

*Articoli/Articles*

## BLOOD IN ANCIENT JEWISH CULTURE

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### SUMMARY

*The article analyzes the Jewish attitude towards blood, conceived both as the vehicle of life, and as a polluting product of feminine bodies. The author analyzes numerous Biblical sources concerning the 'unapproachable' blood of menstruation, the role of blood in the generation of the fetus, the blood as source of illness, the practice of bloodletting, and finally the idea that male menstruation exists as a peculiarity of the Jews.*

### 1. Introduction

When Noah and his family stepped down from the Ark, they were blessed by the Lord, who delivered in their hands "*all that moves upon the earth*" (Gen. 9:2). There is however a strict condition to the killing and eating of animals (which was not granted to Adam):

*"But flesh with its life, which is its blood, you shall not eat. And surely your blood of your lives I will require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man" (Ibid. 9:4-5).*

This is one of the Noahide laws, enacted in the Bible for all humanity, long before the Decalogue. Nothing of the kind has been ruled in ancient civilizations, neither in Mesopotamia, nor in Egypt, nor in Greco-Roman lore.

Even before Noah, death is characterized by the spilling of blood. After Cain had killed his brother Abel, the Lord exclaimed:

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*"What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the ground. And now cursed you are from the earth, which has opened her mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand" (Gen. 4:10-11).*

The Hebrew text uses here in both verses the plural form (i.e., bloods), which is interpreted in the Talmud as including Abel's blood and the blood of all the descendants he would have generated. Another interpretation suggests that Cain did not know wherefrom the soul leaves the body, and therefore hit and injured Abel in many places, until he reached his neck (b. Sanhedrin 37a).

Blood is thus, in the Bible, the characteristic element of both life and death.

Moreover, blood (Heb. *dam*) is included in the word 'man' (Heb. *adam*), whereas *adam* is obviously derived from *adamah* (= earth, cf. Gen. 2:7).

The Midrash<sup>1</sup> (Lev. Rabba 15, 2) offers a homiletical reflection on the word *adam*:

*"Man (adam) is in a state of balance, half water and half blood. If he is worthy, none of these is in excess on the other. If sinful, however, either the water is in excess and he becomes hydropic (hydropikos), or the blood is in excess and he becomes 'leprous' (metsora). This is how adam (may be understood): "or blood" (o-dam)".*

I guess this passage may be interpreted as follows: If blood or water are in excess with regard to their normal (balanced) state, such and such diseases appear. Dropsy (*hydropikos*) is quite evident, but why 'leprous'? *Tsara`at* (here *metsora*, the leprous), is a term used in post-biblical literature for any kind of erythema, or red eruption of the skin. The idea is that in case of plethora, the blood oozes from the vessels, hence the red color of the skin.

## 2. Blood in Scripture

The word *dam*, in all its forms, appears 322 times in the Hebrew Bible, of which 145 times in the Pentateuch and 177 times in the Prophets and Hagiographa. The context is mainly threefold: 1) The

definition of life and death; 2) Sacrificial offerings; 3) Menstrual blood. To which we might add the topic "Blood and circumcision," although this is rather developed in the Talmud.

### 2.1 Blood is the seat (or vehicle) of life

This basic principle in biblical anthropology is closely related to the interdiction of consuming blood. We read (Deut. 12:23-25):

*"Only be sure that you eat not the blood. For the blood is the life. And you may not eat the life with the flesh. You shall not eat it, you shall pour it upon the earth like water; you shall not eat it, in order that it may go well with you and with your children after you, when you will do that which is right in the eyes of the Lord"<sup>2</sup>.*

This injunction appears in similar terms in Leviticus 17:14:

*"For the life of all flesh is its blood, on which its life depends. Therefore I said to the Children of Israel, you shall not eat the blood of any kind of flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood, whoever eats it shall be cut off"<sup>3</sup>.*

A few verses above, there is a significantly different version, where strangers who reside among the Children of Israel are included in the strict interdiction of eating blood. And the text continues as follows:

*"For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls. For it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul" (Lev. 17:11).*

According to the first quote, the life (Heb. *nefesh*) is its blood, whereas the second says that life is in the blood. There is moreover a third formulation that seems rather strange, if taken literally. The context is the following: If someone has hunted birds or animals for food, their blood must be poured out and covered with dust,

*"For the life of all flesh, its blood is in its life (Heb. *damo benafsho hu*)" (Lev. 17:13).*

Obviously, the literal translation can hardly be retained. According to the 11th century commentator Rabbi Salomon Yitshaqi ("Rashi"), one should understand it as follows: "*Its blood is for it like its life*". Hence the KJV translation reads<sup>4</sup>: "*For the life of all flesh is its blood, on which its life depends*".

Rabbi Moses ben Nahman ("Ramban", 13th cent.) takes the term *nefesh* (life) as meaning here rather 'body' - I would say 'organism.' He translates therefore: "*The life of all flesh is, in its organism, its blood*".

Rabbi Obadia Sforno (Italy, 15-16th cent.) explains that the (principle of) life of any living being is its blood, that is to say, the bloody spirit (Heb. *ha-eid ha-damii*). He obviously has in mind the *spiritus vitalis* (or *pneuma zootikon*) of the ancients.

We should however be very careful not to read the Bible with the eyes of ancient physicians, in the anachronistic perspective of Greek physiology. It is true that the three Hebrew terms usually understood (rather superficially) as meaning 'the soul' - *nefesh*, *ruah*, *neshamah* - are semantically related to 'breathing'<sup>5</sup>. *Neshamah* is the spiritual, immortal soul instilled by the Lord. *Ruah* is the breath of life. And *nefesh* (or *nefesh hayah*) is the vital principle. The latter phrase is applied in Scripture to both animals and humans<sup>6</sup>, it may also be seen as meaning 'living organism, or 'living being'. *Nefesh* sometimes also designates a person, an individual, as in Lev. 2:1 - "*If anyone will bring an offering ...*"

When a person dies, his/her *nefesh* disappears<sup>7</sup>. It may thus be considered as the most essential factor of human life, and is intimately associated with blood.

Another quote is relevant to our topic. It says (Lev. 19:16): "*Do not stand [aside] on [seeing] the blood of your neighbor [in danger]*". The King James Version has, quite literally: "*Neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbor*", whereas the Koren Bible is more explicit: "*Neither shalt thou stand aside when mischief befalls thy neighbor*". Be this as it may, 'blood' stands here clearly for 'life'.

## 2.2 The Blood of Covenant

The blood of the covenant (Heb. *dam berit*) was in talmudic times related to the practice of circumcision. In the Bible, it is mentioned in the context of the first offering after the Revelation (Ex. 24:4-8):

*"And Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said: Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you concerning all these words"*.

The second mention is in the Prophetic Writings (Zach. 9:11):

*"... Because of the blood of your covenant, I have sent forth your prisoners from the pit in which there was no water"*.

Most commentators consider that this covenant refers to the former quote, while others assert that it refers to the blood of circumcision. In the *Talmud* and *Midrash*<sup>8</sup> it designates the blood spilled during circumcision. It is stated that a child who is born without a foreskin must go through a procedure involving a minute incision, in order to give issue to a drop of blood (b. Shabbat 135a).

Another biblical episode may be recalled in this context. Before leaving Egypt, the Children of Israel were requested to sacrifice a lamb (Ex. 12:7.13),

*"And they shall take the blood and put it on the two side-posts and on the upper door-post of the houses [...]. And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague will not be upon you to destroy you ..."*

According to the *Midrash*<sup>9</sup> some blood of the lamb was mixed with blood of circumcision and smeared on the door-posts, filling thus an apotropaic function.

## 2.3 The Blood Avenger

The blood avenger is called in Hebrew *go'el ha-dam*, lit. the redeemer of the blood.

*"The revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer: when he meets him, he shall slay him" (Num. 35:19).*

However, in case the murder has been performed without intention, the 'culprit' will be saved from the hand of the avenger, and will abide in one of the "cities of refuge".

*"Lest the avenger of blood pursue the slayer, while his heart is hot and overtake him [...] and slay him, though he was not worthy of death" (Deut. 19:6).*

Most commentaries consider that intentional murder must in any case be substantiated by judicial authorities. Who knows whether this function of 'revenge' was ever carried out ...

On the other hand, anybody should feel responsible whenever he/she sees someone in danger. This is clearly stated in Lev. 19:16, as follows:

*"Do not stand [aside] on [seeing] the blood of your neighbor [in danger]".*

Here again, 'blood' stands quite clearly for 'life'.

#### 2.4 Blood and Sacrificial Offerings

Without describing in detail the different kinds of animal sacrifices, let us only stress here the importance of pouring out their blood. Some blood was sprinkled on the side or on the horns of the altar, or else on the veil. The rest was drained out at the base of the altar. Blood was also smeared on specific places in the process of purification, as for someone who had recovered from "biblical leprosy"<sup>10</sup>.

The sprinkling of the blood by the priest was symbolically meant to represent atonement for a sin committed, or for having been put in a state of impurity. It was as if the person who brought the animal to the priest was expiating with his own soul/life/blood, and the spilling of the animal's blood regenerated his/her own being<sup>11</sup>.

It appears thus that expiation, atonement and purification - are the theological categories related to the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifices.

#### 2.5 Menstrual Blood and Metrorrhagia

Menstrual blood is called in Hebrew *dam niddah*, i.e., the blood of (the woman who is) remote, or distant - read 'unapproachable'. The periods are nicely called in Scripture *derekh ha-nashim*, i.e., the 'way of women'.

A woman who has an issue of blood is called *zavah*. We read (Lev. 15:19-20):

*"And if a woman has an issue, and her issue in her flesh is blood<sup>12</sup>, she shall be seven days in her menstrual separation. And whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening. And everything that she lies upon in her separation shall be unclean; everything also that she sits upon shall be unclean".*

In case a man has intercourse with a menstruating woman, he will be unclean for seven days as well (ibid. 15:24). If such intercourse is performed knowingly, both protagonists incur the death penalty, however its implementation is left to the Heavenly Court<sup>13</sup>.

A menstruating woman is thus unclean and 'unapproachable' for her husband for seven days<sup>14</sup>, irrespective to the duration of bleeding. This biblical injunction has however been modified in talmudic legislation, as will be shown further.

In case a woman has an issue of blood unrelated to menses, the Bible rules as follows:

*"And if a woman has an issue of her blood many days, not in the time of her menstruation, or if it runs beyond the time of her menstruation, all the days of the issue her uncleanness shall be as (for) the days of her menstruation: she shall be unclean [...]. But when she will be cleansed of her issue, then she shall number to herself seven days, and after that she shall be clean" (Lev. 15:25-28).*

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In this case, the woman remains unclean seven days *after* the full cessation of the metrorrhagia<sup>15</sup>. This should be kept in mind, in view of the later talmudic ruling.

Let us remark that there are in the Bible no superstitious practices related to menstruation. The transmission of impurity by contact, or even through intermediary factors (bed, chair) pertains to cultural anthropology, neither to superstition, nor to medicine.

A menstruating woman is sometimes called *davah*, i.e., 'ailing' (cf. Lev. 15:3; 20:18). This term includes both physical and psychological uneasiness. I like to render the derived noun *madveh* by 'affection,' thus stressing the affective dimension of pain. Is this due to an unconscious feeling of losing part of her 'principle of life'? Or perhaps, in as given context, could it be a reaction to the fact that she is not (yet) pregnant? Wishing to remain on the safe side, let us just say that she feels 'unwell'.

### 3. Blood in the Talmud

#### 3.1 Blood in Dietary Laws

Meat of permitted animals can only be cooked and eaten once blood has been evacuated as thoroughly as possible. The term *kosher*, i.e., fit, permitted, ritually lawful, is widely known in non-Jewish circles. Blood may be evacuated in two ways, either by salting the meat, or by roasting it on the grill. Without going into more detail, let us remark that most of the blood has been evacuated previously during the process of ritual slaughtering (Heb. *shehitah*). The animal is suspended head down, in order to drain its blood as thoroughly as possible.

Regarding the issue of blood, and without relationship to dietary laws, there is in the Talmud an interesting figure of speech: "*Blood in (i.e., with) which the soul issues*" (Heb. *dam she-ha-neshamah yotset bo*). This designs blood that sprouts forth in a jet, in a continuous flow<sup>16</sup>. The first issue - for instance in bloodletting - as well as the last drops (Heb. *dam tamtsit*) are not included in this definition.

#### 3.2 Menstrual Blood

Only the blood coming from the matrix confers uncleanness. The uterus is called either *rehem* (a biblical term), or *meqor* (the fountain, the source - of blood, cf. Lev. 20:18), or *heder* (the [inner] chamber), or *eim* (the mother - so in old English), or *qever* (lit. the grave [in which the embryo is like buried], cf. b. Shabbat 129a).

Five denominations for one organ<sup>17</sup>, this obviously shows its ontological importance. One of these terms is relevant to our topic, the 'fountain' of blood. Consequently, the blood that issues from other parts of the genital organs does not confer uncleanness.

According to Rabbi Meir (2nd cent.) one should not marry a woman who has never menstruated (b. Niddah 12b). Incidentally, the Essenes - a Jewish sect that flourished around the first century C.E. - at least those who married, imposed on their putative wives a test of fecundity<sup>18</sup>.

Regarding the length of the period through which a menstruating woman is 'unapproachable' (Heb. *niddah*) to her husband, talmudic sages of the 4th century decided to assimilate menstruation to other kinds of bloody issues. From then on, a menstruating woman could not be approached during the days that she "sees blood", to which the sages added seven days of 'cleaning'. Then she has to take a full (ritual) bath in the evening. This law is implemented by religious Jews to this very day. It is quite remarkable that talmudic authorities had the legal power to change a biblical law, it illustrates the plasticity of Jewish law (Heb. *halakhah*).

Another important remark is that the impurity (or uncleanness - Heb. *tum'ah*) of the woman or of those who touched her, or her bed, chair etc., only hampered them from approaching the Holy Temple. The laws regarding purity have therefore no practical implication since the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., with the exception of the rules concerning intercourse.

#### 3.3 Physiology and Embryology

The generation of the fetus is described as follows in the Midrash<sup>19</sup>:

*"The womb (here eim = the mother) of the woman is full of blood [...] and by the Lord's will a drop of semen (Heb. labnut - lit. white matter) falls into it - at once the fetus (lit. 'child') is created. A metaphor: Put some milk in a dish, add some (curdling) substance, at once the milk is (like) congealed and stands still"*<sup>20</sup>.

The coagulation metaphor can be found in ancient medical literature, particularly in Aristotle's *De Generatione* (1, 327a 15-26). The retained blood of the mother is thus the primary matter from which the fetus develops, whereas the male semen is seen as the active element: it changes the status of the blood from being liquid into solid matter. The female part is passive, whereas the male seed is active. However the blood of the woman was sometimes considered as being the "female seed"<sup>21</sup>. Such a theory had an impact on the origin of the sex of the offspring, and is indeed documented in the Talmud and in biblical commentaries.

For Aristotle, however, the female does not contribute any semen. We read (ibid. 729a 22):

*"If, then, the male stands for the effective and active, and the female [...] for the passive, it follows that what the female would contribute to the semen of the male would not be semen, but material for the semen to work upon"*<sup>22</sup>.

For the Talmudists, the blood of the fetus comes from the mother. We read (b. Niddah 31a):

*"There are three associates in (the creation of) man: the Lord, the father and the mother. The father generates (lit. 'sows') the white (seed), from which bones, sinews, nails, the brain that is in the head, and the white of the eyes develop. The mother generates the red, from which derive skin and flesh, blood, hair, and the black (part of) the eye. The Lord contributes spirit (Heb. ruah), the soul (Heb. neshamah), the brightness of the face (i.e., countenance), the sight of the eyes, the hearing of the ears, the speech of the mouth, walking of the feet, and faculties of knowledge, understanding and discerning"*.

Preuss calls this excursus a 'moral teaching'<sup>23</sup>. To me it seems rather that it pertains to the field of cultural anthropology.

Incidentally, there is a very similar statement in ancient Hindu literature<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, Needham mentions that natives in New Guinea hold that red flesh is provided by the mother, whereas the white bones are provided by the father<sup>25</sup>. Blood in the main organs plays a central role in talmudic lore.

The liver is the source of blood - as stated in Galenic physiology<sup>26</sup>. It is also the seat of anger, but this is due to the bile - not to blood. Its name (Heb. *kaved* = heavy) is apparently related to the fact that it is the heaviest of all organs.

The spleen (Heb. *tehol*) is red and looks like blood, it is however a 'fatty' organ. The sage Mar Samuel, who was well trained in medical knowledge, used to eat a dish of spleen on the day he was bled<sup>27</sup>. It was considered that blood issuing from the spleen when opened did not come from within the organ - such blood would have been forbidden (cf. b. *Kerithut* 21b), but from the walls of the organ. As in other ancient sources, the spleen was considered as the seat of laughter (it eliminates the black bile, which generates melancholia - however this is not recorded in the Talmud)<sup>28</sup>.

The heart (Heb. *lev*, Aram. *libba*) is not described in the Talmud. It is the seat of intellect, of emotions, of psychological traits, rather than of blood. However it is stated that "blood from the heart" may not be consumed (together with blood from the spleen, the kidneys, i.a.). Blood vessels are mentioned in the following context (b. *Hullin* 45b):

*"Ameimar (ca. 400 C.E.) said in the name of Rabbi Nahman, There are three (great) vessels, one extends to the heart, one to the lung, and one to the liver"*.

Regarding the first mentioned, probably the aorta, there was a discussion between two sages (4th cent.), whether any injury to this vessel, or only a serious one, renders the animal unfit.

Slaughtering (Heb. *shehitah*) must be performed with a single cut in the neck (by which both carotid arteries will be severed), thus most of the animal's blood will be spilled in a short time.

Identification of blood was performed in talmudic times with several kinds of reagents. The context was not medical, the aim of such 'tests' being rather to ascertain whether a red stain on a garment or on a bed-cloth was blood or not - again a problem of cleanness / uncleanness.

Seven reagents are listed in the Mishnah (m. Niddah 9, 6-7), most of them alkaline solutions. Among them mineral alkaline (*nitron*), vegetal alkaline (*borit*) and urine "that has fermented for three days". Color nuances were also taken into consideration (b. Niddah 19a).

Soranus, the noted Roman 'gynecologist' (2nd cent.) mentioned differences of color as means of differentiating between blood coming from the uterus and from other parts of the body.<sup>29</sup> Pliny, on the other hand, mentions that garments stained with menstrual blood could only be cleansed with the woman's own urine<sup>30</sup>.

According to Rabbi Zeira (beg. 4th cent.) the color of menstrual blood may be different from one country to another (b. Niddah 20b). Some among talmudic authorities were considered as 'specialists' in such differential diagnosis of blood stains (ibid.).

### 3.4 Pathology

A striking medical aphorism of the Talmud reads (b. Baba Bathra 58b):

*"At the head of all [causes of] diseases, I am, the blood; And at the head of all cures am I, the wine".*

This reference to the central role played by *plethora* (excess of blood) in ancient pathology, hence the prevalence of bloodletting<sup>31</sup>, echoes medical theory and practice in these times (and throughout the Middle Ages). The analogy between the color of blood and of wine is evident and may be related to the ancient concept of 'sympathy'. In fact, the importance of plethora in pathology may be traced to the Alexandrian period, although Erasistratus put strict limits to the amount and frequency of bleeding<sup>32</sup>.

Another medical aphorism may be added here. It reads (b. Bekhorot 44b):

*"Said Rabbah bar Rav Huna (d. 322 C.E.): Plenty of blood - plenty of shehin; Plenty of semen - plenty of tsara'at".*

Both *shehin* and *tsara'at* are skin conditions, the latter has been translated above as "Biblical Leprosy". The commentator Rabbi Salomon Yitshaqi ('Rashi') explains:

*"One who has (too?) much blood and does not have bloodletting performed, will develop a condition called shehin. No precise diagnosis can be forwarded, this condition may include any erythematous skin disease"<sup>33</sup>.*

Blood flow from the genital organs may occur to women (Heb. *zavah*) and to males (Heb. *zav*). Such conditions are mentioned in the Bible (Lev. 15:1-15; 19-30) and further discussed in the Talmud<sup>34</sup>.

Regarding women, the flux mentioned in Leviticus is clearly abnormal genital bleeding. As regards men, it may be any kind of discharge, including gonorrhoea. Such a flux confers uncleanness to both men and women. After cessation of the issue, they count seven days for 'cleansing', they bathe ritually, wash their clothes, and are clean. It should be remarked that only blood coming "from the fountain" (i.e., from the uterus) confers impurity to the woman. Thus in case it is made clear that the blood comes from a vaginal wound, she remains clean. The Talmudists mention the use of a speculum (b. Niddah 66a), which permits such a differential diagnosis.

Anemia and hemophilia are mentioned in the Talmud, although the term hemophilia was obviously unknown.

The disease *yeraqon*, mentioned in Scripture (Deut. 28:22) is usually translated as 'icterus' (jaundice). Hebrew *yaraq* means both 'green' and 'yellow', depending on the context. In the Talmud, it is also used for 'pale'<sup>35</sup>. One child was brought to a sage who found

that he was pale (*yaroq*), he therefore postponed circumcision "until the baby's blood will fall into him"<sup>36</sup>. Three former children had died following circumcision, but this one survived.

It was then ruled that if two children of the same mother have died after circumcision (apparently from bleeding), the third child should not be circumcised<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, in case this happens to the sons of two sisters, the son of another sister should not be circumcised. On the same folio of the Talmud (Yevamot 64b), it says that there are families in which the blood is fluid, while in others it coagulates (easily). Again, the term 'hemophilia' does not appear, but it is striking to find in these case histories an illustration of the genetic transmission of the disease, which was first described in academic medicine at the beginning of the 19th century<sup>38</sup>. Bloody spittle and bloody stools will be now briefly considered.

If someone who has a flux from his genitals spits on a person who is clean, the latter becomes unclean and must wash his/her clothes. He/she must also take a full bath, and remains unclean till the evening (Lev. 15:8).

On the other hand, blood on the stools, or issuing with urine, does not confer uncleanness. However blood that issues before, or after urination, does confer uncleanness to a woman, for it might be of uterine origin.

We spoke above of a speculum used for vaginal or uterine examination. There is however no documentation of such a procedure made by male physicians or sages. Women usually performed these examinations alone, or helped by other women. Or else, a stained garment was presented to local rabbinical authorities, who decided whether 1) this was a bloodstain, and 2) whether it was of uterine origin or not.

Fasting is related to blood, for it causes a diminution of both fat and blood. Fasting also causes halitosis (i.e., offensive breath, Heb. reiah ha-peh)<sup>39</sup>.

One sage prayed after a fast as follows: "Be it Thy will that the fat and blood that I have lost be as if it had been offered on the altar, and accepted".

### 3.5 Bloodletting

Bloodletting is mentioned quite often in both versions of the Talmud (Palestinian and Babylonian). Only a few aspects will be mentioned here<sup>40</sup>. It was performed more often as a preventive means than as a therapeutic procedure.

Mar Samuel (3rd cent.), who was knowledgeable on both medicine and astronomy, made several statements on bloodletting. It should be performed preventively once a month. For the elderly the frequency should be decreased<sup>41</sup>. Samuel also quoted an aphorism that reads:

*"After bloodletting, [one should] drink at once, [whereas] eating [may be postponed] up to [the time requested to walk] one and a half mile".*

It is stated elsewhere (*Derekh Erets Rabba*, no author named): "Whoever fasts after bloodletting, his blood is on his head", which means that he forfeits his life. Another anonymous dictum reads (Shabbat 70a):

*"If one does six things [one after the other], he will die immediately: he comes back from a tiring journey, has then bloodletting performed, goes to the bath, drinks and gets drunk, sleeps on the floor and has intercourse".*

One Rabbi remarked: "(He dies) only if he does these six things in that order of succession". Another adds: "In that sequence, he dies; in another order, he becomes sick".

Just after this statement, it says: "There are eight things that are dangerous if (done in a) great amount, but beneficial in moderate quantity". The last item cited is bloodletting<sup>42</sup>.

Now back to Mar Samuel. We said that he was knowledgeable not only on medical lore, but also on astronomy - which in these days included astrology. Mar Samuel said that bloodletting should be performed on Sundays, Wednesdays or Fridays. On Tuesdays, however, the planet Mars rules<sup>43</sup> and this is dangerous. On Mondays

and Thursdays, the Accuser (Satan) is on the watch, for the Heavenly Court is in session<sup>44</sup>.

Specific days in the month were also considered dangerous, and therefore unfit for bloodletting.

Be this as it may, bloodletting was then the medical operation per excellence, as featured in the following story (b. Berakhot 60a):

*"Said Rabbi Aha (4th cent.): Whoever enters [a clinic in order to sustain] bloodletting should say (i.e., pray): 'May it be Thy will that this procedure provide healing to me, and that You heal me, for [...] Your healing is true [healing], as it is hardly the province of men to heal, although they took to it'"<sup>45</sup>.*

Then comes another sage - of higher repute - named Abbaye, who ruled as follows:

*"One should not speak in this way (i.e., as Rabbi Aha did), for we have been taught by the school of Rabbi Yishmael (2nd cent.) that [it is written in Scripture]: 'And he will be thoroughly healed' (Ex. 21:19), which confers permission to heal [to human healers]"*.

Bloodletting is thus the paradigmatic example chosen by the Talmudists to feature healing practices, which obviously include preventive means.

#### 4. The Blood of Virginitv; the Blood of Desire

##### 4.1 The Blood of Virginitv

The Blood of Virginitv (Heb. *dam bethulim*) is the blood issuing at defloration of the bride. This blood does not confer uncleanness (m. Niddah 11, 1). It is due to a local wound, not to bleeding from the uterus. However, talmudic authorities of the third century ruled that after the first full intercourse the husband must withdraw, as if that blood were "from the source". No intercourse is thus permitted through the next seven days. One noteworthy reason for this ruling is that during the first intercourse the bride is usually apprehensive,

even often fainthearted, and this could cause her to menstruate. In that case, "blood of virginitv" could well become mixed with menstrual blood<sup>46</sup>.

We do not discuss here the case of the wife accused of not having shown the signs of virginitv, her parents being invited to bring to the Elders "the tokens of virginitv" (Deut. 22:13-21).

##### 4.2 The Blood of Desire

The Blood of Desire (Heb. *dam himmud*) is an issue of blood, which may occur when a young woman is demanded in marriage and greets this with pleasure (b. Niddah 66a). Although such an issue does not confer uncleanness according to Scripture, the Rabbis were more stringent, again fearing that desire might cause untimely menstruation. Such a 'psychosomatic' reaction might also be triggered by announcement of oncoming marriage projects, or when the girl is requested to prepare herself for the wedding.

It was therefore ruled that whenever a woman has accepted an offer of marriage, she must wait seven days before being allowed to have sexual relations.

It has been remarked that a small discharge of blood may happen around ovulation, when indeed desire is more readily aroused in women<sup>47</sup>. Another case is documented on the same folio (Niddah 66a):

*"Once came before Rabbi Yohanan a woman who had observed an issue of blood whenever she came home after her ritual bath. - It might be, he said to her, that the envy of the women in your town has risen against you. Make therefore arrangements for your marital relations to take place at the riverside (Lit. on the river). Others said (i.e., counseled): Reveal [your problems] to your friends (in order that the envy of the other women be checked)"*.

It appears that bleeding after the ritual bath (which made intercourse impossible) could, in the eyes of these Talmudists, be caused by witchcraft, initiated by jealousy.

### 5. Blood and anti-semitism

Although not based on biblical and/or talmudic literature, we will briefly comment on two allegations, which led to attacks against the Jews, the hateful blood libels, and the curious theory of male menstruation.

#### 5.1 Blood libels

Blood libels have been recorded since antiquity. In his work *Against Apion*, Josephus Flavius mentions that the Jews were accused of kidnapping a Greek victim once a year, fattening him in their Temple, then sacrificing him and partaking of his flesh<sup>48</sup>.

In the Middle Ages, the alleged victims were most frequently children, the first recorded case being William of Norwich (1144), the most widely circulated one being Simon of Trent (Italy, 1475). We want only to stress here some medical aspects, which could be added to theological data.

In the libel of Trnava (Slovakia, 1494)<sup>49</sup>, the Jews were accused of having drawn blood from a Christian boy, which could then be used for several medical purposes, such as: 1) to heal the wound of circumcision; 2) as an aphrodisiac; 3) for alleviation of the inconveniences of menstruation - for women *and for males*.

Blood libels were staged well into the 19th century and even early 20th century, we only mention the Damascus affair (1840), the Tiszaeszlar<sup>50</sup> case (1882-3) and the Beilis case (1911).

Incidentally, we may mention here, regarding the use of human blood for medical purposes, that the Midrash (Ex. Rabba 1, 34) tells a story according to which Pharaoh, the Egyptian ruler who oppressed the Hebrews, was smitten with 'leprosy'. He was advised to bathe in human blood, and Hebrew children were specially slain for this purpose<sup>51</sup>. This is obviously not a historical document.

#### 5.2 Male Menstruation

Male Menstruation was through the Middle Ages and well into the Early Modern Period considered as a peculiarity of the Jews<sup>52</sup>.

In 17th century Spain, for instance, physicians mentioned this periodical issue of "impure blood", often associated with the frequency of hemorrhoids in Jewish males. This purging of impure blood 'demonstrated' the racial impurity of the Jews, it was also "a punishment for having spilled the blood of Christ". One Spanish author thus wrote: "*On Good Friday all Jewish men and women experience a flow of blood*". Juan Quiñones, a court physician to king Philip IV, sent a pamphlet to the inquisitor Fray Antonio de Sotomayor in 1632, advocating this symptom as a method for recognizing persons suspected of belonging to the Jewish race. These physicians apparently believed that male menstruation was an organic certainty.

### 6. Conclusions

There is an enormous amount of literature on the diverse aspects of the topic "Blood in ancient Jewish culture". Captions like "Blood in religion and folklore," 'Menstruation', or "Women in Judaism" are widely documented<sup>53</sup>.

The prohibition of eating blood in Jewish law has been discussed repeatedly as well<sup>54</sup>.

Blood as a symbol of life has been the subject of studies such as those of Marc Vervenne and Jacob Milgrom (among many others).

Theologians, Anthropologists, Historians, specialists of Jewish law and folklore, of feministic studies, have discussed such topics, using diverse approaches and methods.

My aim in this essay was only to provide a widespread documentation on the use and meaning of ritual and cultural practices related to blood, as exposed in Bible, Talmud and Midrash. A detailed discussion of these diverse aspects was obviously beyond the scope of the present essay.

Without wishing to reduce the Israelite culture to the Hebrew language (although Christian mysticism considered Hebrew as the basic and primitive language of humanity)<sup>55</sup>, the fact that the word *adam* (man) contains the word *dam* (blood) and is itself contained in *adamah* (earth) - is indeed striking and meaningful.

The human being is a creature "of flesh and blood" (*basar vadam*)<sup>56</sup> and blood is the vehicle, or even the essence of life. The preservation, and optimal realization of human life being foremost in the Jewish tradition, one should not be surprised to meet with such a rich material on this vast and essential topic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND NOTES

1. The *Midrash* is a homiletic exegesis of Scripture (*Midrash Aggada*), which originated at the time of the *Mishnah* (final edition at beginning of 3rd century), and even before, but extended well into the Middle Ages. The texts we refer to in this essay are Genesis Rabba, Exodus Rabba, etc., on the Pentateuch.
2. See also Deut. 12:16 (very similar wording).
3. See also Lev. 3:17 - "It shall be a perpetual statute for your generations throughout your dwellings, that you eat neither fat nor blood", and Lev. 7:26-27.
4. We used the King James Version, revised by Harold Fish (Koren Bible, 1986).
5. Breathing is indeed the easily discernable external sign of life, its absence remaining (in principle) the sign of death in Jewish law.
6. See Gen. 1:24 (animals) and 2:7 (humans).
7. See CARNY P., *The Soul (Nephesh) in the Bible - A Psychosomatic Unity*. Koroth 1982; 8 (5-6):122-133.
8. See j.Yebamot 8, 5 and Gen. Rabba 46, 2 on Gen. 17:1.
9. See Ex. Rabba 17, 3. The blood of circumcision was supposed to evoke the merits of Abraham, who was the first to have practiced the procedure.
10. We say "Biblical leprosy," its signs and symptoms being different from those of leprosy. This much debated topic is clearly beyond our present study. See Lev. 14:6-7; 14.
11. This idea is developed in the exegesis of the 'sacrifice' of Isaac - we should rather say "the binding of Isaac" - where the ram that was actually sacrificed and was offered "under (i.e., in place of) his (Abraham's) son. See commentary of R. Salomon Yitshaqi ad loc.
12. "In her flesh": the Hebrew *basar* (flesh) is often used as an euphemism for 'genital organs'. As for "the way of women," see Gen. 31:35, also Gen. 18:11 where it says '*orah ka-nashim*' (the way for women).
13. See Lev. 18:19 and 20:18.
14. The woman is 'unapproachable' during seven days, counted from the beginning of menstruation.

15. Metrorrhagia means bleeding from the womb, cf. Gr. *metra* = uterus.
16. Cf. b. Kerithut 22a, also ibid. 20b. See also Menahot 21a and Hullin 113a.
17. The Midrash also uses the term *metron*, derived from the Greek *metra*. See Gen. Rabba 47, 2.
18. See Josephus, *Jewish War* 2, 161. More on this "test of fecundity" in my book *Medicine and Hygiene in the Works of Flavius Josephus*. Leiden, Brill, 1994, pp. 167-168.
19. See Lev. Rabba 14:9, on Lev. 12:2 "If a woman have conceived seed and born a male child ..." It seems thus that the Bible accepts the theory of female seed, although this remains open to discussion.
20. See Job 10:10 "Have you not poured me out like milk, and curdled me like cheese?"
21. See above, note 19. For a talmudic source, see b. Niddah 25b.
22. See NEEDHAM J., *A History of Embryology*. New York 1959, p. 43 (also pp. 77-80: "Contributions of Jewish Thinkers").
23. See PREUSS J., *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine* (trans. Fred Rosner). New York 1978, p. 387.
24. See (for instance) ZIMMER H. R., *Hindu Medicine*. Baltimore 1948, pp. 186-187.
25. See NEEDHAM J., note 22, above, p. 78, note 2.
26. More on the liver in b. Bekhorot 55a, also b. Hullin 111a. As for Galen, see Kuhn ed., vol. 3, p. 299.
27. See b. Hullin 101a, also b. Shabbat 129a. The Babylonian authority Mar Samuel had more to say about bloodletting (see below).
28. See PAGEL W., *The Smiling Spleen, Paracelsianism in Storm and Stress*. Basel 1984; in particular pp. 135; 138.
29. See *Soranus' Gynecology* (trans. Owsei Temkin), Baltimore 1956, p. 162 [III, 10]: "And some people in diagnosing the seat, say that the blood flowing from the vagina is thin, yellowish, and warm, while that from the uterus is thicker, darker, and colder".
30. See Pliny, *Natural History*, 28, 23.
31. See above, Introduction, quote from Lev. Rabba 15:2.
32. See VON STADEN H., *Herophilus: The Art of Medicine in Early Alexandria*. Cambridge 1989, pp. 401-402, and for Galen's comment, p. 413.
33. Still toward the end of the 16th century, Johann Colerus advised against *morbilli* to cover the child with a red cloth and to give him some wine to drink. Cf. PEIPER A., *Chronik der Kinderheilkunde*, Leipzig 1966, p. 558.
34. See b. Niddah 43ab (*zav*), and 54b (*zavah*).
35. It is also mentioned as depicting the color of the face of someone who has been frightened. See PREUSS J., see note 23 above, p. 166.
36. See b. Shabbat 134a and Tos. Shabbat 15, 8.

37. Another opinion has that only the fourth child should not be circumcised.
38. Hemophilia is transmitted by women, but affects only male children. Cf. OTTO J.C., *An Account of an Haemorrhagic Disposition Existing in Certain Families*. Med. Reposit. 1803; 6:1-4.
39. See b. Berakhot 17a, and Abot de-Rabbi Nathan 6, 3.
40. See PREUSS J., note 23, above, pp. 248-257 - on the various aspects of bloodletting in the Talmud.
41. See b. Shabbat 129ab.
42. The other things cited are walking, intercourse, wealth, work, wine, a long-cooked dish (Heb. *hamin*), and sleep.
43. The planet Mars appears in the French *mardi*, the Italian *martedì* and the Spanish *Martes*. In b. Shabbat 156a it says that someone born under the influence of the planet Mars might become a circumciser, a butcher, or a bloodletter. A criminal is also mentioned - all of these pre-destined to shed blood.
44. Human courts were also, in ancient times, convened on Mondays and Thursdays. On these aspects, see PREUSS J., see note 23, above, pp. 253-254.
45. "They took to it": Heb. *ella she-nahagu*, lit. "they took the habit".
46. See j. Berakhot 2, 6.
47. See MEACHAM T., *Dam Himmud, Blood of Desire*. Korot 1995; 11:82-89.
48. See *Against Apion* 8 (95).
49. Trnava, German Tyrnau, Hungarian Nagyszombat. There was another case in the same city in 1536-1537.
50. On the Tiszaeszlár case, see Edith STERN's paper in Korot 1993-1994; 10:102-111.
51. It says that 150 children should be slain twice a day, and Pharaoh should bathe in their blood morning and evening.
52. See BEUSTERIEN J.L., *Jewish male menstruation in 17th century Spain*. Bull. Hist. Med. 1999; 73, 3:447-456.
53. See BEER I., *Blood discharge: On female impurity in the Priestly Code and in biblical literature*. In: *Feminist Companion to Exodus and Deuteronomy*. Sheffield 1994, pp. 152-164. Also DESTRO A., *The witness of times: An anthropological reading on Niddah*. In: *Reading Leviticus*. Sheffield 1996, pp. 124-138.
54. On the prohibition of eating blood, see SCHWARTZ B., *The prohibitions concerning the 'eating' of blood in Leviticus 17*. In: *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel*. Sheffield 1991, pp. 34-66. Also the earlier paper of GRINTZ J., 'Do not eat on the blood': *Reconsideration in setting and dating of the Priestly Code*. ASTI 1972; 8:78-105. On blood as a symbol of life, see VERVENNE M., *The blood is the life and the life is the blood: Blood as symbol of life in biblical tradition*. In: *Ritual and Sacrifice in the ancient Near East*. Louvain 1993, pp. 451-470. Also MILGROM J., *The Blood*

- Taboo: Blood should not be ingested because it contains life*. Bible Review 1997; (13 Aug.):21-46. An extended bibliography might have been added, but it was not my aim to discuss these aspects in this essay.
55. See for instance the work of Franz Mercurius van Helmont, the son of the physician V. HELMONT J.B., *Alphabeti vere Naturalis Hebraici Brevissima Delineatio*. Sulzbach 1667. This work featured a method for the education of the deaf-mutes, based on the Hebrew alphabet.
  56. This phrase does not appear in the Hebrew Bible. It may be found in the *Wisdom of Ben-Sira* (14:1 and 17:26). It is used quite frequently in the Talmud (cf. j. Berakhot 7, 4; b. Berakhot 28b, Pesahim 75b, 'Eruvin 19a, Sanhedrin 91a).

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