



ICJW Bea Zucker Calendar Study Series

“Feminist Inspiration for Living on the Jewish Cycle”

by Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Three Weeks - Between the Narrows: the Sacred Female Enclosure

Context

Among the most formative events in Jewish experience were the destruction of the two Jerusalem Temples—the first in 586 B.C.E. and the second in 70 C.E. Though these events took place in remote history, they continue to influence our Jewish daily life. In its time, the Temple organized the sacred service of the Jewish People—offerings, prayers and songs. A hereditary priestly caste conducted the service. Destruction of the center of Jewish religious life in the ancient period wreaked havoc and posed a potentially fatal threat to the survival of the Jewish People and Judaism.

The Temple service continued to live on in the hearts and minds of the Jewish People. Gradually a tradition emerged to dedicate three weeks in the heat of summer to prepare to commemorate the destruction. With passing years, observance of semi-mourning customs during these weeks grew in stricture, particularly in communities of Ashkenaz. After the destruction, rules governing women's observance of menstrual restrictions also grew in stricture. Exploring intersections of these ritual systems offers an opportunity to appraise and invigorate the sacred service that we have derived from the Jerusalem Temple with particular attention to gender and women's bodies.

Background

The Three Weeks, *Bein HaMetzarim*—“between the narrows”, fall between the 17th of the Hebrew month of Tammuz—a fast day associated with the breach of the walls of Jerusalem during the Babylonian and Roman sieges, and culminate in the fast of the 9th of Av—the date appointed to mourn the destruction of the Temples. These weeks draw attention to the Jerusalem Temple service, its historic and spiritual meaning.

As sadness is not the sole goal of mourning the loss of a loved one, the sole goal of the Three Weeks is not sadness about destruction. Mourning rituals can heighten our appreciation of the value of life and existence, and the meaningfulness of what we have lost. They afford us an opportunity to explore how to proceed to heal loss and to better incorporate sacred meaning into our daily lives.

There is no explicit record of mourning for a full Three Weeks in biblical or talmudic texts. A 4th century midrash, *Eikhah Rabbati* (1.29)—interpreting the book of [Lamentations](#)—mentions verse 1.3, “All [Zion's] pursuers overtook her between the straits,” where “straits” are later understood to be “days of distress”—referring to the weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av.

Text sources indicate that the intensity of mourning practices increases in stages. In the mishna, the process starts at the outset of the month of Av - “When Av begins we lessen our happiness” (*Ta'anit* 1:7). The following talmudic statement describes two gradations -

From the first day of the month until the fast [of the 9th of Av], the people lessen their activities in trade, building and planting, betrothals and marriages. During the week in which the 9th of Av occurs, it is forbidden to cut one's hair and wash one's clothes [and betrothe]” (*Yevamot* 43b).

This gemara states clearly that at the beginning of the nine days, people decrease certain activities that indicate hopefulness toward the future—building, planting, wedding. The abstinences appear to be customs observed at people's discretion. During the week of the actual commemoration of the destruction, this text mandates personal mourning observances—refraining from haircuts and laundry.

The custom of observing the full three weeks arises in the medieval period. 10th century Babylonian sage [Saadia Gaon](#) suggests that there are three weeks of mourning partly based on a reference to biblical Daniel. Daniel was carried into captivity in Babylon after the destruction of the first Temple. He fasted for three weeks.

I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled. (Daniel 10.3)

Incidentally, Daniel fasted in the first month, in the spring, not during the summer period we are discussing.

In the late 14th century, Rabbi [Isaac Tyrnau](#) writes in his book *Minhagim*—a record of Austrian customs, that the strictures of the week of the 9th of Av apply throughout the Three Weeks: haircuts are not taken and weddings are not celebrated. Joseph Karo, author of the mid-15th century [Shulchan Aruch](#), an authoritative halakhic work for Sephardic communities, rules that the mourning period begins only on the first day of the month of Av as stated above (Orah Hayyim 551:1). However, [Moses Isserles](#) cites Tyrnau's more stringent opinion as halacha in his commentary (Rema) on the Shulchan Aruch, considered foundational for most current Ashkenazic practice (Orah Hayyim 551:2,4).

Some communities suspend the readings from the prophets-*haftarot* connected with the weekly Torah parsha and substitute the *sheloshah de-pur'anuta*, three chapters from Jeremiah and Isaiah that ache with destruction and exile. The 5th-6th century midrash collection, *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* is the source of this custom. Among others, Italian Jews, substitute only the haftara on the shabbat immediately preceding the fast on the 9th of Av, on Shabbat Hazon.

In order to appreciate the significance of commemorating sieges and destructions, let us consider the complex symbolic architectural and ritual system of the Temple and its parallelism to the female body.

The *mishkan*-Tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temples are monumental projects, parallel to the divine Creation in human terms. Though the material building was impressive, the enduring substance is its symbolic structure and service. First century Jewish scholar and historian, [Josephus](#) writes in his *Antiquities of the Jews* about many aspects of the *mishkan*: -

They were every one made in way of imitation and representation of the universe. When Moses distinguished the tabernacle into three parts, and allowed two of them to the Priests, as a place accessible and common, he denoted the land and the sea: for these are accessible to all. But when he set apart the third division for God, it was because heaven is inaccessible to people. And when he ordered twelve loaves to be set on the table, he denoted the year, as distinguished into so many months. And when he made the candlestick, of seventy parts, he secretly intimated the *Decani*, or seventy divisions of the planets. And as to the seven lamps upon the candlesticks, they referred to the course of the planets, of which that is the number. And for the veils, which were composed of four things, they declared the four elements. For the fine linen was proper to signify the earth; because the

flax grows out of the earth. The purple signified the sea; because that color is dyed by the blood of a sea shell-fish. The blue is fit to signify the air; and the scarlet will naturally be an indication of fire. Now the vestment of the High Priest being made of linen, signified the earth; the blue denoted the sky; being like lightning in its pomegranates, and in the noise of the bells resembling thunder. And for the ephod it showed that God had made the universe of four [elements:] and as for the gold interwoven, I suppose it related to the splendor by which all things are enlightened. He also appointed the breast-plate to be placed in the middle of the ephod, to resemble the earth: for that has the very middle place of the world. And the girdle which encompassed the High Priest round, signified the ocean: for that goes round about and includes the universe. Each of the sardonyxes declares to us the sun and the moon: those I mean that were in the nature of buttons on the High Priests shoulders. And for the twelve stones, whether we understand by them the months; or whether we understand the like number of the signs of that circle which the Greeks call the *Zodiac*, we shall not be mistaken in their meaning. And for the miter, which was of a blue color, it seems to me to mean heaven: for how otherwise could the name of God be inscribed upon it? That it was also illustrated with a crown, and that of gold also, is because of that splendor with which God is pleased. (III, 7)

Josephus interprets the Temple space, materials and garments in relation to the solar system and earth, elements, continents and seas, weather, and cycles of the year.

Saadia Gaon explains that the *mishkan* is, on the one hand, a microcosm of the Creation, and on the other, a macrocosm of the human being – an idea cited by 12th century Spanish commentator Ibn Ezra (on Shmot 25.40). In the following table, I suggest some parallels between the Temple, Creation and the human being in terms of materials, structure and function.

Human	<i>Mishkan</i>-Temple	Creation
<u>coverings</u>		
skin	outer skins/ hanging curtains/ gold overlay	earth/ sand/ vegetation/ grass/ moss
<u>skeletal frame</u>		
ribs, spine & bones/ limbs set in joints with sinew/ muscle	wooden beams & boards tenons fitted in sockets	mountains & trees fixed in earth
<u>life fluids</u>		
sweat, blood, urine, semen, menstrual flux, bile	sacrificial blood & water libations	rain, dew, rivers, sea, lava
<u>flesh</u>		
flesh, food/ nurture	offerings on wooden altar/ show bread	animal world/ harvest, fruit
eyes	<i>Menorah</i> (candelabra)	celestial lights
brain/mind/soul	<i>Krúvim</i> (cherubs)	birds; God, <i>Shekhina</i>
womb	Holy of Holies	Israel/ Jerusalem/Temple/ Holy of Holies
<u>divisions</u>		
internal organs separated by membranes	Priestly & Israelite Courts separated by curtains	geographic/political divisions
diaphragm dividing heart from stomach	veil, <i>parochet</i> between enclosure & Holy of Holies	firmament dividing upper from lower waters
<u>processes</u>		
digestion	altar service/ sacrifices	cycle of birth-life-death
bodily odors, perfumes	aromas, fragrances	"sweet savor", incense
firing of synapses	<i>ner tamid</i> - burning menorah	sun

From my book, [ReReading Israel: The Spirit of the Matter](#), p61

Architecturally, the *mishkan*-Temple contains a series of concentric spaces increasing in sacredness with progression inward toward the core of the sanctuary. Ritual impurity excluded people from entering into deeper spaces. One of the exclusions is menstruants. Only the priests were permitted into the most restricted ritual areas. Into the most exclusive sacred space, the Holy of Holies, only one person, the High Priest, entered, only at the appointed time on the most awesome day, on Yom Kippur (Kelim 1:6-9).

Notice that in the table above I refer to the Holy of Holies—the innermost enclosure deep within the body of the *mishkan*—as “womb”. According to my feminist interpretation of the Temple (see the link below), **the *mishkan*-Temple resembles a woman's body in both form and function**. This sacred body houses and processes intimate human-divine encounter. Through that intercourse, transgression and mistakes were to be resolved, and the fertile cycles of fruit-bearing of the earth and people were to proceed.

During the Temple periods, the purity code bound all members of Israelite society to protect the sanctity of the Temple space and ritual. Men and women alike were required to observe rules to *purify* themselves from contact with many bodily processes that convey ritual impurity, among them sexual emissions, freshly-dead reptiles, and corpses. These concepts are rich and complex; they challenge us to address our embodied experience, our creature-hood, and mortality in the context of sacred activity. Nearly all of the ritual purity considerations and practices became obsolete when the Temple ceased.

After the destruction, among the extensive Temple purity rites, there is one main practice that continues: *niddah*-menstrual observances.

According to the Torah, couples are to desist from sexual intercourse during seven days of menstruation (VaYiqra 15). In the post-Temple era, the talmud cites the tradition of women keeping an extra stringency and abstaining for seven extra “clean” days intended by the Torah only to be observed after experiencing an unhealthy discharge, *ziva* (Nidda 66a). When mainstream halakha adopted this stringency, all healthy menstrual discharge came to be regarded as if it is *unhealthy*. Women thereby lost our authority to determine our own healthy menstrual cycle and observe the biblically-based purity laws as they were during the Temple period.

After the destruction of the Temple, women's bodies and fertility functions become the means by which the Jewish community fulfills the ritual purity system—a live and vital site for performing a meaningful aspect of the Temple process. Observing the *nidda* cycle, each couple has the possibility to sanctify intimacy and embody sacred Temple ritual. Even after the Temple no longer stands, union continues to take place within the sacred enclosure of the woman's body. However, with the destruction of the Temple, halakhic authorities render women's capability to discern our own healthy menstrual-*nidda* cycle halakhically irrelevant.

As the Temple service fades into history, rabbinic authorities intensify and extend menstrual separation and immersion rituals. Similarly, they increase the stringency of Temple mourning practices and extend them to Three Weeks. Increasing stringency in observances of abstinence in both realms—private and community—indicates growing rabbinic fears of weakening and loss of connection with the sacred Temple and its service.

The talmudic mourning rituals of Av cited above appear in the context of a discussion of the period of a widow's waiting after the death of her spouse before a new betrothal. The sages negotiate the

mourning and loss, and subsequent renewal of intimate relations between a woman and her spouse. Precisely in this conversation they consider the intensity and period of mourning for the destroyed Temple, symbolically the marital home of the Jewish People with our divine Beloved.

While the extra weeks of annual mourning practices impose constraints on communities, the impact is relatively minor compared with an extra seven “clean” days of monthly sexual abstinence.

An Orthodox male gynecologist, Dr. Daniel Rosenak explains that the observance of the “seven clean days” causes suffering due to “halakhic infertility”—many women ovulate before the end of the extended separation period, and therefore fail to conceive. Couples anguish for years trying to have children without knowing that their halakhic observance renders them infertile. Furthermore, the currently accepted antidote to “halakhic infertility” is too often not leniency with the extra “clean” days. Halakhic authorities encourage the prescription of hormone doses to delay ovulation, solving an halakhic problem with drugs for which there is no medical indication. This (ab)use of medicine in order to uphold a religious stringency exposes women to increased risk of cancer, stroke, and brain tumors—on account of hormones regularly prescribed to delay ovulation.

The approach of many rabbis to 'treat' halakhic infertility with hormones, in order to delay ovulation, constitutes not only a medical problem (since the safety of the treatment - which increases chances of cancer and blood clots - has yet to be established), but also a halakhic problem of 'For your own sake, therefore, be most careful to protect your lives' (Dev. 4:15). Beyond that there is a problem of Jewish values. It is known that a doctor has a mandate to heal, and nothing else. He [sic] does not have a mandate to 'repair' what does not need to be repaired (see link below for source).

Dr. Rosenak explains that the breast tissue of a woman before she has given birth is not fully mature, and is therefore particularly susceptible to the effects of large sudden hormone doses required to postpone ovulation. He reports that the World Health Organization has declared the drugs commonly prescribed to delay ovulation to be carcinogens. Responding to Dr. Rosenak at a panel discussing this issue, one respected Orthodox Jerusalem rabbi, Benjamin Lau stated that in spite of the known health risks to which rabbis are exposing women, the halakhic system cannot weather the challenge of undoing the current *nidda* practice of the seven “clean” days (Yakar Center, 2009).

Dr. Rosenak states:

The sad and inevitable conclusion is that the inability of *Poskim* [halakhic decisors] to deal with this important issue with all the pain and suffering it causes stems from fear and from political consideration. (From [this](#) synopsis of his book and initiative.)

The *niddah* observances regulate sexual intimacy in private homes similarly to the way the ritual purity observances regulated entry into the sacred domain of the Temple. The Temple was *the* sacred home. The Three Weeks draw our attention to the Temple and its service. At this time, let us also consider how to better enable sanctification in the one remnant of Temple-like purity observance, affirming women's embodied integrity and halakhic judgement. As mourning cultivates better appreciation for life and its holiness, let us also work to improve our sanctification of sexuality in our homes.

The Three Weeks are an auspicious time to better fulfill sacred service and intimacy with the Divine in relation to women's lives and experience. The goal is to affirm the sacredness of our

female body and its functions. As Dr. Rosenak quotes above, the Torah obligates us to ensure health and wellbeing—for women and men.

Observances, Practices and Resources

These are abstentions some observe during the three weeks, similar to observances during the 12-month mourning period for a parent:

- weddings, parties, celebrations
- haircutting & beard-shaving
- listening to music
- reciting *shehechyanu* on a new fruit—the blessing to express gratitude for reaching this time

Beginning on the first of the month of Av, for the 9 days, some abstain from:

- eating meat and drinking wine
- bathing
- laundering

[“Repentance or Wailing? The Haftara of Shabbat Chazon”](#) is a valuable conversation about the tone of the special haftara reading – rebuke or lamentation.

About the Temple as a sacred female enclosure, read my essay, [“The Yom Kippur Avodah: a Replication of Menses,”](#) from Judith Kates and Gail Reimer, eds., *Beginning Anew: A Woman’s Companion to the High Holy Days*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997, 243-257.

Here is one man's analysis of halakhic sources concerning, [“Niddah and Counting 7 Clean Days - What are its Origins?”](#). A Jerusalem women's Torah learning institute, [Nishmat](#), trains *nidda* advisors, offers advice, and answers questions about *nidda* observance, fervently upholding the seven “clean” days [even in the case of halakhic infertility](#).

This award-winning documentary, [“The Moon Inside You: Menstruation, Culture & the Politics of Gender,”](#) sheds critical light on attitudes toward menstruation in Western culture.

In addition to the [website](#), this piece synthesizes Dr. Daniel Rosenak's position about the seven “clean” days and the conversation he has generated, [“Be pure or be fruitful.”](#)

The prophet Zecharia speaks of how in a more redeemed time, the fasts will become festivals (8:18,19)

Questions for Discussion

- During the Three Weeks, contemplate the analogy between the Temple and the human body and the Creation in relation to your life—how do you see yourself and your life work as symbolically or literally connecting with furthering Creation?
- How does the metaphor of the Temple as a *female* body affect your understanding of your body and your relation to holiness?
- Explore the meaning of the destruction of the Temple as a metaphoric and ritual system in terms of the human-Creation analogies described above. Contemplate what we have lost, how we have or have not succeeded to replace it, its significance to our experience of the

sacred. During the Three Weeks, explore how to recapture some of this significance in our contemporary lives—at home, in the synagogue and beyond.

- Examine your attitudes toward menstruation. How does/might the observance of *nidda*-menstrual practices contribute to your experience of the sacred?
- Some consider that changing halakha about *nidda* to eliminate the seven “clean days” will harm, even destroy the viability of Jewish observance. Probing the analogy between Temple and woman, how do you see the relationship between feminist initiatives and the ongoing observance of Torah and Judaism. How does the suggestion by an Orthodox male gynecologist to abolish the seven “clean” days contribute to and/or detract from or threaten continuing Jewish life? Explain.
- Why do women (and men) accept, uphold and pass on some observances and traditions that disempower, hurt and oppress ourselves and our daughters—in religious and secular contexts?
- How does this conformism and subservience perpetuate the destruction of Temple sacredness?

Summary of Issues

The Temple symbolically resembles a *woman's* body where the womb signifies the Holy of Holies, the innermost sacred enclosure. After the destruction, the *niddah*-menstrual observances, remnant of the Temple-based purity code, continue to regulate sexual intimacy in private homes similarly to the way the ritual purity observances regulated entry into the sacred domain of the Temple and intimacy with the Divine.

Stringent *nidda* practices are known to cause infertility and even endanger women's lives as a result of drugs used to alter women's ovulation cycles. The value of women's health and life, and integrity in the halakhic system must surely overpower the desire to protect halakhic strictures.

Jewish tradition appoints three weeks of mourning-like practices during the summer. This period commemorates the process leading up to the destruction of ancient Jerusalem and the sacred Temples that once stood there. In view of the parallel between woman and Temple, and harmful, even destructive attitudes toward women's sexual functions that have become embedded in post-Temple sacred ritual, the Three Weeks are an auspicious time to reformulate this observance of sacred service. We might focus the Three Weeks on the repair of our attitudes to and sanctification of women's sexual functions.

Methods & Observations

Under some circumstances, halakha embraces change and/or evolves over time with exposure to other cultural influences, or when new situations or knowledge arise. Sometimes halakhic authorities resist change, adhering to incoherences and contradictions that hurt and oppress. The insistence on stringent *nidda* observance of the seven extra so-called “clean” days compromises the ability of many couples to fulfill the first biblical commandment to bear children and causes anguish. The prescription of risky drugs to women in order to protect religious practice from change contradicts a Torah obligation to look after ourselves exceptionally well. Like all halakha, ultimately the choice about how to observe the *nidda* practices is our responsibility.

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