



# R ECLAIMING OUR *TUMAH*: ONE WOMAN'S "BLOOD STORY"

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On the day following the *Sukkoth* holiday, 2005, I handed in my doctoral dissertation. The subject of this work is the relationship, especially after the destruction of the Temple, between *tumah* (ritual impurity) and the rituals and laws surrounding menstruation (and other uterine blood flows). Since being in a state of ritual impurity barred one from worshipping in the Temple, several rituals and laws related to ritual purity and impurity (*taharah* and *tumah*) were practiced until the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. After that these practices slowly fell into disuse because of their practical irrelevance.

However, while all other practices related to *tumah* and *taharah* are no longer in effect since the destruction of the Temple, a whole

host of regulations and rituals are still practiced today in the context of uterine blood flows, making the relationship between *tumah* and uterine blood flows unique. In other words, while, for example, women still perform internal checks for uterine bleeding and ritually immerse after the bleeding stops in order to exit their ritually impure state, people (men and women alike) who become ritually impure from other causes (such as contact with the dead, nocturnal emissions, contact with certain rodents) do not pay any attention to this fact, nor do they take any measures to reverse their *tumah* status. They merely ignore it.

Why is this so?

The technical answer to this question is twofold: First, the only way to rid oneself of

*tumah* caused by contact with a corpse is by sprinkling ashes of the Red Heifer, an animal that has become extinct. Second, the case of a woman's uterine blood flow is unique in that it is the only example in which *tumah* is still relevant on a practical level, since there is also a sexual prohibition attached to this woman's *tumah* status. While in other cases, the only relevance of a person's *tumah* status was to determine whether or not that person could worship in the Temple, in the case of a woman experiencing a uterine flow, her *tumah* status remains relevant because it is also the factor that determines whether or not she can have sexual intercourse.

While I have come to understand the reasoning behind the retention of the practices surrounding *tumah* caused by a uterine flow to the exclusion of all other *tumah*-related rituals, this is far from the end of the story. The continued practice of the laws and rituals that draw attention to this specific type of *tumah* while all other types of *tumah* are virtually ignored, has caused women and their bleeding wombs to become the locus of most, if not all, negative associations and discourse on *tumah* since the destruction of the Temple. Moreover, with only one type of *tumah* remaining part of the religious social consciousness, the general perception among most Jewish religious practitioners (and even non-practitioners) is that only women's bodies are a source of *tumah* today. Of course, this is not true. While other types of *tumah* may be ignored, they did not disappear. In fact, one could even understand *tumah* as being even more rampant after the destruction of the Temple than ever before, since *tumah* that is caused by certain sinful behaviors (one of which is intercourse with a woman experiencing a uterine flow) is understood to be the cause of the National Exile. As I said above, *tumah* today is merely ignored in most cases—except that of our bleeding woman.

This phenomenon is ironic, of course. Because women regularly and consistently rid themselves of *tumah* each month when they ritually immerse, while men remain in their *tameh* state indefinitely—some choosing to immerse before *Shabbat* or before *Yom Kippur*, but the majority never immersing at all—women who ritually immerse on a regular basis can be considered “less *t'meot*” than men. However, this is far from the current reality. In fact, not only are all women seen on a subconscious societal level as the source of *tumah*, but this is especially true for unmarried women. Traditionally women only begin ritually immersing when they marry. Therefore, from the time a woman begins to menstruate until she begins to ritually immerse, she is seen as perpetually *t'meah*.

One can imagine, then, that the onset of a young woman's menses is no cause for celebration in the traditional Jewish world, to say the least. This is exacerbated by the fact that no traditional Jewish ritual exists marking the onset of menstruation. This pivotal moment in a woman's life is at best ignored, and at most understood, at least on a subconscious level, as the moment in her life when she went from being *tehorah* to being *t'meah* (a condition that will only be reversed, if she chooses to remain within the traditional norm, when she becomes legally sexually permitted in the context of marriage). One conclusion of my research was the need for positive reinterpretations of the *tumah* related to a woman's uterine flow. Since *tumah* is an integral part of the laws and rituals surrounding this flow, we must reinterpret *tumah* in a positive way that speaks to our modern, feminist, sensibilities. One way to do this is through writing and speaking, but another is through creating positive rituals surrounding noteworthy occasions of uterine flow.

These and other conclusions from my research made me feel the import of making



sure my own eldest daughter's first period would be a positive experience for her. I felt a need to counteract all of that negative *tumah* energy inevitably associated with this event. I had read women's accounts of how they experienced the onset of menstruation, and some of these accounts, these "blood stories," were quite shocking. As a mother of three daughters, I felt I was responsible for what their "blood stories" would be. This tremendous responsibility is both a gift and a challenge, and I took it seriously. I did not want this unique and ripe opportunity to affect my daughter's relationship with her body to pass us by. I also felt it was important for us to mark this event in a semi-public way. I explained to her that she had the power to influence others and share this experience with them. I did not force any of this upon her, but I explained to her why I thought it was so important that we celebrate at all, and that we do so among her friends, and she agreed.

So, during the holiday of *Sukkoth*, the year before I handed in my dissertation, we invited her closest friends over to our *sukkah* for a slumber party. My husband and oldest son went camping on the beach in Tel-Aviv, and my daughter, me, my two other daughters,

my then-one-year-old son, and about seven of my daughter's closest friends, slept out in the *sukkah*, died our hair with henna, and watched the movie, *Thirteen Going on Thirty* (Michal chose it, and while it was not my idea of a good film, the coming-of-age theme was appropriate, and it certainly went over big with the girls!).

Before the movie, we sat around a table, each taking a turn to offer a blessing to Michal, and as each girl spoke, she strung beautiful red beads on a string that would later become a necklace for Michal. When it was my turn to offer a blessing to my daughter, I quoted the line from Ezekiel 16, "In your blood live!" and spoke about how it is so important for us to see our blood as the source of life. I was pleasantly surprised at how some of the girls waxed so eloquent in their blessings. Of course, some were shy and said no more than a quick "*mazal tov!*" (which in itself is overcoming a huge hurdle in recognizing that this event is a cause for congratulations!), but a good number truly spoke from their hearts. One girl in particular brought tears to my eyes when she told Michal that she was jealous of her, because she got her period, which means that she is now a woman and can bring children into the world.



As we each placed the beads on the string, it was as if we were stringing our blessings onto this necklace that would forever be a memento for Michal of this magical evening. And, of course, as we blessed Michal, we munched on pomegranate seeds and pieces of heart-shaped, blood-red sponge cake (the one time I felt good about using food coloring!). My younger daughters and I baked the cake without Michal and covered it with white frosting. The red color was to be a surprise. And was Michal surprised! When she cut into the cake, it truly looked like it was bleeding. I hope to never forget the look on her eyes as she cut into that cake. “That was the coolest cake ever, *Imah!*” she said and gave me a big hug when all of her friends left in the morning, each with a red heart-shaped box of heart-shaped chocolates in hand. “Actually, that was the coolest party ever. I’m glad we did it. Thanks, *Imah.*”

It certainly was a night to remember, which was precisely the point. I was hoping her girlfriends would choose to do the same at the onset of their menses (my daughter was the first among her friends to get her period). Disappointingly, they did not. Which shows that we still have a long way to go. But there is not one girl who was present that night who

was not changed even in some subtle way by the experience. Of that I am sure. And most importantly, Michal will have this as her “blood story” to share with her children, God willing, some day.

I did not know it then, but exactly one year later, on *Sukkoth*, right around the time I was handing in my dissertation, I had another opportunity to create a ritual related to blood flow from my own uterus. A few days before *Yom Kippur*, at about seven weeks of pregnancy, an ultrasound showed a ‘blighted pregnancy’—indicating that I would surely miscarry. Given the choice by my doctor to either undergo a D and C or simply wait for the miscarriage to happen spontaneously, I opted to let nature take its course, initiating an almost-month-long process of waiting, intense sorrowing, and coming to terms with what was happening in my body. At ten weeks of pregnancy, I finally experienced the miscarriage. It was my third miscarriage, but my eighth pregnancy. Thank God, I have been blessed with five children, all born by cesarean section, but I want one more. I had tried, in fact, to conceive for over a year, so the loss felt even greater than in previous miscarriages.

This miscarriage experience was also unique for me because of the point at which it came in my life. At 36-years-old, I felt in transition. I knew I wanted one more child, but I also knew that whether or not I ended up having this one last child, I was coming to the end of this phase of my life: the phase of babies and young children. For a variety of reasons, I knew that I would not be like my close friend who is a mother of ten. One reason was my own physical condition. First, there was the fact that my children were all born by cesarean section—not an experience I wanted to put my body through ten times!

But more importantly, perhaps, after the birth of my last child, I started to notice that a rare genetic muscular disease I suffer from,

which had until then only affected certain of my facial and upper body muscles, had progressed to certain muscles in my legs as well. Walking required effort, and I could only walk slowly and with a limp. My body could not keep up with my dreams. It wasn't until then that I began to come to terms with the fact that this disease may end up disabling me; that I may end up in a wheel chair; that I may not be able to retire to a life of hiking and biking. This reality had been difficult for me to face, and I had been struggling with it in an intense way since the birth of my last child.

So the miscarriage came in the midst of this internal struggle. The truth is that I knew having this child was not a practical idea. But I wanted it, and I knew that it would be better to do so sooner rather than later, precisely because of my degenerating physical condition. Knowing this, the miscarriage put me in a vulnerable place. And the timing of it was especially significant. On the holiday of *Suk-koth*, when we leave the security of our homes and dwell for one week in temporary huts, we put ourselves into the hands of God. My miscarriage experience spanned the course of one whole month—from the time I had my first worrisome ultrasound to the time I actually began to bleed—and therefore left me much time for introspection and prayer (by which I mean not formal prayer, but rather, discussions with God). In that month's time, I discovered my fear of the unknown, of putting closure on this period of my life and moving on to the next phase, of the pressure of creating an identity without babies in the picture. I also discovered my own deep sorrow. I did not want this period in my life to end. I loved my life—its balance, its rhythm, its chaos.

But this month also left me time to question what I was meant to learn from this experience. In what way was I meant to grow? Was God sending me a message that I was pushing

myself too hard? Was God telling me that I should count my blessings, focus on what I already have, and settle into the life I have created for myself, stop trying to add more? But even if so, I knew that I could not know that for sure. I was not willing to take this as a sign that it was time to stop trying to conceive. Instead, all of this waiting and inhabiting the space of the unknown taught me about trusting in God. I felt that this experience was not meant to send me any such concrete messages. Rather, it was meant to put me in a place of peace with whatever God had in store. That month of waiting and trusting brought me to the realization that God is taking care of me, even if I cannot see the actual plan. I felt so strongly the message that God was with me in this experience as much as in the births of my five children. I felt that this pregnancy was not meant to end in the birth of a baby. That was not what I was meant to experience from this pregnancy. The purpose was to teach me to be in a place where I had to just let go and put myself in God's hands. It was also to give birth, but not to a baby. To myself.

By the time the actual miscarriage occurred, I was not in a place of shock or sorrow. I knew it was an experience I had to go through in order to grow. I had already done my crying and mourning. When the extreme pain of the actual miscarriage suddenly stopped, it was amazing. The pain was so intense, so overwhelming, and then it was over. There was no gradual abatement of pain, but a complete and sudden stop. Instantaneously, a total calm enveloped me, and I fell asleep. I felt at peace, like I was truly sleeping in God's embrace.

In short, once the actual physical miscarriage was over, I was beyond mourning. I did not see the experience as tragic, or even sad, anymore. I truly believed that this pregnancy was never meant to grow a foetus. It was

meant to grow me. To bring me through this experience to reach this place of inner peace. First I went through the emotional pain, then did the spiritual work, and then I went through the physical pain, the actual birthing process. It was intense. That moment when I felt such total calm envelope me was the transformative moment when the emotional, spiritual, and physical all came together.

But, as with my experience with my daughter Michal when she got her period for the first time, I knew that the Jewish tradition offers no help in this area. No traditional ritual exists for women who experience miscarriage. First I looked into rituals that had previously been created by women after experiencing miscarriage. I had already discovered some of what was out there because a few years before I had helped a friend to create a ritual after a very tragic pregnancy loss. I consulted now two books that had been helpful to us then: *Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope: A Spiritual Companion for Infertility and Pregnancy Loss*, by Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, and *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones*, Volume 1, edited by Rabbi Debra Orenstein. I also looked at a helpful website, [www.ritualwell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org). I read this material through, and borrowed some basic ideas. But nothing seemed exactly right. This is also what happened when I was helping my friend in creating her ritual. While I may have built upon some of their ideas, the ritual I came up with felt totally my own—which is the one benefit of the fact that no traditional ritual already exists.

I knew right away that I wanted the ritual to happen directly after I immersed in the *mikveh* (ritual bath) a week after I had stopped bleeding from the miscarriage. Serendipitously, my *mikveh* night fell out on *motzei Shabbat*, Saturday night, nine days after *Rosh Hodesh*, which is when most com-

munities would be reciting *Kiddush Levanah*, the prayer sanctifying the New Moon. This prayer seemed like an appropriate one to incorporate into my ritual, since, about half a year earlier, I had taken upon myself the practice of reciting *Kiddush Levanah* with a group of women.

The main themes of *Kiddush Levanah* are renewal and rebirth. I wanted this ritual to be about my personal renewal and rebirth. In addition, there were the obvious associations between women and the moon and the monthly cycle. The waxing and waning. Not only the monthly waxing and waning, but the life-long waxing and waning. The constant renewal—these transformative growth experiences that we go through, hopefully, many times throughout our lives. I wanted to recite this prayer with a group of women, and to especially highlight the *Hallel* parts of the *Tefillah*, the parts when we praise God, as well as the second paragraph of the *Tefillah*, when we ask to be renewed like the moon.

This part of the ritual, I decided, would be the final part. We would recite it outside, with the moon in full view, as is the custom. However, I wanted to begin the ritual in a cozy, safe, environment.

On Friday, before *Shabbat*, I baked bran muffins and pumpkin bread. Baking is a nurturing, creative act, and these smells and tastes would create the atmosphere I wanted. Moreover, baking encapsulates so much that feeling of waiting and trusting that I went through during the month-long-miscarriage, and internalized as a result of the experience. But really letting go too, because once it's in the oven, your work is done. There's nothing more you can do, which is very much the way I felt during this whole process.

Before the event, I also popped popcorn. This felt right to me, symbolically, because popcorn had long been a comfort food for

me. Many a night (before I had children) I spent alone in the movie theatre munching on a large bucket of popcorn and crying. These nights were so cathartic for me, and I wanted to return somehow to that kind of cathartic experience.

With these foods on the table, as well as some tea, we gathered around and began to sing a *nigun* (tune) my friend Ruth Gan-Kagan, who also lives across the street from the *mikveh* and therefore hosted the event, composed for my ritual. The *nigun* was set to Psalm 118:23: “*Me’et Adonai Hayta Zot, Hi Niflat Be’eineinu*”/This too is from God, it is wondrous in our eyes.” I chose this verse because the words expressed what I felt about the miscarriage experience: It too came from God. It had its purpose. The pregnancy was not a waste. Something important came out of it for me. And despite (or perhaps because of?) the disappointment, pain, hard work, and reorienting that was involved, it was a wondrous event.

After we sang this *nigun* a number of times together, I told my miscarriage story. Then I read aloud a poem I had written for the event. The poem begins on *Rosh Hashanah*, a week before my first ultrasound, when we read the story of the biblical Chanah praying for a child. She bargains with God, promises God that if she has a child, she will send him to work in the Tabernacle. So, when a son is born to her, after she weans him, she sends him off. She keeps her promise to God. This son that she longed for and prayed so hard for, she dedicates to God. In the poem, I write about how, during that reading about Chanah on *Rosh Hashanah*, when I thought I was carrying a viable pregnancy, I was so upset by Chanah’s willingness to give up her child that I closed my prayer book.

Then the poem moves to *Yom Kippur*, after the ultrasound, when I was waiting to

miscarry. That *Yom Kippur*, I felt so intensely the verse we sing repeatedly during the 25-hour fast: “We are like clay in the Hands of the Creator.” I prayed that *Yom Kippur* for guidance from Chanah, who only ten days before had made me close my prayer book in disbelief. Now I wanted to know her secret, to understand how she had the courage to surrender to God’s Will. I wanted to learn from her how to grow from my pain, rather than wallow in it.

After reading the poem, I showed the women the contents of a tin box, a time-capsule I intended to bury later that night in my own garden. I had thought of burying my foetus, but nothing so recognizably foetus-like came out. Then I considered planting, something my friend had done at the ceremony we created together. Planting is a sign of hope and life, which is what she needed at her ceremony. I did not want my ritual to be about fertility or even hope, *per se*. I hope to conceive again, but I wanted this ritual to be about being at peace with the possibility that I may never have another child. On the other hand, I did want to bury something. I wanted that symbolism of putting something in the ground, away, so I could move on.

I remembered the three positive pregnancy tests that I still had in my bathroom drawer. I always keep my positive pregnancy tests. Throwing them out feels like throwing away a soul. Until the baby is born, I keep them. It’s the only physical thing I have to hold onto, especially during the first trimester. But since these plastic sticks are not biodegradable, I decided to make a time capsule, rather than a box to bury forever. In other words, I saw this as a temporary burial. I was putting this all in the ground: the pregnancy test sticks, an unfilled prescription—dated December—for a month’s supply of folic acid and iron pills, and the papers left from tests I

was to have performed throughout the pregnancy. But it would be buried, not lost forever. I did hope to have another child, and if not, that did not mean that my identity as a mother of babies would be lost. It would still remain a part of me, but it would recede further and further into the past. I can dig it up and look at it whenever I want, even if I may never live it again.

I also included in the time-capsule a picture of a woman and infant that Hallel, my then four-and-a-half-year-old daughter, had cut out from a magazine a few days before and given to me, spontaneously and without a conscious clue as to what I was going through. (I did not tell my children about the pregnancy.) She had cut it out and handed it to me, saying: "This is you, Imah!" I knew right away that this picture would go into the capsule. That may be me, but I also must be able to part with that image of myself, to bury it as part of my past and not my future, if need be. Only God knows, and by burying this capsule, I felt that I was somehow communicating in a ritual way my willingness to live in that space.

Then it was time for sharing. I invited my friends to tell their stories, share their thoughts. Each woman, after she spoke, drank pomegranate juice from my glass goblet, decorated with roses, the Miriam's Cup I use for Pesach seders at my house. Pomegranate juice I chose because I believed that it was the pomegranate juice I drank the few days before my miscarriage that finally brought on the bleeding. Deep red liquid brings deep red liquid. Why not?

The first woman spoke. She told us of her own miscarriage at six months of pregnancy. She cried when she described the experience as "birthing death." Another woman told about her recent miscarriage at seven weeks, and how she too had tried to understand the message in this event and come to be at peace

with it. Nevertheless, she admitted, it took some re-orienting and re-visioning. For example, she told us, when she was pregnant, she kept hearing the message in her head: "Forty-five working on five," which she understood to mean that she was 45 years old and working on her fifth child. However, after the miscarriage, she was trying to understand what else that number five could mean for her future.

Another woman told about two successive still-births. Each time, she became sick, was attacked by a deadly bacteria, and in order to save her life, they had to get her five-month-old foetus out of her. She told us how she cried for weeks afterwards, both times, and how she did not want to return to the living. How she wanted to leave her three living children to be with this dead foetus. She cried all of the time, she says, until she made the conscious decision to live. "*Ubachartah Bachayim!* And you shall choose life!" And then the decision to try again, despite the risks to her life. And then, thank God, a baby girl. Her miracle baby.

Another woman told of her only child's birth at age 42. None of us knew that in-utero her son had a twin. This is the first time she spoke of this. The twin was lost when she was in the hospital, on bed rest. But she decided, then and there, to focus on her miracle baby and not dwell on what was lost. Again, another choice to live. To focus on what is, what God had given her, and not what God had taken away. Another woman told of her problems with infertility and her miracle baby (by now the message was clear—all babies are miracle babies!), the infant daughter she held in her arms. Bed-ridden from the beginning of the pregnancy, told she would certainly lose the pregnancy, she did not give up. "Don't give up," she told us. "Take control of your fertility and your pregnancies. Take control of your bodies. Your lives."

Another woman spoke of her infertile period, which was filled with obsessive checking and testing and timing, and which ended when she came to own her desire to have another child. Once she owned it, her obsession abated, and she conceived.

Another woman admitted to having no problems with infertility and no miscarriages. Just four healthy children. But she told of her coming-to-terms with her own illness, and how, once she surrendered, she really learned to love her more limited existence. More limited in some ways and so much richer, more full, in other ways. Another woman told of a growth she had on her uterus. The doctor said they needed to operate. My friend did visualizations. She imagined the growth was a cloud. She imagined rain in her womb. At her next doctor's visit, the ultrasound showed no more growth, only what looked like a pool of water on the floor of her uterus.

Another woman, a mother of ten, admitted how her surrendering to God was all of those years of baby after baby, and that her decision to stop was her rebellion against God's Will. She still wonders where those souls she refused to bring into this world have gone. Perhaps into the bodies of her grandchildren or other children she has felt a deep connection to over the years?

Another woman expressed how important it felt for her for women to be able to share in this way. Married for the first time at age 40, she had two children right away in the past two years, fifteen months apart. She loves her children, loves being a mother, but it's been a difficult adjustment—from totally free, single woman, to wife and mother-of-two in just two years. Even her loving, internally-connected, psychologically self-aware husband can't understand what it's like to be pregnant and give birth. What it's like to throw up every day for five months. What it's

like to not have a complete night's sleep for two years straight. What it's like to feel, even resent, being tied-down yet not want to let go. Her eyes fill with tears of joy, tears of catharsis, having found a way to connect. Finally she is in a room full of people who can identify with what she is going through.

Another woman said that she was uncomfortable with the lack of men in the room. How will they learn to open up in this way if we shut them out? Write them off? Yet she understood the desire for a safe women's space for this kind of ritual about an experience no man could ever hope to relate to. I told the group that I had sent my poem to one male friend, telling him that I wanted to share this with him, but that I did not want him to come to my ritual. He said that he found the poem moving, although he felt that he could never relate to the feeling of carrying another life inside himself. He said that he wanted to come to my ritual, that he would be quiet and sit on the side. He was jealous of us women in our ability to experience pregnancy and child birth, even when it ends in miscarriage. But I explained to him that it was not because he is a man that I did not want him there, but because of the fact that as a man, he could never relate to my poem completely. This is one thing that only women can share, and therefore, having a man there, even my husband, would break the security I could only feel in an all-female space.

After sharing, we all went out into the clear, dark night to recite *Kiddush Levanah*—the prayer recited as the moon works towards its half-month fullness—together. I looked up at the almost-full moon. It had been ten days since *Rosh Hodesh*.

*Like the moon, I have been filled and emptied, emptied and filled. I pray to be renewed like the moon, but by that I do not mean simply to be*

*filled again with blood and the potential to conceive and birth another life. No, I mean a renewal of spirit, a rebirth of me. My womb is empty, and I too was empty. But I can live in that empty space, and I can fill that empty space. And I can praise God for bringing me to a place where I can look up at the moon, marvel at its splendour, and truly be content in this moment. I am surrounded by friends on a moon-lit night, praising God and our ability to be renewed, on the way to my home, a home full of children and the man who makes me feel whole. And if he is*

*still awake, we will be reunited in the most physical way possible for two humans to unite. And maybe, this time, our union will result in conception. And maybe it won't.*

“Either way,” my friend tells me as she hands me a bottle of coffee liquor, “you’ll have fun trying.”

And the truth is, I think I have actually reached a point where I am not “trying” anymore. As much as I want another child, I am open to what God has in store.

## NOTE

Photos courtesy of the author.