



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Tazria-Metzora 5772

By Sigal Samuel

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*Parshat Tazria-Metzora* lays out the biblical prescriptions regarding menstruation, a topic more steeped in critique and apology than almost any other area in Jewish law. Contemporary readers seeking to reconcile the Torah's approach to menstruation with their own sensibilities typically run up against a few uncomfortable facts. First, the text discusses this natural bodily process in the same breath as *tzara'at*, a skin disease traditionally viewed as punishment for sin, and seminal emissions, a phenomenon that rendered Israelite men ritually impure.<sup>1</sup> Second, the text explains that a menstruating woman is impure for seven days, and that she communicates this impurity to anyone who touches her and anything she sits or lies on.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, women in Israelite society were likely forced to withdraw from the public sphere during their periods, both because of their impure status—which prevented them from entering sacred spaces or eating sacred foods<sup>3</sup>—and because they may have lacked the means to effectively contain menstrual blood.

For millions of girls and women in developing countries today, menstruation still stands as a barrier to women's inclusion in society. Because feminine hygiene products are not always available or affordable, girls use rags, newspapers, leaves and mud instead. But these are relatively ineffective methods, forcing girls to withdraw while they are menstruating. Girls' school attendance suffers as a result. According to an Oxford University study, in rural Ghana, many girls miss up to five school days each month because of their periods.<sup>4</sup> Afraid to risk the humiliation of bloodstains on their clothes, they stay at home, often falling behind in class or dropping out entirely.

This reality is especially troubling when we realize that women are critical drivers of community development, which means that girls' inability to complete their educations constitutes a great loss, not only for them as individuals, but also for their families, communities and countries.<sup>5</sup>

While many organizations are starting to do the important work of providing poor women access to affordable sanitary pads,<sup>6</sup> we must also look at the root of this problem, which is the fact that menstruation is taboo in many developing nations. It is rarely discussed openly, making its deleterious effects on girls' school attendance difficult to see and address.<sup>7</sup> Without a higher profile and increased visibility, the problem will continue to go largely unacknowledged.

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 14:1-15:18.

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 15:19-24.

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 7:19-21.

<sup>4</sup> Donald G. McNeil Jr., "Girls' Health: Kits to Aid in Menstrual Health May Cut School Absenteeism in Kenya," *New York Times* 15 Feb. 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/health/16glob.html>

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Leeder, "Experts' Call to Action: Invest in Women, Reverse Poverty," *Globe and Mail* 22 Sep. 2009. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/behind-the-veil/invest-in-women-reverse-poverty/article1296554/>

<sup>6</sup> "Entrepreneurship vs. Menstruation: Africa's Race to Build a Better Sanitary Pad," *Global Envision* 26 Jul. 2011. <http://www.globalenvision.org/2011/07/26/entrepreneurship-vs-menstruation-africas-race-build-better-sanitary-pad>. See also AJWS grantee "Kisumu Medical & Education Trust," <http://www.kmet.co.ke/news/reusable%20sanipads%20launch.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Seymour, "Bangladesh: Tackling Menstrual Hygiene Taboos," *UNICEF* 2008. [http://www.unicef.org/wash/files/10\\_case\\_study\\_BANGLADESH\\_4web.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/wash/files/10_case_study_BANGLADESH_4web.pdf)

In this regard, *Parshat Tazria-Metzora* may provide a helpful model for the international development community. Despite some of the potentially negative aspects described above, there is one remarkably positive aspect to the biblical treatment of menstruation: as far as the Torah is concerned, this bodily process is neither private nor unmentionable. Instead, it is quite public: people often know when a woman has her period, and if she experiences any irregular bleeding, she must bring two birds to the tabernacle for the priest to sacrifice on her behalf.<sup>8</sup> Far from being hidden or ignored, the rites of menstruation are dealt with by the priest: the person in the highest position of all. On an even more basic level, menstruation receives ample attention and acknowledgment in the text, and is treated with surprising frankness.

If families, schools, communities and governments in the Global South would begin acknowledging menstruation and discussing it candidly, we could remove the underlying stigma that prevents women from accessing the sanitary solutions they need to come out of hiding and achieve greater inclusion in society overall.

This destigmatization process needs to be undertaken, not only by people in developing countries, but by us as well. While we may have access to physical amenities like pads and tampons, many of us still view menstruation as private and unmentionable. We should, instead, address this bodily function with a sort of biblical openness, insisting not only that it be public but that the stigma associated with the normal functioning of women's bodies be removed.

In discussing the priestly rites that accompany menstruation, our *parshah* speaks of the sanctuary as the "tabernacle that is *betocham*."<sup>9</sup> While *betocham* is typically translated as "in their midst," it can also be read quite literally as "in them"—in their bodies. I would like to propose that, this week, we choose to read the verse this way, and to recognize that the Divine sanctuary resides in us: physical, embodied beings. It is only by fully internalizing this notion that we will feel moved to ensure that girls' and women's bodies everywhere are freed from stigma and, by extension, that we will succeed in empowering girls and women as agents of change.



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<sup>8</sup> Leviticus 15:25-30.

<sup>9</sup> Leviticus 15:31.

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