



“The Five Books of Moses:
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

28 Metzora—Blood and Holiness

Text

ויקרא טו

א וידבר יהוה אל-מֹשֶׁה וְאַל-אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר. ב דַּבְּרוּ אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתֶּם אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי יִהְיֶה זֶבַע מִבְּשָׂרוֹ זָוָב וְטָמֵא הוּא. ג וְזֶה תִּהְיֶה טָמְאָתוֹ בְּזָוָבוֹ כִּי בִשְׂרֹוֹ אֶת-זָוָבוֹ אוֹ-הַחֲתִימִים בִּשְׂרֹוֹ מִזָּוָבוֹ טָמְאָתוֹ הוּא. ד כָּל-הַמִּשְׁכָּב אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב עָלָיו הַזֶּבַע יִטְמָא וְכָל-הַכְּלִי אֲשֶׁר-יִשָּׁב עָלָיו יִטְמָא. ה וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִגַּע בְּמִשְׁכָּבוֹ יִכַּסּ בְּגָדָיו וְרַחֲץ בַּמִּים וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרְב. ו וְהִי שֵׁב עַל-הַכְּלִי אֲשֶׁר-יִשָּׁב עָלָיו הַזֶּבַע יִכַּסּ בְּגָדָיו וְרַחֲץ בַּמִּים וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרְב. ז וְהִנֵּה גַע בְּבִשָּׂר הַזֶּבַע יִכַּסּ בְּגָדָיו וְרַחֲץ בַּמִּים וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרְב. ח וְכִי-יִרְקַח הַזֶּבַע בְּטָהוֹר יִכַּסּ בְּגָדָיו וְרַחֲץ בַּמִּים וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרְב. ט וְכָל-הַמְּרֻכָב אֲשֶׁר יִרְכַב עָלָיו הַזֶּבַע יִטְמָא. י וְכָל-הַנֶּגַע בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה תַּחְתָּיו יִטְמָא עַד-הָעֶרְב וְהַנּוֹשָׂא אוֹתָם יִכַּסּ בְּגָדָיו וְרַחֲץ בַּמִּים וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרְב. יא וְכִל אֲשֶׁר יִגַּע-בּוֹ הַזֶּבַע וְיָדָיו לֹא-שָׁטַף בַּמִּים וְיִכַּסּ בְּגָדָיו וְרַחֲץ בַּמִּים וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרְב. יב וְכִל-חֲרָשׁ אֲשֶׁר-יִגַּע-בּוֹ הַזֶּבַע יִשְׁבֵר וְכָל-כְּלִי-עֵץ יִשְׁטַף בַּמִּים. יג וְכִי-יִטְהַר הַזֶּבַע מִזָּוָבוֹ וְסָפַר לוֹ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים לְטָהַרְתּוֹ וְכַסּ בְּגָדָיו וְרַחֲץ בִּשְׂרֹוֹ בַּמִּים חַיִּים וְטָהַר. יד וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׂמִינִי יִקַּח-לוֹ שְׁתֵּי תְּרִים אוֹ שְׁנֵי בְּנֵי יוֹנָה וְבֹא לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֶל-פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְנִתְּנָם אֶל-הַכֹּהֵן. טו וְעָשָׂה אֹתָם הַכֹּהֵן אֶחָד חֲטָאת וְהָאֶחָד עֹלָה וְכָפַר עָלָיו הַכֹּהֵן לִפְנֵי יְהוָה מִזָּוָבוֹ. {ס} טז וְאִישׁ כִּי-תִצָּא מִמֶּנּוּ שִׁכְבַת-זָרַע וְרַחֲץ בַּמִּים אֶת-כָּל-בִּשְׂרֹוֹ וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרְב. יז וְכָל-בְּגָד וְכָל-עוֹר אֲשֶׁר-יִהְיֶה עָלָיו שִׁכְבַת-זָרַע וְכַסּ בַּמִּים וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרְב. יח וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב אִישׁ אֶתָּה שִׁכְבַת-זָרַע וְרַחֲצוּ בַּמִּים וְטָמְאוּ עַד-הָעֶרְב. {פ}

יט וְאִשָּׁה כִּי-תִהְיֶה זָבָה דָּם יִהְיֶה זָבָה בְּבִשְׂרָהּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּהְיֶה בְּנִדְתָּהּ וְכָל-הַנֶּגַע בָּהּ יִטְמָא עַד-הָעֶרְב. כ וְכִל אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁכַּב עָלָיו בְּנִדְתָּהּ יִטְמָא וְכִל אֲשֶׁר-תִּשָּׁב עָלָיו יִטְמָא. כא וְכָל-הַנֶּגַע בְּמִשְׁכָּבָהּ יִכַּסּ בְּגָדָיו וְרַחֲץ בַּמִּים וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרְב. כב וְכָל-הַנֶּגַע בְּכָל-כְּלִי אֲשֶׁר-תִּשָּׁב עָלָיו יִכַּסּ בְּגָדָיו וְרַחֲץ בַּמִּים וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרְב. כג וְאִם עַל-הַמִּשְׁכָּב הוּא אוֹ עַל-הַכְּלִי אֲשֶׁר-הוּא יִשְׁבַת-עָלָיו בְּנִגְעוֹ-בּוֹ יִטְמָא עַד-הָעֶרְב. כד וְאִם שָׁכַב יִשְׁכַּב אִישׁ אֶתָּה וְתִהְיֶה נִדְתָּהּ עָלָיו וְטָמֵא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְכָל-הַמִּשְׁכָּב אֲשֶׁר-יִשָּׁב עָלָיו יִטְמָא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְכִי-תִזָּוֵב עַל-נִדְתָּהּ כָּל-יָמֵי זָוָב טָמְאָתָהּ כִּימֵי נִדְתָּהּ תִּהְיֶה טָמְאָה הוּא. כו כָּל-הַמִּשְׁכָּב אֲשֶׁר-תִּשְׁכַּב עָלָיו כָּל-יָמֵי זָוָבָה כַּמִּשְׁכָּב נִדְתָּהּ יִהְיֶה-לָּהּ וְכָל-הַכְּלִי אֲשֶׁר תִּשָּׁב עָלָיו טָמֵא יִהְיֶה כְּטָמְאָת נִדְתָּהּ. כז וְכָל-הַנּוֹגֵעַ בָּם יִטְמָא וְכַסּ בְּגָדָיו וְרַחֲץ בַּמִּים וְטָמֵא עַד-הָעֶרְב. כח וְאִם-טָהַר מִזָּוָבָה וְסָפַרָה לָּהּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְאַחַר טָהַר. כט וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׂמִינִי תִקַּח-לָּהּ שְׁתֵּי תְּרִים אוֹ שְׁנֵי בְּנֵי יוֹנָה וְהִבִּיֵּא אֹתָם אֶל-הַכֹּהֵן אֶת-פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד. ל וְעָשָׂה הַכֹּהֵן אֶת-הָאֶחָד חֲטָאת וְהָאֶחָד עֹלָה וְכָפַר עָלֶיהָ הַכֹּהֵן לִפְנֵי יְהוָה מִזָּוָב טָמְאָתָהּ. לא וְהִזְרַתָּם אֶת-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִטָּמְאָתָם וְלֹא יִמְתּוּ בְּטָמְאָתָם בְּטָמְאֵם אֶת-מִשְׁכַּנִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹכָם. לב זֶה אֶת תּוֹרַת הַזָּב וְאֲשֶׁר תִּצָּא מִמֶּנּוּ שִׁכְבַת-זָרַע לְטָמְאָה-בָּהּ. לג וְהִדְוָה בְּנִדְתָּהּ וְהַזָּב אֶת-זָוָבוֹ לְזָכָר וּלְנִקְבָה וְלֹאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב עִם-טָמְאָה. {פ}

Vayiqra 15

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ² Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When any man has a discharge issuing from his member, he is unclean. ³ The uncleanness from his discharge shall mean the following — whether his member runs with the discharge or is stopped up so that there is no discharge, his uncleanness means this: ⁴ Any bedding on which the one with the discharge lies shall be unclean, and every object on which he sits shall be unclean. ⁵ Anyone who touches his bedding shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ⁶ Whoever sits on an object on which the one with the discharge has sat shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ⁷ Whoever touches the body of the one with the discharge shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ⁸ If one with a discharge spits on one who is clean, the latter shall wash his clothes,



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bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ⁹ Any means for riding that one with a discharge has mounted shall be unclean; ¹⁰ whoever touches anything that was under him shall be unclean until evening; and whoever carries such things shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening.

¹¹ If one with a discharge, without having rinsed his hands in water, touches another person, that person shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ¹² An earthen vessel that one with a discharge touches shall be broken; and any wooden implement shall be rinsed with water.

¹³ When one with a discharge becomes clean of his discharge, he shall count off seven days for his cleansing, wash his clothes, and bathe his body in fresh water; then he shall be clean. ¹⁴ On the eighth day he shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons and come before the Lord at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and give them to the priest. ¹⁵ The priest shall offer them, the one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering. Thus the priest shall make expiation on his behalf, for his discharge, before the Lord.

¹⁶ When a man has an emission of semen, he shall bathe his whole body in water and remain unclean until evening. ¹⁷ All cloth or leather on which semen falls shall be washed in water and remain unclean until evening. ¹⁸ And if a man has carnal relations with a woman, they shall bathe in water and remain unclean until evening.

¹⁹ When a woman has a discharge, her discharge being blood from her body, she shall remain in her impurity seven days; whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening. ²⁰ Anything that she lies on during her impurity shall be unclean; and anything that she sits on shall be unclean. ²¹ Anyone who touches her bedding shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; ²² and anyone who touches any object on which she has sat shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ²³ Be it the bedding or be it the object on which she has sat, on touching it he shall be unclean until evening. ²⁴ And if a man lies with her, her impurity is communicated to him; he shall be unclean seven days, and any bedding on which he lies shall become unclean.

²⁵ When a woman has had a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or when she has a discharge beyond her period of impurity, she shall be unclean, as though at the time of her impurity, as long as her discharge lasts. ²⁶ Any bedding on which she lies while her discharge lasts shall be for her like bedding during her impurity; and any object on which she sits shall become unclean, as it does during her impurity: ²⁷ whoever touches them shall be unclean; he shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening.

²⁸ When she becomes clean of her discharge, she shall count off seven days, and after that she shall be clean. ²⁹ On the eighth day she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, and bring them to the priest at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. ³⁰ The priest shall offer the one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering; and the priest shall make expiation on her behalf, for her unclean discharge, before the Lord.

³¹ You shall put the Israelites on guard against their uncleanness, lest they die through their uncleanness by defiling My Tabernacle which is among them.

³² Such is the ritual concerning him who has a discharge: concerning him who has an emission of semen and becomes unclean thereby, ³³ and concerning her who is in menstrual infirmity, and concerning anyone, male or female, who has a discharge, and concerning a man who lies with an unclean woman.



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Context

Parashat Metzora continues the discussion begun in Parashat Tazria about *tzaraat* (possibly psoriasis), a skin condition that renders people, as well as clothing and homes *t'me'im-impure* and requires a process of *tahara*-purification. The process is unique. In addition to the more common washing and offerings, it involves the sacrifice of one bird and the release of another, the shaving of all body hair, and anointing the ear, thumb, and toe. The Torah provides leniencies for a person who has not the means to buy all of the offerings. A house that is deemed infected must be dismantled and re-built stone by stone. At the end, parashat Metzora shifts focus from *tzaraat* to purification from genital discharges, men's and women's.

Explorations

Tumah and *taharah* are very important in VaYiqra, and difficult to translate into our life context. Under the influence of Western Christian concepts of purity and impurity, people often mis-associate *tumah* and *taharah* with dirtiness and cleanliness. Let us try to understand them better in the context of the passage in our parasha dealing with menstruation.

By way of introduction, the Torah and the sages are *not* squeamish about the body. There is no shame about engaging with the intimate details of what we now consider *personal* hygiene and private sexuality. The fertile cycle of individuals and couples is relevant to the public sacred service of the *mishkan* and daily life of the community.

In chapter 15, the Torah describes the process of *taharah* from the *tumah* of men's and women's genital emissions. Emissions occasion careful attention to one's own body, and to the surroundings—materials and people. One reason for attentiveness is that *tumah* passes from one to another by contact. *Tumah* affects people's lives and connection with the sacred. Without specifying what *tumah* is, we can be certain that it entails exclusion from the sacred realm, while the process of *taharah* that follows enables contact with the sacred realm. This process of *tumah-tahara* brings men and women into an ongoing relationship with the *mishkan*-tabernacle corresponding with their sexual lives.

Chapter 15 describing male and female discharges is built in a pyramidal structure. On both sides of the central verse 18, it opens and closes with the more potent *tumah*, *zav* (15:2-15) and *zava* (15:25-30)—*unhealthy* discharge. At the next level, flanking the center of the pyramid, are the verses dealing with ejaculation of semen (15:16-17) and menstrual bleeding (15:19-25)—healthy discharges. The pinnacle of the chapter, verse 18, refers to sexual intercourse, the union of the two. Except that the actual length of time of emission is different—women's menstrual cycle lasts around 3-7 days compared with men's ejaculation lasting a few moments—the conveyance of *tumah* and the processes of *tahara* from the end of the emission are parallel for men and women.

This parallel of men's and women's bodies in terms of sexuality is markedly different from Western concepts that portray women's bodies as soft, uncontrollable, leaky, weak, permeable, changing, and messy by contrast with the Apollonian male who is firm, intact, controlled, strong,



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impermeable, pyramidal, stable and tidy. The Torah portrays men and women subject to similar genital emissions that govern their sacred service, and their intercourse with one another. In this passage, the Torah does not affiliate women specially with *tumah*, nor impose special rules or rituals on women; men are subject to the same kinds of *tumah*, and are equally required to perform *taharah*. *Tumah* and *taharah* relate to bodily function and sexuality; they enable intimate contact and entry into the sacred realm. *Tumah* indicates a period of separation of men and women from their partners, and from the *mishkan*; *taharah* indicates preparation for and re-entry into the sacred realm, and resumption of sexual intimacy.

By contrast with this integration of sexuality with holiness, Christian theologian St. Augustine (354-430), teaches the incompatibility of the sexual body with sacredness.

For the concupiscence of the flesh is in some sort active, even when it does not exhibit either an assent of the heart, where its seat of empire is, or those members whereby, as its weapons, it fulfills what it is bent on. But what in this action does it effect, unless it be its evil and shameful desires? For if these were good and lawful, the apostle would not forbid obedience to them, saying, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey the lusts thereof" [Romans 6:12]. He does not say, that ye should have the lusts thereof, but "that ye should obey the lusts thereof;" in order that (as these desires are greater or less in different individuals, according as each shall have progressed in the renewal of the inner man) we may maintain the fight of holiness and chastity, for the purpose of withholding obedience to these lusts. Nevertheless, our wish ought to be nothing less than the nonexistence of these very desires, even if the accomplishment of such a wish be not possible in the body of this death. (*St. Augustine, Anti-Pelagian Writings, Chapter 30 [XXVII.]—The Evil Desires of Concupiscence; We Ought to Wish that They May Not Be.*)

Building the Christian doctrine of *original sin* in the Garden of Eden, St. Augustine views sexuality and the mortal body as the partner to evil—at odds with chastity which is a partner to holiness. Women are particularly the source of the sin of sexuality, for Eve brought about the *Fall* of humanity from grace. Pope St. Gregory retorts to St. Augustine in 605:

Therefore when women, after due consideration, do not presume to approach the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord during their monthly period, they are to be commended. But if they are moved by devout love of this Holy Mystery to receive it as pious practice suggests that they do, they are not to be discouraged. For while the Old Testament makes outward observances important, the New Testament does not regard these things as highly as the inward disposition, which is the sole criterion for allotting punishment. For instance, the Law forbids the eating of many things as unclean, but in the Gospel the Lord says: "Not that which goes into the mouth defiles a person, but that which comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." He also said, "Out of the mouth proceed evil thoughts" (See Mark 7:18-20). Here Almighty God shows clearly that evil actions spring from the root of evil thoughts. Similarly the apostle Paul says: "To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. And later he indicates the cause of their corruption, adding, "For their very minds and consciences are defiled" (Titus 1:15). If, therefore, no food is unclean to one of a pure mind, how can a woman who endures the laws of nature with a pure mind be considered impure?



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Gregory accepts that a menstruating women may take communion—participate in a sacrament—because the body is irrelevant to the sacred act, something to be endured.

After the destruction of the second Jerusalem Temple in 70 C. E., these *tumah* and *tahara* observances fell out of use except where they pertain to the sexual intimacy of couples. Here, the separation and *tahara* processes apply according to the woman's menstrual cycle, and post-*partum* bleeding. Indeed, the sages of the Amoraic period made the laws of separation more stringent, applying the seven “clean day” purification process of the *zava*-a women with abnormal blood flow to menstruating women. However, in relation to the synagogue and rituals, there are no halakhic restrictions on women's participation at any stage of our menstrual cycle, including handling the Torah itself (see reference in Study Links below).

In relation to women and menstruation, many negative ideas have burdened the way we see ourselves and our healthy body functions—menstruation is unruly bleeding that we must hide, a sickness, smelly, the cause of pain, bloating, and mood swings, also known as a *curse*, at least an unpleasant inconvenience. These views persist in spite of the sexual revolution. Few women or men celebrate women's cycles, or welcome their daughters and sisters into menstruation.

Questions for Discussion

- Discuss your views of menstruation, and their roots. What assumptions about menstrual bleeding inform your attitudes toward your period? To what extent do cultural views affect your own experience?
- Why does Western culture focus its distaste for bodily function on women and women's biology and how does this parasha compare?
- In your view, what, if any significance is there to the biblical exclusion of ejaculation and menstrual blood from the *mishkan*-sanctuary?
- Consider the connection between sexual cycles and holiness—how is or might it become meaningful to you?

Study Links

British anthropologist, Mary Douglas published an influential and innovative comparative study of *tumah* and *taharah* (including Leviticus) in 1966, *Purity and Danger*. [Here](#) is the 6th chapter, “An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo.”

Building on Douglas, Jewish feminist theologian Rachel Adler wrote a landmark essay arousing Jewish women's interest in Jewish menstrual observances in the early 1970's, “*Tum'ah* and *Taharah*: Ends and Beginnings” in *The Jewish Woman*, reprinted and slightly abridged from *The*



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Jewish Catalog; A Do-it-Yourself Kit, edited by Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld and Sharon Strassfeld (this essay is not available on-line); later she re-canted many of her previous positions and declared the *niddah* laws irredeemably misogynist. [Here](#) is her second take, “In Your Blood Live: Re-visions of a Theology of Purity.”

[This video](#) about the *moon within* follows the journey of a young woman exploring views in science and culture about menstruation from open and critical perspectives. Though it is long, it is worth watching, and sharing with young women.

Some are inclined to use hormones to eliminate menstruation except when women want to conceive. Seasonale and Lybrel are currently on the market. [This article](#) discusses the new drugs.

[Here](#) is a set of complete Jewish rituals for the onset of menstruation from many Jewish traditions and perspectives.

Devorah Zlochower assesses the Jewish legal considerations about women handling a Torah scroll during menstruation [in this paper](#).

[This image](#) of the Greek god Apollo holding Daphne demonstrates the relative male and female body types.

[This website](#) gives a succinct account of the evolution of the Christian doctrine of original sin.

Summary of Issues

The book of VaYiqra expresses views that sanctify our healthy bodies and sexual functions, challenging us to explore their meaning. The cycle of *tumah* and *taharah* prepare for entry into the sacred realm of union—with our intimate partner, and within the sanctuary. The Torah sanctifies both women's and men's sexuality and embodied functions by connecting them with ritual service, a gateway to the divine.

Methods & Observations

While in some areas, the Torah is a foundation for Western values and concepts, in relation to sexuality, attitudes about holiness expressed in this parasha contrast sharply with Western concepts of sex and sin.

Contact

Please address queries and comments to
Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman - bonnadevora@gmail.com