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FROM A "POT OF FILTH" TO A "HEDGE OF ROSES" (AND BACK)

Changing Theorizations of Menstruation in Judaism

Jonah Steinberg

Before the day fades
and the shadows flee,
I shall get me to the hill of myrrh,
to the mound of frankincense.
All of you is beautiful my love;
there is no flaw in you.

—Song of Songs, 4:6-7

Introduction

Concerning the Jewish laws of purity and impurity, including *hilkhot niddah*, the laws pertaining to the menstruating Jewish woman, the fourteenth-century rabbi, philosopher, and physician Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, also Rambam) wrote the following in his legal magnum opus, the *Mishneh Torah*: "It is clear and manifest that the laws of purity and impurity are Scriptural decrees, and they are not among the matters which human understanding can judge; for lo they are included among the *hukkim* [inscrutable God-given laws]."¹ Closer to our own day, the Orthodox Jewish writer Kalman Kahana introduced the manual *Taharat Bat Yisroel* (The Purity of Israel's Daughter)—a summary of *hilkhot niddah* aimed at the Jewish married couple—with a similar remark:

Man cannot fully understand the reasons for these restrictions, just as he cannot fathom completely the reason for any of the divine

¹ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah Laws of Mikvaot* [Ritual Pools] 11:12. In Maimonidean parlance *hukkim* (statutes) are understood to be God-given laws whose cause "is hidden from us either because of the incapacity of our intellects or the deficiency of our knowledge," whereas *mishpatim* (judgements) are "commandments whose utility is clear to the multitude," *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 507 (III: 26).

commandments. Indeed, the motivation for the observance of *mitzvot* [commandments] is never the knowledge of their full meaning, even if this were attainable. The basis for *mitzvot* is, rather, the realization that they are the manifest will of the creator. Man's only goal on earth is to fulfill, for as long as he breathes, the will of the creator of the whole universe.²

Both of these statements, Maimonides' and Kahana's, reflect a long-standing principle of Judaism, preserved today in the dogma of Jewish Orthodoxy: the belief that the encoded laws of the religion—which is to say, the rabbinically codified interpretations and elaborations of the Pentateuch's commandments—are God-given dictates ultimately beyond human comprehension. The prime requirement of the Orthodox Jewish life is not understanding, nor even faith. The fundamental demand is action, practical observance.

Nonetheless, both early and contemporary rabbis have written in detail of the divine wisdom manifest in Judaism's commandments. Rarely are such justifications unaccompanied by statements such as the two just quoted—which, in principle, brand all attempts at explanation as speculation in the realm of the unknowable—but rarely are the explications themselves expressed in correspondingly qualified or uncertain terms. Rabbinic writing often seems to reflect self-assured insight into divine motivation. To be sure, the assiduous observance of commandments by Jews throughout the ages has been motivated less by specific understandings of *ta'amei mitzvot*, the reasons of commandments, than by the theological belief that on some level such *ta'amim*, such reasons, do exist. Even so, *ta'amei mitzvot*, in various guises, have always constituted an important body of Jewish thought, and they continue to do so. Commandments and their observance are facts of Orthodox Jewish life; and, like all facts of life, they invite speculation and encourage theorization.

This paper examines a history in which a set of rules and practices—the *Halakhah* (religious law) pertaining to the menstruating Jewish woman—has remained remarkably constant, while the recorded thought and propaganda generated to support this body of Jewish law have undergone a near-complete reversal. To begin, this essay sets forth the evidence that demonstrates the change of ideology.

The rabbis of late antiquity and of the Middle Ages called upon notions of physical danger and disgust to vindicate the laws of menstruation and to exhort their followers to compliance. The menstruating woman was cast as a physical and spiritual hazard all in one, a pernicious threat to the well-being of her mate and other men. Fear and revulsion were the responses

² Kalman Kahana, ed., *Daughter of Israel [Taharat Bat Yisroel]*, trans. Leonard Oschry, 3d ed. (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1973), 29.

these early rabbis sought in the defense of meticulous observance. Jewish men were encouraged to see the laws surrounding menstruation as safeguards against otherwise inevitable physical, medical, and spiritual catastrophe, their wives being, by their nature, the sources of this peril.

Contemporary "modern Orthodoxy,"³ by contrast, emphasizes very different reasons for the observance of the *niddah* laws. The current popular Orthodox literature on the menstrual routine—an ever-growing array of manuals and guidebooks for young, neophyte, and prospective observers—maintains, to some extent, the themes of physical danger and disease, in ostentatiously updated terms. However, the dominant and altogether novel ostensible messages of this genre are mutuality, esteem, and enduring marital vitality. "Family values," so to speak, are at the core of this new approach. Observance of the menstrual regulations is said to guarantee not only an eternally renewing honeymoon but also the appreciation of the wife by her husband as an "equal human being," valuable for more than sexual pleasure and procreation. Uniformly, the modern Orthodox literature concerning menstruation seeks to obscure the earlier themes of revulsion and avoidance, stressing companionship and intimacy even as it prescribes meticulous physical separation. The citation of earlier rabbinic texts in this literature is correspondingly selective. Although there are certain continuities—and these are important to note—the great bulk of earlier ideology is religiously avoided.

Without a doubt, this change of tune bespeaks response to the changing status of Jewish women both in secular society and in observant circles or, at least, a response to the threat of female empowerment. The purveyors of Orthodox dogma have felt it necessary to speak a new language in order to keep young couples within a fold defined by ancient praxis. Nonetheless, despite the aim of the "family purity" manuals to appeal to modern sensibilities, dubious and archaic claims concerning women's bodies, sexuality, and emotions, as well as the dynamics of heterosexual monogamy, typify these new treatises on *hilkhot niddah*.

The first task at hand is to juxtapose the old ideology and the new. This expository project itself, however, raises another problem and an important question. The question is, how completely can a renovated superstructure

³ "Modern Orthodoxy" does not neatly denote a single movement in contemporary Judaism. Although the label has emerged within Jewish circles as a frequent term of reference, there are many differing communities and institutions that may be thus identified. The communities from which the tracts on menstruation that will be discussed in this exposition have emerged may be described most briefly as comprising Jews who relate to and participate in contemporary secular institutions and activities, in conjunction with their Jewish observance, to a significant extent beyond that which is merely necessary and expedient.

of ideology and theorization make a constant set of physical practices, embedded in a comprehensive social system, mean something new? This question is of central import to feminism in religion, and especially to Jewish feminism. Given the centrality of praxis as a defining force in Jewish identity, *reinterpretation* has been an especially appealing tool to observant Jews inclined toward feminism. Even if the recent wave of writing on "family purity," for all its claims of transgender beneficence, has failed to expunge offense to women (and men) from the attitudes that surround the *niddah* laws, does it nevertheless point the way to a more viable and progressive reclaiming of these practices through reinterpretation? Are new explanations sufficient to displace erstwhile prejudices and to chart a course ahead; or must redemption, in the case of these customs, extend beyond apology?

Exploring the efficacy of reinterpretation, this essay will consider the work of the Jewish feminist and theologian Rachel Adler, who came upon the scene in 1973 with a novel spiritual rethinking and defense of Orthodox *niddah* practice, and who retracted and criticized this same approach in a deeply introspective and socially critical article in 1992. Adler's two articles, and the self-described experiential journey that links them, point toward physically indicated social realities and unspoken meanings, somatic traditions, that innovative apologies alone cannot countermand. In view of Adler's experience and of the tendencies that link the early explanations of the menstrual code to the current apologias, this essay will maintain that systems of prescribed physical dispositions and routines may, in religious culture, become integral vectors of meaning that may endure with defining force through dramatically changing tides of verbal ideology and that must, therefore, occupy the feminist in religion just as much as written doctrine.

Origins: The *Niddah* in Rabbinic Judaism

The Pentateuch, in Leviticus 15:19–32, 18:19, and 20:18, prohibits Israelite men from sexual congress with menstruating women. The Pentateuchal code specifies that the menstruous woman is *t'me'ah* (impure) and that she transmits *tum'ah* (impurity) to objects and persons whom she touches. Menstruating women and women with unusual bloody vaginal discharge, along with lepers, ejaculants, and carriers of corpse impurity are forbidden by the Levitical code from entering the sacred precinct of the Temple. Historian of rabbinism Shaye Cohen writes: "As long as the Temple stood in Jerusalem the realm of the sacred was clearly marked off from the realm of the profane. In the Temple, and in proximity to persons and objects bound for the Temple, purity was an essential requirement."⁴ With the de-

struction of the Second Temple by the Roman legions in 70 C.E., the purity code became a relic, much of it having become obsolete or having been suspended for lack of purifying rites involving the Temple. Technically, without the rite of the red heifer (Numb. 19), virtually all Jews are contaminated by corpse impurity—the most grievous of all Levitical contaminations—either through firsthand contact or by transmission, in subsidiary degrees.

Nevertheless, even before the destruction of the Second Temple, Jewish sects and pietistic groups had begun to fashion religious practices around elements of the Levitical purity code independent of the Temple rites, and certain of these practices persisted into the epoch in which the rabbis inherited the mantle of Jewish leadership from the displaced priesthood. The opinion in the Mishnah (192 C.E.) that an ejaculant may not recite certain benedictions aloud is a remnant of this concern for Levitical purity (Mishnah, *Berakhot* 3:4–6); and in contemporary Judaism, the ritual laving of hands before eating bread is another.⁵ However, the only kind of impurity that retained extensive practical consequences beyond the epoch of the very earliest rabbis was the impurity of the menstruating woman.

Unlike the laws concerning other impurities, the practices and regulations surrounding menstruation did not fade in formative rabbinism but proliferated and endured, and continue to do so. The categories of ejaculant and leper are no longer operative concepts in Judaism outside textual study. Nocturnal emissions and dermal sores do not, in practice, bar their victims from social interaction, physical contact, or participation in Jewish ritual; but menstruation is another matter. To this day, in Orthodoxy, a painstakingly elaborate system of practices and ritual surrounds the Jewish woman once a month throughout her fertile years.

Through the talmudic tradition and the codification of Jewish law in the Middle Ages, the rabbinic prohibitions concerning women during menstruation and the seven additional "white days" thereafter evolved to include the following, for example: A wife must inform her husband when she expects the onset of menstruation. During menstruation, husband and wife may not touch each other, even by means of an intermediate object, nor pass objects between them. They may not share a bed nor sit together on a mobile seat without some object interposed between them. At table during the menstrual period, some obvious deviation from the norm (such as a change of places or place settings) must be made so as to remind the couple of the wife's condition. The husband may not eat directly from his wife's leftovers (though she may eat his); he may not see parts of his wife's body that are

Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue, ed. Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 106.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴ Shaye Cohen, "Purity and Piety: The Separation of Menstruants from the Sancta," in

usually covered, smell her perfume, gaze upon her clothing (whether or not it is being worn), listen to her singing (though she may listen to his), or discuss sexually exciting subjects with her.⁶

At the end of seven "white" or "spotless days"—a period of time added by rabbinic tradition to the menstrual period itself, and ascertained by a prescribed routine of genital self-examination—the wife must visit the ritual bath after nightfall (Y.D. 197). Before immersion in the ritual pool, she must remove all foreign objects from her body, comb her hair, blow her nose, and wash herself thoroughly (Y.D. 198). In the ritual pool, the woman must stand, leaning forward with her legs and arms slightly spread out ("as if kneading dough"),⁷ and immerse herself twice under the supervision of an experienced female observer—once before reciting the appropriate blessing and once after.⁸

Questions regarding the laws of menstruation remain among the most frequent *halakhic* (legal) queries addressed to Orthodox rabbis; and volumes of commentary have been generated to respond to present-day predicaments. Shared car travel, contact lenses, dental work, hair dyes, and disco dancing are representative topics of recent consideration. Moreover, Orthodox rabbis still are called upon to pass judgment upon unusual vaginal discharges, a process that often involves the inspection of undergarments or examination cloths. Current Orthodox literature on menstruation encourages Jews to consult their rabbis, without shame or hesitation, in any case of doubt. In recent years, telephone hot lines have been established for pressing after-hour inquiries. In short, the regulations surrounding menstruation are a major preoccupation of Orthodox Judaism and a major manifestation of Judaism in the lives of Orthodox married couples. It should also be noted that because a woman's husband is generally the only man who knows when she is menstruating, all other men relate to her at all times as though she were a *niddah*. Therefore, it is not only the intimate relationship

⁶ *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah* 195. (Subsequent references to this source will be indicated parenthetically in the text.) Compiled in the sixteenth century by Joseph Caro, the *Shulhan Arukh* is the most authoritative code of Jewish law. For lists of these (and other) regulations in English, see Kahana, 43–48; Saul Wagschal, *Taharas Am Yisroel: A Guide to the Laws of Taharas Hamishpochah*, 2d ed. (New York: Feldheim Press, 1982), 59–67; and Tehilla Abramov, *The Secret of Jewish Femininity: Insights into the Practice of Taharat Hamishpachah* (New York: Targum-Feldheim Press, 1988), 110–15. The *Shulhan Arukh* also forbids the husband to jest or sport with his wife while she is a *niddah*.

⁷ Other activities invoked to describe aspects of the appropriate position are "weaving" and "nursing" (Y.D. 198).

⁸ The *Shulhan Arukh* itself maintains that the blessing should be said before entering the ritual pool (while not yet naked), but the fourteenth-century *Tur* and the *Rema* (glosses on the *Shulhan Arukh*) prescribe the practice cited here, which is now the norm. For the laws of immersion in English, see Wagschal, 25–42, and Kahana, 65–85.

between husband and wife that is shaped by the *niddah* regulations, but the relationship between the sexes in the public domain as well. The enormity and pervasiveness of the concern for *hilkhot niddah* in contemporary Jewish Orthodoxy, especially among young adults, can hardly be overemphasized. Orthodox Judaism increasingly and emphatically identifies these regulations as the backbone of Jewish family life and as a mainstay of Jewish community.

The central regulations and essential physical customs that surround menstruation in current Orthodox Jewish observance originated in the formative and canonical documents of rabbinic law and have remained consistent. However, the terms in which the menstrual laws are currently recommended and defended in the realm of modern Jewish Orthodoxy differ drastically from the ideas of earlier epochs. Although certain, often suggestive continuities do exist between the modern Orthodox theorizations of menstruation and earlier apologies, differences of theory and of mythology are far more conspicuous, as we shall see.

"A Pot of Filth"

Physical danger, disgust, and concomitant fear are the principal markers of Jewish thought surrounding menstruation in all epochs except our own. Of the biblical attitude toward menstruation, Rachel Adler has written recently:

Niddah, from the root NDD, connotes abhorrence and repulsion. In a recurring prophetic motif, it is associated with adultery, idolatry and murder. The icon for sinful Israel wallowing in its corruption is not the corpse-handler or the leper but the exposed *niddah*, her skirts stained with menstrual blood, shunned by passersby.⁹

The earliest rabbinic texts, as well, link danger, disgust, and fear with menstruation. The following passage from the talmudic tractate *Pesahim* is representatively alarmist.

If a menstruous woman passes between two [men]—if it is at the beginning of her menstruation, she will cause one to die; if it is at the end of her menstruation, she will bring strife between them. (*b. Pesahim* 111a)

Here the danger is not the impurity of menstrual blood per se, but rather a pernicious or odious influence or aura emanating from the menstruating woman herself. In a similar vein, it is said that the gaze of a menstruant can turn a vat of wine to vinegar. Another talmudic passage connects still another danger with menstruation and sexual transgression.

R. Aha of the school of R. Josiah said: he who gazes at a woman eventually comes to sin, and he who looks even at a woman's heel

⁹ Rachel Adler, "In Your Blood, Live: Re-visions of a Theology of Purity," *Tikkun* 8, no. 1 (1992): 40.

will beget degenerate children. R. Joseph said, this applies even to one's own wife whilst she is a *niddah*." (*b. Nedarim* 20a)

Notions of dire peril in early rabbinism served not only to warn men away from their menstruating wives but also to encourage fealty to the law among women. A widely cited passage from the Mishnaic tractate *Shabbat*, included in the Sabbath eve liturgy of many Orthodox congregations, proclaims:

For three sins, women die in childbirth: [for neglecting the laws of] *niddah*, *hallah* (the tithing of baked goods), and the kindling of [Sabbath and Festival] lights. (Mishnah, *Shabbat* 2:6)

Here the physical danger is turned back upon the woman if she fails to safeguard her husband from ritual transgression. In addition to being a source of pervasive danger, menstruation was cause for distaste in early rabbinic thought. In a talmudic discussion of sexual temptation, the following is said:

Though a woman be a pot of filth whose mouth is full of blood, yet all chase after her. (*b. Kiddushin* 152a)¹⁰

This theme of danger and revulsion linked to menstruation persists in the work of the classical and medieval rabbinic commentators who inherited the talmudic legacy. Shaye Cohen summarizes and discusses some of the rulings listed in a document known as *Baraita de-Niddah*, probably composed in Israel in the sixth or seventh century (i.e., in the period directly after the Talmud's definitive redaction):

A menstruant must not cut her fingernails, lest a husband or child accidentally step on or touch the clippings and, as a result, develop boils and die; a priest whose mother, wife, or any other female member of the household is menstruating, may not bless the people, lest his blessing become a curse; a Sage who partakes of food prepared by a menstruant will forget his learning; a menstruant's spit, breath, and speech cause impurity in others.

¹⁰ We should also take note of the discussion in *b. Shabbat* 84b, where we learn that the "early Sages" forbade the menstruant to wear cosmetics, jewelry, and colorful clothing. To these three restrictions specifically, Rabbi Akiba is quoted as responding, "If so, you will make her ugly to her husband, and he will divorce her." This passage might be interpreted to indicate that R. Akiba did not approve of the earlier sages' encouraging distaste as an appropriate response to the menstruant. (Such dissent is a possibility in the talmudic framework.) However, it is also possible that R. Akiba assumed the distaste provoked by menstruation itself to be deterrent enough and found detraction from the wife's physical appearance to be excessive. In any case, the *Shulhan Arukh*, referring to this talmudic passage, opines that the menstruant was permitted physical adornment "with difficulty" or "under duress" (Y.D. 198).

"The identity of the group or school which composed *Baraita de Niddah* is unknown," writes Cohen, "but the text had enormous impact on later Jewish piety."¹¹

The commentary on the Pentateuch of Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides, also Ramban)—a twelfth-century Catalanian rabbi, philosopher, kabbalist, and physician whose disciples included the most influential rabbinic legal scholars of the subsequent generation—demonstrates the fear and peril that remained attached to the menstruous woman in medieval rabbinism. Commenting upon Genesis 31:35, in which the matriarch Rachel uses the excuse of menstruation to avoid the inspection of her saddlebags by her father, Nahmanides writes:

The correct interpretation appears to me to be that in ancient days menstruants kept very isolated for they were ever referred to as *niddoth* on account of their isolation since they did not approach people and did not speak with them. For the ancients in their wisdom knew that their breath is harmful, their gaze is detrimental and makes a bad impression, as the philosophers have explained. I will yet mention their experiences in this matter.¹²

Nahmanides keeps the final promise of this passage with a longer discourse on the perniciousness of menstruation, in his commentary on Leviticus 18:19. The passage is worth citing at full length to reveal its distinctive blend of medical and spiritual ideas:

Scripture prohibited [having intercourse with] a menstruant woman for the reason . . . that the Torah permitted sexual intercourse only for the sake of raising children, and . . . the whole child or the greater part thereof is created out of the woman's blood, as I have already mentioned, and from the blood of menstruation it is not created at all. Indeed, how could a child be formed out of this blood since it is deadly poisonous, capable of causing the death of any creature that drinks or eats it. Now when the womb contains a large amount of this blood of menstruation, the woman cannot become pregnant as this blood is not endowed at all with the capacity for forming [a child]. Even if she were to become pregnant from other blood, and then derive nourishment from this blood, the child would die. Physicians have also mentioned already that if the foetus derives nourishment from the best blood, and all its nutriments be of the best quality, but some of this blood of menstruation is mixed in with it, it will cause

¹¹ Cohen, 108. Some rather apologetic recent scholarship has contended that *Baraita de-Niddah* was composed by a heretical Jewish sect. Even Cohen writes, "Earlier Rabbinic texts did not contain regulations like these" (108). This is true; but it is hoped that this essay demonstrates that the ideas in *Baraita de-Niddah* do not come from nowhere in rabbinic Judaism.

¹² Ramban (Nahmanides), *Commentary on the Torah*, trans. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shiloh Publishing, 1974), 255.

it to go bad, and produce in the child inflammatory swellings and sores of all kinds. And in the opinion of our Rabbis (Tanchuma, Metzora 1) even if a small part of this [menstrual blood] remains in the foetus, the child will be a leper. By virtue, then, of all these reasons it was fitting that the Torah prohibit intercourse with a menstruant. The doctors have also told us in connection with it, a true experience, which is one of the wondrous works of *Him who is perfect in knowledge* in creation: that if a menstruant woman at the beginning of her issue were to concentrate her gaze upon a polished iron mirror, there would appear in the mirror red spots resembling drops of blood, for the bad part [in the menstrual blood] that is by its nature harmful causes a certain odium, and the unhealthy condition of the air attaches to the mirror, just as a viper kills with its gaze. And surely it is harmful to have intercourse with her then, since physically and mentally she is attached to the man's body and mind. Therefore scripture prohibited it by saying, "and her impurity will be upon him," meaning that her condition is a contagious one. It is with reference to this that it states, "the uncleanness of a woman in her impurity," always mentioning in connection with the term "impurity" which is like that used in speaking of a creeping thing and of a leper, in which cases their impurity is within their bodies. It is possible that this is the sense of the expression (Leviticus 20:18), "he has bared her fountain, and she has uncovered the fountain of her blood," for that blemished fountain should be covered and not bared in order to draw its bad and extremely harmful waters. Thus intercourse has been prohibited to the *holy seed* [Israel] all the days of her impurity, until she immerses herself in water, for then she will be purified—also in her thoughts—and become completely clean.¹³

This long passage merits a separate essay of its own—one that would explore the allusions to medicine and physicians with regard to the science of Nahmanides' day. Here, in this connection, it is sufficient to note that Nahmanides makes use of apparently contemporaneous medical wisdom in constructing a defense of the Torah's *niddah* laws based on notions of physical danger. Nahmanides' references to medicine seem aimed to vindicate the earlier rabbinic sources that attach deleterious power to menstruation. Also, it is noteworthy that Nahmanides seems to draw upon wisdom external to Jewish literature for the purpose of exhorting Jews to follow Jewish law. These strategies of Nahmanides illustrate a tendency in rabbinic commentary to assert that the commandments of the Torah invariably prove to be the guidelines for the ideal life, even by non-Jewish standards. In Nahmanides' day, in connection with menstruation, this argument seems not to have been so difficult. However, even as we observe Nahmanides' apologetic strategy of synthesis, we must recall the opposed tradition of thought in Judaism, i.e. the view that the reasons of the Torah's laws are ultimately beyond human

¹³ Ibid., 255–56.

investigation. There is evidence for this view in early rabbinic sources.¹⁴ Moreover, the quotation from Maimonides with which this essay begins is evidence that this same tradition of thought, as well as the agenda of apology, was current in the Middle Ages. In fact, paradoxically, it is this very belief in the inaccessibility of divine intent that allowed one theory to be replaced by another, that allowed, in other words, apologies such as Nahmanides' to be obscured by contemporary Orthodoxy in favor of very different ideas, while the practices discussed remained, in greatest part, unchanged.

"Family Purity" and the "Hedge of Roses" in Modern Orthodoxy

Early rabbinic lore, as has been shown, cautioned Jewish men against directing affection, and even attention, toward their wives during periods of menstruation. In fact, avoidance of the menstruant as a dangerous obstacle in the path of male Jewish life was the dominant motif of rabbinic thought on menstruation until the latter half of the present century. By contrast, popular modern Orthodox defenses of *hilkhot niddah* stress attention, affection, and companionship (even during menstruation itself) as ostensibly intrinsic values of the *niddah* laws. Indeed, in contemporary Orthodox literature this very group of laws has been effectively renamed to accord with this reversal of theorization. Instead of *hilkhot niddah*—a term that, by its etymology, identifies the menstruating woman as an ostracized object of ritual concern—most contemporary Orthodox literature employs the term *taharat ha-mishpaha*, translated as "family purity." The corresponding party line now states that "there is nothing that can quite equal the effectiveness of this institution in reinforcing the fiber of domestic life."¹⁵ What once was a tradition of abhorrence and avoidance has now been recast as one of deep bonding and beneficial attraction.

Though the new theorization is conspicuously different, as we shall soon see, the method of its presentation resembles Nahmanides' apology. That

¹⁴ *Midrash Tanhumah* (Ki Tisa 2:2, and parallel in *Pesikta Rabati* 10) may evidence this view with regard to the *niddah* regulations in particular. The midrash there states that "only words of Torah," as opposed to fearsome physical deterrents, separate husband and wife during menstruation. According to this midrash and its play upon the verse "your belly is as a heap of wheat ringed with roses," the mere sight of a "bloom" of menstrual blood, and pious recollection of the scriptural prohibition (also likened to a blossom), ought to be sufficient to deter even the most ardent husband from intimacy with his wife. ("He turns his face to one direction and she hers to the other.") Ironically, this source, which might argue against speculative reasons for menstrual prohibitions, makes room in current Orthodoxy for theological justifications of *hilkhot niddah* and for new attitudes toward intimacy during menstruation that are directly opposed to those that predominate in earlier rabbinism, as will be shown in this essay.

¹⁵ Norman Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses: Jewish Insights into Marriage and Married Life*,

is, in the present day, the ancient regulations are made to appear as the natural counterparts of contemporary science and common sense. One manual, for example, states:

Jewish family life is generally known for its success and happiness. This is largely due to minute instruction on how to lead a married life given us by our sages of blessed memory. The rabbis were well aware of the physiology and psychology of human beings and the needs of the average man and woman.¹⁶

In not a small number of "family purity" manuals, reference is made to "scientific studies" that demonstrate great benefits of health deriving from sexual abstinence during menstruation, including the reduction in rates of certain cancers and the like (though this writer has seen not a single annotation specifically citing such a study). One booklet goes as far as to suggest that women who observe "family purity" need not bother about Pap smears.¹⁷

The theme of medical justification is not new, as we have seen; but the emphasis in manuals of "family purity" on companionship and attraction between husband and wife *during* the period of menstruation is a drastic change indeed. Orthodoxy, by definition, is loath to acknowledge alterations of doctrine and theory. The new system of thought on menstruation and its laws is presented as eternal, and contradiction is denied. Under the heading "No Superstition," Rabbi Norman Lamm's best-selling marital manual *A Hedge of Roses*, now in its sixth English edition (as well as in Hebrew and Portuguese editions), proclaims of "family purity,"

For one thing, it is not the kind of superstition that, in other cultures, has stigmatized the menstruant as repulsive, placed upon her mysterious and stringent taboos, and banished her from the community for the duration of her menses. (40)

In fact, the ideology surrounding the menstrual code in previous ages has fit this bill with ease, as we have seen; but this is a nonfact in the popular

6th ed. (New York: Feldheim, 1987), 14. Subsequent references to this source appear parenthetically in the text.

¹⁶ H. E. Yedidiah Ghatan, *The Invaluable Pearl: The Unique Status of Women in Judaism* (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1986), 26.

¹⁷ "[M]any gynecologists and obstetricians feel that the Pap smear does not have to be administered to women who observe *niddah*." Zev Shostak, *A Guide to Jewish Family Laws*, 4th ed. (Brooklyn: VTE, 1983), 32. Kalman Kahana writes, "We shall not dwell upon the abundant physiological benefits derived, by men and women who live according to these laws. It has already been proven and much has been written about this in medical literature—that the withdrawal from marital relations during the menstrual period, as presented by the Torah, has prevented or severely restricted the occurrence of numerous diseases among the Jewish people" (29).

literature of mainstream modern Orthodoxy. The production of a contrary new truth, at least in literature, is an amazing feat, considering that Orthodox Judaism abhors the attribution of fallacy or fallibility to the sages of its past. The feat is even more astonishing when we turn from what "family purity" *isn't* to what it *is* in modern Orthodox apology.

Aside from the practices that Nahmanides would recognize, "family purity" is to modern Orthodoxy a cement of marriage, so to speak, defined in opposition to the alleged depravity of the secularized Western world. Of Jews who have left Orthodoxy for secular lifestyles, *A Hedge of Roses* says,

Those benighted souls who have opted to "be modern" and "play it cool" by abandoning the restraints imposed by traditional moral standards have deluded themselves into thinking that they have espoused a new "philosophy of sex" when, in fact, they have dared nothing more than plain, old fashioned libertinism out of a sense of exasperation and despair. (18)

R. Lamm goes on to depict this supposed libertinism in the following condemnation:

The novelists of depravity, the enthusiastic college instructors, the unqualified "teams" of sex-therapists, the smut salesmen who appear in court as the champions of free speech and free press—all the preachers of permissiveness—these are [the] priests and profits [of the "sexual revolution"]; the casual and "cool" approach its official theology; the inhibitions of traditional morality its Devil; the stream of heavily annotated statistical studies of the breakdown of sexual morality, the documented "proof" of the truth of its revelation; the unmarried state of maximum bisexual opportunities and unrestrained scatology, its eschatological vision. (19–20)

Such damnation clears the way for "family purity" to be introduced as a healthy alternative in the following terms:

Before they are joined to each other . . . bride and groom must purge themselves of any notions about the physical expression of love that might prove injurious to a full, wholesome relationship.

It is precisely this that Family Purity achieves for the young couple about to be married, and, thereafter, throughout their married life together. (32)

"Family purity," which is to say, the commitment to observe *hilkhot niddah*, achieves this outcome, in the modern Orthodox theorization, by guaranteeing the married couple a monthly period of physical distance that encourages emotional proximity. Another handbook of "family purity" explains:

These laws . . . remind the couple not to treat each other as sexual objects or simply as a means of gratification. In a way, they make it possible for the couple to relate on a more human and non-sexual level.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ghatan, 163.

Yet another guidebook paints a rosy picture of the couple during the *niddah* separation:

[A] question that is often asked is: How can a husband and wife express love during the *niddah* period when they cannot touch? The answer: They will discover new ways to convey their love. A wistful glance, a reflective thought, or a favor to ease the other's everyday tasks, are also tender expressions of love. They will learn that silence and self-restraint are often more eloquent than kisses and caresses. They may even develop new interests and hobbies that they can share with each other during the *niddah* period. The rational expressions of love will outlast the physical aspects and truly deepen their love and commitment to each other and their beliefs. Above all they will recognize that their love is as enduring now as it was before, even though it has found new modes of expression.¹⁹

It is remarkable that the modern Orthodox ideal expressed here would be the nightmare of earlier rabbinic generations. To the critical eye, it is apparent that wistful glances, shared activities, and tender expressions of love during the *niddah* period are warned against as mortally dangerous in classical and medieval rabbinic thought in no uncertain terms. Now, however, such intimacy without touch is recommended. Even the anecdotes change accordingly, as yet another guidebook demonstrates:

"And," adds Brenda with a wink, "for the first time in years, my husband makes a habit of calling me from work. It seems to happen precisely during the time when he can't touch me! I sense that his desire to reach out to me is a by-product of the system of the *harcha-kot* [distancing measures]."²⁰

By Orthodox Jewish standards, the preceding quotation is extremely erotic, and we have seen that eroticism during the *niddah* period is exactly what earlier theorizations aim to eliminate. In the modern Orthodox approach to menstruation, however, erotic interest coupled with self-restraint is paramount and encouraged.

Having considered the evidence in rabbinic texts regarding Jewish attitudes toward menstruation before the modern period, it should not be surprising that the current popular treatises that present the new mythology of "family purity" are extremely selective in their presentation of earlier Jewish thought. One passage from the Talmud, however, figures prominently in all of the new literature. This is the statement, from the talmudic tractate *Niddah*: "Because a man may become overly familiar with his wife and thus be repelled by her, the Torah said that she should be a *niddah* for seven clean days (after her flow) so that she will be as pleasing to her husband as

¹⁹ Shostak, 27-28.

²⁰ Abramov (cited in n. 6), 100.

on the day of her marriage" (*b. Niddah* 31b). This quotation speaks plainly of male sexual desire ("pleasing" here means also "sexually pleasing"); but the mythology of "family purity" converts this dictum into the promise of an eternal *and mutual* honeymoon. First, the notion of habituation is generalized, in gender-neutral terms, to include both partners:

Unrestricted approachability leads to over-indulgence. And this over-familiarity, with its consequent satiety and boredom and ennui, is a direct and powerful cause of marital disharmony. (Lamm, 59)

In another formulation it is precisely this habituation or routine that is portrayed as a source of danger.

Taharat ha-mishpaha [family purity] is . . . crucial in protecting the marital bond from one of its most universal and perilous enemies which comes to the fore soon after the newness of married life has worn off: the tendency for sex to become routinized" (Lamm, 55)

Next, "family purity" is presented as the antidote to sexual ennui for both husband and wife:

With the institution of *taharat ha-mishpaha* . . . a marvelous domestic miracle occurs: the honeymoon lasts throughout the greatest part of one's active life! The drama of love-without-sexual-contact followed by the loving union of husband and wife and their being together is repeated every month. (Lamm, 61-62)

In a significant departure from the talmudic passage just quoted, this honeymoon cycle is presented as a service to both husband and wife:

[Very impressive] is the fact that this cycle of abstinence and fulfillment provides for a recovery period for both husband and wife, one which establishes a much-needed regulation of the sexual rhythm of the male as well as the female, and allows for a replenishment of the libidinal reservoir. No voluntary separation can ever be as effective in providing this relaxation as one in which neither spouse may approach the other and, therefore, where neither need fear to decline and have his or her affection or fidelity suspect. (Lamm, 45-46)

Another formulation also stresses mutuality and uses contemporary terminology.

Perhaps more than ever before, the couple will realize at the conclusion of the *niddah* period that the conditions of sexual practice mentioned in the Torah have one common purpose—the development of mutual respect for another's sexual rights.²¹

The mutual respect theorized in these passages as a justification of *niddah* separation is a radical departure from the apologies of earlier epochs, which

²¹ Shostak, 26.

used male fear and revulsion and denigration of the female as means of recommending observance. In general, the theory of family purity speaks of the *niddah* separation in terms of beneficial and mutual attraction and vague "sexual rights."

It is in the attempt to elucidate these "rights," however, that the ideology of "family purity" reveals one bias that undermines its ostensible mutuality: The preceding passage implies shared rights, and the following one, another mutuality: "In complying with their common beliefs and goals they [the couple] will find that they have inner reserves of self-control. Even newlyweds who may find it difficult to practice abstinence will find that they have great willpower and self-restraint."²² On comprehensive inspection, however, it turns out that, despite the frequent deployment of "each other" and "they" in this literature, the "rights" in question are most often presented as the reward of the woman, whereas the need for restraint is pinned upon the man. R. Lamm, for example, defends his menstrual "hedge of roses" as follows:

By restraining the husband from pursuing his sexual goals in uncontrolled fashion, it informs him, in the most potent manner possible, that his wife is not created only for his pleasure. When the husband, in mutual commitment with his wife to the higher visions of Judaism, accepts the institution of Family Purity—and he recognizes that no matter how overpowering his passions, how persuasive his proposals, and how unwilling his wife, he must refrain from approaching her in any manner whatever—he realizes in the very depths of his being that she is a person who possesses inner worth, autonomous value, and sacred and inalienable rights at least equal to his own. (65–66)

On the other side of the coin, in the "family purity" chapter of a volume aimed at women, entitled *The Secret of Jewish Femininity*, appears this passage: "The *harchakot* [separations] guarantee a woman's right to privacy while preserving a spirit of peace and harmony within the home."²³ That is to say, the *niddah* separation, if observed, supposedly guarantees the Jewish wife a monthly period during which she will not be physically molested by her husband and allegedly forces the husband to contemplate his wife as something other than a sexual plaything, which (it is often made to seem) would not otherwise be possible.

Indeed, a remarkable phenomenon general throughout all presentations of "family purity" is that the one period of time that is not theorized in terms of "rights" and "respect" is the half of each month during which sexual intercourse is permitted. What is more, the extreme emphasis on unconsummated eros during the menstrual period is fundamentally at odds with the aim of discovering the wife as something other than a focus of

²² Ibid., 27.

²³ Abramov, 105.

sexual interest. Despite its conspicuous efforts to transform the *niddah* from an *object* of male concern into a *person* in her own right, the ideology of "family purity" continually relies upon the monthly reobjectification of the woman as the target of an almost demonized male sexual desire.

Clearly the modern Orthodox ideology of "family purity" is an attempt to respond to an age in which women are more empowered to determine the patterns of their lives, in which Western medical science no longer thinks of menstrual blood as ritual impurity, and in which the connection of unnatural and pernicious power and behavior to menstruants is no longer a commonplace. The near-complete reversal in theorization from Nahmanides' day (when, by the way, it was widely considered transgressive to teach rabbinic literature to women) to the present teachings of modern Orthodoxy is vividly apparent in the following self-assured apology from a modern Orthodox manual for women:

The laws of family purity are not meant to make women feel taboo or unclean, but rather are designed to elevate sex by enabling mates to relate to one another as people and not merely as sex objects. They were never intended to ostracize women or make them feel unclean. . . . The woman's monthly period is a God given gift to humanity; it serves to preserve the close and healthy relationship between husband and wife.²⁴

Such apologies are direct responses to powerful tides of feeling within Judaism that the *niddah* regulations *do* ostracize women and that they *do* make women feel unclean. These statements, and the new theorizations here considered invite the remaining question of this essay, namely: how deeply can the meaning of a culturally embedded physical routine be altered by intensive, but localized, changes of theorization?

Criticism from Within the Fold: The Theologies of Rachel Adler

As a young Orthodox Jewish writer in the early 1970s, Rachel Adler drafted a brief essay—published in the first *Jewish Catalog* and in the first Jewish feminist anthology, *The Jewish Woman*—which swiftly became an influential defense of strict *niddah* observance among educated, religiously observant Jewish women.²⁵ Years later, in 1992, Adler opened an article in *Tikkun* as follows:

Twenty years ago, as a young Orthodox woman, I began what became an influential article with the words, "All things die and are reborn

²⁴ Ghatan, 164. For another examination of recent Orthodox literature on *hilkhot niddah*, see Jody Myers and Jane Rachel Litman, "The Secret of Jewish Femininity: Hiddenness, Power and Physicality in the Theology of Orthodox Women in the Contemporary World," in Tamar M. Rudavsky, ed., *Gender and Judaism: The Transformation of Experience* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 51–77.

²⁵ Rachel Adler, "Tumah and Tahara-Mikveh," in *The Jewish Catalog*, ed. Richard Siegel,

continually." I was wrong. Sometimes we cannot repeat ourselves. We can only transform ourselves. Yet our moral responsibility for that earlier self and its acts lives on. Twenty years later, as a feminist Reform theologian I continue to be faced with an essay I wrote, an essay that continues to be quoted, cited and reproduced, promulgating opinions and prescribing actions that I now cannot in good conscience endorse.²⁶

Adler's first article was and remains a very influential statement within modern observant Judaism, since it rejected the ascendant ideology of "family purity" and its promises of marital "rights" and eternally renewing honeymoons in favor of an approach to menstruation that was meant to be rooted in female experience and to be essentially independent of sexual relationships with men. In a footnote concerning the sort of popular *niddah* literature considered earlier in this essay, Adler wrote, "I have not discovered any book in English on the laws of *niddah* and *mikveh* [ritual bath] which was written for people above the intellectual level of a cretin" (1973, 171 n). Responding to this dearth of meaningful theory, Adler crafted a distinctive and innovative theology of *niddah* impurity that she summarized in 1992 as follows:

I formulated a theology of purity in which menstrual impurity and *mikveh* were relocated within a universal cyclical process in which all creation endlessly rehearses its death and rebirth. In the context of this theology, menstruation was not only normalized, it acquired powerful spiritual significance. While the theology justified the laws of menstrual impurity and supported their observance, it sought to reframe their meaning, to remove their stigma and to discover their spiritual value. (39)

Describing the sources of this theology, Adler continued: "Intuitively, I sensed that the classical texts by themselves would yield no answers. The topic [of what purification meant for women] had not interested their creators because women as spiritual subjects had not interested them" (1992, 39).

To augment these texts, Adler succinctly formulated an ideology through which the Jewish woman might celebrate the cycle of life and the promise of redemption by experiencing her monthly ritual immersion as renewal and as separation from a menstrual reminder of death. "Menstruation," wrote Adler, "is an autumn within, the dying which makes room for new birth"

Michael Strassfeld, and Sharon Strassfeld (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 167-71. Subsequent references to this source appear parenthetically in the text. See also Adler, "Tumah and Tahara: Ends and Beginnings," in Elizabeth Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman* (New York: Schocken, 1976), 63-71.

²⁶ Adler, "In Your Blood, Live" (cited in n. 9), 38. Subsequent references to this source appear parenthetically in the text.

(1973, 168). Adler distanced her thought from such words as *purity* and *impurity*, *clean* and *unclean*, insisting instead on the original Hebrew *tumah* and *taharah* as a dichotomy arising from nature itself. For Adler in 1973, abstention from sex during menstruation was an acting out of death and an anticipation of new life (167).²⁷ Critically, in 1992 Adler undermined her former work as follows:

What I had succeeded in creating was a theology for the despised, reminiscent of certain strains of early Christianity, where worldly power went unchecked, the slave remained a slave, the poor stayed poor, the woman subject to her husband, but the meaning of indignity was inverted and transfigured: humiliation was triumph, rejection was salvation, and death, eternal life. My theology upheld the rules and practices that sustained women's impurity by holding out to the impure a never before experienced sense of purity. (40)

Adler's 1992 article speaks directly to the question of local theoretical change in the context of a broader net of meaning, and to the question of persistence of physical or nonverbal meaning beneath theoretical reinvention:

What did it mean to claim that the theological meaning of *niddah* had to do with symbolisms of life and death, when its impact on women's lives was obviously and concretely sexual? What did it mean to describe *niddah* as part of a cycle when, in the public life of the communities in which it was observed, women were always treated as if they were impure. (39-40)

Adler's first theology of *niddah* attempted to sunder the rules and regulations from their traditional theoretical basis and to relocate them in a matrix of new meanings. Nonetheless, she later observed that her work was used by Orthodox rabbis as "merely an effective apologia for getting educated women to use the *mikveh* [the ritual bath]," while attitudes at large remained unchanged.

Adler also observed of the *niddah* regulations, "Because this [body of law] governs sexual and social behavior and attitudes so pervasively, it can be said that menstrual impurity is constitutive of the religious selfhood of women in Orthodox Judaism" (39). That is, making new theorizations available to women does not necessarily alter the deepest or most tangible meanings of their observance, nor the significance of this observance in the society around them. Theory and doctrine alone cannot make something entirely

²⁷ Just like the more mainstream Orthodox ideology of "family purity," Adler's theology of 1973 categorically denies that abhorrence or fear of the menstruant ever occurred in canonical Jewish thought. Whereas in "primitive religions" the menstruant "might have the power to cause illness or death," Adler wrote, "[i]n Jewish society . . . *tumah* was not perceived as causing physical consequences. Nor was it viewed as dangerous in any way" (167).

new of women's experience. Significantly, Adler's repudiation of the Orthodox *niddah* regulations coincides with a cathartic social and spiritual statement of protest that she expresses at the end of the 1992 essay (41). That is to say, an enduring and satisfying change of mind, for Adler, necessarily entailed changes of practice and of social identity as well.

Conclusion

Neither the talmudic and medieval rhetoric of danger and abhorrence nor the recent apologia of "family purity" and marital intimacy accounts, in the main, for the fidelity of observant Orthodox Jews to the religious regulations surrounding menstruation. Both ideologies are systems of apology for practices that, at least in principle, are held to be beyond question. Undoubtedly, each of the two explanatory frameworks for *hilkhot niddah* has helped a great many Jews come to terms with the demands of Orthodox observance, but Maimonides and Kalman Kahana, as they are quoted at the outset of this essay, are correct in suggesting that, ideally, Orthodoxy requires no such apologies. The prohibition of intercourse with a menstruant is explicit in the scriptural Torah, and the central practices of *hilkhot niddah* are detailed in the most authoritative sources of rabbinic law. Jews who embrace these injunctions and regulations as direct, divine commands will abide by them no matter how they are defended.

This is not to say that apologies are powerless. On the contrary, the attribution to menstruating women of a physically and spiritually corrupting odium, for example, or the privileging of disgust as an appropriate reaction to the natural function of female bodies, inevitably impacts upon and shapes not only female identity (as it is both perceived and experienced) but also normative relationships and gender politics along the ritualized and mythologized boundary of sex. Likewise, the justification of the menstrual code as a marital aid—a healthy respite, erotic recharging, or humanizing restraint—has power to shape the dynamics and experience of life and partnership. The remaining question is whether the harmful tendencies that are expressed in the former apologia may be mitigated by, if not the more recent Orthodox theorization, any other response consisting only of apology.

One phenomenon that argues against the efficacy of adjusting apology alone is especially notable in Rachel Adler's experience and observations: change of ideology, when the change is not expressed in praxis, allows multiple frameworks of theorization to exist superimposed. That may not initially sound foreboding to pluralistic ears; but Adler's branding of her own attempt at a purely intellectual redemption of *hilkhot niddah* as the creation of "a theology for the despised" highlights the problem of such multivalence when one already extant framework is so detrimental. No matter in what different ways the details of *hilkhot niddah* may be understood by certain women or

couples, the differences can have only limited effect if the practices themselves are still entirely amenable to a former, harmful justification that abides conspicuously in canonical sources. From Lamentations and before, through Nahmanides and beyond, reviling of the menstruant is general. Without any physical evidence of departure from the earlier framework, not only do the practices remain mistakable at large for this devaluing response to womanhood, but they also may be experienced as such—new and contradictory interpretations notwithstanding—when practitioners encounter the former ideology persisting in literature and society.²⁸

It is indeed remarkable that a religious movement known as Orthodoxy should evidence as apparently complete a rethinking of life-shaping practices as this investigation has revealed. Perhaps, however, the shift from Nahmanides' attitude of dread and revulsion to the erotic attraction stressed in such tracts as Norman Lamm's *Hedge of Roses* is not so radical and discontinuous at all. As we have noted, the modern tracts on menstruation in Jewish Orthodoxy tend to emphasize the interest, gaze, and sexual attention of the male over and against a passive female "right" to have male physical attentions periodically restrained. The readiness with which the ideology of the "renewing honeymoon" falls into this mode of objectifying the female might also be accounted for by the persistence of somatic information. That is, the physical patterns generated by regulations that set apart the menstruant as an object of male, ritual concern may be understood as a bridge between one extreme reaction to the female and its diametric opposite. Intuitively, disgust and erotic attraction may not seem readily interchangeable; but just this exchange appears in the Orthodox apologia for *hilkhot niddah*, and this is possible, perhaps, because objectification remains a constant in the formula.

Regardless of what valence, if any, we ascribe to the scriptural proscription of sexual intercourse with a menstruant, we must acknowledge that the rabbinic details of *hilkhot niddah* were elaborated and codified within an interpretive context characterized by the assumption of an unwholesome, even corrupt or pernicious nature inherent in menstruation and, by extension, in womanhood itself. Moreover, these laws were developed in a religious and societal context in which members of the male sex were markedly privileged as the custodians and arbiters of law. Explicit, verbal ideology is far from being the only vehicle of meaning in religious culture. Messages

²⁸ It must be stressed again that neither the modern Orthodox ideology of "family purity" nor even Adler's initial theology of *niddah* engages early attitudes toward menstruation, and their canonical sources, head-on. Although both of these apologies diverge from former trends and even contradict them, neither explicitly imputes fault to anything in the past. Neither directly invalidates former, detrimental attitudes nor indicates how the sources it ignores are to be dealt with.

concerning the relative position and worth of human beings in the religious context may be encoded in, among other vectors, patterns of physical dispositions and relations. An attempt to move away from attitudes of disgust and fear in response to menstruation, and from devaluation of the female, ought to acknowledge that these all too common responses are not expressed in words alone.

CHILDREN'S GENDERED RESPONSES TO THE STORY OF ADAM AND EVE

Stuart Z. Charmé

The forbidden fruit eaten by Eve and Adam in the biblical story of the fall precipitated a dawning of consciousness first manifest as an awareness of the nakedness of their bodies. The moment when Eve and Adam each looked at the other's body and first became aware of their *genital difference* might also be interpreted as the symbolic confirmation of their different *gender identities*. Feminist interpretations of this story have been quick to point out the patriarchal quality of these gender identities. In other words, this is a story that expresses male notions of the proper gender roles and identities for men and women. In *Reinventing Eve*, Kim Chernin quotes an old Jewish folk saying that hints at the unspoken voice and perspective that have been excised from this story. The saying goes, "Adam's last will and testament read, 'Don't believe Eve's version.'"¹ The suggestion that the story preserved in the text represents only one version of the events narrated, namely Adam's, raises the intriguing question of what Eve's version might have been.

To assess the impact of gender on the versions of this story that might be told, one of the best places to begin might be with the imaginations of the young descendants of Eve and Adam, girls and boys coming to terms with their own gender identities. Often, children are first introduced to this biblical story at a time when their own ideas of gender and gender role identity are beginning to solidify. It is a time when their religious ideas and meanings are embodied in stories that orient them to the surrounding world.² What stories can young girls tell us about what Eve's version of life in the garden might have been? Is it possible that girls respond to this well-known religious myth differently from boys?

¹ Kim Chernin, *Reinventing Eve* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 149.

² James Fowler describes the importance of narrative in expressing meaning for school-children, who are predominantly characterized by "mythic-literal faith," what he calls the second stage of faith. See Fowler's *The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper, 1980), 125-50.