To Jonathan —
Blessings!

ReVISIONS
SEEING TORAH THROUGH A FEMINIST LENS

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KEY PORTER BOOKS
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments / 7
Foreword by Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg / 11
Introduction / 19

PART I. WOMEN IN THE TORAH / 35

Introduction / 37
Power and Powerlessness / 40
Male and Female: Were They Created: Eve, Lilith and the Snake / 44
Leah and Rachel: A Study in Relationships / 58
The Women of the Exodus Story: A Study in Community / 69
The Daughters of Tzelophehad / 83

PART II. BLOOD AND WATER: THE STUFF OF LIFE / 89

Introduction / 91
Blood and Its Symbolism in the Torah / 94
Menstruation and the Laws of Nidkhal / 100
A Jewish Feminist Reexamination of Menstruation / 104
Blood and Men: A Feminist Look at Brit Milah / 114
Women and Water in the Torah / 122
A Feminist Reexamination of Mikveh / 125

PART III. GOD, GODDESS, GENDER AND THE TORAH / 133

Introduction / 135
Searching for the Female Spirit in the Torah / 137
Female Imagery and Paganism / 149
The Place of the Goddess and Shekhinah in Judaism / 162
God-Language / 170

Epilogue / 177
Glossary / 181
Notes / 185
Bibliography and Suggested Further Reading / 191
Index / 195
God's holy place in the human body; they embody future generations and the spark of holiness to reproduce. Any emissions of blood or semen, whether normal or abnormal, are seen as entering that state of reproductive partnership. If thwarted, as in the case of menstrual blood not "in season" or semen not in intercourse, that partnership is not fulfilled. We wash in fresh waters, symbol of returning life, and offer sacrifice in sadness. Seen in the context of a society that believes that every manifestation of God, whether human or animal, is first and foremost commanded to procreate, and in procreating is most like God, strictures around the body and its emissions are highly symbolic and also utilitarian.

A JEWISH FEMINIST REEXAMINATION OF MENSTRUATION

The challenge is: How can we reappropriate the Torah's menstrual sections from a feminist viewpoint?

When I first got my period, I came home and told my mother, and I did not know what to expect. Upon hearing the news, my mother explained that when she got her period, her mother slapped her hard, and said, "Welcome to the pain of being a woman." But she wouldn't do that to me, oh no, she was a modern woman. She kissed me, and then gave me a little slap, just for tradition's sake. I did not know then, and I still do not know, to which tradition she was referring, though I suspect that many young women of the 1940s and 1950s received such little slaps. That was the only celebration many of us got in honor of becoming women.

Through the years, I have had my ups and downs with this monthly cycle. I have had cramps or no cramps, felt blue, felt
sensuous; I have felt impatient and wished it would be over. But I have never felt nothing. Menstruation has always been a sign for me: of my body working or "not working," of a miraculous inner system, of being female.

I go to the mikveh each month, not so I may be "kosher" for my husband—I’m no chicken product—but as a woman bidding farewell to a regular part of myself. I am a woman who needs some way to existentially experience and then bless special moments. I never feel physically or spiritually dirty during my cycle. I do, however, feel a need to realign myself, to rebalance my emotions and attentions, which have been different during those days. I pay attention to my cycle: its presence has been reassuring and its absence was the first sign—a most welcome and spiritual one—when I wanted to become pregnant.

Because I have learned to count the days and months by my own body, I have never understood why the Jewish tradition—such an essential part of my being—does not have a blessing for this regular monthly event. Surely a religion which boasts of a positive view of the body, a religion which has a blessing for an activity as mundane as going to the bathroom, would have a way to sacralize such a significant occurrence! The male composers of the liturgy, living in a world where modesty was central and women’s bodies were a mystery at best, were not able—or more likely, not willing—to imagine such a blessing. They simply never composed one. If they had, where would it be found—in the back of the prayerbook with other daily blessings? I sometimes wonder if we had such a blessing passed by mother to daughter, which has been lost. Have women always felt ambivalent about menstruation and thus never risen up to bless it, even in private, among themselves?

I cannot accept this neglect, and neither can my body, which is tied inexorably to my Jewish soul. I began searching for a bracha
(blessing) for menstruation years ago in rabbinical school. The first time we menstruate definitely deserves a more spiritual response than a slap! And menopause, the final parting with what has been a monthly event for years, deserves its recognition too.

I thought to invent a new bracha, then I decided to reinvent an old one. There is a prayer in the traditional daily and Shabbat service that many women and men across the denominational spectrum find difficult and offensive. It is found in the morning blessings, and in the Orthodox prayerbook appears as “Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has not made me a woman.” (Women say “who has made me according to Your will.”) Valiant attempts have been made to explain this as men’s gratefulness for the commandments that are incumbent upon them which would not be incumbent upon them if they were women. Another explanation is that it is a prayer of gratitude for not having to go through the pain of childbirth.

But whatever the fanciful or homiletic interpretations, this blessing remains a huge spiritual obstacle. I decided to tackle this negative expression, appropriate it, and turn it around for women.

Each month, at the time I see I have gotten my period, I say, “Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu melech ha-olam, she’asani ishah: Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the World, who has made me a woman.” It sets the mood for the rest of my month. It is always a revolutionary moment, too, this blessing of my menses/month, as I realize that the slightest change in wording, removing the le, changing the negative “who has not made me a woman” into the positive “who has made me a woman,” affirms my own holiness and sanctity in God’s eyes within the context of menstruation, not in spite of it. Sometimes I change the traditional opening of baruch atah to the feminine grammatical brucha at, and sometimes I use an opening which says “Blessed is the Source of Life.” But
whenever I say the blessing, I wish my mother had thought of this kind of acknowledgement when I was twelve.  

Naomi Goldenberg writes about the split between mind and body in modern Western religious thought. In such thought body is bad and mind is good; God is symbolized as closer to mind, or soul, or essence. “Godliness” means soul and therefore goodness. The absence of godliness means carnality and therefore evil. This bifurcation, she argues, is a result of monotheism. She writes, “... belief in transcendent entities may well encourage the devaluation of physical life.”

But feminists, even monotheistic ones, can reject this mind/body bifurcation. In the realm of menstruation and birth women have the most potent possibility of seeing ourselves as both body and spirit, an integrated whole. Our bleeding bodies, our creating bodies become a gateway to our souls. Our souls become a mirror of our bodies. We must hope it is possible to rescue the aspects of mystery inherent in menstruation. We can fully acknowledge the fearful elements of our being, being conscious of ourselves. Erich Neumann noted women in ancient times were conscious of themselves as the “subject and object of mysterious processes and as a vessel of transformation.” Seeing ourselves as we menstruate as “vessels of transformation” would undoubtedly change the aura of self-negation we have inherited.

We can emerge from this discussion with a sense of the *mysterium tremendum* of life and death, which is in our own corporeal female selves, if we speak in completely different terms. Let us not say we are clean or unclean; we are instead “in a time of power” or “finished with the time of power.” Sometimes I think of menstruation as a time of intense electrical charges—the charge of life and death—pulsing through my body. If you come too near such charges, they will hurt you. I need space and time to “neutralize” myself.
Though most of us would reject the menstrual huts of old, where women were sequestered until their menstrual period had passed, perhaps there is still some positive expression of separation we can reappropriate. A most eloquent argument for a positive identification of female blood with power is made by Penelope Washbourn in her article “Becoming Woman: Menstruation as Spiritual Challenge.” She terms menstruation a “crisis in self identity” for a young girl. Cultures that allow the girl to experience this time of physical and emotional change as one of upheaval help her perceive female sexuality gracefully. Those like our own that ignore the crisis aspect of menstruation, increase women’s anxiety rather than decrease it.

Washbourne writes:

Menstruation symbolizes the advent of a new power that is mana or “sacred.” A sacred power has life-giving and life-destroying possibilities, and in no case is mana to be taken lightly. A taboo expresses this feeling that something special, some holy power, is involved, and our response to it must be very careful. Even those societies which appear to have only negative attitudes toward menstruation—that is, place many restrictive taboos on the menstruating female and the community, are expressing a deep understanding of the essential sacredness of the event and of the need to ensure the beneficial effects of this sacred power. 47

How should we deal with the notion that the niddah is to be “put away,” far from men, only among other women? Washbourn suggests that seclusion, far from being oppressive, has an elevating aspect to it.

Another element of menstrual taboos that is frequently ignored is the
real need of the girl to withdraw psychologically and physically into solitude or into the presence of other women... The girl must wrestle with the meaning of her female identity, and withdrawal may have a positive function.48

We have lost the positive elements of being away from men. If we were to choose such seclusion voluntarily, and share our inner being, our sense of physical and spiritual power, and that "electrical charge" at menstruation time with other women, the older historical association with "menstrual huts" in some new, feminist form might be reappropriated.

Anthropologists and historians of ancient societies suggest that such menstrual separation was not always a negative experience. Monthly segregation in ancient societies was, as Erich Neumann suggests, a "movement of women into a sacred female precinct." He writes,

The mysterious occurrence of menstruation or pregnancy and the dangerous episode of childbearing make it necessary for the inexperienced woman to be initiated by those who are informed in such matters. The monthly "segregation" in the closed (i.e. taboo) sacral female precinct is only a logical continuation of the initiation that has occurred in this place at the first menstruation. Childbearing occurs in this same precinct, which is the natural, social and psychological center of the female group, ruled over by the old, experienced woman... It is important for the basic understanding of the magical efficacy of woman and of woman as a mana figure to bear in mind that woman necessarily experienced herself as subject and object of mysterious processes and as a vessel of transformation.49

Can we see such possibilities today? Can we use our menstrual
period, and even a return to the original biblical idea of separation—albeit now voluntary and with feminist goals—as a time to restore and rededicate ourselves as women apart from men? We live surrounded by men and patriarchy still. Could we use a monthly withdrawal from that arena into a solely female space?

Tamar Frankiel speaks of the need to escape from the societal pressure to perform equally well every day of the month, regardless of our own inner rhythms during ovulation and menstruation. “We might be forgiven for some oversights during ‘that time of the month’ but these are considered weaknesses rather than signs we might do better directing our energy in another path… we have no positive vision of this time.” She goes on to suggest, “This is our solitude, our darkness, our hiddenness—an opportunity to go inward, that can lead to a spiritual focus.”

All of these concepts, it can be argued, lie within the traditional world view of the Torah. All of these scenarios create a beautiful aura around seclusion, but one that may be accused of apologetics. We are left to wonder who created this seclusion in ancient times: nurturing, wise women or squeamish men?

The Orthodox practice today of the period of niddah lasting fourteen days (that is, the addition of seven extra days, causing normal menstrual impurity to last a total of fourteen days) is a later rabbinic addendum. These additional days are sometimes called “white days” for the white cloth that must be inserted vaginally to determine that no stain of blood is left. This dictum is not found in the Torah at all.

The original biblical system of impurity was directed at keeping all those with discharges, both men and women, from approaching the holy district of the Temple, considered the place of God’s presence. But the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. caused a radical shift in Jewish life which included a change of the
focus of these purity laws. Without the Temple, without a center that could contract impurity, it made sense for most of the purity laws to fall into disuse. The rabbis legislated that, after the destruction of the Temple, the laws of purity for men were eliminated, but remained intact for women. Thus, while there was parallelism in the Torah for men and women’s purity after emissions, the Rabbis removed that parallelism, making the purity laws relevant in the main only to women. Additionally, they claimed that, since the Temple was gone, the laws of who might approach the Tabernacle were rendered irrelevant. But women did not approach the Tabernacle directly, so the laws of ritually impurity still applied to them.

By the time of the rabbis, the focus of those laws had also shifted. Once about holiness and approach, life mixing with death, power and danger, they now became about sexual relations with a husband. Rachel Biale notes, “The justification for these laws was shifted from the realm of purity laws to the arena of sexual taboos. ... The transformation also meant a shift from the sphere of public, cultic life to the sphere of family life.” As Jewish society in the third century C.E. moved closer to the Roman ideal, women’s role, like that of their Roman counterparts, became more and more circumscribed. The home replaced the Temple, now gone, as the center of Jewish life. The husband replaced the priest as symbol of religious authority in the home.

The notion that menstruation was a powerful symbol of life and death became painted over with ideas of female filth, pollution, and disgust at the whole female bodily experience. No longer were women secluded, either by their own design or by others’ will, because they were dangerously close to the source of death and life. Today, women separate during their menses because they are forbidden to their husbands. We have lost the
element of holiness, retaining only the element of taboo. Blu Greenberg puts it well, when she says, “It falls to this generation of women, Jewish women with a new sense of self, to restore that element of holiness to our bodies, our selves.”

Menstruation defies the borders of life and death prevalent in the Torah. The prohibitions against mixing the milk of the mother (life) with the slaughtered kid (death); against taking the mother bird with her young; and against slaughtering an animal with its young on the same day all point to the intense delineation of boundaries between living and dying, and their significance in a society that did not tolerate the mixing of opposites. Menstruation defies those boundaries, month after month. Women bleed from their life-giving organs, they give birth on the cusp of death, and yet they live. Menstruation defies male definitions of the absolute black-and-white lines of life or death.

Rejoice, Fair Zion! Raise a shout, Fair Jerusalem... You, for your part, have released your prisoners from the dry pit, for the sake of the blood of your covenant. (Zechariah 9: 9 and 11)

It is common in the Hebrew Bible that Zion and Jerusalem are imaged as feminine. However, this is the only place in the entire Hebrew Bible where the phrase “blood of covenant” is used in relation to those “feminine entities.” It is especially noteworthy that the noun, “your covenant” in the Hebrew appears in a feminine form. The traditional commentators, Rashi and Ibn Ezra among others, explain away this anomaly. They claim the feminine grammar is no indication of anything feminine, a mistake as it were. (They do not, however, make a similar claim in regards to masculine grammar used throughout the Bible, as being no indication of anything masculine!) They assert that the verse refers to the blood of circumcision.
But let us look at it in its feminine literality. It does not say "the covenant of blood," but rather, "your covenant of blood," suggesting that all "daughters of Zion" have that covenant of blood. For its sake, prisoners are released from the dry pit (death). It is through menstruation—from "adulthood" when we truly accept our responsibilities as Jews, through the elder years when bleeding stops and wisdom starts—that the entire world is saved from death. Saved from the dry pit—the pit in which there is no water—no womb, no regeneration, no rebirth.

Menstrual blood is women's covenantal blood, just as brit milah, circumcision, is men's. Women indeed have a brit inscribed in their flesh as an everlasting covenant. Women's covenant of blood is not just once, at eight days, but every month. We are "initiated" when we begin to bleed. If blood seals covenant, then women's blood seals our covenant, at puberty and through a natural flow rather than a human cut. This is a universal covenant, which all women, not just Jews, experience.

We need to rethink the Jewish quality we can ascribe to this brit of blood. What if girl children were named at eight days or at birth, but "brought into the covenant" at menstruation with a Jewish rite? Since at the brit milah one of the prayers assures us that "in your blood, you will live," for women, the blessing is perhaps even more true. The whole world, all of life in essence, lives through our blood.

Blood and water, the stuff of life. God could have had it any other way. We humans could have reproduced by fission, by splitting of atoms, by hatching from eggs, by cell mitosis. We don't. We reproduce through blood and water. We should say a blessing to announce our blood's arrival. We should bid it farewell at the end of the flow. It is our electrical charge; the holy spark that society belittles, that commerce exploits through unnecessary product lines, that patriarchal interpretation has reduced to little more than an embarrassing and dirty physical blemish. By reinterpreting it for ourselves, no matter how far-fetched that interpretation might seem, we restore ourselves to wholeness and insist on female physical holiness being part of that wholeness.
Among the traces of living substances
The marine colors of colorless form
Ever so slowly submerged
In timeless, spaceless, motionless mode
In the water, life-giving, life-sustaining
As the foetus’ domain.
Sarah-Louise Giroux 3 Elul 5754
(Written upon her conversion to Judaism at the mikveh)

Can we take this traditional water ritual and give it a new twist? Perhaps feminists can reappropriate this ancient ritual and see water as a powerfully positive reaffirmation of our wholeness and our purity.

Physically, the mikveh is a small pool of “living water” about the size of a jacuzzi, but without jets. The water must be part rain water, or water taken from a natural source, so that it is truly “living.” Traditionally, those ready to change their existential status go to mikveh to mark that shift. You go into the water as one kind of person, you come out another. People converting to Judaism are initiated in the mikveh. Brides about to become married women go, before the wedding ceremony. Some grooms now choose to go as well.

In the Orthodox community, the most common use of the mikveh is by married women after their menstrual cycle. During those seven days, and for an additional seven afterward, menstruating wives have sexually separated from their husbands, as legislated by the Torah in the laws of niddah in Leviticus. It has become inexorably linked to having a husband, to making oneself ready to
return to sexual relations with one's male partner, and to being connected to a man. According to tradition (although some argue that this is not law), divorced or single women, and lesbians, even though menstruating, do not go to mikveh. It is assumed they are not having sexual relations with a man, perpetuating the connection of mikveh with women in relationship to men.

No matter how we try to skirt the issue, no matter how we rewrite history or remake images, the bottom line is that a traditional rationale sees the mikveh as the last necessary step before resuming sexual relations within a heterosexual marriage, a step commanded by God. Any other reason for going—to spiritually renew oneself after one's cycle, to cleanse from the menstrual "whisper of death," to link oneself to Jewish women's "herstory," to reground after feeling cramps and bloating, to deal with a trauma like divorce or chemotherapy—are deemed "interesting" and "unique" and perhaps even "lovely." But according to strict traditionalists, these reasons are secondary and superfluous. This adds up to a great deal of resentment toward the mikveh among liberal and non-Orthodox women. We need to redefine the use of the mikveh as an act of "taking back the water."

I am a Reform Jew, a rabbi and a feminist, and I go to the mikveh every month. For me, it is an experience of reappropriation, a rebirth: first of myself as a woman and a Jew, a regrounding after my period or after times of stress or upheaval; then a rebirth of the entire mikveh ritual itself. The mikveh has been taken from me by sexist interpretations, by my experiences with Orthodox "family purity" committees who run communal mikvaot as Orthodox monopolies, by a history of male biases, fears of menstruation and superstitions. I return each month to "take back the water."
To take back the water means we reject its principal import as a tool of marriage and we open up other avenues for meaning. To take back the water means to open the mikveh up to women not attached to men. In order to do that, we may have to build alternative mikvaot, run by women, for women, following women’s rules, not funded or run “behind the scenes” by male rabbis with family purity laws or their own denominational territories to protect.

For those in small towns, using a lake or stream, or a dip in the ocean, is a wonderful alternative. Go in groups at times when privacy is assured. Where there is a community Jewish center, steps could be taken to ensure a truly cross-denominational representation building a small mikveh on a site which already has a swimming pool. Women who have jacuzzis in their homes might agree to turn the hot tub into a mikveh once a month!

To take back the waters means to dip on Rosh Chodesh, when the moon and the sea and women’s cycles become one. To take back the water means to open the mikveh during the day, so women don’t have to sneak in under cover of darkness. (If we aren’t ashamed of our bodies, why do we need to hide our immersions? If we reject the notion that mikveh is only for the right to resume sex with our husbands, we won’t have to be modest about going.)

As Miriam’s well gave strength to the Israelites, so too can the mikveh give strength back to Jewish women. Water is the symbol of birth—now it can be a symbol of conscious feminist rebirth. To take back the water means to separate it from the laws of niddah, so that women feel free to experience its spiritual power even if they do not feel moved to acknowledge their own menstruation, menopause, or sexual separation from their partners. To take back the water means to turn the mikveh into a Jewish
women's center: with Torah learning and books available, maybe even feminist classes, not just wig advertisements and pamphlets on keeping a kosher home.

We can appropriate the "spiritual cleansing" properties of immersion, called in Hebrew tevilah, for a variety of other occasions. In the past ten years, I have witnessed the powerful emotional response of converts and I have sought to re-create that experience for Jews in other life situations.

I myself have experienced this transformative power. The first time I went to mikveh was before my ordination. I wanted to be "clean" as I approached the day I began my spiritual calling. I knew that ordination day itself would be moving, but also hectic and public. I wanted a private way to prepare. Because I was not married at the time, the woman in charge of overseeing immersions, sometimes called the "mikveh lady," was hesitant and unsure. She needed a category into which I could fit. Somehow I managed to convince her that I was like a bride! I felt the mikveh experience in a deeply personal way as I cleansed myself of personal doubts and obstacles to my ordination.

I used mikveh again after I completed the thirty-day mourning period, sheloshim, for my sister. The intensity of that month and my own grief was so strong that I needed an equally strong ritual to mark my reentry into normal life. The mikveh soothed me, and reassured me that life could somehow go on.

I call the use of the mikveh for people who have experienced radical, intense life changes or trauma, "spiritual therapy." I use the mikveh as a tool for that kind of pastoral encounter. I remember the first situation that arose enabling me to offer the mikveh in this way. A woman who had been a congregant of mine sought a spiritual outlet after she had been raped by the handyman she had hired to work in her home. She was a single mother and emotion-
ally fragile. After months of therapy, she still seemed to be stuck on her feelings of being “dirty.” Her therapist, knowing how involved she was in her Judaism and how much comfort that brought her, came to me to inquire whether there was some Jewish ritual that could help this woman remove the feeling of being “tainted.” I suggested the mikveh could be a tool for cleansing both her body and soul.

We tried it. In the water she meditated on a clean, pure image of herself, shining and shimmering with light. The mikveh performed no magic and she, of course, stayed in therapy. However, her therapist reported that having a Jewish framework in which this woman could rid herself of the “stain” she felt, was crucial to the successful completion of therapy and her ability to go back to work, synagogue, friends and family with a sense of peace.

Since that incident, in every therapeutic situation when I have suggested the use of mikveh, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. Some Jewish therapists and pastoral counsellors now see the link between sexuality, spirituality and spiritual purity and are either using the mikveh as a tool with clients, or referring them to rabbis who will take them. Situations in which rabbis might suggest mikveh have been rape, incest, marital infidelity and reconciliation, infertility, loss of pregnancy, menopause, invasive surgery, milestone birthdays, end of mourning, crisis points and life-changing situations.

Of course, mikveh does not take the place of therapy. It is not voodoo. It will not bring fertility or good luck and it cannot radically change personalities or situations. It will never cure deep-rooted problems. It offers no quick-fix, but acts as one part of a healing process which expressed in a Jewish context. In fact, it is probably more symbolism than anything else: a bath unlike any other bath. According to therapist Yonah Klem,
at home, the bathroom is familiar and the water, the same that usually comes out of the tap. Leaving the ease and familiarity of home to bathe in a different bathroom, and then to go further to immerse in the natural waters in a pool that has no counterpart anywhere else, also builds expectation and intent. 62

Like any new ritual, the use of the mikveh as a spiritual tool requires preparation and creativity. It also requires new liturgy to accompany the ceremony and an open, supportive atmosphere. We generally do a good job of marking life’s traumas and transforming moments with gatherings and parties. The mikveh helps us frame those life-changing occurrences as moments in Jewish time. Because there is little precedent for such non-traditional mikveh ceremonies, we have the freedom and flexibility to create rituals that speak to the heart and move people to positive action. We can use the mikveh in as many new ways as we want, inventing as we go along. Some ceremonies will be written by rabbis and some by the participants themselves. Some will have music and others will use candles. I have encouraged mothers of the bride to offer blessings as she dips in the water. One man converting to Judaism sang a song he had written as he entered the water. 53

Rachel Adler has written,

When Jewish women who were not Orthodox appropriated my reframing of immersion in the mikveh to mark occurrences for which no ritual had existed, they taught me an important lesson about the possibility of salvage... The makers have imbued these rituals with a different understanding of what purity means. 64
The mikveh is now about salvage: salvage of a woman’s reality, salvage of ourselves as spiritually whole but spiritually fragile, salvage of a tradition that was once put upon us but which we have embraced as our own. Salvage is a way of feminists embracing a tradition with a potential that exists beyond that particular tradition’s narrow scope.

Some ask: Why bother at all to take back the water? Why not simply abandon an institution which makes us so uncomfortable? My answer: Because we have so little that is ours. We put on a tallis, but in doing so we share a man’s ritual garb. We need symbols we can own, not merely rent. The water belongs to us: It is the fluid of our own bodies and a deeply moving experience of connection to Mother Earth. We acknowledge that to be female is to bleed. To bleed is to give and also lose life. To give and also lose life is to be dangerously close to the edge. To be close to the edge requires regrounding, re-centering, a rebirth. To be reborn is to enter the waters of the womb once again. To do that, women must be in control of the process and the product, of the intention and the action. We are now in the process of, as Adler calls it, salvage.

I believe we can also reappropriate the traditional use of mikveh. If menstruation as the symbol of power and danger can be reappropriated to the feminist agenda, its symbolism can be celebrated with the use of mikveh. The goal is to have a positive physicality, a cycle that begins with blessings and ends with blessings, the first and last time, and every time. Water and blood, blood and water—the stuff we are made of, we stand in awe of. We acknowledge our own power and our own limitations.

If the goal is to also to acknowledge our sensuality, what could be more luxurious than this long bath in nature’s mother-waters?
The water softly caresses us as we immerse naked and let it lap and lick and touch every part of our sexual being. We dip with our fingers and toes spread; but with our legs spread too, so the water touches the vagina, and we feel its coolness on the core of our sexual heat. Then we pray for sexual satisfaction this month, for joining, for union; we pray for playfulness and abandon. The waters rebirth us as sexual beings as much as Jewish beings.

This “water of Eden” carries us back to our first encounter with Lilith, that sexual, sensual mate of Adam, that free part of ourselves which we now immerse.