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To Whom It May Concern:

The following essay, entitled “Menstruation in the Jewish Tradition,” was written as a part of Dr. Jeffrey Haus’ Women and Judaism in Fall 2020. It is in compliance with Kalamazoo College’s Honor System. All work is originally my own, and all research is cited both within the essay in Chicago Manual Style footnotes and in the Bibliography. This essay is written for the Voynovich Essay Contest in the Religion category.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
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Menstruation in the Jewish Tradition

In the fight for a feminist Judaism or a Jewish feminism, feminists have come to understand the complicated systems that are in place, systems that are often coupled with religious customs. In questioning one's own belief system, it can be difficult to discern where religious obligation ends and where contemporary adaptation can begin; this is especially true for Jewish traditions surrounding *niddah*, the state describing a menstruating woman. While there are rabbinical texts written about menstruation customs prevalent in various time periods, the Talmud and even halakhah often tell different stories. Jewish law today must conduct its own preservation and adaptation of customs based on what is most helpful to the congregation, the same way rabbis have conducted their people in various historical moments. While customs surrounding *niddah* have been contested over the last century, especially since the 1960s feminist movement and the increasing *s'micha* or ordination of female rabbis in the U.S. since 1972, new conversations defending, challenging, and adapting these religious rituals to the modern age have been developed. The conversation since has been focused on the role and identity of women in these customs. The laws and customs surrounding *niddah* shape the way a Jewish woman views herself and form the basis of her connections to Judaism and her Jewish community, both positive and negative.

Many of the ways in which women are restricted within the Jewish tradition relate back to the customs of *niddah* and the idea that a menstruating woman is impure. Her entire world is regulated based on her menstrual cycle, and while that is not a new idea to the global patriarchy, it certainly has been called into question in recent years. In the Babylonian Talmud as well as in Christian literature, "Eve, and by extension womankind, began to menstruate as a punishment for eating of the Tree of Knowledge," a curse set upon women late in the rabbinical period of

Judaism.¹ The idea that women are punished for what Eve did in the Garden of Eden has been maintained within Jewish tradition, even manifesting itself as “danger and revulsion linked to menstruation,” a natural bodily function.² Because of this perception of women, women who decided “to abstain from the house of worship when they [were] *Niddah*” were praised.³ There were no rules explicitly restricting women’s participation in synagogue activities, Sabbath services, or High Holidays while menstruating, but in choosing to separate themselves because of their position as *niddah*, women were considered even more pious. It was a sacrifice for the good of her own religious practice and her community, for she would not want to accidentally “slay” one of the men she walks between in the synagogue.⁴ Jewish women have been asked to put their religion, and in particular the men in their religion, above even themselves, and *niddah* customs are just one example.

While not regulated by the Talmud, it has been difficult for women to counteract the restrictions and mentality that have come with *niddah* since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. During this time there was chaos surrounding the loss of the Temple, a holy place, and the disruption around impurity practices. As such, “other sorts of impurity legislation fell into disuse, and the laws of *niddah* were transferred to the realm of family life and sexual taboo.”⁵ In this way, laws, regulations, and customs that once applied to everyone, including men who presumably had the most access to the Temple, suddenly were applied to women more strictly than before, restricting and commenting on their natural bodily functions and daily habits

¹ Shai Secunda, “The Construction, Composition and Idealization of the Female Body in Rabbinic Literature and Parallel Iranian Texts: Three Excursuses,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 23 (2012), 67.

² Jonah Steinberg, “From a ‘Pot of Filth’ to a ‘Hedge of Roses’ (And Back): Changing Theorizations of Menstruation in Judaism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13, no. 2 (1997), 12.

³ Evyatar Marienberg, “Menstruation in Sacred Spaces: Medieval and Early-Modern Jewish Women in the Synagogue,” *Scandinavian Jewish Studies* 25, no. 1 (2004), 10.

⁴ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 177.

⁵ Plaskow, 177.

that come with them. During the rabbinic and medieval periods, rabbinical writers called the uterus things like “*bet hatorfa* (place of rot),” further emphasizing the disgust that was and still is attached to women and women’s reproductive body.⁶ As a way of counteracting what a woman’s body goes through while in a state of *niddah*, *mikveh* or ritual bath has been implemented to cleanse women of the impurities that come from their natural female bodies. The *mikveh* creates “a dynamic whereby the Jewish woman’s body is subject to inspection, supervision and approval” as well as a potentially invasive environment if she is uncomfortable with the person who is doing the inspecting.⁷ If a Jewish woman can escape the connotations of connecting her period to Eve’s sin or her uterus to a rotten place, she is still subject to constant observation. This could create a separation between her religion and her natural body because the latter does not always seem conducive to the former. Purity and impurity have been constantly applied to women, subjecting them to a binary that they cannot control especially when applied to the life-giving function of their physical bodies.

Despite negative opinions that have been expressed in recent years, there are some sources that argue the rituals associated with *niddah* could be beneficial to women as individuals and in their heterosexual marriages. Documents like *Baraita de-Niddah*, written in roughly the 6th or 7th century in Israel, explicitly lay out what a woman can and cannot do when she is menstruating.⁸ Such restrictions have been seen both as hindrances as well as separations that benefit women and their husbands. In the last fifty years, restrictions surrounding *niddah* between a husband and a wife have been seen in a positive light as modern Orthodox communities have advocated for “attention, affection, and companionship (even during

⁶ Plaskow, 177.

⁷ Rachel S. Harris, “Introduction: Sex, Violence, Motherhood and Modesty: Controlling the Jewish Woman and Her Body,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 23 (2012), 7.

⁸ Steinberg, 12.

menstruation itself)”⁹ as well as “intimacy without touch.”¹⁰ Such space gives a husband and wife time to grow emotionally connected without the distraction of physical intimacy. The idea behind this separation is that it leads to the “promise of an eternal *and mutual* honeymoon” for the married couple, in an attempt to make their marriage last forever.¹¹ These considerations have been translated as *taharat ha-mishpaha* or family purity and center the life of a heterosexual married couple as a reason for promoting *niddah*.¹² For a woman who has a period every month for more or less 40 years of her life, Jewish customs stating that a husband and wife cannot have sex while a woman is on her period or for seven days afterward decreases their sexual activity by about half. This can potentially give a couple the time and physical space to build an emotional connection and friendship. Under this consideration, *niddah* benefits a woman greatly by granting her the ability to engage with her physical body on her own while engaging emotionally with her husband, thus strengthening their relationship.

On the other hand, when an institution rooted in patriarchy, which Judaism is, attempts to regulate a woman’s body, it is taking away her power to do so herself. A woman who is restricted from having sex for nearly half of her reproductive and, therefore, sexually active life may have a difficult time understanding her own sexual desires. This sexual understanding of the self often comes with a freedom that cannot be regulated by religious rituals. If she is constantly restrained “by the assumption of an unwholesome, even corrupt and pernicious nature inherent in menstruation and, by extension, in womanhood itself,” a woman is left without space to conduct her own identity separately from that given to her by Judaism.¹³ Additionally, ideas of family purity imply a heterosexual marriage and focus on a domestic life that may not be true for all

⁹ Steinberg, 15.

¹⁰ Steinberg, 18.

¹¹ Steinberg, 19.

¹² Steinberg, 15.

¹³ Steinberg, 25.

people. A person's gender, especially for women and nonbinary people who have to live and work outside of the heterosexual, cisgender male patriarchy, is central to their identity and the way they function in the world. This world includes their religious community, in this case Judaism. While historians do not and cannot have a clear understanding of how women may have internalized these restrictions, it can be assumed that they did. For a Jewish person to be considered so "unclean" that they cannot "even look at the Torah scrolls" has a large impact on their religious identity.¹⁴ According to Rabbi Simone Schicker of the Reform Temple B'nai Israel in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the idea that a *niddah* cannot touch sacred objects is an "outdated and erroneous understanding of the law" that more and more people are beginning to recognize and do away with.¹⁵ However, a woman who is constantly reminded that "the laws pertaining to menstruation are...punishment and atonement" for Eve's sins cannot escape the negative connotations that are attached to being a reproductive female, a person without whom the human population would die out.¹⁶ The damage associated with women's self-image as well as with the image of women tied to impurity and Eve's sins are passed down from generation to generation, from mother to daughter. This makes it increasingly hard to negotiate a new way of understanding *niddah* for a culture and religion rooted deeply in tradition.

When the core identity of women and relationships with women within the Jewish community are tied to these negative connotations of a woman in *niddah*, it makes it even harder to question gendered customs including mourning rituals, birth rituals, and the ordination of female rabbis. Before the 19th century, there were no recorded restrictions against women participating in mourning rituals; however, afterwards it was known that "women don't go into

¹⁴ Plaskow, 177.

¹⁵ Rabbi Simone Schicker, email message to author, November 17, 2020.

¹⁶ Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 24.

the cemetery when they are in the state of *niddah*” which bans them from mourning and grieving the way men are allowed.¹⁷ This simple act, and others surrounding mourning including separating men and women “while escorting the coffin to the burial” and the recitation of *kaddish*, once again places women outside of their religious community.¹⁸ Even *s’machot bat*, birth ceremonies for baby girls, are a relatively new way of welcoming babies assigned female at birth into the Jewish community. While the argument is made that girls are already included in the covenant because “Sarah’s descendants embody the covenant’s meaning in the absence of an external sign” like circumcision, the lack of a welcoming ceremony still leaves women out of rituals that include them in the community.¹⁹ All of these exclusions relate back to the way women are viewed as *niddah*, and it even affects their education and employment opportunities as rabbis. The ideas that “feminine corporeality...[is] a space to be controlled or tamed from its suggestions of impurity and unruliness” leave women who studied to be rabbis without a title, despite their studies being the same as their male counterparts.²⁰ Titles such as *maharat*, *rabba*, and *rabbanit* have been used to describe women who have the same education and experience as male rabbis simply because they are women. Whether cited or not, *niddah* and the negative connotations of women that have come with it have projected a negative image of women within the Jewish community, affecting rituals and customs beyond *niddah*.

In recent years as more women historians and rabbis have contributed to the field, there is a growing study of feminist interpretation of *niddah* practices, and some even shape a positive view of *niddah*. Female rabbis have been able to “put *nidah* back on the ritual radar” and this includes a discussion associated with *mikveh* that can also be reclaimed as “personal religious

¹⁷ Rochelle L. Millen, *Women, Birth, and Death in Jewish Law and Practice* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 145.

¹⁸ Millen, 145.

¹⁹ Millen, 74.

²⁰ Harris, 7.

experience rather than as halachic conformity.”²¹ While the rituals themselves are changing slightly, recently rabbis and feminists have been looking at ways that they can understand the rituals differently, whether historically or in the present moment. This reevaluation includes looking at rituals that may allow for transgender and non-binary people to participate. For one, Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert “makes the case that Niddah enabled women to engage in a similarly embodied set of practices that distinguished their female bodies as Jewish.”²² As opposed to Jonah Steinberg’s claim that *niddah* in any form simply reasserts male privilege, Fonrobert argues that for ancient Jewish women this practice gave women and men an equitable bodily experience, specifically as *niddah* compares to circumcision or *milah*.²³ Reinterpreting rituals such as *niddah* and *mikveh* as sex- and body-positive that benefit women, that are flexible enough to be used by lesbian couples and non-binary people with periods or even in non-gendered healing practices, allows for a feminist reclamation of practices rooted in patriarchy. Because they are being reinterpreted, the patriarchal control of such rituals can be unwound and eventually fully dismissed. With effort and egalitarian participation and representation within the Jewish community, women can assume control over their bodies and personal rituals.

Practices, laws, and rituals surrounding *niddah* are arguably rooted in patriarchal control and disgust of the female body, a fact that should not be ignored. However, through careful study and understanding of how the rituals affected ancient and medieval Jewish women, contemporary feminists can work to build a feminist theology that does include *niddah*. Women are a part of the Jewish covenant, and their connection to *niddah*, *mikveh*, *simhat bat*, *s’mita*,

²¹ Rabbi Debra Reed Blank, “Making up for Lost Time: Female Rabbis and Ritual Change,” in *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate*, ed. Rabbi Rebecca Einstein Schorr and Rabbi Alysa Mendelson Graf (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2016), 449.

²² Laura Levitt, “Reviewed Work(s): Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 93, no. 1/2 (2002), 313.

²³ Levitt, 312.

and *kaddish* are just a few entry points into the covenant. Stripping women of ancient customs is not the solution for including them in a religion that is more than 2,000 years old, but reworking how the rituals are viewed, who benefits from them, and how they are conducted are necessary steps. Not all Jewish women still practice *niddah*; in fact, many non-Orthodox Jews do not, so it can be assumed that these rituals will one day be a part of history instead of common practice.²⁴ Some people, however, still do practice *niddah*, and many others use *mikveh* for non-*niddah* related forms of cleanliness. Practices surrounding the bodily state of *niddah* have defined how Jewish women view themselves and how they are seen within their community, and it is important that feminists recognize the history of these traditions and uphold them in new and creative ways.

²⁴ Rabbi Schicker, November 17, 2020.

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