more to do with early medieval Christian discomfort with sexuality
than with levitical nostalgia or folk fears. Where Leviticus only require abstinence after parturition, Latin penitentials prohibit sexual relations with pregnant women and lactating mothers, who according to received wisdom could not conceive. These proscriptions appear much more frequently than those concerning menstruants.37

Indeed, such an understanding seems to have been part of the worldview on the continent, too. Gallic councils do not mention any restrictions on menstruants in the sancta. And Giselle de Nie, in her study “Contagium and Pollution in Sixth-Century Gaul,” explains that “all evidence appears to point to a concept of pollution that was primarily concerned with the spiritual obfuscation caused by yearnings of the flesh and the ‘contagiousness’ of this state, rather than a ‘soiling’ by organic fluids, as in the Old Testament (Leviticus 15).” Gregory of Tours, in fact, refers to sexual desire as polluting and contagious,38 and Christians who engaged in church-sanctioned marital sex were required to cleanse themselves before entering a church or participating in Christian ritual.39

The pervasiveness of sexual prohibitions underscored to priests and confessants that sexuality was both dangerous and tainted by sin. Indeed, high-medieval penitentials most often grouped women in the sections on the seven deadly sins because of their perceived sexual danger. Church theologians permitted marital sex for procreation, not pleasure.40 As James Brundage explains, “since marital sex was a concession, not a right, and since pleasure was an ever-present incitement to lust, penitential writers maintained that sex in marriage must be strictly scheduled and closely monitored.”41 In his Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe, Brundage calculated that an observant couple who took advantage of every possible intimate opportunity would be able to engage in sexual relations “slightly more than once a week, on average, over a three-year period.”42 In contrast to rabbinic texts that advocated menstrual separation to enhance male libido, the Christian penitential of St. Finnian (525–550) maintained that without periods of marital separations marriage “lacked legitimacy and degenerated into sin.”43

The influence of private penitentials begins to wane during the Carolingian church reforms of the ninth century. Charlemagne sought to centralize ecclesiastical and political authority by encouraging uniform practices sanctioned by ecclesiastical authorities. The Council of Châlons (813) and the Council of Paris (829) condemned the use of private penitentials and urged bishops to burn them lest “unskilled priests deceive men further through
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The few church-sanctioned penitentials composed during the ninth century drew from the Bible and patristic sources, rather than from local customs.

Summa for Confessors

The pastoral use of penitential literature continued to wane throughout the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries as the church shifted its favor to canon law. There was, however, a second wave of penitential activity during the thirteenth century. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) required all Catholics to confess their sins annually, but parish priests were unaccustomed to hearing private confessions and administering penance. To guide priests with their newly charged task, scholastic theologians composed pastoral guides. These compilations differed from their early-medieval counterparts in their scope and emphasis. Rather than slavishly copying old traditions, the authors of the penitential compendia (summa confessorum) reevaluated early medieval penitentials to meet the needs of the post-reform ecclesiastical world. As we have seen, the early penitentials restricted almost every opportunity for marital sexual relations. The thirteenth-century penitentials were much more liberal: a theologian of this period had to provide some justification for prohibiting marital sexuality. The new penitential manuals rationalized abstaining from conjugal relations with menstruating women on the basis of potential medical risks to the fetus, risks “newly rediscovered” in recent translations of Greek medical literature. Moreover, many texts (especially those written after 1215) advise rather than require abstention during menstruation. For example, Robert of Flamborough, the administrator of penance at the Abbey of Saint Victor outside Paris, wrote a manual entitled the Liber Poenitentialis, (The Book of Penance) to teach other priests how to grant absolution for sins in 1210. In it, he explains that men should abstain from sexual relations with menstruating women because

[ε]ach month the heavy and torpid bodies of women are lightened by the flowing of unclean blood. And if a man has intercourse with a woman at this time, those conceived by this union are said to carry the vice of the seed with them, and so lepers and those afflicted with elephantiasis are born from this conception, and soundness degenerates, having been corrupted by the enormity of limbs and the baseness in the bodies of them.
Therefore it is ordered, not only in the case of other women but also in the case of their own — to whom they appear to be married — that they know the fixed times of intercourse, when there must be conjoining and when there must be abstaining from their wives.51

Thomas of Chobham (b. c. 1160), in his confessional manual written in 1215, similarly warns against having sexual relations with pregnant women and menstruants because of the potential risks to the fetus. In *Summa Confessione*, Peter of Poitiers (d. after 1216) warns priests that menstruating women could infect their husbands and children with leprosy.52 Peter also mentions that Jews do not frequently get leprosy because they do not approach menstruating women.53 Sexually transmitted diseases were often associated with leprosy in the Middle Ages, thus sexual permissiveness — defined here as sexual relations with menstruants — could also be said to lead to leprosy, redefined as syphilis.54

The authors of these new confessional manuals were not unique in their recourse to Greek natural philosophy. The canon lawyer Rufinus had previously justified abstention from sexual relations with menstruants on the basis of Greek medicine. In his *Summa Decretorum*, written between 1157 and 1159 CE, Rufinus wrote:

> And in fact this blood is so execrable and unclean, as already Julius Solinus has written in the book about the marvels of the world, that through contact with it fruits do not produce, wine turns sour, plants die, trees lack fruit, the air darkens; if dogs eat [the blood], they are made wild by madness. . . . Indeed is desire kept away not only because of the uncleanness of the menstrual flow, but also lest a defective progeny is born from that intercourse.”55

Nevertheless, Rufinus does not forbid sexual relations with menstruants absolutely,56 but rather — as would the later summae confessorum — he warns against its dangers, drawing upon medical theories to posit menstrual blood as a poisonous substance that can engender a “spoiled fetus.”57

Rufinus’s attribution of Solinus as the source of his medical theories is particularly noteworthy because there were more immediate Christian sources at his disposal.58 Solinus’s ideas came to Christian Europe via Isidore, Bishop of Seville (d. 636). In his *Etymologies*, Isidore wrote:59

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The menstrual flow is a woman’s superfluous blood: it is termed “menstrual,” because of the phase of the moon by which this flow comes about. The moon is called mēnē in Greek. These are also called the “womanlies” (muliebria), for women are the only menstruating animal. On contact with this blood, crops do not germinate, new wines go sour, grasses die, trees lose their fruit, iron is corrupted by rust, air and copper are blackened; which should dogs eat of it, they are made rabid. Even bituminous glue, which is dissolved neither by iron nor by [strong] waters, polluted by this gore, falls apart by itself.60

Neither Isidore nor Solinus mentioned the association between leprosy and menstruation, though Jerome (b. 346), church father, Bible translator and exegete, introduced that notion to Christians in his commentary to Ezekiel 18. Jerome wrote that if a man has intercourse with a woman during her period, the fetuses that are conceived draw on the defects of the semen: “The result is that lepers and those with elephantiasis are born from the conception. The corrupted blood causes the foul bodies in both sexes to degenerate with deformity of the members in number and size.”61 Jerome’s interpretation was certainly known in the Latin West.62

But Rufinus’s appeal to newly discovered Greek and Roman medicine, rather than extant Latin Christian sources, speaks to a conscious attempt to justify menstrual separation on the basis of medical science — a hallmark of thirteenth-century summa confessorum menstrual prohibitions. Because of the attendant danger to the fetus, abstinence during menstruation was believed to be a necessity, a “moral obligation,” rather than a vestige of Old Testament purity rituals.63

Yet even given these potential medical risks, the Dominican friar Raymond of Peñafort does not mention sexual relations with menstruants in his Summa on Marriage (written after 1234).64 And John of Freiburg states that while one should not ask for sexual relations with menstruants, if a spouse demands sexual relations, the other spouse is duty-bound to comply.65 Indeed, throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we see a gradual loosening of the bonds of menstrual laws in favor of satisfying the marriage debt, that is, the duty of both husbands and wives to fulfill each other sexually.66

In the High Middle Ages, the requirements for menstrual separation transformed in the medieval church. Sexual relations between a husband and a
menstruating wife were medically unadvisable but not religiously forbidden, and, with the exception of Thomas of Chobham’s, no well-known thirteenth-century penitential text barred menstruants from access to the sancta. Sexuality, rather than menstrual impurity, barred one from the sacred precincts. As Robert of Flamborough explains in his confessional manual:

> Whoever has rendered what is owed to his wife cannot be free for prayer, nor eat of the flesh of the lamb.

Likewise, if the bread of the Temple offerings could not be eaten by those who had touched their wives (Leviticus 7:20; 15:16–18), so much more is it the case that the bread that descended from heaven cannot be violated and polluted by those who a short time before had clung to conjugal embraces. Not because we condemn marriage, but because at this time when we are about to eat the flesh of the lamb, we should be free of the flesh.

**IMPURITY REDEFINED**

The spiritual and sexual opportunities of menstruants improved at precisely the same moment that celibacy became the sine qua non for spiritual pursuits. The loosening of the purity restrictions against menstruants and the concomitant distrust of sexuality with regard to the sancta must be viewed within the context of the Gregorian Reform Movement and its aftermath. That is not to say that Christian ambivalence toward sexuality was unique to the medieval Latin West. The esteem many medieval Christians felt for virginity went to Christianity’s inception and survives among many Christians today. Yet celibacy was not an absolute requirement for clergy until 1123. This clerical sexual revolution was the result of the Gregorian Reforms, a movement that undergirded the major theological and intellectual endeavors of the twelfth century, including the *Glossa Ordinaria* and Gratian’s *Decretum*. These, in turn, affected the social and religious lives of medieval women.

**Church Reform**

After years of subjugation to feudal lords, clerics in the eleventh century undertook a series of reforms to assert church authority and to revitalize Christian spirituality throughout the Latin West. Toward this end, reformers
emphasized that clergy were uniquely qualified to serve as mediators between God and man. This sacerdotalist agenda led to the creation of an even stricter dichotomy between the clergy and the laity as reformers sought to purify the church from all things tainted by the secular world. They ultimately divided Christians into two categories: those who served God and everyone else. They established new monastic orders and outlawed simony, lay investiture, clerical marriage, and concubinage. Just as Ezra had required the returning Israelites to cast away their pagan wives, clergy across Europe abandoned their wives, children, and concubines to starvation, prostitution, or death.70

These clerical reforms initiated two apparently contradictory trends. On the one hand, we find that virginity — ever venerated — was elevated to an even more exalted level; on the other hand, allowances for marital sex — including sexual relations with menstruating women — increased dramatically. This apparent contradiction was part of the reformers’ deliberate attempt to create a bifurcated society. According to Dyan Elliot, “lay chastity, whether heretical or orthodox, had the potential to challenge the structure of Christian society. It was necessary to deflect the laity from too rigid an imitation of the theological model of marriage.”71

The eleventh-century reforms were brought to fruition during the twelfth. The reformers’ agenda could only succeed if enforced through educational and legal change, so twelfth-century scholars organized the diverse biblical interpretations, legal opinions, and theological notions received from their forebears and systematized them into a unified whole, thereby creating a Christian truth for a Christian world. Biblical exegetes compiled the Glossa Ordinaria, a running commentary on the entire Hebrew Bible and New Testament that became the standard for all subsequent Bible studies. Theologians, most notably Peter Lombard, collected a myriad of theological opinions and organized them into a four-volume compendium of Christian theology entitled The Four Books of Sentences (Libri Quattuor Sententiarum). And most famous of all, in legal studies, Gratian wrote his Harmony of Discordant Canons, the consummate textbook of canon law. The Glossa Ordinaria, the Sentences of Peter Lombard, and Gratian’s Decretum formed the basis of Catholic studies until modern times, and they are particularly important for our understanding of menstruation. Because of their enduring influence and popularity, their interpretation of menstruation and female impurity had a profound effect on women’s social and spiritual lives.

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Early Medieval Exegesis of Leviticus 15

The *Glossa Ordinaria* is a running commentary on the Old and New Testaments derived from earlier Christian exegesis. However, there were few sources from which the *Glossa* could derive its exegesis of Leviticus. Many church fathers wrote commentaries on the Old Testament, but few devoted their time to Leviticus because they considered literal and rational interpretations of the priestly laws impossible. Neither Augustine nor Gregory nor Jerome nor Ambrose devoted an exclusive commentary on Leviticus. The few early church fathers who did comment on the book treated impurity allegorically as a metaphor for sin and considered the need for ritual immersion after physical impurity superfluous after baptism. Thus the authors of the *Glossa Ordinaria* looked to the efforts of early medieval biblical scholars. An anonymous early medieval interpretation of Leviticus 15, erroneously attributed to Bede, offers an entirely allegorical interpretation. The author understands the zav as a man who does not know how to impose a limit on his words. Playing on the double meaning of seed, the text explains that “the sermon of evangelical doctrine is a good seed which grows in the hearts of listeners in good ground,” whereas evil teaching (symbolized by the zav’s uncontrolled flux) is bad seed which the evil man sows. Just as the man with flux pollutes, those who have been touched by his teachings are also polluted and must be cleansed. The commentary similarly allegorizes the ejaculant as one polluted by sexual concupiscence. Such a man is unclean “all the way until evening (Lev 15:16)” because just as “evening is the end of the day, and the beginning of the night, thus also punishment is the end of empty happiness and the beginning of salubrious sadness.”

The commentary’s interpretation of the menstruant is the most extraordinary. The niddah refers not to women but “to men effeminized by women,” that is, to men who have lost their virility to women because of their sexual desire:

For anyone effeminated by women has nothing virile in himself and when the time of desire returns he discharges blood, that is, if he had anything good, he loses it through negligence, and he is separated for seven days, in order for him to recognize that he is subject to seven demons. “[If the blood of desire ceases] after seven days have been counted, let him who
has been cured be found as if purged on the eighth day by the received grace of the seven-fold spirit.”

The zavah (a woman with an uncontrollable blood flow) is similarly construed as a man who does not reign in his passion.74

Rabanus of Mainz (Hrabanus Maurus c. 780–856), abbot of Fulda and bishop of Mainz, was the most influential source for later exegesis on Leviticus. One of the most educated and prolific churchmen of the Carolingian Renaissance, Rabanus reworked and “updated” Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies* in his twenty-two volume *De Rerum Naturis* (*On the Nature of Things*). Rabanus reinterprets Isidore’s aforementioned “scientific” understanding of menstrual blood using the allegorical mode of Bede and, in so doing, advocates a spiritual observance of Lev. 20:18.75

[By] allegory the flow of blood can be understood as the obscenity of idolatry, and the pollution of errors. And in this way the time of menstruation is to be understood to be that time in which the entire world was involved in error and idolatry. And it is not permitted to approach a menstruating woman, nor to have intercourse with her; because neither is it permitted to Catholic men to have commerce with the idolatry of pagans or the heresy of heretics.76

Isidore had expatiated upon dangers of menstrual blood; Rabanus construes the physical blood flow as a symbol for idolatry. In transvaluing physical impurity from an external physical state to an internal spiritual state of being, his approach foreshadowed an interpretive trend that would become popular during the twelfth-century Renaissance.77

Rabanus also wrote a complete commentary on Leviticus as part of a comprehensive exegesis on the Pentateuch.78 Carolingian exegetes typically wove their own commentary onto a matrix of patristic works, acknowledging sources — or not — as they saw fit. Rabanus, however, had little exegetical material from which to draw for Leviticus, outside of works by Origen and Hesychius of Jerusalem. Instead, he depended on his own experience as abbot of Fulda, encyclopedist, and penitentialist to recast Leviticus as a penitential text. Then, in contrast to earlier Irish penitentials, he allegorized the impurities delineated in Leviticus as symbols for the seven deadly sins.79 Rabanus’s work was not immediately popular although it would become so. It was his commentary that became the basis for the *Glossa Ordinaria* on Leviticus.
The monastic exegeses of Rabanus and his fellow Carolingians were encyclopedic, but also verbose and poorly organized, making easy referencing nearly impossible. In an effort to create more effective teaching tools, Bible scholars in the cathedral schools of the eleventh and twelfth centuries reconfigured and systematized these earlier commentaries into running glosses. The *Glossa Ordinaria*, a straightforward and concise commentary with complementary and often distinct interlinear explanations, was the most famous and influential of these endeavors. Often known as “the Gloss,” the *Glossa Ordinaria* became the definitive biblical commentary throughout the Middle Ages. Rabanus’s interpretation of menstrual impurity, as reflected in the *Glossa*, became the standard interpretation throughout the Latin West and had far-reaching influences.

Anselm of Laon was likely the guiding force behind the *Glossa Ordinaria*. Given his many obligations as master of the cathedral school, he was unable to complete the entire gloss and entrusted large sections to his students. The commentary on the Pentateuch went to Gilbert the Universal (d. 1134), who earned his soubriquet because of his breadth of knowledge. Given the dearth of exegesis on Leviticus, Gilbert interspersed his own observations amid a nearly verbatim rendering of Rabanus’s allegorical commentary. The *Glossa* on Leviticus 15:19, Leviticus 20:18, and Genesis 31:35 shed a great deal of light on medieval exegesis in general and attitudes toward menstruation in particular. Medieval Christian exegetes generally employed a fourfold method of interpretation — literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. Early Christian exegetes had claimed that literal interpretation of Leviticus was impossible. The *Glossa*, however, uses the literal aspect of menstruation to curb sexual desire. Otherwise, it interprets menstruation symbolically, as an allegory for sin and idolatry or as a mark of humility and a characteristic of ecclesia.

**Menstrual Laws as a Temporary Cure for Concupiscence**

The connection between menstruation and libido contributes to a common theme in the *Glossa Ordinaria*. One explanation of Leviticus 15:19 interprets menstruation literally as an occasion to speak about something more important than itself. The Gloss understands that God generously prescribes a
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seven-day period of conjugal separation during a women’s menstrual period to help men and women curb their lust. The author substantiates his interpretation with a Christianized perspective on Jewish practice: “The Jew in the flesh was able to be helped though this law.” Though diametrically opposed to the talmudic justification for retaining menstrual separation after the destruction of the Temple, this Christianized perspective suggests Christian familiarity with Jewish practice. The gloss on Leviticus 20:18 — “If a man lies with a woman in her infirmity and uncovers her nakedness, he has laid bare her flow; both of them shall be cut off from among their people” — also uses menstrual prohibitions to promote sexual abstinence more explicitly, stating that “the legislator intends to persuade chastity; that we not continually mingle with men and women in the manner of beasts; but that, as if compelled, we come to the practice of continence little by little.”

Menstruation as Sin and Idolatry

Alongside the literal use of menstruation to curb sexual appetite, the Glossa offers another interpretation of Leviticus 15:19, and this one treats the menstruant symbolically, as an effeminate soul polluted by base thoughts. Just as the menstruant in Leviticus is rendered ritually impure independent of any physical act — or in the words of the gloss, “the menstruant pollutes herself by herself” — a soul becomes polluted by merely entertaining evil thoughts. Menstrual impurity signifies that “evil thoughts and volitions need not be completed by work; in the eyes of God, they are considered as deeds and punished.”

Another opinion understands the menstrual flow as idolatry and the seven-day flow of the menstruant as a metaphor for the ages of man “all the way to completion.” In so doing, the Glossa grafts an Augustinian eschatological scheme onto the imposed period of separation of the menstruant. Augustine of Hippo believed that the there were six ages of man and a seventh age of salvation before the eschaton. Just as menstrual blood flows for seven days, idolatry will flow through the seven ages of man until the end time. The Bible’s exhortation to separate from menstruants should be understood allegorically as the need to separate from idolatry, idolaters, and their supporters. The levitical warning not to touch vessels, chairs, or beds that menstruants had sat on or slept in similarly signifies the need to steer clear of any idolatrous accoutrements.
The gloss on Leviticus 20:18 also offers a symbolic interpretation to complement the literal one, and it similarly construes the “menstruant” as the “whole error of idolatry and sacrifices” and “the wisdom of the Gentiles.” Just as the holiness code punishes a couple engaging in sexual relations during menstruation with karet (cutting off), a man who approaches idolatry “will be killed in the midst of his people, lest he be called a man who has alienated images of God by ignoring the creator. And she too will be killed, lest it be called wisdom; because the wisdom of this world is stupidity in the eyes of God.”

**Ecclesia as Menstruant**

The gloss on Rachel hiding Laban’s idols (Genesis 31:35), a narrative rather than a legal passage, offers an interesting twist on the interpretation of menstruation. Rachel sits on her father’s idols while he greedily scours her tent for his material goods. While “nature teaches that children should rise before their parents,” Rachel excuses herself for remaining seated upon her father’s entry by stating that “the way of women is upon me.” Unlike in the legal passages discussed above, the Glossa Ordinaria does not relate this phrase in any way to sexual abstinence. Nor does the text choose to suggest that menstruating Rachel is incapacitated in any way. On the contrary, although the gloss explains that by this phrase “she indicates that she is menstruating,” the authors do not understand this physiological state in negative terms. Rather, they extol the menstruating Rachel and see her as a symbol of the church. Rachel seated—a mark of her humility and penitence—covers the idols, as the church “covers the vice of terrestrial concupiscence through the humility of penitence.” Thus menstruating Rachel signifies the church, “who suppress idols by sitting as we condemn the guilt of avarice by penitence,” whereas Laban “follows the uncleanness of avarice as if menstruating.” Father Laban, therefore, is the true menstruant. Spiritual impurity, rather than female biology, is the source of sin and censure.

The Glossa Ordinaria on Leviticus strips menstruation of its physiological origins and cultic associations to make it a means to restrain libido and a cipher for idolatry and heresy. In neither case is menstrual impurity itself a problem, and it is certainly not a mark of demonic possession. Indeed, the story of Rachel and the idols in Genesis does not relate in any way to sexual abstinence, nor does it describe the menstruating Rachel as idolatrous. Rather
than demonize Rachel and her flow, the Glossa valorizes her. Rachel the men-struant is recognized as the symbol of ecclesia and a model of humility and virtue for all to follow. During this age of systematization, the physiological state of menstruation is transformed into a state of humility characteristic of the church, and libido and heresy become the true pollutants.

THE GLOSSA ORDINARIA’S PARTNER:
THE HISTORIA SCHOLASTICA

Peter Comestor (d. 1178), a Paris master who became chancellor of Notre Dame, took a different approach in his Historia Scholastica, a summary of biblical history used alongside the Glossa Ordinaria as a study aid in cathedral schools and universities. Although used in tandem, the two texts differ markedly in their treatment of levitical purity laws. Where the Glossa interpreted menstruation allegorically, Comestor interpreted the Hebrew Bible — including Leviticus — literally.83

In his paraphrase of Leviticus 15, Comestor equates male and female impurity, noting that the zav and zavah were subject to the same laws of uncleanness and purification because they suffered from similar diseases.84 Menstru-ants, by contrast, need not perform any special ritual acts of purifi cation. They need only wash themselves and their clothing because only “morbid states of uncleanness equivalent to sin” would require a salutary offering.” Menstruation does not because “it is natural.”85 Comestor thus maintains the levitical distinction between the zavah and niddah, thereby offering a more literal reading than contemporary Jewish scholars who were obligated by rabbinic tradition! Comestor, moreover, considers as logical the levitical com-mand that men who engage in sexual relations with menstruants are impure for seven days and must wash themselves to be purifi ed, given that men and women who slept with their legitimate spouse were deemed impure until evening and needed to purify themselves.86

Comestor also describes menstruation neutrally in his commentary on Genesis 18. Sarah laughed when she heard that she would conceive a son, because

they (Abraham and Sarah) were both old and the female things of Sarah had ceased, that is, menstruation, with the cessation of which also ceases the power of giving birth.87
Menstruation for Comestor is a natural physiological process that indicates fertility.

Parturition, by contrast, is tainted by its very nature. After waiting for the prescribed period of purification (forty days for a boy, eighty for a girl), the parturient must, according to Leviticus, offer two sacrifices—a one-year-old lamb as a burnt offering and a pigeon or a turtledove as a sin offering (12:6). Although Leviticus is silent on the rationale for the offerings, Comestor offers that two sacrifice are necessary to atone for two distinct sins: that of the mother who conceived the baby in lust and that of the baby born in a state of original sin. Comestor associates parturition with lust and sin; menstruation, by contrast, is a natural state of being.

The reformers’ discomfort with sexuality became a part of medieval popular imagination. The Glossa Ordinaria and the Historia Scholastica influenced both scholars and laymen because the texts provided all students of scripture with a standard Christian interpretation of the Holy Writ which they could then preach. The Gregorian agenda, however, was most effectively enforced through the resurgence and implementation of canon law. During the same period when exegetes systematized biblical commentary, many scholars created legal compendia to promote their sacerdotalist agenda. The most enduring of these efforts is Gratian’s Decretum.

### Gratian’s Decretum and Its Precursors

Efforts to systematize canon law go back to the ninth century, and strikingly, these earlier compendia restrict menstruants. One of the first attempts to reassert church control over the laity was the Libro duo de synodalibus causis et disciplinis ecclesiasticus (The Collection in Two Books) by Abbot Regino of Prüm (845–915). Regino divides his legal work into two separate volumes, the first dedicated to the clergy and the second to the laity, thus distinguishing the two in both content and form. He forbids sexual congress with menstruants.

Burchard, bishop of Worms (b. 965), completed his twenty-volume Decretum between 1000 and 1025. In this massive work, Burchard attempted to cover all aspects of Christian life, including confession. Although the interest in using penitential literature for pastoral work had dwindled on the continent by 1000, Burchard nonetheless set out to organize extant penitential literature for ecclesiastical use. Book 19, the manual for confessors, was the most popular section of the Decretum and was often copied separately under the
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Burchard requires sexual abstinence during menstruation and, significantly, denies menstruating nuns and laywomen access to the sancta. Those who dare must do penance for twenty-one days. Burchard justifies his ruling on the basis of Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus’s canons, thereby reinvigorating Theodore’s waning influence in the Latin West.89

Bishop Ivo of Chartres compiled an even larger and more unwieldy collection of canon law, also entitled the Decretum, at the end of the eleventh century. According to the available printed sources, Ivo quotes Burchard’s Corrector on menstruants verbatim.90 Ivo’s Panormia, a shorter, more organized, and far more influential version of canon law, does not restrict menstruants’ access to the sacred.91

These early works retain many of the limitations on sexual congress with menstruants characteristic of their penitential sources. In fact, in the early period of the reforms it is possible the reformers were so eager to distance themselves from anything sexual that they selected like-minded texts from all sources at their disposal without concern for developing an underlying rationale for their stance. Indeed, according to James Brundage, early reformers “considered sex and other pleasurable experiences tainted by evil and a potent source of sin. They were not merely suspicious of sex, but hostile to any sexual activity at all, save for marital relations undertaken expressly and consciously to conceive a child. The reformers, even more than the penitential authors and earlier patristic authorities, were intent on limiting marital sex and on penalizing extramarital sex as severely as they could.”92 Such zeal underlies Burchard’s inclusion of strictures against menstruants that had been ignored for centuries. Despite their fervor, however, eleventh-century reformers were unable to produce one comprehensive and enduring law code. Although the reformers successfully put an end to clerical marriage, their law codes were too unwieldy, unorganized, irrational, and contradictory to be enforced in society at large. Yet reformation’s goals could only permeate Christian society by means of a coherent and organized code of canon law. In the 1140s, Gratian rose to the challenge and, in so doing, changed the history of canon law and the opportunities for Christian women in the twelfth century.93

Gratian’s Decretum

In his Harmony of Discordant Canons, more commonly known as the Decretum, Gratian systematically organized and analyzed 3,945 canons, aligning

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His work almost immediately became the standard textbook and the point of reference for all subsequent discussions of canon law. But the text was not consigned to the ivory tower. Gratian’s Decretum touched upon almost every aspect of Christian public and private life. Because no matter of Christian law was outside its purview, the Decretum also became an instrument for controlling the sexual practices of Christians. The church’s fear of lust and its accompanying openness to menstruation exerted its most far-reaching influences when enunciated in this most influential work of canon law. In contrast to Jewish sources that permit marital sexual relations in ritual purity and restrict menstruants, the Decretum is negative about sexuality in general but not in ways that restrict menstruants’ access to the church or to God.

Decretum on Human Sexuality and the Marriage Debt

Influenced by Augustine, Gratian, like many of his contemporaries, believed that lust was the byproduct of original sin and polluting. Marital intercourse is a concession, necessary for three reasons: for procreation, to forefend adultery, and to pay the marriage debt—the duty of both husbands and wives to fulfill each other sexually. Nonetheless, any type of sexual satisfaction barred one from the sacred. Like the ba’al qeri in Leviticus, any man who had an emission of semen is charged by the Decretum to wash before entering a church or receiving the Eucharist.

Though Gratian permitted sexual relations in marriage for procreation, he, like the penitentials, prescribed periods of sexual abstinence. Unlike the penitentials, Gratian subordinated the religious requirements for marital abstinence to the payment of the marriage debt. A husband or wife should not demand sexual intercourse during forbidden times; but if one does, the other is obligated to satisfy the debt. In his four-volume systematization of theology, Peter Lombard (1100–1160) similarly subordinated church requirements to the marriage debt.

Interestingly, as Pierre Payer notes, neither Gratian nor Lombard explicitly mention sexual abstention during menstruation in their discussion of marital abstinence. Nonetheless, some later legists, such as John of Freiburg, assumed that Gratian subordinated the taboo against sexual relations with menstruants to the marriage debt as well. Even those scholars who understood the marriage debt more narrowly still made concessions for sexual relations...
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The Bolognese canon lawyer Huguccio (d. 1210), who believed that all sexual relations — even for procreation — were sinful, stated that it is a mortal sin to have sexual relations with a menstruant. Therefore, if a wife were a menstruant, a husband should not pay the marriage debt unless he believed that she would commit adultery.103

By the beginning of the thirteenth century, the church as a whole had softened its stance, and this trend continued for another two hundred years. While many Dominicans believed that married couples who engaged in sexual relations during menstruation sinned, they lessened the degree of sinfulness from mortal to venial.104 Pope Innocent III upheld Gratian’s interpretations, and these views were incorporated into his collection of canon laws. As James Brundage writes, “earlier prohibitions against intercourse during pregnancy and menstruation produced a rich casuistry to deal with doubts about the practice, but most thirteenth- and fourteenth-century writers treated ritual purity as a minor issue.” Even when restrictions reappear in the moralistic literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they are “low on the list of sexual offenses.”105

The loosening of the bonds of sexual relations for laymen occurred at the same moment that lust was vilified and virginity valorized. Sexuality became the means to distinguish between the laity and the clergy.106

Ritual Purity and the Sancta

Gratian’s permissive stance on menstrual purity is inversely proportional to his attitude on sexual pollution. Menstruation is not libidinous; lust, by contrast, is the byproduct of original sin and is morally polluting. Gratian develops this understanding in his discussion of natural law. He defines natural law as the most ancient and authoritative source of law, “contained in the law and in the gospel” and completely rational and immutable. Yet here Gratian must concede that certain practices described in the Hebrew Bible are no longer practiced. Despite changes in observances, Gratian concludes that natural law is immutable: “Natural law is contained in the Law and the Gospel, but it can be shown that not everything contained in the law and the gospel pertains to natural law. Moral precepts are immutable; symbolic precepts derived from observances are immutable; the observances themselves are not.”107

Gratian had at hand a myriad of defunct laws to prove his theory on natural law. He chose to build his argument on the levitical purity laws of the menstruant and the parturient:
For in the Law [Lev. 12:2–5] it was commanded that a woman not enter the Temple for forty days if she had given birth to a male child, and for eighty days in the case of a female child. In contrast, a woman is now prohibited from entering a church immediately after giving birth. Again a woman undergoing menstruation was considered unclean according to the law. Now, however, she is not prohibited from entering a church immediately or from receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion; nor is it prohibited that a mother or her child be baptized immediately after the birth.

Gratian quotes directly from Gregory’s *Libellus Responsorum* to demonstrate the mutability of purity laws and concludes his argument with the following excerpt:

[A] woman undergoing the usual period of menstruation should not be prevented from entering a church since fault ought not to be imputed to a excrescence of nature. Thus, it is unjust that, on account of what is suffered unwillingly, they be deprived of the entrance into a church. For we know that the woman who suffered from the issue of blood, coming up behind the Lord, touched the hem of his garment and was immediately freed from her infirmity [Matthew 9:20–23]. Therefore, if it was praiseworthy for her with the issue of blood to touch the garment of the Lord, why should a woman suffering from menstrual bleeding not be allowed to enter the Lord’s church? . . . If then it was proper that the woman presumed to touch the Lord’s garment in her illness, why should what was granted to one infirm person not be conceded to all women who endure a similar infirmity due to a natural debility?

Reception of holy communion should not be prohibited during the same period. If a woman on account of her great reverence, does not presume to receive that is to be commended; but if she also receives she is not to be judged. Even when they have no fault good people will sometimes acknowledge one. This is because things that happen without fault often occur on account of a fault. For example, we eat, which is without fault, when we are hungry, but it is because of the first man’s sin that we become hungry.

Gratian’s argument is groundbreaking. He refutes the menstrual laws of Leviticus 15 and permits menstruants full access to the sancta. Moreover, he uses the *Libellus Responsorum* in the service of his liberal agenda. Gratian was
also familiar with the opinions of Archbishop Theodore — in fact, he quotes Theodore’s stance on sexual relations with an adulterous wife. About menstruants, however, Gratian cites only Gregory, thereby forcing Theodore’s opinion on menstruants and the sacred, recently reintroduced by Burchard, back into oblivion.

Gratian’s Decretum was the most enduring code of Christian law until the twentieth century. Scholars memorized it, students studied its logic and its theories, and the laity lived it. It is no coincidence that the most important work of medieval law wholeheartedly gave menstruants access to the sacred precisely at the same time that women’s spirituality was flowering in the twelfth century.

FEMALE MYSTICS IN THE LATIN WEST

From the 1100s to the 1500s, we see the development of many different public modes of Christian female spirituality. Groups of religious women — such as the Beguines in Central Europe, Tertiaries (lay devotees associated with the Dominican and Franciscan orders), and Beatas in Spain — banded together in cities and led pious lives in public view. Among all of these changes, the most well known is the development of female mysticism. The twelfth century was the age of Christina of Markate (1096/8–1160) and Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179). And by the thirteenth century, as Caroline Bynum notes, “women were more likely than men to be mystics, to gain reputation based on their mystical abilities and . . . were primarily responsible for encouraging and propagating some of the most distinctive aspects of late medieval piety.”

The rise of female spiritual movements was a new phenomenon in Christian culture of the Latin West. Factors that contributed to it certainly include the growth of cities, the dearth of marriageable men, and the shelter that women’s movements offered in violent times, all elements of the changing social realities of twelfth-century Europe. Yet the development in the Latin West of female mysticism must also be viewed in light of the new attitudes toward menstruation and sexuality popularized in biblical exegesis, theology, and canon law. Menstruation was no longer a barrier to the sacred, and virginity became the essential criteria for mystical pursuits. Hildegard, for example, rejects the idea that menstruating women be barred from the church, while upholding the prohibition barring men wounded in battle from church entry “lest they violate the integrity of Christ’s Temple.”

Barbara Newman
sends Hildegard’s opinion sent a clear message: “A man who has shed blood in warfare is unclean, like fratricidal Cain; but a woman shedding her own blood is not. Even though Eve’s wound is a punishment for sin, it is nonetheless God-given and therefore sacred.” Hildegard herself wrote that God does “not disdain this time of suffering in women.”

The reform movement had divided Christian society into two: celibates for heaven, the laity on earth. Though women could not attain official authoritative positions outside of the convent, they could achieve authority in the church through prophecy. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas allowed that

[pp]rophecy is not a sacrament but a gift from God . . . And since in matters pertaining to the soul woman does not differ from man as to the thing (for sometimes a woman is found to be better than many men as regards the soul), it follows that she can receive the gift of prophecy and the like, but not the sacrament of the orders.”

Virginity was the established precondition for prophecy or visionary experience. Given that most women’s mystical knowledge was infused through the spirit rather than formal study, most female visionaries were unlearned. Their virginity, divine grace, and the approbation of male church leaders gave them their only clout.

By contrast, menstrual purity was not a prerequisite to God. A. J. Minnis’s study of the opinions of eleven scholastic theologians over the period 1240–1337 on the question of whether women could be ordained found that not one of these eleven — including Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) Bonaventure (1217–1276) and John Duns Scotus (1265–1308) — justified women’s exclusion from holy orders on the basis of her menstrual period. Moreover, though the Virgin Mary was free of the stain of original sin, she was nonetheless the natural mother of Jesus. Because she was a mother, albeit the mother of God, Christian theologians understood that her physiology must have logically resembled that of all mothers; menstrual blood was understood to be an essential fetal nutrient that the body later converted into breast milk. Theologians therefore determined that Mary did menstruate even though she was free of the curse of Eve.

Even though amenorrhea was seen as a sign of spiritual grace, and despite the likelihood that some women took affirmative steps to achieve it, it was not a requirement for mystical access. It was an ex post facto sign of holiness in those for whom it occurred, rather than a prerequisite. The reforms of the
tenth and eleventh century had reinforced existing suspicions concerning sexuality and given rise to a new understanding of menstruation. By the thirteenth century, sexuality rather than bodily purity had become the major impediment to divine pursuits, allowing virgins — both male and female — to achieve heavenly heights.\textsuperscript{122}

For medieval Christians, menstruation was a natural physiological process that did not bar one from sacred ritual. By contrast, lust, the product of original sin, was morally and ritually polluting. Laws prohibiting sexual relations with menstruants were maintained for medical reasons and to curb human libido. Sexual relations with menstruants, however unadvisable, were permissible to pay the marriage debt. Menstrual laws decreased in inverse relationship to the rise of the view that all sexual relations were barriers to the sacred: only those free of the stain of sexuality could approach the sacred or receive the Holy Spirit. Sexuality in general, rather than bodily effluxes, pollutes. This new definition of impurity as libidinal reduced the stigma on physical impurity, permitted menstruants access to the sacred, and facilitated the flowering of female Christian mysticism in the twelfth century. This window of opportunity would begin to close when menstrual pollution returned to the fore and aligned women with the demonic in the later Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{123}

Ritual purity and virginity served almost identical functions in the sibling religions. Early Christians, as noted by Peter Brown, believed that virgins were temples of the Holy Spirit and served as mediators between God and man. Only those liberated from the confines of sexuality were free to live like angels who worship God on his throne of glory. Indeed, for early Christians, virginity endowed a person with the same “supernatural spiritual abilities” possessed by the Hekhalot mystic who required physical purity to participate in heavenly liturgy or to serve as a mediator between heaven and earth by adjuring an angel.\textsuperscript{124} After the Gregorian reforms, celibacy was required of all priests. Concupiscence functioned as a polluting force that disqualified clergy from ecclesia, the Christian equivalent of Temple,\textsuperscript{125} just as menstrual impurity denied medieval kabbalists entry into the celestial Temple.

Notions of purity and impurity do not disappear in Christianity; rather, they are redefined. The Middle Ages witnessed the emergence of sexuality as the new impurity.
Conclusion

According to a popular midrashic tradition, the nonagenarian Sarah never menstruated until three angels arrived to announce the birth of Isaac. The Zohar interprets Sarah’s amenorrhea as a mark of her sanctity and singular status among women. She alone, of all her sex, was free of the stain of impurity. The Zohar explains:

Come and see, an Eve came into the world and cleaved to the serpent who polluted her and brought about death to the world and to her husband. A Sarah rested and came forth and did not cleave to him [the serpent] . . . Because Abraham and Sarah did not cleave to the demonic other side, Sarah received the privilege of supernal life for herself, her husband, and her sons after her. As it is written, “Look to the rock whence you are hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug out” (Isaiah 51:1). Concerning this [therefore it was written] “and these were the years of Sarah’s life,” because she was privileged in all of them. And it is not written among other women, [for example] and these were the years of Eve’s life.

According to Zoharic mythology, the serpent, ruler of the demonic other side (sitra ahra), is the source of all human impurities. Whereas Eve sins in the Bible by eating of the Tree of Knowledge and God punishes her with painful labor, in the Zohar, Eve sins by cleaving to the force of impurity that then pollutes her with the menstrual flow. Sarah, by contrast, remains ritually pure after her encounter with the serpent. Untainted by menstruation, the mark of the serpent, she is able to achieve a level of sanctity denied Eve and all her other descendants; Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of God, perpetually rests upon her. Just as a male mystic achieves spiritual ecstasy through his union with the Shekhinah, Sarah achieves spiritual ecstasy through her union with the male aspect of God, Yesod. Sarah’s special spiritual status turns on
her purity. The Zohar justifies the absence of female mystics by contrasting Sarah’s purity with other women’s impurity.

Jewish mysticism is based on the Israelite Temple cult. The Temple Mount was God’s terrestrial address; the Holy of Holies, God’s private office on earth. Access to the Temple was limited to the ritually pure; access to the Holy of Holies was limited to the high priest on the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish year. After the destruction of the physical Temple, Jews who yearned for immediate access to the divine expressed their spiritual quest in Temple cult symbolism. Hekhalot mystics imagined a celestial Temple. German Pietists identified the four-wheeled chariot of Ezekiel with the tetragrammaton; medieval kabbalists imagined the sefirotic realm as the Holy Hekhal. Access to the celestial Temple, like access to the Jerusalem Temple, was limited to the ritually pure. Hekhalot literature prescribed elaborate purity rituals for aspiring male adepts and described the spiritual and moral dangers facing the unworthy. The traditions of the contemporaneous Beraita d’Niddah (BdN), also addressed to men, focused on the dangers of menstrual impurity for sacred endeavors. These traditions represent two sides of the same coin with respect to purity and the divine. Italian Jews of Palestinian origin transmitted Hekhalot and BdN traditions to Northern Europe, where they become an essential part of the mystical practice and esoteric theology of the German Pietists.

The significance of menstrual impurity intensified when these Ashkenazic ideas filtered into medieval Kabbalah, but the focus on menstruation that emerged in Kabbalah was different in kind from the constraints in earlier religious circles, in part because it was not merely a set of laws or customs. It was part of a larger cosmic and theological understanding of the universe born of the Temple cult. Kabbalists, like latter-day high priests had to avoid menstrual impurity to enter a sefirotic realm conceived of as a celestial Holy of Holies. Zoharic myth reinforced the long-established tradition that menstrual impurity was antinomic to the sacred. For theosophical Kabbalists, everything in the human realm — including menstruation — had its origins in the divine. Women menstruated because the Shekhinah menstruates, and both flows were stimulated by excess Judgment or the sitra aḥra. Menstruants, already viewed as inimical to the divine, became particularly nefarious when they were understood as reflecting the Shekhinah herself, empowered by the sitra aḥra. Just as the menstruating woman was separated from her husband, the
Shekhinah had to be separated from the other divine attributes. Any contact between the pure and impure could infect the Godhead with the forces of the demonic realm. This symbolic understanding of the divine menstruant had a profound impact on the image and spiritual opportunities of medieval Jewish women and continues to influence folk custom today.

By contrast, ritual purity was not essential to spiritual success in either Islam or Christianity in the medieval period. Menstrual laws were a quotidian aspect of Islamic ritual, and bodily impurities did not carry the same taboos as found in Judaism and Christianity. Analysis of Islamic scriptural, legal, and mystical sources, as well as contemporary Sufi practice, indicates that purity of heart, rather than physical purity, was the criterion for divine pursuits and was considered equally accessible to both men and women. Similarly, while menstrual laws remained entrenched in Christianity, the relaxation of the laws codified by Gratian in his *Decretum* coincided with the flowering of Christian female mysticism in the Latin West. Virginity — real or reclaimed, male or female — became the sole prerequisite to the Christian divine.

In Jewish law, the antinomy between menstruation and the sacred remained embedded. Jacob Landau, one of the first Italian Ashkenazi scholars to include the Zohar in his legal decisions in his *Sefer ha-Agur* (1491) mentioned that women in his community did not look at a Torah scroll when it was raised and shown to the congregation. In his gloss on the Shulḥan Arukh, the Ashkenazi rabbi Moses Isserles (d. 1572) noted that women in Ashkenaz generally refrained from entering synagogues or touching holy books. Moses Sofer (Hatam Sofer, 1762–1839) decreed that menstruants neither enter the synagogue nor pray. His student Rabbi Aqiva Schlesinger wrote that a woman with a blood flow should not come to the Western Wall because people pray there, and thus it is like a synagogue. Israel Meir Kagan (Hafets Hayim, 1838–1933) prohibited menstruants from looking at a Torah scroll when it was raised and from entering cemeteries. The *Lubavitch Book of Customs* forbid all women from lighting Hanukah candles: as menstruating women cannot make the blessing over the candles, all women should refrain from blessing to ensure modesty.

It is this antinomy between menstruants and the sacred that undergirds a practice commonly followed by Jewish women who immerse themselves in ritual baths. Rabbis generally advocate reciting blessings before performing a commandment. However, in striking contrast to most other benedictions, menstruants customarily recite the blessing of ritual immersion after the first
of their three immersions to ensure that they pray in a purified state. Some Jewish women will not touch a Torah, believing that any past or present experience of menstrual impurity bars them from contact with the sacred scroll. Other Jews believe that only menstruants must refrain from touching a Torah and attending prayer services.

These modern practices are not based in Jewish law; they are rather reformulations of Temple cult–based spiritual practices that barred women access to the holy. Nor have these concepts vanished from the mystical landscape. Indeed, the influence of the Zohar on menstruants may become even more pronounced among religious Jewish communities in the future. Though the Zohar was not intended as a halakhic work, in recent years several Hebrew books have appeared that claim to derive laws from it. Yisaskhar of Kremonits’s *Yesh Skhar*, more commonly known as *Shulḥan Arukh ha-Zohar* (1569) was the first kabbalistic book to present itself as a halakhic work. This sixteenth-century text was first reprinted in 1984 and by 1993 was in its third printing. Citing the Zohar, the *Yesh Skhar* warns that flouting menstrual laws is tantamount to transgressing the Ten Commandments and will incur the early death of children. Women must cut their hair and nails prior to ritual immersion because the spirit of impurity inheres in new growth.

In 1988, Moses Hayim Teiburg published *Sefer ha-Zohar ha-Nigleh* (The Book of the Zohar Revealed). Teiburg derives the Zohar’s halakhic perspective on the portions of the Bible to teach proper practice to the unenlightened. He warns his readers not to approach menstruants because twenty-four types of impurity possess them. Husbands must separate from their menstruating wives lest they combine that which God separated. Sexual relations with menstruants will, he writes, drive the Shekhinah away from the world.

In 2001, Abraham Tseinart published the most comprehensive modern effort to promulgate the Zoharic corpus and make it more accessible. *Shulḥan Arukh ha-Zohar* (SAZ) is a thirty-volume work dedicated to teaching “the laws, customs, strictures, embellishments, and morals that can be gleaned from the teachings of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai in the Zohar.” Though this convention is not new, SAZ differs from the earlier examples in its breadth and scale. The thirty volumes were designed for ease of use and render the Zohar’s esoteric Aramaic traditions into simple Hebrew. Its scope and its emphasis on popularization ensures that it remains important to Jewish women coming of age in the twenty-first century.
Paragraph 195 of Karo’s Shulḥan Arukh Yoreh De’ah codifies the laws of menstrual separation. The SAZ rationalizes the reasons for the Shulḥan Arukh’s restrictions on menstruants because “the spirit of impurity rests on the niddah.” Thus possessed, a menstruant’s magical prowess exceeds that of a ritually pure woman. Men should guard themselves from impure women because the spirit of impurity rests upon them. Anything that they approach or that approaches them becomes impure. Consequently, the SAZ explains that a woman must count an additional seven clean days after the cessation of her flow to free herself from the clutches of the evil qelippot restraining her.25 Moreover, a woman must cut the hair and nails that grow during her flow because their zohama attracts the sitra zohama; these dangerous parings must be hidden lest they harm others. Whoever burns them increases Hesed in the world (because they originate in the side of Judgment).26

The laws of niddah given in the SAZ not only protect Jewish men from an ungodly force, but their observance facilitates mystical vision:

Israel was privileged when the Holy One, blessed be He, gave them the law “do not approach a woman (18:19). . . . He who observes the laws of niddah as he is commanded is thereby privileged to unite with the supernal unity, and by this he is privileged to have the Shekhinah rest upon him.27

According to the SAZ, menstrual laws are a gift for men from God.

According to one Zoharic myth, the divine aspect of the Shekhinah vanishes when she becomes a niddah, and she then becomes possessed by an evil handmaiden. This is the meaning of the phrase “God wanders away (n-d-d) from the niddah (n-d-h).” The heh signifies that the Shekhinah departs, and a demonic handmaiden takes her place. Thus niddah laws are essential for divine access and necessary for the maintenance of cosmic harmony: men can emulate and meet God by avoiding menstrual impurity. Women, involuntarily polluted by menstrual impurity, cannot access the divine without causing cosmic disruption. This understanding rationalized women’s absence from medieval Jewish mysticism.

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INTRODUCTION


2. Milgrom, Anchor Bible: Leviticus, 745.

3. A Bar Ilan database search of the printed (Margaliot) edition of the Zohar reveals an overwhelming number of instances of the term niddah as compared to the Aramaic and Hebrew terms for the nine other “fathers of impurity.”


7. Baskin, “Dolce of Worms,” 42. That is not to say that there are no examples of learned Jewish women. According to halakhah, women were merely exempted, not forbidden, Torah study, and some distinguished themselves. The figures Beruriah and Ima Shalom were noted for their scholarship in the Talmud, Urania of Worms led prayer services for women, Rabbi Shlomo Yitshaq’s (Rashi’s) daughters were purportedly learned, and the leaders of the German Pietists encouraged women to study Torah. Yet female Pietists could acquire only the exoteric Torah knowledge that would enable them to practice Judaism more efficiently; stringent purity laws barred them from esoteric lore. The Pietist Eleazar of Worms, who lauded the Torah knowledge of his wife and daughter (Shirat ha-Roqeqh, 226–232), not only adopted the most strict interpretation of menstrual purity laws known at that time but also instituted additional restrictions governing mystics’ contact with menstruants. See, among others, BT Berakhot 20b; BT Qiddushin 29a. Sefer ha-Hinukh, 532 par. 418; Judah the Pietist, Sefer Hasidim, ed. Margaliot, 211 par. 835 and par. 1501. Petahia of Regensburg, Seeuv Rav Petahia Mi-Regensburg, 9; Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Talmud Torah, 1:13; Maimonides, Teshuvat ha-Ramban, ed. Blau, 34. On Jewish women’s education in the late-antique world, see Ilan, “Quest for the Historical Beruriah, Rachel, and Ima Shalom,” 1–17; Goodblatt, “Beruriah Traditions,” 68–85; Boyarin, Carnal Israel, 183–196; Swidler, Women in Judaism, 97–105. In the Middle Ages, see Abrahams, Jewish Life in the Middle Ages, 26; Agus, The Heroic Age of Franco-German Jewry, 284–309; Cohen, “Women and the Study of Talmud,” 28–37; Grossman, Pious and Rebellion, 154–174; Goitein, A Mediterranean Society, 2:171–211; Harvey, “Obligation of Talmud


12. Rapoport-Albert, “On the Position of Women in Sabbateanism,” 143–327. Professor Rapoport-Albert’s Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zev (Littman, 2011) appeared in print too late for me to cite it in my notes and bibliography, but I would like readers to be aware of her excellent new study. See also Chajes, Between Worlds, 97–118.


14. Vital, Sefer Hezyonot, 6–7, 10; Chajes, Between Worlds, 97–118; Chajes, “Spirit Possession in Sixteenth Century Safed,” 124–158; Faierstein, “Maggidim, Spirits, and Women in Rabbi Hayyim Vital’s Book of Visions,” 186–214. The notion that women could become possessed by external forces may be an outgrowth of the Zoharic understanding of the menstruant as possessed. Note that the women described by Vital bear striking resemblance to female demoniacs in thirteenth-century Europe. “Speaking ‘in persona diaboli,’ they were viewed as sources of supernatural authority, treated with circumspect awe by priests, and sometimes even allowed to preach” (733). Newman contends that they played an essential part in the thirteenth-century attempt to relive the Gospel as a drama (“Possessed by the Spirit,” 733–734; compare Voaden, God’s Words, Women’s Voices, 41–72). This desire to recreate the drama of earlier spiritual experiences was common to sixteenth-century Safed as well.


19. There are expressions of dualism in the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha, but these are not as “radical” as those of the Greeks. See Fraade, “Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism,” 262, 267–269; Boyarin, Carnal Israel, 31–60.

20. Plato, Theaetetus, 97c.


23. According to the ninth-century Midrash Tanhuma, Israelite women did not menstruate while traveling through the desert because the Shekhinah rested upon the camp. See Midrash Tanhuma, ed. Buber, 3:5:18, 27.


33. Sacrificial blood and the blood of circumcision, by contrast, are holy and have salvific qualities. Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?* 16–17, 31–32.


36. Lev. 15:19–30. The Bible does not require immersion for niddot and zavot. After the destruction of the Temple, a zavah could no longer offer a sacrifice, and ritual immersion became her only means of purification. Cohen, “Menstruants and the Sacred,” 277.

37. M Zavim, 1; T Zavim, 1.

38. Note that while Leviticus does not stipulate ritual immersion for menstruants, the Mishnah Miqva’ot 8:1 and 5 does. Cohen, “Menstruants and the Sacred,” 277; Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis*, 149; Meacham, “Mishnah Tractate Niddah,” 176.


41. There is no historical record documenting the acceptance of Rabbi Zeira’s stricture. However, we do know that by the early Geonic period, this stricture became the standard interpretation. Thanks to Devorah Zlochower for this clarification.

42. BT Ketuvot 61b. M Niddah is the only section of the Mishnaic order of purities to have its own Gemara. This need not be seen as evidence of rabbinic misogyny. Fonrobert suggests that Tractate Niddah represents a rabbinic attempt to develop a discourse on the
female body that coincides with the contemporaneous gynecological studies of Rufus, Soranus, and Galen. References to women’s limitations during the menstrual flow appear only in other talmudic tractates (Menstrual Purity, 41–42).

43. Avot d’Rabbi Natan, ed. Schechter, ver. A, 2:5. See also BT Sanhedrin 43a.
44. See also Isaac ben Moses of Vienna, Or Zarua, 4:48b.
45. Secunda argues that the seven clean days were originally instituted in Babylonian as a polemical response to Zoroastrian menstrual laws (“Ki Derekh Nahsim Li,” especially 216).
49. Milgrom, Anchor Bible: Leviticus, 904.
50. Cohen, “Purity and Piety,” 107; Baskin, “Women and Ritual Immersion,” 132. The rabbis differ as to the definition of the term ba’al qeri. It may refer to man who has ejaculated in intercourse (PT Yoma 8:1:44d), a man with gonorrhea (M Berakhot 3:6), a man who has had a nocturnal emission, or an onanite. For the purposes of this general overview, I follow the example of Shaye Cohen and use the term ejaculant.
51. While Tosefta Berakhot 2:13 allows menstruants to read the Torah, the version of the argument in the Babylonian Talmud, which has been tampered with, extends this privilege only to men who have had sexual relations with niddot. See BT Berakhot 22a; Cohen, “Menstruants and the Sacred,” 295 n34; Boyarin, Carnal Israel, 180–181.
52. Cohen, “Purity and Piety,” 107. The specific prohibition that ba’alei qeri not study Torah was known as taqqanat Ezra, the enactment of Ezra. See BT Baba Qamma 82a; Cohen, “Women and the Sacred,” 273–299; Dinary, “Profanation of the Holy,” 17–37.
53. BT Berakhot 22a; PT Berakhot 3:3:6c; Tosefta Berakhot 2:3. Cohen, “Menstruants and the Sacred,” 284. Scholars applied a double standard to the observance of the laws of qeri. For example, when Rabbi Judah had a seminal emission, he immersed himself in a river before teaching his students, even though he did not require immersion for others. See BT Berakhot 22a; Fraade, “Ascetical Aspects,” 275; Boyarin, Carnal Israel, 51.
55. Several Geonim and many other Jewish men under Muslim rule would immerse themselves after ejaculation. Their practice was likely more influenced by Islam than by Palestinian custom. Most Germanic Jews, by contrast, ignored the custom until it was reintroduced by the German Pietists. Lewin, Otsar ha-Geonim, 4:43, 54–56; Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Qeriyat Shema, 4:8; Hilkhot Tefillah, 1:9; 4:4; Ḥavatselet, “Development of One Custom under the Influence of Time and Place,” 531–537; Cohen, “Menstruants and the Sacred,” 285.
57. Zohar 1:54b–55a, 167b; Tishby, The Wisdom of the Zohar, 3:1366–1367; Biale, Eros and the Jews, 57. On the association between ba’al qeri and death in Kabbalah, see Bahya ben Asher on Lev. 24:3; Joseph Hamadan, Ta’amei ha-Mitsvot, #55 in Gottlieb, Ha-Qabbalah be-Kitvei Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher, 260.


59. Satlow, “‘Try to Be a Man,’” 40.

60. PT Berakhot 3:3,4 6c; BT Berakhot 21b; BT Niddah 31b; PT Ketuvot 5:8 29d; BT Ketuvot 62b; Boyarin, Carnal Israel, 50–51; Cohen, “Menstruants and the Sacred,” 283. Compare the Beraita of Rabbi Pinḥas ben Ya’ir in BT Avodah Zarah 20b and my interpretation in chapter 1.

61. Fonrobert, Menstrual Purity, 44–45; compare Sifra Metsora, 1:75a and 4:78a; Mishnah Niddah 5:1, cited in Fonrobert, 48, 53.

62. See chapter 7.


ONE. From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Temple


5. Idel, Ascensions on High, 23–37.

6. Dan, Three Types of Ancient Jewish Mysticism.


8. Wolfson notes that some of the Sar Torah texts presuppose an ecstatic experience of illumination as ascent (Speculum, 116–117).


11. There is some evidence that the rabbis also believed that cultic purity laws remained in effect in the heavens. See Numbers Rabbah 19:7.
12. BT Berakhot 21a–21b.
15. See, among others, *Synopse* #3, #9, #79, #177, #178, #299, #424, #884.
16. *Synopse* #683; see also *Synopse* #337, #623. Though moral and physical purity are prerequisite, they are not equated in Hekhalot literature as they are in Qumran and in late antique midrashim (Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 95). To adjure an angel, one must approach God not only in (spiritual) purity but also after (physical) “immersion” (*Synopse* #199). This distinction is important. In Qumran literature the equation of moral and physical purity makes physical impurity a mark of evil, facilitating the development of a spirit of impurity; Hekhalot literature does not demonize impurity. This absence of a demonic aspect to impurity distinguishes Hekhalot literature from later Jewish mysticism as well.
17. BT Yoma 21b; BT Baba Batra 12a.
22. *Synopse* #12, #27, #378, #971.
23. *Synopse* #4–6, #24, #29. Earthly visitors to heaven are not alone in their need for purity. Ministering angels contract impurity through their close contact with man during their daily descents into our world. They are sullied by the odor emitted by human beings, who are born of women and may contract impurity through emissions and dirt. When they return to heaven for the angelic liturgy, the ministering angels immerse themselves seven times in rivers of fire. After immersion, they check themselves for any remaining traces of impurity. They will participate in the heavenly liturgy only when certain of their sanctity. See *Synopse* #180, #181, #265, #531, #810, #790, #791. The ministering angels’ sevenfold immersion may be more representative of the seven Hekhalot than of any contemporary rabbinic practice. Moreover, when sacrifices could no longer be offered at the Temple, immersion became the final act in the purification process. Any required “checking” would have to be completed before immersion. The ministering angels, however, check themselves after immersion. Ablution in the rivers of fire is their sole means of achieving purity — there is no waiting period. They must therefore check themselves after immersion to be certain that the process has worked.
necromancy was also an essential part of the Western medieval magical tradition. Kieckhefer, Magic in the Middle Ages, 168.


28. Deut. 23:10–15; See also 1 Sam. 20:26.

29. Rashi explains that the term “purity” refers specifically to purity from semen. Rashi on BT Avodah Zarah 20b, s.v. ve-nishmarta mi-kol davar ra.

30. Sexual abstinence is omitted in the printed edition of the text; cleanliness leads directly to purity.

31. One of the most interesting descriptions of these degrees of holiness can be found in Synopse #558, where different levels of holiness are required for entry into different levels of heaven. The purity requirements of angels similarly depend on their station in heaven. The Hayyot ha-Qodesh, the Ofranim, and the Cherubim sanctify and purify themselves to a greater degree than do the ministering angels because they stand at a higher level of the heavens near the supernal merkavah (Synopse #795, #535, #518).

32. Note that according to one opinion in the Talmud (BT Berakhot 22a), an ejaculant may study Talmud but cannot mention divine names.

33. BT Berakhot 21a–22b; Cohen, “Menstruants and the Sacred,” 283.

34. Synopse #424.

35. Synopse #436, #489; compare #684.

36. Synopse #424.

37. Synopse #623; compare #663.

38. M Yoma 1:1. Thanks to Charlotte Fonrobert for this reference.

39. Synopse #303; compare Synopse #565.

40. Synopse #299.

41. BT Berakhot 21b.

42. The absolute requirement to wait five days before counting the seven clean days is propounded by in the Terumat ha-Deshen. The author of that text justifies his stricture by invoking the purity requirements of seminal emission. I am indebted to Devorah Zlochower for this reference.

43. Compare Synopse #663, where the aspiring mystic is told to immerse himself in a river three times. This instruction reflects the practice of menstruants who must immerse themselves in a ritual bath three times. Ejaculants only needed to immerse themselves once.

44. Because the rabbis never explicitly defined the terms of the metaphor, the anatomical referents are a subject of scholarly debate. For a detailed analysis of these anatomical referents, see Barkai, Les infortunes de Dinah, 40. Meacham, “Mishnah Tractate Niddah,” 224–231.
45. M Niddah 2:5.
46. The alternative of the upper chamber does not fit this explanation neatly because blood from the upper chamber is considered pure (PT Niddah 2:4, 50a). But Hekhalot mystics were extremely vigilant about purity laws (e.g., the story of Nehunyah ben Haqa-nah, later in the chapter), and it is likely that they considered any bloody issue from the female impure. Note that the Geronese kabbalist Ezra of Gerona also believed blood from the upper chamber to be impure. See chapter 7.
47. Van Gennep, Rites of Passage; Bynum, “Women’s Stories, Women’s Symbols,” 35; Idel, Ascensions on High, 23–37.
48. Synopse #424.
49. Synopse #314; Schäfer, Magische Texte, 165.
50. There is, however, one reference, ostensibly to women in general, which may intend menstruants in particular. Several rituals warn mystics against speaking with their wives or with women at large. Synopse #498, #623, #507. While speaking with women could certainly result in sexual arousal (BT Nedarim 20a; Massekhet Derekh Erets Rab-bah 1; BT Eruvin 63b), the warning clearly derives from M Avot 1:5, which warns men not to speak much with womankind. Any man who did not heed this exhortation would cause bad things to befall him, would be no longer be fit for the study of Torah, and would ultimately inherit hell. Several manuscript editions of the Mishnah identify this generic woman as a menstruant. Katsh, ed. Ginzei Mishnah, 101; MS Kaufman A50, f. 188b; Faksimile Ausgabe des Mischnah Codex Kaufman A-50, ed. Beer, 2:337. MS Parma de Rossi 138, fol. 113a; Mishnah Codex Parma, 226. According to this reading, men put good fortune, heaven, and Torah knowledge at risk by speaking with menstruants. This tradition was known throughout the Middle Ages and is explicitly mentioned by Rashi, Jonah Gerondi, and Menahem Me’iri. Schechter, introduction to Avot d’Rabbi Natan, xvii–xx. Compare Menahem Me’iri, Perush ha-Mishnah l-Me’iri 5:188; Isaac of Dura, Sha’arei Dura, Hilkhon Niddah, 2:18. For a different understanding, see Horowitz, Pithei Niddah, 25–26.
52. Synopse #648, #684.
53. No need for “pure food” is mentioned in the Bible. Priests were expected to eat while ritually pure, but no specific requirements for handling their food are described. Sanders, Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah, 136.
54. Synopse #489, #314, #19; Schäfer, Genizah-Fragmente, 165.
55. Scholars have noted the affinities between the Dead Sea Sect and Hekhalot literature, and the purity concerns of the Dead Sea Sect may have influenced the food concerns of Hekhalot mystics. Those who did not belong to the sect were considered impure and were denied access to the food supply. See Baumgarten, “Sacrifice and Worship among the Jewish Sectaries,” 46; Schiffman, Sectarian Law in the Dead Sea Scrolls, 160–164; Lesses, Ritual Practices, 142–144. On the affinities between Qumran and Hekhalot literature, see Elior, The Three Temples.
57. Synopse #288.
58. Synopse #83.
59. Synopse #86; Schäfer, The Hidden and Manifest God, 40–42. Note that Rabbi Aqiva is also able to identify by sight a child who was both a mamzer and conceived during niddah. See Massekhet Kallah, ed. Higger, 16:146–148; Kallah Rabbati 2:2, 191–193; see also Zohar 3:226a (RM).
60. Synopse #224–#228.
63. Against this view, see Schlüter, “Die Erzählung,” 98.
64. BT Niddah 16a.
65. Lieberman identifies the dissenter as Rabbi Eliezer, the supreme authority on blood purity (“The Knowledge of Halakhah,” 243n73). It is also possible that the dissenter was the Rava, who was able to differentiate between sixty different types of blood by smell alone and enjoyed an “international reputation” as an expert on bloods (Fonrobert, Menstrual Purity, 116–117).
66. Lieberman, “The Knowledge of Halakhah,” 244. See also the sources that he cites in note 78. For a critique of this view, see Schlüter, “Die Erzählung,” 98–99.
67. Since the text makes no mention of another piece of cloth, I assume there is only one. Schlüter believes there are two (“Die Erzählung,” 109); compare Lieberman, “The Knowledge of Halakhah,” 243n74.
68. This step may have been a means to purify and deodorize the cloth (Lieberman, “The Knowledge of Halakhah,” 243), or may reflect contemporary magical practices (Schiffman, “The Recall of Nehunya ben ha-Qanah”).
69. On this text and the BdN, see Lieberman, “The Knowledge of Halakhah,” 241–244.
71. See the extensive discussion of magic and menstruation in chapter 7.
72. Schlüter, “Die Erzählung.” In a similar vein, Halperin, believes that Hekhalot mystics were lower class rebels hoping to learn the mysteries of Torah through magic rather than study. Halperin, The Faces of the Chariot.
73. On Hekhalot literature and late-antique magic, see Lesses, Ritual Practices, 122, 279–366; Schäfer, “Jewish Magic Literature,” 75–91; Schiffman and Swartz, Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts; Swartz, Scholastic Magic, 33–52. On purity prerequisites for


75. Rachel Elior, *The Three Temples*.

76. Interestingly, onions were believed to stimulate menstruation (BT Niddah 63b). Thanks to Devorah Zlochower for this reference.

77. *Synopse* #436, #489 (not in N8128).

78. Ibid.

TWO. *The Mysticism of the Beraita d’Niddah*

1. We have no manuscript edition of the composition we now know as the BdN. Chaim Horowitz published his version from a unique manuscript that was subsequently lost. The restrictive niddah traditions are first named as a distinct text in the mid-thirteenth century when the physician, halakhist, and kabbalist Moses Nahmanides quotes laws in the name of a Beraita d’Massekhet Niddah. There are, however, several medieval compendia of niddah laws strikingly similar to Horowitz’s text that may be abridgments or earlier versions. Moreover, Geonic sources, Ashkenazi liturgical books (*Mahzorim*), and halakhic codes attest to the influence of its traditions in the medieval period. In an oral communication, Shaye Cohen suggested that the BdN, like the texts of Hekhalot literature, may be a compendium of older niddah traditions that were first redacted as a book by the early sages of Ashkenaz who were heavily influenced by Palestinian traditions. Indeed, this possibility becomes even more cogent when we consider that the manuscript version of the BdN was bound with an early version of the Palestinian Talmud. See, for example, MS London Add 27129, fols. 130b–131a; MS Parma de Rossi 541, fols. 222b–225a. For a discussion of all the manuscript varia, see Marienberg, *Etudes sur la Beraita d’Niddah*.

2. Just as M Niddah begins with a law of Shammai, the BdN begins with the words “Shammai says.” Other traditions are attributed to Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, Rabbi Ḥiyya, Rabbi Nehunyah ben Haqanah, and Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh. See Schechter, “Jewish Literature in 1890,” 339.

3. BT Shabbat 31a; *Midrash Tanhuma*, ed., Buber, 3:5:17, 53. Menstruants are explicitly permitted to separate the hallah in BT Bekhorot 27a.


5. On the possibility of Zoroastrian influence on rabbinic niddah laws, see discussion in chapter 6. On the dangers of niddot in the Middle Ages, see chapter 7.


7. BdN 1:2, 3; compare 2:2, 10. The authors of the BdN must have derived this idea from Leviticus, which deems spittle impure.


10. Ibid., 2:5, 18.
13. Ibid., 3:4, 30. Ba’alei qeri were similarly forbidden entry to synagogues (BdN 3:3, 26).
14. Ibid., 3:3, 26. Parturients were also barred from the holy (BdN 3:4, 30).
15. Saying “amen” exempts from the obligation to bless individually. Therefore, were a menstruant to utter “amen,” she would, in essence, be blessing God and thereby blaspheming his name.
16. BT Berakhot 20a–b.
17. Ibid.
19. See parallels in BT Berakhot 24b; BT Shabbat 40a, 150a; BT Qiddushin 33a; BT Avodah Zarah 44b; BT Zevahim 102b.
21. BdN 2:3. This finding is reiterated in many later sources, such as Nahmanides and Bahya ben Asher on Genesis 31:35; Israel al Nakawa, Menorat ha-Ma’or, 3:6:5; Me’ir ibn Aldabi, Shevilei ha-Emunah, 3:1; Pesiqta Rabbati, ed. Friedman, 14:5.
22. This particular prohibition may have to have influenced “normative” halakhah. The rabbis generally advocated reciting blessings before performing the commandment. In order to ensure that women pray in a purified state; however, niddot were required to recite the blessing for ritual immersion after the first of their three immersions in the ritual bath (Dinary, “Profanation of the Holy,” 21–22; BdN 17n99). This convention, which belies the rationales of talmudic menstrual laws, is practiced by Orthodox Jewish women today. For further discussion, see my final chapter.
24. While the Talmud does not imbue impure persons with demonic power, it does imbue those seeking demonic power with impure spirits. The Talmud describes magic in terms of a dichotomy between purity and impurity. Sanctioned magic is performed by means of the pure name of God, and unsanctioned magic is performed by means of the names of impurity and impure spirits. The rabbis, moreover, believed in the tenets of sympathetic magic, whereby like elements attract. Thus, to perform illicit and therefore impure magical acts, the magician must visit a polluted area. See BT Sanhedrin 91a; BT Niddah 17a; BT Hagigah 3b. The Talmud specifies graveyards as the site of illicit magical practice. In fact, of the six references to spirits of impurity in the talmudic corpus, four are associated with graveyards (BT Hagigah 3b; BT Sotah 3a (twice); BT Sanhedrin 65b (twice); BT Niddah 17a).
29. BT Berakhot 61a; BT Eruvin 18b.


32. This understanding seems to have influenced the following tradition redacted in the early Geonic Sefer ha-Miqta’ot: a high priest must not enter a home in which a niddah resides, nor may he recite the priestly blessing when any of the women in his home menstruates because, as Rav Yodan said, “The prayers of any priest who raises his hands [to recite the priestly blessing] when his mother, wife, or daughter is polluted, or [any priest] who enter the home of a menstruant are an abomination. His future generations are lost; he has not freed his fellow Jews from their obligation.” Because just as a high priest is forbidden entry into a home containing a corpse, a priest is forbidden entry into a home inhabited by a menstruating woman (Assaf, Sefer ha-Miqta’ot, 39).

33. Leviticus Rabbah, 16; Numbers Rabbah 9; BdN1:2 and 1:4, 6. That sexual relations with menstruating women cause leprosy became a commonplace in rabbinic culture. See discussion and relevant sources in chapters 7 and 9.


35. Midrash Tanhuma, ed. Buber, Parashat Korah, 6; Shoftim, 7; Midrash Yelamdenu, Korah, 1, 12. Midrash Mishlei, ed. Buber, 25. There are two appearances of the come and see formula in the Talmud Bavli (Qiddushin 20a; Arakhin 30b). Here too, the formula is used to demonstrate point to sinful behavior.

36. Consider also that a menstruant may not touch the cloth that will envelope her husband’s corpse. BdN 1:5, 7.

37. The association between menstruation and death lies at the root of the ancient near-eastern belief in the demonic possession of menstruants. Through the agency of her menstrual flow, the menstruant is perceived to come under the influence of a spirit of impurity — a polluting and malignant adversary of the holy and living god; she thus becomes a potential danger to all she encounters. The priestly writers of Leviticus, influenced by a strong antipathy to Canaanite religion, had sought to censor these understandings and instead pronounced ritual impurity to be a neutral state of being. Menstrual blood contaminates, they claimed, not the menstruant. Thus in contrast to other near-eastern cultic leaders who concentrate on exorcising spirits of impurity from the possessed, Israelite priests transferred impurity from the menstruant herself to the items that she touched, partly in order to suppress the notion that her impurity constituted any kind of possession (Milgrom, introduction to Anchor Bible: Leviticus, 44, 936).

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 46, 941.

40. Compare Lev. 15:3; Isa. 30:22; Ezek. 7:19–20; Lam. 1:8. The term niddah may refer either to a menstruant in particular or to pollution in general. These examples suggest the former reading. See Milgrom, Anchor Bible: Leviticus, 952.

41. The late-antique Targum Yonatan ben Uziel interprets the term literally as impure spirit (ruah mas’ava) in a discourse on on Zech. 13:2. Although the JPS Bible translates these last two terms as “for purging and for cleansing,” the words literally mean “hatt’at, a
type of sacrifice, and for the menstruant.” The grammatically focused medieval commentator Rabbi David Qimhi (Radaq) relates the two terms and assumes the term hatt’at refers to the zavah who must bring a hatt’at sacrifice and that the term niddah refers to the menstruant who may now become purified by the living waters of the spring. When they are purified, the “prophets and the impure spirit will vanish from the land.” According to this reading, Second Zechariah makes a direct connection between the purification of menstruants and zavot and the exorcism of the evil spirit from the land. See Radaq’s commentary on Zech. 13:2, s.v. va-‘et ruah ha-tum’ah.


44. *The Temple Scroll*, 45:10, 2:192, 47:3–6, 48:14–17, 2:386–387. All these different impurities are subsumed under the term “niddah-like impurity.”


47. “Sod ha-‘ervah u-maqor ha-niddah,” in *The Thanksgiving Scroll (1QS)*, 9:22.


51. The Damascus document describes non-Zadokites as impure because they engage in sexual relations with menstruants (CD 5:7).


56. Nitzan, “Hymns from Qumran ‘le-phahed u-le-vahel’ Evil Ghosts,” 19–46. Note that although Nitzan herself does not believe that these hymns were used for magical purposes at Qumran, several other scholars do. See Naveh and Shaked, Magic Spells and Formulae, 19–20; Ta-Shma “Comments on Hymns from Qumran,” 440–442.

57. Chazon, “New Liturgical Manuscripts from Qumran,” 211. This prayer may refer to the miscegenation of the nefilim and the daughters of men in Gen. 6.

58. Several scholars have suggested an association between Qumran and Hekhalot literature. See among others, Davila, Descenders to the Chariot; Elior, The Three Temples; Schiffman, “Exclusion from the Sanctuary and the City of the Sanctuary in the Temple Scroll,” 301–320; Schiffman, “Hekhalot Mysticism and the Qumran Literature,” 121–138; Schiffman, “Merkavah Speculation at Qumran: The 4Q Serekh Shirot ha-Shabbat.”


64. Lesses, Ritual Practices to Gain Power, 134–144; Swartz, “‘Like Ministering Angels,” 162–167; Swartz, Scholastic Magic, 162–165, 215.

65. Marcus, Rituals of Childhood, 51; Swartz, “‘Like the Ministering Angels,” 166; Swartz, Scholastic Magic, 217–221. Lieberman believed that “a member of a non-halakhically oriented sect” wrote the BdN. Lewin similarly asserted that the Beraita was the work of a Palestinian ascetic sect merely informed by rabbinic practice. See Lieberman, Shiqi`in, 22; Lieberman, “Knowledge of Halakhah,” 241; Lewin, ed., Sefer Metivot, 110. For other theories, see Aptowitzer, Mehqarim be-Sifrut ha-Qabbalah, 166–168 (Karaite influence); Revel, “Differences between the Jews of Babylonia and the Land of Israel,” 17; Finkelstein, “Persistence of Rejected Customs in Palestine,” 184; Dinary, “Impurity Customs of the Menstruate Woman,” 310; Maccoby, Ritual and Morality, 34.


68. On the other hand, sex with a menstruant would result in leprous offspring. If these children escaped the threat of leprosy, they would be denied intellect (Leviticus Rabbah 16; Numbers Rabbah 9; BdN 1:2).

70. BT Baba Metsia 84a; BT Berakhot 20a; Boyarin, Carnal Israel, 212–215.

71. The history of Rabbi Ishmael does not appear in Horowitz's version of the BdN. However, it does appear in a discussion of restrictive niddah laws in an eleventh-century text from the school of Rashi entitled the Liqqutei Pardes, as well as in many subsequent halakhic texts that contain sections of the BdN. Marienberg notes that the story may either be a later interpolation, or an old tradition that was not included in Horowitz's version (Marienberg, Niddah-Études sur le Beraita d'Niddah, 50). Israel Ta-Shma argues for the antiquity of the tradition, reasoning that the story of Rabbi Ishmael negates the halakhic sensibilities of the Rashi school and could be ignored if it were a new tradition. That it was included strongly suggests that the tradition was ancient (“Ritual, Custom and Reality in Franco-Germany,” 284–287).


73. On the extreme beauty of Rabbi Ishmael, see T Horayot 2:5–7; PT Horayot 3:4; BT Avodah Zarah 11b; BT Gittin 58a. The angel Gabriel or simply the Sar Torah replaced Metatron in some later accounts of the story. See also, Wolfson, Speculum, 212–213n96.

74. On the etymology of the term sandaq and for an explanation of his function, see Hoffman, Covenant of Blood, 201–204.


76. For example, the figure of Rabbi Ishmael was conflated with that of the high priest Ishmael ben Elisha. According to Sefer Miqszo’ot, Ishmael believed that he merited his position because he washed his hands before blessing the congregation and would not perform sacrifices with priests who lived with a menstruant. His vigilant attempt to separate himself from all types of impurity during the divine service ensured his success (cited in the name of Sefer Miqszo’ot by Rabbi Abraham ben David in his gloss to BT Tamid; cited by Assaf, Sefer Ha-Miqtszo’ot, 39). There is no legal basis for prohibiting priests from their duties when a member of their household was menstruating. This idea is first expressed in BdN 3:2, 25.

77. See also Ra’anana Boustan’s discussion of Rabbi Ishmael in his From Martyr to Mystic, 106–113.


79. The one exception is the version in Liqqutei Pardes, where Ishmael’s mother is hardly mentioned. It was his father’s attention to purity laws that entitled him to such an illustrious son (Liqqutei Pardes, cited by Horowitz, 5:46).

80. BdN 2:1, 10.
81. BdN 3:1, 22.
82. Cited in the name of Sefer Miqtsō’ot by Abraham ben David in his gloss to BT Tamid. Assaf, Sefer Ha-Miqtsō’ot, 39.
83. Swartz, Scholastic Magic, 34.
84. BdN 2:5, 18.
85. Similarity first noted by Lieberman, “Knowledge of Halakhah,” 243n76.
87. For sight, see Synopse #83–86; for smell, see BT Niddah 20b; Lieberman, “Knowledge of Halakhah,” 243.
88. Synopse #436, 489.
89. Synopse #288.
90. These are red, black, a color like a bright crocus, earthy water, and undiluted wine (M Niddah 2:6).
91. Michael Swartz, “‘Like the Ministering Angels,” 151. Brahmins in India continue to eschew onions because of their strong odor.
92. Synopse #9, #149, #181.
93. Thanks to Devorah Zlotchower for this reference.
94. BT Niddah 20b; Fonrobert, Menstrual Purity, 115–117.
96. Synopse #588; See Schäfer, The Hidden and Manifest God, 80.
97. Synopse #489.
98. Ibid.
100. Wolfson, Speculum, 107; see also note 144; Grözinger, “Names of God and the Celestial Powers,” 60–61.
101. Pisqei Niddah, MS London Add 27129, fol. 133b. This two-page introductory to the niddah laws of Sefer ha-Pardes appears among a collection of nine sources on menstrual laws. Pisqei Niddah ascribes many of the rationales for marital separation during menstruation to Massekhet Niddah. As we have seen, the actual talmudic tractate does not deal extensively with the laws of separating spouses. It is therefore likely that the author refers to the BdN.
102. MS BM 27/29112, fol. 131b.

THREE. Menstruation and the Mystics of Ashkenaz


3. Although Ahima’ats claims simply to document his family’s history, in fact, he fills his record with fabulous tales that give us important information about the culture of eleventh-century southern Italian Jewry. See Bonfil, “Between the Land of Israel and Babylonia,” 1–30; “Myth, Rhetoric, and History?” 99–135.

4. This association is also noted by Dinary, “Profanation of the Holy,” 29.


6. Ibid., 12. Rabbi Shefatiah’s wife desires similar qualities for her daughter’s suitor (ibid., 26).

7. On the possibility that this Sefer ha-Merkavah refers to a specific book, rather than to the genre, see Idel, “From Italy to Ashkenaz and Back,” 52; Abrams, “Ma’aseh Merkabah as a Literary Work,” 329–345.

8. One might assume that the singular form “candle” would indicate that the menstruant did not light Sabbath candles since it was customary to light at least two candles, corresponding to the commandments to “observe” (Deut. 5:12) and “remember” (Ex. 20:8) the Sabbath day. However, this custom is first documented in the *Sefer ha-Ra’avyah*, a legal compendium written by the Ashkenazi halakhist, Eliezer bar Yoei ha-Levi (d. c. 12208). See Ta-Shma, “Early Franco-German Custom and Ritual,” 127–130.


11. See *Synopse* #341; #426; #289; #495; #500; Schäfer, “Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism,” 294.

12. *Synopse* #426, translated according to the MS Oxford 1531. MS New York ascribes the exhortation to the angel Az’uyah. Note that MS Munich 40 and MS Dropsie 426 read “nizhar ba-sefer ha-zeh.” See also “this mishnah,” *Synopse* #424; “these secrets,” *Synopse* #705. On the importance of references to actual texts in Hekhalot mysticism, see Schäfer, “Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism,” 293–294.


15. These ideas run counter to Rabbi Judah ben Betayra’s assertion that the words of Torah are not susceptible to impurity. BT Berakhot 22a. It is important to remember that Judah ben Betayra’s statement supports the Babylonian Talmud’s abrogation of *taqkanat Ezra*, not of menstrual laws.

16. *Megillat Ahima’ats*, 19. In BT Sukkah 53b, King David inscribed the divine name on a shard of pottery and threw it into unruly waters. Immediately, the water subsided 16,000 cubits.
17. On exorcism in the talmudic period, see Bar-Ilan, “Exorcism by Rabbis,” 17–32.

18. Lead, like iron, was used by magicians to deter demons. Montgomery, Aramaic Incantation Texts, “Magic bowl 1”; Gaster, Holy and the Profane, 10; BT Yoma 69b; Idel, “Evil Thought of the Deity,” 359n8.

19. Megillat Ahima’ats, 30. The essential difference between the two exorcism accounts lies in the power of the expelled demons. Basil’s daughter’s demon simply sank to the bottom of the sea, while the spirit of impurity in the Sefer Merkavah caused the water to recede almost a mile.


24. Because there are no other attestations of this practice in the other works of the school of Rashi, Shaye Cohen suggests that the custom may reflect a later development interpolated into the earlier text (“Menstruants and the Sacred,” 296n46). Israel Ta-Shma likewise notes the anomaly within the context of the Rashi school but argues for the antiquity of the tradition (“Ritual, Custom and Reality in Franco-Germany,” 284–287).

25. Sefer ha-Pardes, MS British Library Add 27129, fol. 134a; compare Isaac ben Moses, Or Zarua, 1:360, 48d.


27. At a certain point, as Cohen notes, this arrangement was no longer possible and menstruants in Sephardi families resumed all of their household functions, with the exception of those stipulated in the Talmud (“Menstruants and the Sacred,” 280). For a comparison between Ashkenazic and Sephardic niddah observances, see Dinary, “Profanation of the Holy,” 23; Zimmels, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, 198.


29. See chapter 8. The Geonim may have been influenced by Muslim culture when they imposed short-lived additional regulations separating husbands and their menstruating wives, such as barring menstruants from food preparation and from family meals.


32. Some legists hold that menstruants may enter mosques, but not tarry within (Katz, *Body of Text*, 2).

33. See also, Dinary, “Profanation of the Holy,” 29.


36. Other scholars have noted Ashkenazic Jewry’s affinity to the laws of the Beraita d’Niddah. Yedidia Dinary, who wrote two of the most important articles on the isolation of menstruants in the Middle Ages, does not provide an explanation for the attraction. Jeffrey Woolf argues that the “explanation appears to be quite straightforward. Franco-German Jewry from its inception, maintained a fierce loyalty to and veneration for the totality of its received sacred literature and religious lore, which it inherited from its forebears in Southern Italy” ("Medieval Models of Purity and Sanctity," 270).

37. Hagahot ha-Ramah le-Shulkhan Arukh, Orekh Ḥayim, 88:1; Ta-Shma, “On the History of Polish Jewry,” 347–369. On the influence of Hasidei Ashkenaz on the separation of menstruants from their husbands in the Eastern Rite (minhag Osterreich), see Zimmer, *Olam ke-Minhago Noheg*, 220–249. Haym Soloveitchik disagrees with Ta-Shma and Zimmer’s suggestion that Hasidei Ashkenaz influenced Polish Jewish law. In reference to menstruation, however, he notes that “all evidence that we possess for the hypersensitivity of Hasidei Ashkenaz to any form of pollution, whether physical or ritual, is with regard to the sancta with their powerful taboos, not with regard to mundane sexual relations” (Soloveitchik, “Piety, Pietism, and German Pietism,” 487).


40. I borrow the term esoteric theology (*torat ha-sod*) from the work of Joseph Dan, *Torat ha-Sod shel Hasidut Ashkenaz*.

41. Note that even Haym Soloveitchik who denied the lasting influence of Hasidei Ashkenaz, nonetheless concedes their enduring influence on later mysticism and penitential practices (Soloveitchik, "Piety, Pietism, and German Pietism," 468–469).


43. J. N. Epstein suggests that the student in question was Asher ben Yehiel. See his *Meḥqarim be-Sifrut ha-Talmud*, 2:772–773.

44. Solomon ben Yehiel Luria, *Teshuvot ha-Maharshal*, #29, p.23c.

45. The need to separate menstruants from sacred texts is extended to the cases that customarily housed the books. These book boxes were traditionally adorned with decorations and biblical verses. While women were permitted to embroider the decorations, they could not embroider the writing, lest they blaspheme the name of God (*Sefer Hasidim*, *Notes to Pages 48–50* · 195)
ed. Margaliot, 943). Note that the practice of placing books in cases may show the influence of the contemporaneous Christian custom of Bible boxes. The desire to protect holy texts from all impurities is also the basis of the Pietist’s prohibiting Christian contact with Jewish texts. Pietists were forbidden to pawn books to Christians or to allow Christians to rebind them. See Marcus, “Hierarchies, Religious Boundaries and Jewish Spirituality,” 14; Wineberg, “Love of the Book,” 159–175.

46. Marcus, “Political Dynamics of the Medieval German-Jewish Community,” 123.
54. The Pietists did not just copy Hekhalot traditions but rather interpolated the late-antique ideas with their own (Ta-Shma, “Libraries of the Sages of Ashkenaz,” 299–309).
57. Marcus, Rituals of Childhood, 52; Schäfer, “Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism,” 293; Swartz, “‘Like the Ministering Angels,’” 164; Swartz, Scholastic Magic, 217–221. Compare Lesses, Ritual Practices to Gain Power, 364.
58. PT Berakhot 3:3, 6c; BT Niddah 31b; BT Berakhot 21b; Boyarin, Carnal Israel, 50–51; Cohen, “Menstruants and the Sacred,” 283; Satlow, “‘Try to Be a Man,’” 40. See also the introduction to this book.
60. Sefer Hasidim, ed. Margaliot, 59 (compare 978, 979); Abrams, “‘The Mystery of All Mysteries,’” 70n40.
62. Eleazar of Worms, Sefer ha-Roqeqah, par. 321, 413.
63. Wolfson, “Sacred Space and Mental Iconography,” 593–634.
64. Synopse #436, #489.
65. Eleazar of Worms. Sefer ha-Kavod, MS Oxford 1566, fol. 38b. For more on the Sefer Ha-Kavod, see Dan, Torat ha-Sod, 55–56, 58. On divine names and vision, see Idel, Kabbalah: New Perspectives, 97–103; Idel, “Defining Kabbalah,” 97–122; Wolfson, Speculum,
66. *Sefer ha-Malbush*, MS British Museum Margaliot 752, fols. 92–93; MS Sasson 290, fol. 311a. Thanks to Rebecca Lesses for providing me with copies of these sources. The precise dating of *Sefer ha-Malbush* is a subject of scholarly debate. Gershom Scholem alone mentions three different possibilities. In *Major Trends*, he connects it to Hekhalot mysticism (77); in “Tradition and New Creation in the Ritual of the Kabbalists,” to the school of Eleazar of Worms (136); and in *Jewish Gnosticism*, to the early post-Talmudic period. Joseph Dan describes the *Sefer ha-Malbush* as an early esoteric work known to Hasidei Ashkenaz (*Torat ha-Sod*, 74). Wolfson suggests that it is a Babylonian Geonic magical text preserved by Hasidei Ashkenaz. Although the text may not have been written by the German Pietists, it was copied by them and bears their mark (Wolfson, *Speculum*, 242).

67. Eleazar of Worms, *Sefer ha-Shem*, MS Munich 81, fols. 144a–145b.


69. Note that there is a tripartite structure in early continental Christian penitentials, such as the Rheims penitential (Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials*, 11). On the possible influence of Christian penitential literature on Hasidei Ashkenaz, see Baer, “Socio-Religious Orientation of *Sefer Hasidim*,” 1–50; Fishman, “Penitential System of Ḥasidei Ashkenaz,” 201–229.

70. Marcus, “Hasidei Ashkenaz Private Penitentials,” 75–76.


72. MS Bodleian Opp647, fol. 21b.


74. Ibid.

75. Marcus, “Judah the Pietist and Eleazar of Worms,” 19, referring to Hekhalot Rabbati 13:2, Jellinek, *Beit Midrash*, 3:93, *Synopse* #199. In the excerpt, the mystic is compared to a man who has a ladder in his home, which he ascends and descends. The requirements for the *yored merkavah* are cleanliness from idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, murder, slander, perjury, conceit, and groundless hatred and observance of all the positive and negative commandments. Peter Schäfer suggests that the reference to all positive commandments illustrates that “concern is the entire Torah.” See Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, 119–121; “Ideal of Piety of the Ashkenazi Hasidim,” 9–23.

76. I have found two exceptions: (1) Darkei Teshuvah, a penitential published at the end of *Teshuvot ha-Maharam*, which requires an onanite or one with a nocturnal emission to fast for forty days and sit in water during the winter. Note, however, that the sin described here is “spilling seed in vain” (*Shikhvat zera levatalah*) not an ejaculant in intercourse. This text defines baʿal qeri more restrictively than does Hekhalot literature. (2) A penitential for sexual laws in MS Bodleian Opp647, fols. 20a–23a. The penance for baʿal qeri precedes that for having sexual relations with one’s menstruating wife (catalogued by Marcus in “Hasidei Ashkenaz Private Penitentials,” 64). Thanks to Daniel Abrams for providing me with a photocopy of the manuscript.
77. Pachter, “Shmirat Habrit.” Thanks to Daniel Abrams for this reference.

78. One exception may be found in a version exclusively devoted to sexual laws in MS Bodleian Opp. 647, fols. 20a–23a. The penance for ba’al qeri precedes that for having sexual relations with one’s wife menstruating wife (catalogued by Marcus in “Hasidei Ashkenaz Private Penitentials,” 64).


80. Ibid., 1126. This idea may have influenced Nahmanides’ commentary to Genesis 18:19. See chapter 7 for a detailed discussion of this verse.

81. Compare ha-Hiluqim she-ben Anshei Mizrah u-venei Erets Yisra’el, ed. Margaliot, par 11, p. 79.

82. Eleazar of Worms, Sefer ha-Roqelah, par. 318.

83. Woolf suggests that the works of the schools of Rashi, written “after the Babylonian Talmud became the exclusive arbiter of Halakhic truth, describes niddah laws with no basis in Babylonian halakhah as custom, whereas the German Pietists appeal to an older authority, binding before the Babylonian monopoly on halakhah” (Woolf, “Medieval Models of Purity and Sanctity,” 271). Understanding the mystical consciousness of the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz, as we do here, explains the appeal of the older tradition.

84. Ashkenazim could not completely identify the synagogue with the Temple — the halakhic ramifications for both men and women would have been enormous. Ta-Shma and Woolf explain that Ashkenazim identified the synagogue and Temple in terms of their symbolism and sanctity (Ta-Shma, “Synagogal Sanctity,” 351–364; Woolf, “Medieval Models of Purity and Sanctity, 263–280).


89. See Eleazar of Worms, Sefer ha-Roqelah, par. 318, 204–206; MS Oxford OPP. ADD. 14, fol. 209a; Schechter, “Jewish Literature in 1890,” cited at 342. An attribution of these laws to Sa’adia Gaon, though false, would have been especially significant to a Pietist audience. Sa’adia’s philosophy profoundly influenced pietistic conceptions of the divine glory. Proper observance of niddah laws was essential to achieving such a vision. See Dan, Torat ha-Sod, 104–116; Scholerm, Major Trends, 86; Wolfson, Speculum 126–129, 195–198.


93. Wolfson, Speculum, 235.

94. Ibid.

95. Scholars have suggested that certain sections of Hekhalot Rabbati may allude to sexual activity within the divine realm. See Synopse #240–#245 and #189, in Halperin, “A


98. Ezek. 1:4–5; Arugat ha-Bosem, MS Merzbacher, fols. 73–74; MS Munich 92, fols. 10b–11a; Abrams's synoptic edition of Sod ha’Egoz, in Sexual Symbolism, *4–*23.


100. Ibid., 57. Other authors interpret the walnut more generally, as a fertility symbol.


103. See also Abrams, Ha-Guf ha-’Elohi ha-Nashi be-Qabbalah, 72.

104. BT Bekhorot 45a. Thanks to Charlotte Fonrobert for directing me to this source. See her Menstrual Purity, 57.

105. The Commentaries to Ezekiel’s Chariot of R. Eleazar of Worms and R. Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen. On the basis of this inconsistency, Abrams suggests that Eleazar did not write the most sexually explicit version. The anonymous author “indeed knew Eleazar’s works and read this explicit version into his text” (Sexual Symbolism, 57). Rather than slavishly follow Eleazar, the author of the tradition recorded in the Merzbacher manuscript tried to bridge the gap between Eleazar’s theology and that of the special cherub circle (54).

106. The hashmalah’s gender is also reinforced by its feminine shape — the letter kaf 2.


108. See Farber, “Tfisat ha-Merkavah be Torat ha-Sod,” 116. For more on the feminine nature of the throne, see Wolfson, “Image of Jacob,” 1–62.


110. Note that Abrams, who argues that Eleazar did not conceive of the egoz as a bisexual symbol, concedes that the throne was a feminine symbol (Sexual Symbolism, 47–57).

111. Keter Shem Tov is also known as Sefer ha-Pé’ér. The text printed by Jellinek in Ginzei Hokhmah ha-Qabbalah, 82–92, is faulty. I consulted MS Cambridge DD.11.2; MS Jews College, Montefiore 431; and MS HNUL, 541.

112. MS Cambridge DD 10.11.2, fol. 20b; MS Jews College, Montefiore 431, fol. 44a; MS HNUL,541, fol. 23b.

114. Note that the purity requirements of the zavah and the niddah had been conflated since the Talmudic period. See introduction to this volume.

115. The sexual imagery is made even more explicit by the ensuing discussion of the excitement of the cherubim. See Idel’s discussion of the female nature of the soul and the male supernal powers in “Sexual Metaphors and Praxis,” 198–201.


FOUR. Menstrual Impurity and Mystical Praxis in Theosophical Kabbalah

1. Here I intend to offer a general overview to the emergence of Kabbalah in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in keeping with current scholarship. For more detailed introduction, see among others, Green, A Guide to the Zohar, 3–27; Idel, Kabbalah: New Perspectives; Sendor, “Emergence of Provençal Kabbalah”; Wolfson, Jewish Mysticism: A Philosophical Overview,” 389–437; compare Scholem, Origins of the Kabbalah.


3. Though the Bahir was long considered the first work of Kabbalah, scholars now question its influence. On the Book Bahir, see Abrams, Sefer ha-Bahir; Abrams, “Bahir, Sefer Ha—”; EF, 2nd ed., 3:62–63; Idel, “Ha-Tefillah be-Provans,” 265–286; Pedaya, Ha-Shem ve-ha-miqdash be-Mishnat Rav Yitshaq Sagi Nahor; compare Scholem, Origins of the Kabbalah.


9. I borrow these terms from Peter Schäfer’s study of Hekhalot Literature, The Hidden and Manifest God.


11. The kabbalistic focus on the Temple is in part a legacy of the Jewish mystical tradition and in part a reaction to Maimonides. Maimonides had described Temple cult ritual as a concession to the primitive needs of newly emancipated Israelites. Early kabbalists denied these assertions and, in keeping with earlier Jewish spirituality, made the Temple a central symbol of the sefirotic realm. (See Maimonides, Guide II:32; Brody, “Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Height,” 565–568; Green, Guide to the Zohar, 138–142.) Temple cult images also figure prominently in thirteenth-century Castilian and Catalanian Hebrew-manuscript
15. Ibid., 5a–b, 20b, 69b.  
17. Jacob Ha-Kohen, Commentary to Ezekiel’s Chariot; Moses de Leon, Commentary of the Merkavah; Gikatilla, Commentary on the Merkavah; Farber-Ginat “Concept of Merkavah in Thirteenth-Century Esotericism.”  
23. Bahir, 9. See also Sod ha-Qorban le-Rav Azriel, MS Parma 1390. Thanks to Daniel Abrams for this reference.  
26. Lev. 10:1–2; Zohar 3:23b (RM); compare Zohar 2:110a (RM).  
27. Gikatilla, Sod ha-Nahash, MS BN 841, fol. 276a; compare Joseph Hamadan, Sefer Ta’amei ha-Mitsvot, 127–130.  
28. Sefer ha-Qanah, 77a–b.  
29. Zohar 2:3a–b; compare 3:75b.  
30. BT Yoma 54a; BT Yebamot 63b–64a; Idel, Kabbalah: New Perspectives, 128–130; Idel, Kabbalah and Eros, 32–33.  
31. Idel, Kabbalah and Eros, 33.  
32. Ibid.  
34. Idel explains, “In the ecstatic school, ‘radical asceticism’ was not a prerequisite for ecstatic vision.” Rather than “suppress the body,” the initiate sought to “strengthen the intellect” (The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia, 143–144). Idel shared in private correspondence that in the thousands of folios of Abulafia’s work, there are no specific ritual purification techniques or exhortations to separate from women. There is a “suggestion” of asceticism in the ecstatic works of Isaac of Acre, which likely influenced later ecstatic mystical praxis. See also Fishbane, As a Light before Dawn, 248–283.

36. See, among others, Zohar 1:54a, 62a, 83a, 128b, 178b; 2:162b, 173a; 3:40a, 53a–54b, 152b. The converse of this equation is also true. When the spirit of holiness rests upon a man, the spirit of impurity cannot approach him. Zohar 2:225b; Hamadan, *Sefer Ta‘amei ha-Mitsvot*, positive commandment 31, 127–130; compare Natan the Physician, *Zikron Tov*, MS Cambridge 485, fol. 88b.


44. Zohar 3:97a.

45. Kabbalists, likely drawing from women’s practice, would pare their nails before Sabbath immersion as well (Ginsburg, *Sabbath in Classical Kabbalah*, 230–231).

46. Zohar 2:60b (RM).

47. BdN 1:4, 6.

48. Ibid., 3:2, 25.

49. MS British Library Add 27/29112, fol.133b, interprets the phrase “holy to me” (Lev. 20:26) as holy “to my name.” Jonah Gerondi warned men not to say the divine name unless they were in a state of complete cleanliness and sanctity. See his *Iggeret ha-Teshuvah*.


51. The connection between the BdN and Zohar 2:3a is noted by Margaliot in his gloss and more recently by Ta-Shma in a list of examples illustrating the influence of Ashkenazi halakhah on the Zohar (*Ta-Shma, Ha-Nigleh she-ba-Nistar*, 33).
55. Cohen, The Holy Letter, 9–59; Ginsburg, The Sabbath in Classical Kabbalah; Tishby, Wisdom of the Zohar, 3:1390–1394; Wolfson, “Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath,” 154–161; Todros Abulafia, Otsar ha-Kavod, 50, 52; Menahem Tsoni, Sefer Tsoni, 15. The Italian kabbalist Menahem Recanati asserts that women can empower the Shekhinah by engaging in licit sexual relations with their husbands (Recanati, Perush al ha-Torah, 61b).
61. Moses de Leon, Sheqel ha-Qodesh, 62, 63.
63. Moses de Leon, Sheqel ha-Qodesh, 62.
64. Note that in a description of the ten levels of impurity that mirror those of the holy sefirot, Yesod is described as “the donkey of purity,” a particularly potent image for one who is scrupulous in the yoke of the law (MS BN 841, fol. 247a). On the sources of this idea, see M Berakhot 1:1; BT Berakhot 31; compare Recanati, Commentary on the Torah, 79c–d; MS Vatican 236, fol. 73a.
65. De Leon therefore warns men to assume that their wives are niddah until they are certain of their purity status (Mishkan Edut, MS Cambridge Dd 2:2:1, fol. 40b).
67. Nathan ben Avigdor, Be’urim al Derekh ha-Nistar, MS Mich. 340, fol. 31a. Nathan the Physician, Zikhron Tov, MS Cambridge 485, fol. 93b, Rashi, and others had similarly asserted that the levitical prohibitions against illicit sexual relations (arayot) precede the chapters on holiness to illustrate that abstention from the arayot is a necessary precondition for sanctity. See Rashi on Lev. 19:1, s.v. qedoshim tihiyu.

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70. Ibid., 178–179.
71. Ibid., 172–179.
72. MS Cambridge Dd 4:2; compare Zohar 1:19b–20a; 2:15b; 3:227a; Zohar Ḥadash, 38a–38b.
73. Moses de Leon, Commentary on the Merkavah in Mishkan Edut, MS Cambridge 4:2, fol. 47b; Farber-Ginat, Perush ha-Merkavah le-Rav Moshe de Leon, 9–55. Eleazar of Worms similarly asserts that the missing heh signifies an incomplete vision. However, he believed that the prophet, unaccustomed to the heavenly realm, was unprepared for a complete vision of the divine glory and saw the electrum (hashmal) instead. For another interpretation, see Abrams, Ha-Guf ha-Elohi ha-Nashi Be-Qabbalah, 40.
75. In his Sheqel ha-Qodesh, Moses de Leon explains that the Shekhinah is the mirror that does not shine independently — she absorbs all the light of the sefirot above. Since she does not shine herself, she is the entryway for prophets, who even though they themselves may not be able to enter further into the sefirotic realm, can nonetheless glimpse within because she does not shine — if she did, they would not be able to see within and achieve a divine vision. On the Shekhinah as an “optic hole,” see Wolfson, Speculum, 307.
76. BT Eruvin 21b on Song of Songs 7:14; BT Ketuvot 10a–b; Fonrobert, Menstrual Purity.
77. In MS BN 841, fol. 252a, there is a discussion of ten levels of impurity, a mirror image of the holy sefirot. The tenth level of impurity, the ditch, contrasts the image of the Shekhinah, the well. The symbolism of openings in the land may also correspond to the sexual organ of the supernal land, the Shekhinah. See also the parallel made between the Shekhinah and the vagina in Zohar 3:142a.
79. Moses de Leon, like Gikatilla, relates the supernal foreskin to the impure Shekhinah. Mishkan Edut, MS Cambridge Dd 4:2, fol. 48a; Joseph Gikatilla, Perush al ha-Merkavah, 1:4, 49.
80. Moses de Leon may have based his interpretation on a Pietistic interpretation of the external qelippah. In the Pietist versions of Sod ha-Egoz, the green external shell is specifically described as the “qelippah that drops off.” Just as old blood sloughs off the wall of the uterus, the qelippah drops off its shell (Altmann, “Eleazar of Worms’ Hokhmah ha-Egoz,” English, 105, 106; Hebrew, 111, 112. Dan, “Hokhmah ha-Egoz,” appendix A, 77–78; appendix C, 81).
82. Joseph Gikatilla, Perush al ha-Merkavah, 1:4, p. 49.
83. Zohar Ḥadash, 38a.
84. See, for example, Zohar 2:126b–127a; 3:65b.
86. For more on this text, see chapter 5.
FIVE. The Myth of the Menstruating Shekhinah

4. Rashi on BT Eruvin 21b, s.v. she-'bdot.
7. BT Berakhot 31a; BT Niddah 66a; BT Megillah 28b.
10. Exodus Rabbah, 23:12; Moses de Leon, Sefer ha-Rimmon, 136; Isaac of Acre, Sefer Me’irat Einayim, 174, 241. See also Marcus, Rituals of Childhood, 151 n29. Note that while the Shekhinah is portrayed as niddah in Egypt, terrestrial women are not. According to Midrash Tanhuma, Jewish women did not menstruate while in Egypt because their fear of the Egyptians interrupted their flow. Midrash Tanhuma, ed. Buber, 3:5:18, 27.
16. Judah the Pietist, Sefer Hasidim, ed. Margaliot, par. 1148, 571–572; Eleazar of Worms, Perush ha-Roqeah al ha-Torah, 249; Liebes, “‘De Natura Dei,’” 50; Eleazar of Worms, Siddur Ḥasidei Ashkenaz, 2:393; compare Pirqei de Rabbi Eliezer, 45.
17. Liebes, “‘De Natura Dei,’” 50. BT Megillah 22b; BT Ḥagigah 18a; BT Rosh ha-Shanah 23a. Eleazar of Worms, Sefer ha-Roqeh, 130, par. 228; Moses de Leon, Sefer ha-Rimmon, 90; Isaac of Acre, Sefer Me’irat Einayim, 175, 177; Ḥayim Vital, Pri Ets Ḥayim, 452; Vital, Sha’ar ha-Kavanot, 76b. Note that Hemdat Yamim (1732) 2:23d–24a empowers women. See Wolfson, “Face of Jacob,” 257n13.
18. The idea that the Shekhinah’s behavior depends on external influences similarly derives from descriptions of the moon in medieval astronomy. Scholem, “Two Treatises of Moses de Leon,” 338, 381; Zohar 1:181a; 2:218b.
19. Zohar 1:38a, 1: 53a, 185a; 2:237b; 3:95a–95b; 3:247b. According to Zohar 1:190b, God requires a sacrifice of atonement for Rosh Ḥodesh to mask the smell of the Shekhinah’s...


21. This is not the only parallel between supernal man and woman and their human counterparts. Hamadan explains that just as the moon is illuminated and filled by the efflux of the sun, man enlightens woman. The parallel extends beyond sociology to biology. According to medieval theories of medicine adopted from the Greeks, men were made up of hot and dry elements, and women of cold and wet. This distribution of qualities also belongs to the cosmic order. The male sun rules during the day and is responsible for the growth of warm and dry vegetation, while the moon rules during the night, freshening springs of water and promoting the growth of cold and wet plants. Hamadan, Sefer Ta‘amei ha-Mitsvot, MS Jerusalem 8°597, fol. 178a.

22. BT Hullin 60b; Zohar 1:168a–b, 252a. For a different interpretation, see Zohar 1:73b, where the sins of man cause the flaw in the moon.

23. The blessing over the new moon is compared to the marriage ceremony (qiddushin). Hamadan, Sefer Ta‘amei ha-Mitsvot, MS Jerusalem 8°597, fol. 178a.

24. Hamadan associates the thirty-day limit on the Nazirite vow to the Shekhinah’s menstrual cycle. Because the Nazirite state is intricately connected with the supernal woman, women are permitted to become Nazirites (Num. 6:2). Joseph Hamadan, Sefer Ta‘amei ha-Mitsvot, MS Jerusalem 8°597, fol. 187a; Ms BN 850,3, fols. 230a–231b.

25. For a discussion of different types of valid water, see Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Miqva‘ot, 11:1–12.

26. BT Eruvin 4b; Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Miqva‘ot, 1:1; 4:2.

27. BT Baba Batra 65b; Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Miqva‘ot, 6:6.

28. Kabbalists often compare dynamic interplay in the heavenly realm and the process of emanation to rivers, streams, and fountains. The final sefirah, the Shekhinah, is often compared to the ocean or a well. Hamadan incorporates this association into the image of the Shekhinah as a miqveh. The symbol of the supernal ritual bath is usually applied to the sefiarah of Hesed, lovingkindness. See among others, Moses de Leon, Sefer ha-Nefesh ha-Hakhamah, par. 63, n.p.; Zohar 3:54a; Menaḥem Recanati, Sefer Ta‘amei ha-Mitsvot, 12:1; on Yesod as a miqveh, see Zohar 1:244b.

29. Note that the Zohar compares seminal emission to a spring of water. Spring water is not drawn and would be valid for use in a miqveh. See Wolfson, “Coronation of the Sab-
bath Bride,” 305; on male and female waters, see Wolfson, Circle in the Square, 110–115, 227n160, 228n168.

30. The flow of divine energy reflects medieval medical theory. Just as medieval physicians believed that sperm originates in the brain and then flows throughout the torso to the penis, kabbalists posited that the supernal efflux flows through sefirot to Yesod, the divine phallus. Compare Menahem Tsoni, Sefer Tsoni, 46a.


32. Compare Menahem Recanati, Perush al ha-Torah, 61c.

33. Compare Joseph Angelet, Livnat ha-Sappir, MS BM 771, fol. 326b.

34. Compare Menahem Recanati, Perush al ha-Torah, 61c.

35. The written Torah is a symbol of Tiferet. Its secrets are brought to light by the oral Torah, the Shekhinah. The comparison between the written Torah and a ritual bath in the passage is therefore significant. Tiferet not only purifies the Shekhinah but also, as the written Torah, also purifies Israel.


40. BT Rosh Hodesh 26a; Fonrobert, Menstrual Purity, 18–19.


45. Sifra, 9:12; BT Shabbat 64b. Note that Rabbi Aqiva’s lenient ruling is not an attempt to relieve women’s suffering; rather, he is concerned to relieve the suffering of a man living with an unattractive wife.

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47. E.g., Eleazar of Worms, Sefer ha-Roqeh, 204–206, par. 318; Isaac of Dura, Sha’arei Dura, 2:18, 81; Abraham ben David, Perush al Sifra, 12:8.

48. E.g., Joseph Gikatilla, Sha’arei Tsedeq, 6b; Joseph Hamadan, Sefer Ta’améi ha-Mitsvot, MS Jerusalem 8°597, fols. 177a, 178a; Hamadan, Sefer Tashaq, ed. Zwelling, 346.

49. Sefer Halakhot Gedolot, 1:347; Sefer Miqtsot, in BdN, 51; see also Yannai, Mahzor Piyyutei Yannai, ed. Rabinowitz, 432n17. The roots of this custom may lie in Zoroastrian practice. Zoroastrian menstruants wore special clothing that had been worn by a woman who had given birth to a stillborn child or had come into contact with a corpse (Vendidad, 79; now newly translated by Samuel Secunda, “Ki Derekh Nashim Li,” Videvdad 16.2.2, 339). Karaites required menstruants to wear menstrual clothing and considered the clothes polluting (Sefer Halakhot Gedolot, 3:147n29).

50. Mahzor Vitry, 499, 606; Sefer ha-Orah, 2:1, 167; Sefer ha-Pardes, 358; Hagahot Maimuniyyot, 18; Ta-Shma, Minhag Ashkenaz ha-Qadmon, 50–51.

51. Joseph Hamadan, Sefer Tashaq, 344.

52. Ibid., 346; Joseph Hamadan, Sefer Ta’améi ha-Mitsvot, MS Jerusalem 8°597, fol. 178a; Menahem Recanati, Perush al ha-Torah, 61c; Zohar 1:238b.


56. Zohar 1:238b; compare 3:54a, 152a. The Shekhinah is often described in terms of Isaiah 34:6, “the sword of the Lord is filled with blood,” and Isaiah 63:2, “why is your clothing red?” On sefirot and colors, see Idel, “Kabbalistic Prayer and Colors,” 17–27.

57. Biale, Eros and the Jews, 45.

SIX. The Ontic Metamorphosis of the Menstruating Shekhinah

1. For example, Ezek. 6:17; Lam. 1:8, 4:14; Jer. 13:22; Ezra 9:11.

2. Compare Ricoeur, Symbolism of Evil, 35; on the complicity between sexuality and defilement, see p. 28.


4. Bahir, 77; see Scholem, Origins, 147.

5. ibn Shu’i’eb, Perush al Be’ur ha-Ramban, 24b. The printed version falsely ascribes this work to Me’ir ibn Sahula. See Horowitz, The Jewish Sermon in Fourteenth-Century Spain, 14–16, 159–170; Idel, “We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition,” 55; Pedaya, “‘Flaw’ and ‘Correction’ in the Concept of the Godhead,” 187n8.

7. Gottlieb, Ha-Qabbalah be-Sof ha-Me’ah Yod Gimmel, 111; Ha-Qabbalah be-Kitvei Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher, 23n74.


12. Note these sefirot are associated with the female. Binah and Shekhinah are feminine aspect of the divine, and Gevurah (grammatically feminine like the other two) is the divine source of terrestrial women.


19. Ibid., 15.

20. Ibid., 15–16.

21. For an example of the Shekhinah as a passive vessel, see Zohar 1:181a.


24. On mei niddah and niddah, see BT Hullin 109b; Zohar 1:27b.

25. Isaac of Acre, Me’irat Einayim, 29, 154, 198; Zohar 3:142b; Joseph Angelet, Livnat ha-Sappir, MS BM 771, fol. 326a; Menahem Tsioni, Sefer Tsioni, 47c; Tishby, The Wisdom of the Zohar, 1:376–379.
of the Zohar, 1:375. For the possible midrashic source of this idea, see Targum Yonatan ben Uzziel on Gen. 4:1.

26. The roots of this idea may be found in Leviticus Rabbah, 19:5, where the image of the zavah is compared to a period of tribulation for Israel. Compare Joseph Angelet, Livnat ha-Sappir, MS BM 771, fol. 342a; see also fols. 324a–325b, in which Angelet explains that just as a woman is polluted by blood, man may be polluted by sin; just as menstruants must conduct internal examinations during their “clean days” to determine their purity status, man must introspect to ensure that he is pure of all sins. On Angelet’s image of the righteous soul as clear glass, see Wolfson, Speculum, 276–277.


28. Joseph Gikatilla, Shaʻarei Tsedeq, 4b, 6b.


32. Targum Yonatan ben Uzziel on Gen. 4:1; BT Shabbat 146a; BT Yeḥamot 103b; BT Avodah Zarah 22b. See Rashi on BT Shabbat 146a, sx. ke-sh-ba ha-naḥash al havah.

33. Biale suggests that the serpent’s filth refers to seminal pollution (Eros and the Jews, 45). Boyarin suggests that the “filth” that the serpent introduced into Eve was the desire for illicit sexual relations, “adultery or bestiality or both” (Carnal Israel, 82).

34. BT Niddah 65b.


39. Ibid.

40. Hebrew translation of the way of women is upon me above “Derekh Nashim Li,” Gen. 31:35; BT Avodah Zarah 24b; see also BT Avodah Zarah 18a. Secunda suggests that the rabbis claim the etymology of this term as a polemical response to Zoroastrian men-
strual laws ("Dashtana — ‘ki derekh nashim li;’” 29–31). See also BT Berakhot 8b, where Rabban Gamliel admires the Persians because “they are temperate in their eating, modest in the privy, and chaste in another matter.”

41. BT Shabbat 110a. The ensuing exhortation to assault the serpent with nail parings and hair similarly suggests Persian influence, for Zoroastrians considered these trimmings as polluting as the dead (Boyce, History of Zoroastrianism, 1:309).

42. Bundahis, 3:5, 15n4; Zaehner, Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma, 183.


45. Alexander Kohut assumes that the Bundahis myth was the source of the rabbinic tradition ("Über die jüdische Angelologie und Dämonologie in ihrer Abhängigkeit vom Parsismus,” 63, 66; see also Eliade, “Moon and Its Mystique,” 165–166). This reading does not necessarily contradict Biale and Boyarin, since the image of the serpent instilling filth admits of many different exegeses. Interpretations of subsequent exegetes reflect their particular concerns. Biale’s association of filth with seminal pollution corresponds to Palestinian rabbinic emphasis on ba’al qeri, discussed in chapter 1 (Eros and the Jews, 40). Boyarin’s association of filth with illicit sexual behavior points to a rabbinic belief in women’s insatiable lust (Carnal Israel, 82). On the sitra ahrāmah and lasciviousness in Kabbalah, see Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” 100; Scholem, “Sitra Ahrāmah,” 56–83; Tishby, Wisdom of the Zohar, 2:509–514, 529–532.

46. Zohar 1:25b, 36b, 47a, 52b, 63b, 70b, 122b, 126 a–b, 145b, 228b, 2:194a, 168a, 193b, 236b, 242b; 3:97b; Joseph Hamadan, Sefer Ta’amé ha-Mitsvot, MS Jerusalem 8°597, fol. 178b; Menaḥem Recanati, Perush al ha-Torah, 61c; Menaḥem Tzioni, Sefer Tzioni, 47c. Samael is often described as a filthy (zohama) impure spirit (ruaḥ mas’ava de-zohama).

47. Isaac of Acre, differing from the Zoharic interpretation that follows, does not offer a dualistic interpretation of the sefirotic realm. For Isaac, menstruation is created within Judgment. Isaac of Acre, Sefer Me’irat Einayim, 29; compare Shem Tov ibn Ga’on, Keter Shem Tov, 42b.

48. Conversely, when the Shekhinah is strong, no impure force can approach her. For example, she was able to protect Sarah from the impure powers of Pharaoh. See Zohar 3:276a (RM).

49. Zohar 3:79a; 1:190b. Some kabbalists combine the midrash of the serpent instilling filth into Eve with the symbol of the Shekhinah as moon to create a lunar myth of the origin of menstruation. When the Shekhinah is impure, she attracts the spirits of impurity from the sitra ahrāmah. Thus aroused, the evil serpent darkens the moon with a stain (ketem, the halakhic term for blood spots). Her impurity is made manifest by the dark phase of the moon. See Zohar 1:131a, 1:65a, 192b; 3:247b; Moses de Leon, Sefer ha-Nefesh ha-Hakhamah, 14; Joseph Hamadan, Sefer Ta’amé ha-Mitsvot, MS Jerusalem 8°597, fol. 178a; Menaḥem Recanati, Perush al ha-Torah, 61c; Ḥayim Vital, Pri Ets Ḥayim, 19:3, 458–459. Like terrestrial women, the moon will be freed of all traces of blemish and restored to her former state of brilliance in the messianic age (Midrash Tehillim, ed. Buber, 146:4). The
nexus of menstrual impurity, impure spirits, the moon, and the eschaton is evident in the Zohar, where the verse “and I will cause the spirit of impurity to pass from the land” is used most consistently in connection with the restoration of the moon in the messianic age. See Zohar 1:70b, 73b, 114a, 124a, 131a, 163a–b; Joseph Hamadan, Sefer Ta’amei ha-Mitsvot, MS Jerusalem 8*:597, fol. 178a; Menahem Recanati, Perush al ha-Torah, 61c.


51. Zohar 1:25b, 36b, 47a, 52b, 126a–b, 143b; 2:111a, 194a; 3:79a; Joseph Angelet, Livnat ha-Sappir, MS British Museum 771, fol. 326a; Menahem Recanati, Perush al ha-Torah, 61c. On the identification of the Shekhinah with the serpent, see Zohar 3:119b; compare Zohar 1:64a. Joseph Hamadan describes the sitra ahra as eighty pilagshim (Sefer Taḥaq, 313).

52. Zohar 2:125a, 128a.


59. Joseph Hamadan offers a very different version of this idea, endowing the concubine with a positive aspect in his discussions of the “pilegsh of the Holy One” (Sefer Ta’amei ha-Mitsvot, MS BN 817.3, fol. 162a). See also Idel, “Additional Fragments from the Writings of Joseph Hamadan,” 47–48, 52–53; Idel, Kabbalah and Eros, 104–152.


61. Note that when the Shekhinah is impure, her character is altered by “the Mystery of the Storm Wind,” “the external shell,” and “the Mystery of the Entrance to the Land.” These all refer to her menstrual cycle. See chapter 4.

62. This phrase is a play on Jeremiah 3:3–4: “you had the brazenness of a street woman, you refused to be ashamed. Just now you called to Me, ‘Father! You are the Companion of my youth.’ ”

63. A play on Psalms 106:39: “thus they became defiled by their acts, debauched through their deeds.” Moses de Leon continues by explaining that the male sins in qeri while the female in the botsinei (Mishkan Edut, MS Cambridge, Dd 4:2:1, fol. 48a). In this section,
however, de Leon may refer to a popular saying in rabbinic literature: If there are no willing partners, men and women intent on committing adultery will satisfy themselves by other means. Men will substitute a “large squash” with a small hole for a woman and emit semen in vain (be-qeri), while women will substitute a small squash (be-botsinei) for a man. See BT Megillah 12a–b; BT Sotah 10a; Rashi on BT Sotah 10a s.v. q’ari u-botsinei; Kohut, *Arukh ha-Shalem*, 7:183; Liebes, “Peraqim be-Milon Sefer ha-Zohar,” 141–151, 161–164; Wolfson, “Woman — The Feminine as Other,” 178–180.

64. Zohar 1:122b.


66. MS Parma 2654, fol. 276a, probably written by Joseph Hamadan, suggests a similar connection between the image of a maidservant taking her mistress’s rightful place and menstrual impurity. When the serpent instilled his filth (menstruation?) into the Shekinah, he weakened the pure, divine channels and empowered the pilegesh, named Timna, giving her access to the divine realm. Timna, which means “she who was prevented,” tried to take the place of her pure mistress and ascend through the holy sefirot. She was literally *timna*, prevented, from this ascent by the sefirah of Tiferet.

67. The letter heh is the final letter in the tetragrammaton. Compare Zohar 1:27.

68. Lev. 14:34–35.


70. Compare Zohar 3:272b (RM).


75. Zohar 2:3. On the connection between sexual immorality and the exile of the Shekhinah, see BT Sotah 3b; *Sifre* on Deut. 23:15, 258. See also Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, 205–206.

76. Zohar 2:3a–b.


80. Philo explains that a man should not engage in sexual relations with menstruating women lest he waste his generative seed “for the sake of a gross and untimely pleasure” (*Special Laws*, 3:32).


84. Compare Sha’arei Tsedeq 10a, where Gikatilla explains that the biblical laws of zavah are stricter than those of niddah because the niddah’s flow is restricted to a certain cycle whereas the zavah’s flow is not restricted to any temporal boundary (it is “out of place”). For this reason, Num. 5:2 banned zavot rather than niddot from the Israelite camp.


86. Joseph Gikatilla, Sod ha-Nahash, MS BN 841, fol. 277b; Zohar 1:126b; 2:111a; 3:79a; compare al Nakawa, Menorat ha-Ma’or, 4:85; Wolfson, “Mystical Rationalization of the Commandments,” 244.

87. Douglas, Purity and Danger, 4; Douglas, Implicit Meanings, 53.

88. Ibid., 113.
89. Ibid., 124. That pollution taboos are socially constructed corresponds to Foucault’s understanding of how our attitudes toward sexuality are determined by the order in society (History of Sexuality, 3–13).

90. Flory, Marian Representations in the Miracle Tales of Thirteenth-Century Spain and France.


95. Wolfson, “Crossing Gender Boundaries,” 99–104, 108–110; Sendor, “Isaac the Blind’s Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah,” 1:12–13. See also Joseph Gikatilla’s play on the words breasts (shadayim) and demons (shedim) in Sha’arei Tsedeq, 4b–5a; on the symbolic relationship between language and anatomy, see Jacqart and Thomasset, Sexuality and Medicine, 16. The example cited above from Zohar 1:232a does not correspond to this paradigm: when the angel “stands in Judgment upon the world it is called female, like a woman who is pregnant, she is filled with Judgment and then called female.” Compare Hellner, A River Flows from Eden, 72, 169.


97. One could argue that there is an orthographic error in the manuscript. The letter yod could have been unwittingly elongated to produce vav, thereby confusing hu for hee. It would be more difficult for a scribe to confuse vav for heh, thus mistaking darko for a
darkah. Most manuscript variants confirm these readings. Only two manuscript variations read darkah, "her way." MS Escorial Heb MS. 417 and MS Palatine Library Parma Heb. 1231; see varia in Meier, Sefer Ta‘amei ha-Mitsvot, 127.

98. Joseph Hamadan, Sefer Ta‘amei ha-Mitsvot, MS Jerusalem 8°597, fols. 177a–179b.

99. The term used is a masculine possessive, be-fgimo. All the other pronouns are feminine.

100. Bi-shlomo (masculine personal pronoun). Joseph Hamadan, Sefer Tashaq, 346. Note the integration of the feminine into the masculine in a manuscript variant that reads “on the head of the matronita stands his crown.”


**SEVEN. The Interplay between Myth, Science, and Law**

1. On the intersection of science and religion among Jews, see Langerman, “Acceptance and Devaluation,” 223–245; Ruderman, Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery; Ruderman, Kabbalah, Magic, and Science. Among Christians, see Biller and Ziegler, Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages; Ziegler, Medicine and Religion c. 1300; Risse, Mending Bodies, Saving Souls.


3. The most popular source of medical authority in the Bible was Eccl. 38:1–15. See Ziegler, Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages, 5.


7. Ibid., 140.


12. This duality continues into the modern period and has been discussed at length by scholars of gender studies. See, among others, Beavoir, The Second Sex, 3–38, 253–266; Bordo, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body, 165–184; Cixous and


20. Ibid., 72–73.

21. Note that Aristotle had never dissected a cadaver and was unaware of the existence of ovaries. After Herophilus engaged in human dissection and discovered the ovaries, physiologists were forced to acknowledge the analogy of the ovaries to the testes. Galen rejected Aristotle’s model and affirmed the existence of female seed (Preus, “Galen’s Criticism,” 83).


23. BT Niddah 25b, 31b; Rosner, “Sex Determination in the Talmud,” 173–178. For a very different understanding, see BT Gittin 57a. On Aristotle and the rabbis, see Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, 389; Newmyer, “Talmudic Medicine and Greek Sources,” 34–57. Note that the Talmud does not systematically follow Aristotelian biological theory. For example, BT Niddah 31a presents the Galenic idea that both men and women emit seed that contributes to the development of the fetus. Male seed is sperm that generates the child’s bones, sinews, nails, brain, and the whites of the eyes. Female seed is menstrual blood, which engenders skin, flesh, blood, hair, and the pupils of the eyes.

24. The element fire is intrinsic to the sefirah of Judgment. Women, who are created in Judgment, are therefore hewn from this elemental fire. Isaac of Acre, *Sefer Me’irat Einayim*, 154; compare Zohar 1:103b.


29. Ibid., 73–87; Whipple, *Role of the Nestorians and Muslims in the History of Medicine*. To be sure, Western Europeans did not completely abandon the medical sciences in the early Middle Ages. Medical works were translated in North Africa and Ravenna. Yet the scope of these studies was more limited. Western European physicians valued the practical use of medicine over its theoretical study and were more attracted to Soranus than to Galen. Only four of Galen's works were translated into Latin before the eleventh century, and only one of these, *Ad Glauconem*, mentions the uterus. Green, “Transmission of Ancient Theories,” 130–173.


31. Ibid., 293; see also Women's Secrets, trans. Lemay, 117, 124. This idea gave rise to a belief in a seven-chambered uterus: three on the right, three on the left, and one in the middle. The odd number of chambers gave rise to a third gender possibility — the hermaphrodite. See Kudlien, “Seven Cells of the Uterus,” 415–423; Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine*, 91–96; Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science*, 197n21; Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 188, 303n13.


33. This text is a Hebrew translation of the Latin *De passionibus mulierum*, version B. Barkai, *A History of Jewish Gynecological Texts*, 20–37, 57, 65.


35. Travis notes that this may be a scribal error because the Mishnah deems the blood of the upper chamber pure. Travis, “Kabbalistic Foundations of Jewish Spiritual Practice,” 701n248.


38. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes two types of female blood: (1) purified blood that is used to make up the embryo and (2) the waste of this blood — menstrual blood (Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 77).

39. With the exception of cats, which could resist the powers of menstrual blood and snakes. See BT Shabbat 75b; BT Avodah Zarah 40b.


41. Lev. 15:24.

42. Paraphrase of Job 37:16.


46. Early thirteenth-century halakhic treatments of menstruants, such as Nahmanides’ *Hiddushim al Massekhet Niddah*, Solomon ibn Adret's *Torat ha-Bayit*, or Aaron ha-Levi’s *Bedeq ha-Bayit*, bear no outright disparagement of niddot. Written before the dissemination of the Zohar, they were handbooks intended for scholars required to answer intricate halakhic questions (Galinsky, “On Popular Halakhic Literature,” 314–315).


52. Ibid., 729a.


54. During gestation and lactation, these excess fluids are redirected to nourish the child and maintain homeostasis (Dean-Jones, Women’s Bodies in Classical Greek Science, 46).

55. Amenorrhea was considered very unhealthy because it was thought to result in the retention of waste (introduction to Women’s Secrets, trans. Lemay, 44). Against this view, see Avicenna, Liber Canonis, 3:3:25, 373a–373b.

56. Concoction literally means cooking. It is a process of sanguinification by which food is transformed by heat into blood (Green, “Transmission of Ancient Theories,” 43).


58. Ibid., 2:459b–460a. Dean-Jones believes that this presentation contradicts Aristotelian biology. In On the Generation of Animals, Aristotle claims that menstrual blood is distinct from other bloods in the body. It is a residue that the womb collects during the course of the month. Accordingly, menstrual blood would cause neither a “general disturbance” in the blood nor a swelling in the body. Moreover, she argues that there was no menstrual taboo in classical Greek society. Menstruating women were not scorned any more than nonmenstruating women. Aristotle and Hippocrates encourage men to have sexual intercourse with menstruants. Dean-Jones concludes that this excerpt was originally a gloss in the margins and was interpolated into the text in the Hellenistic period to subjugate an increasingly liberated class of women. See Dean-Jones, Women’s Bodies in Classical Greek Science, 229–230, 234, 248. Though the account itself may be pseudographic, it exerted great influence on later natural scientists and physicians who were convinced of its authenticity.

59. Pliny, Natural History, 8:79–81.

60. Ibid., 8:33,57; Aelian, On Animals, 2:7:97; White, Book of Beasts, 169n1; compare Albertus Magnus, Man and the Beasts, 293, 398. Thanks to Marc Epstein for his bibliographical help.

61. On the physiological association between sexuality and eye disease, see Jacquart and Thomasset, Sexuality and Medicine, 181.


64. Ibid. The text draws a further connection between serpents and women: “If the hair of a menstruating woman be taken and placed under a dung heap or clod of earth or where dung was made during the winter or summer by virtue of the sun, there will be engendered a long and powerful snake” (Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 76). Paracelcus, the Renaissance polymath, takes this association one step further and explains that menstrual blood and semen exposed together may give rise to the basilisk “whose poison is similar to that in the eyes or breath of a menstruating woman” (Pagel, *Paracelcus*, 116; on the dire effects of the “menstrual spirit,” see 122).

65. Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 75, 129. This understanding gave rise to the myth of the venomous virgin, a tale that Jacquart and Thomasset describe as “the literary justification for the fear of the poison within women’s bodies” (191–192; compare the medieval commentaries to *Women’s Secrets*, trans. Lemay, 130–131).


67. Nahmanides was familiar with other aspects of contemporary gynecology as well. He describes the rabbinic, Galenic, and Aristotelian perceptions of the nature of female seed (Nahmanides’ commentary to Lev. 12:2, ed. Chavel, 2:65).

68. BT Shabbat 75b, 146a; BT Avodah Zarah 22b, 40b; BT Pesahim 111a; BT Yebamot 103b. Compare Isaac of Acre, *Sefer Me’irat Einayim*, 154.

69. There are two distinct superstitions known as the evil eye: (1) the belief that some people are able to harm others at a glance; and (2) the belief that jealous demons will begrudge men all forms of happiness. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 54–56. See also Kern-Ulmer, “Power of the Evil Eye and the Good Eye,” 344–353; Kern-Ulmer, *The Evil Eye*.


73. On the physiological association between leprosy and venereal disease in the Middle Ages, see Ell, “Blood and Sexuality in Medieval Leprosy,” 153–164.

74. See chapter 9.


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80. Ibid., 112.

81. Idel, “‘We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition,’” 52–53; Wolfson, “‘By Way of Truth,’” 151–153.

82. Isaac of Acre, *Sefer Me’irat Einayim*, 159.

83. Wolfson, “‘By Way of Truth,’” 152.

84. Lev. 18:19.

85. Compare Zohar 2:3b.


89. Elsewhere, Shem Tov ibn Ga’on explains that spirits of impurity were especially attracted to the smell of human blood. Necromancers would therefore use bloodlike incense in order to draw spirits of impurity to earth (Shem Tov ibn Ga’on, *Keter Shem Tov*, 43a).


94. Jacob ben Sheshet, *Sefer ha-Emunah ve-ha-Bitahon*, 89; Gottlieb, *Ha-Qabbalah be-Kittel Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher*, 102. On wine as a symbol of Judgment, see Bahya ben Asher’s commentary to Gen. 9:20, ed. Chavel, 1:123.


97. Shem Tov ibn Ga’on, *Keter Shem Tov*, 42b; Isaac of Acre, *Me’irat Einayim*, 154; Menahem Recanati, *Ta’amui ha-Mitsvot*, 71c. Recanati also explains that “the mystery of the sin of menstruation is that woman squeezed the grapes” (Perush al ha-Torah, 61c).

98. Moses de Leon, *Sefer ha-Rinmon*, 344–345. Note that while de Leon acknowledges the danger of impure women gazing at mirrors, purified women, by contrast, are encouraged to look in mirrors in order to entice their husbands, in Zohar 2:3b.
99. Zohar 2:3b; Tishby, 
*Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:1202–1203.


101. Note that one of the most comprehensive discussions of the origins of menstrual impurity is attributed to the hero of the Zohar, Rabbi Shim’on bar Yohai.


103. Note that there are twenty-seven forms of impurity specific to women. Samael transmits twenty-four by means of the act of instilling. The discrepancy must be the result of an exegetical need that the number of impurities correspond to the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew *va-’evah*, enmity, which is twenty-four.


106. BT Shabbat 75b; Midrash Tanhuma on Gen. 18:25, ed. Buber, 1:4:12, 92; see also Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 102n51. Belief in the magical power of menstrual blood was not limited to the talmudic period. According to a mid-thirteenth-century Ashkenazic magical manual, one could cure a woman’s excessive blood flow by tying a menstruant’s hair to her bed (MS Parma 541, fol. 264b).

107. BT Sanhedrin 67a; BT Berakhot 53a; BT Eruvin 64b; BT Pesahim 110a–111a; BT Yoma 81b. For a general discussion of women and magic in the Babylonian Talmud, see Blau, *Das altjüdische Zauberwesen*, 23–26; Fishbane, “‘Most Women Engage in Sorcery,’” 27–42.

108. BT Sanhedrin 91a; BT Niddah 17a; BT Hagigah 3b.


110. Of the six references to spirits of impurity in the talmudic corpus, four are associated with graveyards. The Talmud specifies graveyards as the site of illicit magical practice. BT Hagigah 3b, BT Sotah 3a (twice), BT Sanhedrin 65b (twice), BT Niddah 17a. This rabbinic understanding is a striking inversion of extra-talmudic magical techniques, in which a magician’s purity was a prerequisite for success. See chapter 1.

111. Thanks to Jane Kanarak for this observation.

112. According to the medieval tosafists, the niddah must first cast the appropriate spell (*Tosafot* on BT Pesahim 111a, s.v. *im tkhilat*).

113. BT Pesahim 111a.


115. Note the difference in degree: in the Talmud, practitioners of unsanctioned magic use impure names, while in Kabbalah, Bila’am uses the language of seminal emission (*lashon qeri*). See Sefer Toldot Adam, MS BN 841, fols. 246b, 254b; Midrash ha-Ne’elam Ruth, 81c–d.

116. BT Sanhedrin 67a.

117. Compare Midrash ha-Ne’elam Ruth 81b, where the interpretation of “sorceress” follows the grammatical model of the Talmud. BT Ye’amot 103b states that when Israel
received the Torah at Sinai, their pollution ceased. This challenges Rabbi Yossi’s assertion that all women are filled with the filth of magic, for they too would have been purified at Sinai. Rabbi Isaac claims that the Torah was given to men alone, as it is written, “and this is the law which Moses set before the sons of Israel” (Deut. 4:44). (Rabbi Isaac interprets the Hebrew, bnei, “sons” exclusively as sons, rather than inclusively as children.) Women were not purified of the serpent’s filth through the granting of the Torah. To fend off skeptics, Rabbi Yossi adds that impurity returned to both men and women after the sin of the golden calf. See Zohar 1:126a–b; compare Zohar 1:37b, 52b–53a, 63b, 131b; Zohar 2:194a.

118. “Impurity is drawn to impurity just as like is drawn to like.” See Zohar 3:111a; Cohen-Alloro, “Ha-Magiah ve-ha-Kishuf,” 20, 85.


120. Note that one man walks between two women in Midrash ha-Ne’elam Ruth, while one woman walks between two men in the Talmud; compare Zohar 2:3a–b.


123. Synopse #288.

124. Ibid., #83; compare #86.

125. Zohar 2:77b (Raza d’Razim). See also Zohar Hadash 35b, Zohar 2:272b (Tosafot), Massekhet Kallah, ed. Higger, 140. On the marks caused by forbidden sexual relations, see Zohar 2:75b (Raza d’Razim); on physiognomy and chiromancy, see BT Yoma 22b, BT Hagigah 22b, Zohar 2:16b (RM).

126. God punishes Miriam and King Uzziah with scale impurity (Num. 12; 2 Chron. 26), but the leper is not considered morally impure (Klawans, Ritual and Moral Impurity, 25).


129. Leviticus Rabbah, 15:4; Neusner, The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism, 83–84; Klawans, Ritual and Moral Impurity, 96–104. In Castilian Kabbalah the “torah of the tsara’at” is the “torah of one who brings forth a bad name.” For more on the relationship between the impurity of tsara’at and sin in Castilian Kabbalah, see, among others, Zohar 3:47a, 55a; for a more metaphorical treatment of tsara’at impurity, see Natan the Physician, Zikhron Tov, MS Cambridge Add. 485, fols. 46b, 86b.

130. Klawans, Ritual and Moral Impurity, 98.

131. Note that according to Zohar 1:18a, the serpent was not initially evil. He was transformed into a malevolent force when he himself was corrupted by a spirit of impurity.

132. See Zohar 1:48a, 53b–54, 58a, 100a, 167b; 2:111a; 3:41b, 47a, 55a; Moses de Leon, Mishkan Edut, MS Cambridge Dd 4:2:1, fol. 33a; Cohen-Alloro, “Ha-Magiah ve-ha-Kishuf be-Sefer ha-Zohar,” 85. For the rabbinic sources of this idea, see BT Makkot 70b; Sifre Deuteronomy, 173:12.

134. For a metaphorical treatment of the zavah, see Zohar 3:54a and Eser Madregot shel Tum‘ah, MS BN 841, fol. 246b.


136. Ibn Shue’ib, Be’ur al Perush ha-Ramban, 24c.

137. Milgrom, Anchor Bible: Leviticus, 46, 941.

138. See chapter 2.

139. Isaac of Acre, Me’irat Einayim, 154. On the relationship between women and the Angel of Death, see BT Berakhot 51a.

140. BT Baba Batra 165; Zohar 1:152b; 2:262b.

141. Zohar 1:53b–54a, 114a; Isaac of Acre, Me’irat Einayim, 154; MS Milano Ambrosiana P.47 Sup. 1.6, fol. 33b.

142. Zohar 1:36a.


144. Some rabbis believed that it was inappropriate for women to sing alone in public. According to RM 2:233b, a song sung by a woman (mizmor, רְאֹמֵס), creates a strange blemish (mum zar, צָרַמּו). See Lev. 18:19.


146. On the Zohar’s indebtedness to Ashkenazi halakhah in general, see Ta-Shma, Ha-Nigleh she-ba-Nistar; on the influence of the BdN specifically, see pp. 32 and 51.

147. Ibn Shue’ib, Be’ur al Perush ha-Ramban, 24c.


149. Rabbi Manhama in BdN 2:3n185.

150. Ibid., 2:3, 13; Nahmanides’ commentary to Gen. 31:35, ed. Chavel, 2:177.

151. While the BdN mentions the danger of the menstruant’s saliva (1:1, 3; 2:1, 3), it makes no explicit mention of the hazards posed by her smell. Bahya ben Asher may have inferred this danger from the Hanina ben Haqanah story in BdN 1:7, 9. For more on this story and its relationship to the Hekhalot literature, see chapter 2. Zohar 1:190b also makes note of the smell of menstrual blood, explaining that God requires the sacrifice of Rosh ha-Shanah “to cause the serpent to pass and to perfume one (feminine) who needs it. . . . It is therefore written, ‘Do not come near a woman during her period of impurity.’” See Lev. 18:19.

152. BdN 1:2, 3, 4; 1:4, 6, 7; 2:4, 17; 3:4, 27.

153. Ibid., 1:2, 3.

154. Zohar 2:3a.

155. Ibid.


159. On the canonization of the Zohar, see Huss, *Ke-Zohar ha-Raqia*.
Spain,” 27–53. Thanks to Judah Galinsky for this reference.
161. On the proliferation of popular halakhic treatises in late thirteenth- and fourteenth-
century Catalonia and Castile, see Galinsky, “On Popular Halakhic Literature,” 305–327;
Ilan, “Jewish Community in Toledo,” 65–95; Hallamish, “Acceptance of the Zohar into the
Realm of Halakah,” 413. Hallamish warns not to overemphasize the halakhic influence
of the Zohar because the authors of the Zohar were not halakhists and they did not
share their esoteric teachings with the populace. Nonetheless, even Hallamish concedes
that the Zohar influenced Iberian Jewish culture before the expulsion. Hallamish, *Ha-
Qabbalah*, 120–125.
162. This effort parallels contemporary Christian clerics who wrote treatises to educate
lay people, and itinerant preachers who roamed the country to reform Christian practice.
Jewish literature in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, see Huss, *Ke-Zohar ha-Raqia*,
140–179.
164. The author of *Sefer ha-Ḥinukh* is the subject of scholarly debate. See, among others,
Ta-Shma, “Author of Sefer ha-Ḥinukh” (in Hebrew), in *Knesset Mehqarim*, 2:196–201; Ga-
165. *Sefer Ha-Ḥinukh*, Parashat Tazria par. 166, p.200. He quotes the Ramban humoral
medical theories from his commentary on Leviticus 12:4. See parallel Parashat Metsora
par. 207, p. 342.
168. On secrecy as a means to impose change, see Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*.
172. Menahem Tsioni, *Sefer Tsioni*, 47c. For more on Tsioni and the Zohar, see Huss,
*Ke-Zohar ha-Raqia*, 96; Ta-Shma, *Ha-Nigleh she-ba-Nistar*, 81; Yuval, *Ha-Hakhamim be-
Doram*, 282–292.
175. *Sefer ha-Qanah*, 77a–b.
176. Menahem Recanati, *Perush al ha-Torah*, 65b; Joseph Hamadan, *Sefer Taʾamei ha-
Mitsvot*, MS Jerusalem 8597, fol. 179a. Note that this idea is absent in *Sefer Taʾamei ha-
Mitsvot*, MS Oxford Michael 119, fols. 176a–178b. On the treatment of gilgil and illicit
sexual relations in Menahem Recanati, Joseph Hamadan, and the anonymous author of
the *Sefer ha-Qanah*, see Kushnir-Oron, “Ha-Peliʾah ve-ha-Qanah: Yesodot ha-Qabbalah
she-ba-hem,” 100–104.
177. *Sefer ha-Qanah*, 77a–b.
EIGHT. Menstrual Impurity and Sufism

My work in this chapter has been made possible by the generosity of many scholars who shared with me Islamic texts that are not widely available and, in some cases, also provided translations that have been of great assistance and which I quote here. Marion Katz and Barbara Von Schlegel have been particularly helpful, and I am grateful to have been able to rely on their more than collegial scholarship of medieval Islamic law and classical Sufism.

1. For an overview of the Muslim purity system in English, see Katz, Body of Text; Reinhart, “Purity/No Danger,” 1–24; Maghen, “Close Encounters,” 348–392.


4. Lev. 18:19.

5. Menstruants can touch the outside cover of the Qur’an. For exceptions, see Bakhtiar, Encyclopedia of Islamic Law, 23.


8. Sura 2:222, trans. Katz, Body of Text, 49. There are many possible renderings, including illness (Pickthall), impurity (Fakhry), and vulnerable condition (Asad).

9. Except the blood of martyrs.


11. The question of influence is a thorny one. As noted, there are similarities between the laws in Sura 2:222 and Lev. 15:19, and the Qur’anic language “do not approach” evokes the language of Lev. 20:18. Yet it is difficult to prove with any certainty that Muhammad was either influenced by Leviticus or was reacting against Jewish practice in Arabia.

12. Katz, Body of Text, 49; on the purity laws as an expression of a new covenantal system, see 32–58.


14. al-Bukhari, vol. 1, book 6, #299; see also #300, #298.

15. Abu-Dawud, book 1, #212; compare #213.


19. Ibid., #327.

20. Ibid., #293, in Katz, Body of Text, 199.


23. On purity laws and the language of covenant see Katz, Body of Text.


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27. This list is taken from a thirteenth-century textbook on Sufism, Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī, Doctrine of the Sufis, trans. Arberry. For an in-depth explanation of these stages, see Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 98–148; for the formulation of a modern Sufi shaykh, see Hoffman, Sufism, Mystics and Saints in Modern Egypt, 159–163.

28. Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 169. On the use of dhikr in modern Egypt, see Hoffman, Sufism, Mystics and Saints in Modern Egypt, 163–188.


30. This generally remains true, except in Nubia, where women are excluded from dhikr because of impurity. Hoffman reports that in modern Egypt women and men perform dhikr in the same place, but the level of segregation often reflects the status of society: lower classes mix more than do upper-class women. There is a woman’s branch of the Sufi order Muhammadiyah Vahiyah, which had its own dhikr in a mosque in Heliopolis led by a woman (Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt, 166, 247).

31. Katz, Body of Text, 199. Katz explains that some Muslim legists were concerned lest menstruating women lose merit if they neglect the salāt and therefore obligated women to perform some type of devotion during the ritual prayers. Body of Text, 260n143. Compare the hadith that states women are deficient in their religion because they cannot pray or fast while menstruating; see al-Buhārī, vol. 1, book 6, #301. This contrast was also noted by Tritter (17), but in #318, Muḥammad does not require his wives to make up their prayers.


33. For a comprehensive overview of women in Sufism, see Chishti, “Female Spirituality in Islam,” in Islamic Spirituality; Elias, “Female and Female in Islamic Mysticism”; Hoffman, Sufism, Mystics, and Saints, in Modern Egypt, 226–254; Nurbakhsh, Sufi Women; Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam; Schimmel, My Soul Is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam; Smith, Rabi; as-Sulami, Early Sufi Women, trans. Cornell.

34. Sura 2:228; my emphasis.

35. Sura 4:11; 7:189; Hoffman, Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt, 228.

36. Ibid., 227.

37. Julie Marcus, by contrast, derives from this that pollution concepts have the effect of preventing women from regular contact with God and of regularly pushing women outside the community of believers. For her very different approach, see Marcus, “Islam, Women, and Pollution in Turkey,” 213–214.


42. Thurkill, Chosen among Women: Mary and Fatima in Medieval Christianity and Shi’ite Islam.
44. On the historicity of Rabīʿa, see Smith, Rabīʿa, 20; Sells, Early Islamic Mysticism, 152.
45. as-Sulamī, Early Sufi Women, trans. Cornell, 90.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid, 106.
49. ibn Attār, Tadhkirat al Awliyá, 59, cited in Smith Rabīʿa, 21; Hoffman-Ladd, “Mysticism and Sexuality in Sufi Thought and Life,” 83; Smith, Rabīʿa, 27n20. Compare early modern Judaism, when uneducated men were described as “men who are like women”; see Weissler, Voices of the Matriarchs, 54–59.
50. Schimmel, My Soul Is a Woman, 77.
51. Ibid., 79.
52. Elias, “Female and Feminine in Islam,” 211.
53. Susan Bordo, Unbearable Weight, 5.
55. Schimmel, My Soul Is a Woman, 78.
56. Ibid., 79–80.
58. Displays of supernatural powers were frowned upon, and Sufi masters considered these acts obstacles to spiritual advancement. The distaste for ‘shopkeeper sheikhs’ is evident in the hadith “that miracles are the menstruation of men.” Just as menstruation separates a husband and wife, miracles separate God from the mystic. Annemarie Schimmel attributes this symbolic transfer of menstruation to men to Indian Muslims — a significant fact because male menstruation was part of Indian folklore (Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 212).
59. Schimmel, My Soul Is a Woman, 39.
60. Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 427.
61. Wemple, Women in Frankish Society; Brooten, Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue; Smith, Rabīʿa, 141–165.
65. Schimmel, My Soul Is a Woman, 47.
70. Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 167.
NINE. Menstrual Impurity in Medieval Christianity

3. BT Niddah 31b.
8. The texts suggest that women absented themselves from the sacred because they believed that the Holy Spirit abandoned their bodies upon the advent of their flow and was dispossessed by an impure spirit. The author of the Didascalia argues that the women’s argument is theologically unsound because the Holy Spirit will not abandon those who have been baptized. The Didascalia, moreover, does not prohibit sexual relations with menstruants. See Voobus, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, 244; Cohen, “Menstruants and the Sacred,” 289–290; Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 173; Elliot, *Fallen Bodies*, 3.
10. Though menstruating nuns were barred from religious ceremonies, menstruating abbesses were, at times, permitted to attend services from the galleries of their monastery churches. Taft, “Women at Church in Byzantium,” 59, 63–72; Gerstel, “Painted Sources for Female Piety in Byzantium,” 89–111.
12. Irish exegetes interpreted the Bible more literally than their counterparts on the continent and may have entertained very different notions about purity and impurity. It is possible that the Anglo-Saxons whom Augustine intended to convert to the Roman rite practiced menstrual customs learned from the Irish church (Meens, “A Relic of Superstition,” 282–284.). One of the battles for the hegemony of the British church is played out through the notion of impurity. On early medieval Irish exegesis of Leviticus, see Smalley, “An Early Twelfth-Century Commentator on the Literal Sense of Leviticus,” 78–99.
‘The Libellus’ authenticity has been called into question because the actual letter does not appear among Gregory’s official papal letters, yet even those who consider its provenance spurious cannot deny its influence throughout the Middle Ages.


16. In his commentary on Ezekiel, Gregory allegorizes menstruants as symbols of sin (noted by Elliot, *Fallen Bodies*, 178n73). Dyan Elliot offers a very different interpretation of medieval Christian conceptions of menstruation in her *Fallen Bodies*, a fascinating study of pollution and demonology in the Latin West.

17. Note that Gregory was not asked about sexual intercourse with menstruants.


19. Gregory tacitly endorses the levitical laws of ba‘al qeri but is unwilling to acknowledge his debt to a Jewish practice. He self-consciously insists that his interpretation is allegorical and that it stems from Stoic rather than from contemporary Jewish practice. The rabbis offer four possible interpretations for a ba‘al qeri: an ejaculant in intercourse, a man with gonorrhea, an onanite, and one who has had a nocturnal emission tradition (PT Yoma 8:1:44d; M Berakhot 3:6; BT Niddah 35b; Cohen, “Purity and Piety,” 107). Gregory significantly chooses the most narrow reading. Palestinian rabbis similarly defined the ba‘al qeri as an ejaculant in intercourse. It is possible that Gregory’s interpretation throws light on the practices of early medieval Italian Jewry, who drew from Palestinian customs.


32. Women were often barred from entering monastic churches, though certain monasteries established special women’s churches outside their walls to accommodate them (Schulenberg, “Gender, Celibacy, and Proscriptions of Sacred Space,” 355).

34. Early Irish monks preserved a style of Christianity independent of Rome. The many proscriptions against having sexual relations with menstruants in the Irish penitentials may reflect Irish penchant for literal exegesis. Although many of these interpretations are now lost, vestiges of a literal approach may be found in the penitentials.


40. Church authorities, like the rabbis, wrote about women as they related to men (Murray, “Gendered Souls in Sexed Bodies,” 79–93; Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 165).


42. Ibid., 160, 162.

43. Ibid., 155.

44. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials*, 58.

45. See discussion of Rabanus of Mainz, below.

46. Penitential literature during the tenth and eleventh centuries was written and copied for episcopal use rather than as pastoral guides for the laity (Hamilton, *The Practice of Penance: 900–1050*, 45–46).


49. See chapter 7.


51. Ibid., Book 5:288, p. 238.


54. Peter’s familiarity with Jewish practice is especially notable because he was a canon of St. Victor, the Parisian abbey famous for its interest in Rashi’s exegetical techniques.


56. By contrast, Rufinus’ contemporary, the Bolognese canon lawyer Huguccio, stated that it is a mortal sin to have sexual relations with a menstruant. Therefore, if a wife were a menstruant, a husband should not pay the marriage debt unless he believed that she would commit adultery. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society*, 283.

57. On rabbinic understandings of “spoiled blood,” see chapter 7.
58. On Isidore’s sources, see MacLehose, “Nurturing Danger,” 9; Payer, Bridling of Desire, 107.
59. Cadden, Meaning of Sex Difference, 49.
63. Payer, The Bridling of Desire, 108. For the many Jewish parallels, see chapter 7.
65. John of Freiburg, Summa Confessorum, 4:2q45 (220vb), cited by Payer in Bridling of Desire, 230n118. For more on John of Freiburg, see Boyle, “Summa Confessorum of John of Freiburg,” 245–268.
69. Among the many authors who have devoted studies to virginity in Christianity, see Brown, “Notion of Virginity in the Early Church,” in Christian Spirituality, 1:427–443; Brown, The Body and Society; Brundage, Law, Sex, and Society; Castelli, “Virginity and Its Meaning for Women’s Spirituality,” 61–88; Fonrobert, Menstrual Purity, 160–166.
70. Elliot, Spiritual Marriage, 102–104.
75. Laistner, Thoughts and Letters in Western Europe, 221.
76. Rabanus of Mainz, De Rerum Naturis, 6:243b–244b; Patrologia Latina, vol. 111: 174–175. On Rabanus’s method of exegesis, see Laistner, Thoughts and Letters in Western Europe, 301–303; Smalley, Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages, 43. The homology between

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menstruation and idolatry is noted in Jewish sources as well. Midrash Tanḥuma on Lev. 15:25, ed. Buber, 35:14, 52n72; M Shabbat 1:9. Compare M Avodah Zarah 3:6; BT Shabbat 92b. See Rashi on Gen. 35:2. Rabanus of Mainz mentions Jews and Jewish practice in his Bible commentary — a fact that leads some scholars to suggest that he spoke with Jews. This scenario could suggest that Rabanus derived the homology between menstrual impurity and idolatry from Jews. Given that Rabanus’ commentary is essentially a compilation of older sources, it is difficult to differentiate his own voice from uncited sources.

80. Evans, Language and the Logic of the Bible, 43–45.
81. Ibid., 38, 43; Smalley, Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages, 57–66.
82. Twelfth-century Christian scholars often consulted with rabbis to establish a correct reading of the Hebrew biblical text (Evans, “Masters and Disciples,” 254–260; Gibson, “Introduction to the Biblia Latina cum Glossa Ordinaria,” IX, n31; Grabois, “Hebraica Veritas and Jewish-Christian Intellectual Relations in the Twelfth Century,” 613–614; Smalley, Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages, 47, 52–55). This instance does not necessarily reflect a twelfth-century encounter with Jews because the reference to Jewish practice is a verbatim borrowing from Rabanus of Mainz (Expositiones in Leviticum, 5.2, Patrologia Latina, vol. 410). Furthermore, it is impossible to ascertain whether Rabanus himself witnessed Jewish practice, because he often quotes directly from sources without citation. It is noteworthy that Hugh of St. Victor, who did consult with Jews, skins over Leviticus 15.
84. There is no critical edition of the Historia Scholastica. A later interpolation identifies the zavah with the woman with a blood flow in the gospels and writes: “Whence too it was said by the Lord to a woman discharging blood, after she was cured: ‘Go, and sin no more (John 8).’ Through which it is clear that the disease had befallen her because of her own sin.”
85. Patrologia Latina, vol. 198:1208–1209. Consider the following later interpolation: “The Hebrews recount that if anyone sleeps with a woman on the first day of her menstruation, and a child is conceived, and lives, within ten years it shall be leprous. But if he does so on the second day, the child will be leprous by the twentieth year and so on until the seventh day” (1208d).
86. Ibid.
87. Ibid., 1099c.
88. Peter Comestor, Historia Scholastica, Patrologia Latina, vol. 198:1205a–d. Comestor explains that even with such clear evidence, “the Hebrews nevertheless believe that children do not have sin.” Peter’s familiarity with Jewish rejection of original sin may suggest contact with Jewish scholars.
89. Book 19:140. Compare to the penitentials of the German Pietists, discussed in chapter 3.
90. There are no extant critical editions of Ivo’s Decretum. See Patrologia Latina, vol. 161:15, 150, 891.


94. Brundage, Medieval Canon Law, 190.

95. Brundage explains that Gratian was largely successful until 1350, when the state courts began asserting legal control over citizens’ sexuality (Law, Sex, and Christian Society, 579).

96. Ibid., 235–255.


98. Ibid. On the increased interest in marriage laws in the Middle Ages, see 260–288; and Elliot, Spiritual Marriage 142–155.


101. Payer, Bridling of Desire, 106. Gratian does quote Gregory: “so, too, even when they have not given birth, they should certainly be prevented from having sexual relations with their husbands when they are undergoing their usual flow of menstruation” (Decretum 5 c. 2).

102. John of Freiburg, Summa Confessorum, 4:2 q. 45 (220vb), cited by Payer in Bridling of Desire, 230n118.


104. Elliot, Spiritual Marriage, 150–151; Payer, Bridling of Desire, 106.


106. Elliot, Spiritual Marriage, 150–151.


108. Gratian was familiar with penitential laws and according to Payer is indebted to Theodore with regard to his stance on sexual relations with one’s wife when she is adulterous: C32, q. 1, c. 6; Payer, Sex and the Penitentials, 114.


110. Bynum, Jesus as Mother, 172; Bynum, “Religious Women in the Later Middle Ages,” 121–139; McGinn, “Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism,” 201–205; Schultenburg “Sexism and the Celestial Gynaeceum from 500 to 1200,” 122, 127, 131n11.

111. For a review of the many theories, see Bynum, “Religious Women in the Later Middle Ages,” 122–129.

112. It is interesting to note that in the Byzantine church, where menstrual laws are still followed, there are comparatively few female saints (Talbot, Holy Women of Byzantium, x–xiii).
115. Ibid., 118.
117. The female saints most venerated in the Middle Ages were also overwhelmingly virgins. Newman, “Flaws in the Golden Bowl,” 21, 28.
118. Restrictions against women learning actually increased between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. In order to gain authority they could not rely on book learning but rather had to rely on the vision of God (Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, 169). On the association between vernacular theology and women’s mysticism in the later Middle Ages, see McGinn, “Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism,” 201–211.
119. Thomas of Chobham, who died between 1233 and 1236, is an exception.
122. This understanding may have contributed to the resurgence of churcning as a purificatory measure from both the sin of concupiscence and from seminal pollution. Although male theologians required churcning as a rite of purification, many women embraced the custom to express their spirituality. Lee, “Purification of Women after Childbirth,” 48; Rieder, “Between the Pure and Polluted.” On Jewish women’s acculturation of the churcning ritual, see Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children*, 105–116.
123. Elliot, *Fallen Bodies*.
125. Dyan Elliot adapts Mary Douglas’s formulation that impurity is matter out of place to the reformers’ attitude toward celibacy: “Women were the matter that was out of place in the reformers’ vision; the dirt that imperiled sacerdotal purity. And so, like dirt, they were ruthlessly set to one side” (Elliot, *Spiritual Marriage*, 102).

**CONCLUSION**

1. My allusion to Marina Warner’s *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* is deliberate. In a separate study, I argue that the Zohar describes Sarah as immaculate in response to the symbol of Maria Immaculata. See Koren, “Immaculate Sarah.”
2. The Zohar interprets this verse metaphorically to demonstrate the significance of man’s origins. “The rock whence you are hewn” refers to the penis and the “pit from which you were dug out” refers to the womb.
3. Zohar 1:122a; compare 1:124b; and Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha’arei Tzedeq*, 14a. Genesis 18:11 reads: “Sarah stopped (hadal) having the periods of women.” Later exegetes ignore the plain sense of the verse and interpret the Hebrew term hadal as “begin.” This reading suggests that the ninety-year-old Sarah had never menstruated before that moment. Mordechai Aqiva Friedman attributes this new reading to Rabbi Meir and his school, which taught that only those who observe menstrual laws will be blessed with sons. The BdN
(19) enlarges upon this interpretation, explaining that “when the matriarchs observed the laws of niddah, their prayers were immediately answered [and they conceived sons]. Sarah was barren, her source was closed and her womb was sealed. Nonetheless, as soon as she observed the laws of niddah, her prayers were answered” (Friedman, “Genesis 18:11 in the Midrash,” 95–102). Rather than privilege Sarah for observing menstrual laws, the Zohar privileges Sarah for her amenorrhea.

4. According to Genesis Rabbah 72:6, all four matriarchs were prophetesses. In the Zohar, the matriarchs Rebecca and Rachel also attained union with the Shekinah (Zohar 1:140b), and the Holy Spirit rested on Leah (Zohar 1:157a); compare 1:168b. Nonetheless, the Zohar considers Sarah’s spiritual status unique (Zohar 1:159b–160a).

5. Zohar 1:81b, 1:112b.


10. Mishnah Berurah 7, par. 88. Joseph Karo urged women to avoid cemeteries because they could cause harm to the world. Though he is silent on the cause of this danger, his source, as noted by Hallamish and Huss, is the Zohar 2:196a. Joseph Karo, Beit Yoseph, Yoreh De’ah 359; Hallamish, Ha-Qabbalah, 167; Huss, Ke-Zohar ha-Raqia, 159; compare Dinary, “Profanation of the Holy,” 35.


12. For the historical development of this practice, see Dinary, “Profanation of the Holy,” 21–22; BdN, 17n99.


14. Yedidiah Dinary compiled an exhaustive list of the laws that restrict menstruants’ access to the sacred in his Hebrew article “Profanation of the Holy” (13–37); see also Cohen, “Purity and Piety,” 103–115.

15. Hallamish, “Acceptance of the Zohar into the Realm of Halakhah during the Middle Ages”; Ha-Qabbalah, 409; Huss, Ke-Zohar ha-Raqia, 178.

16. Gries, Sifrut ha-Hanhagot, 76; Hallamish, Ha-Qabbalah, 121. There are a few other examples of mystical treatises that follow the well-known legal framework of Joseph Karo’s sixteenth-century Shulḥan Arukh — most notably the Shulḥan Arukh falsely attributed to Isaac Luria. Shulḥan Arukh ha-‘Ari is an abridgment of Jacob Tsemah’s Sefer Nagid-u-Metsaveh. Gries, Sifrut ha-Hanhagot, 87; Hallamish, Ha-Qabbalah, 123–125; Huss, Ke-Zohar ha-Raqia, 178.

17. Yesh Skhar, 272, citing Zohar 2:111.

18. Ibid., 269, 272, citing Zohar 3:79a and 2:111.


22. Ibid., 105, citing Zohar 2:36a.
24. Introduction to Shulhan Arukh ha-Zohar.
26. Ibid., 258–265, par. 198.
27. He cites the Zoharic passage discussed above as his source (1:126a).
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