

The Myth of Jewish Male Menstruation

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Most of the medieval Christian antisemitic tropes, such as Jews as ritual murderers and cash-grubbing moneylenders, are hauntingly familiar. Hideous depictions associated Jews with Satan. Christians ascribed to Jews deformed bodily characteristics including pointed noses, horns, and hemorrhoids.^[1] But one such bodily trope, though nearly ubiquitous since the Middle Ages, has received far less attention: Jewish men were thought to menstruate on a monthly basis. The significance of this claim, which degrades Jewish men by associating them with all women, thus demeaning both populations, is especially important during an era during which we are acutely attuned to the value of equality.

The earliest explicit source asserting that Jewish men menstruate appears in the early thirteenth century, when, in 1221, Jacques de Vitry, a successful clerical proponent of the Albigensian Crusade in southern France and the Fifth Crusade in the East, wrote of the Jews:

And it is said that they have a flux of blood every month. God has smitten them in their hinter parts, and put them to perpetual opprobrium ([Psalms 78:66](#)). After they slew their true brother, Abel [figured metaphorically as Christ], they were made wanderers and fugitives over the earth, cursed like Cain, with a trembling head, that is, a quaking heart, fearing both day and night, not believing in his life.^[2]

The larger theological and historical context for the cleric's claim is a curious mix of New Testament verses suggesting that Judas was punished for betraying Jesus by "his bowels gush[ing] out" ([Acts 1:18-19](#)), the notion that female menstruation was a punishment for Eve's original sin,^[3] and de Vitry's contention that Jewish men menstruated because they were "unwarlike and weak even as women." For de Vitry, Jewish males' regular loss of blood explained their consequent need for Christian blood, which allegedly could be collected by murdering Christian children. Whatever the initial impetus, from the thirteenth century on, Christians increasingly believed that Jewish men experienced monthly menses.

Beginning with the fourteenth century, the menstruation libel appeared with greater frequency in the works of numerous Christian preachers.^[4] At the end of the Middle Ages, we find perhaps the best-known menstruation accusation: in Tyrnau, Austria in 1494, one official account of the blood libel accusations records that "suffering from menstruation, both men and women alike, [the Jews] have noted that the blood of a Christian constitutes an excellent remedy."

The medieval version of the menstruation/blood libel accusation finds expression in a jarring passage in the 1966 Bernard Malamud novel *The Fixer*, where the Russian interrogator asks Yakov Bok, who stands accused of ritual murder:

"Do you know that in the Middle Ages Jewish men were said to menstruate?" Yakov looked at him in surprise and fright. "I don't know anything about that, your honor, although I don't see how it could be" (93).^[5]

Yakov Bok is not the only modern Jewish literary personality to fall prey to this stereotype: Leopold Bloom, the famed Jewish protagonist of James Joyce's 1922 *Ulysses*, actually menstruates.^[6]

In the late medieval and early modern periods, the male menstruation motif became closely connected to the theory of the four humors, the remarkably long-lived attempt to explain the workings of the human body by exploring the balance between bodily fluids. Men were generally thought of as emitting extra heat, whereas women were considered cool. While most men were generally able to reduce their heat naturally, the effeminate Jewish male was seen as unable to do so and thus required menstruation in order to achieve bodily equilibrium.^[7] And while it is unclear how widespread the menstruation trope was during the Middle Ages, by the early modern period it had become conventional wisdom. One sixteenth-century British author writes that "Jews, men, as well as females, are punished *cursu menstruo sanguinis*, with a very frequent blood-fluxe."^[8] In seventeenth-century Spain, it was generally accepted that Jewish men menstruated.^[9] We find references to Jewish male menstruation in Germany in 1614 and England in 1649. That in 1789, Abbe Gregoire, a French champion of the Jewish right to Emancipation, felt the need to denounce the belief

that male Jews menstruate—even as he acknowledged that “almost all have scanty beards, a common mark of effeminate temperaments”—suggests that the canard remained commonplace through the French Revolution.^[10]

By the turn of the twentieth century, the old claim of Jewish male menses was closely tied to the new motif of the sissy Jewish male and was well on its way to being transformed into a racial-gender theory. Austrian and Germanic culture in the late 1800s and early 1900s prized physical prowess. It is therefore unsurprising that in early twentieth-century Germany, the menstruating Jewish man appears prominently in Nazi-era antisemitic literature. In 1935, Theodor Fritsch, a bookseller and member of the SA, argued that “the Jew has a different sexuality than the Teuton; he [the Jew] will and cannot understand it [German sexual identity].” Fritsch was asserting that the Jewish male was somehow not fully male. His proof? Jewish male menstruation.^[11]

This trope, which persisted for over 700 years, is pernicious not only because it caricatures Jewish men, but also because it uses misogyny to promote antisemitism: Jewish males’ inferiority was said to be manifest in their effeminate physical qualities. De Vitry encapsulates the canard pithily: “[The Jews] have become unwarlike and weak even as women and it is said that they have a flux of blood every month.” Of course, the claim is absurd. Like Yakov Bok, we do not possibly “see how it could be.” But that never bothered virulent antisemites.

That bias against Jewish men and all women went hand-in-hand for some 700 years suggests that these two forms of discrimination were closely connected, historically and perhaps even conceptually. The woman, who, as Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her 1949 feminist manifesto *The Second Sex*, was considered the “Other” or outsider by many societies throughout history, was the perfect tool with which Christians could stigmatize the Jew, the ultimate religious and ethnic outsider.

Today, thankfully, we have seen dramatic improvements in Jewish-Christian relations, and the male menstruation screed happily no longer occupies an important place in popular culture. Still, even if largely forgotten, it remains an important canard to recall: by telling the story, we can better remember the importance of standing for the humanity of Jews and all people, regardless of sex or religious creed.

[1] See Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism* (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 2002), 44-52.

[2] Translation from Irven M. Resnick, “Medieval roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses,” *Harvard Theological Review* 93, no. 3 (2000): 259.

[3] Sander L. Gilman, *The Jewish Self: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 74-75.

[4] Resnick, *ibid.*, 260.

[5] My thanks to my former colleague and past bibliographer of the Bernard Malamud Society, Dr. Eileen Watts, for introducing me to Malamud and *The Fixer*.

[6] See Austin Briggs, "Why Leopold Bloom Menstruates," in *Bloomsday 100: Essays on Ulysses*, eds. Morris Beja and Anne Fogarty (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2009), 41-61.

[7] John L. Beusterien, "Jewish Male Menstruation in Seventeenth-Century Spain," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 73, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 447-456.

[8] David S. Katz, "Shylock's Gender Jewish Male Menstruation in Early Modern England," *The Review of English Studies* 50, no. 200 (November 1999): 440-462.

[9] Beusterien, *ibid.*, 447.

[10] See the excerpt from his "An Essay on the Physical, Moral and Political Reformation of the Jews," in *The Jew in the Modern World*, eds. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (Oxford University Press, 1980), 52. Cited by Resnick, *ibid.*, 253 n. 48. See also "Introduction" in *German Jews, Gender, and History*, eds. Benjamin Maria Baader, Sharon Gillerman, and Paul Lerner (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 2012), 1.

[11] Sander L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 98.