

TAMPONS AND TORAH

By: Nina Sachs

Shabbat Shalom. My name is Nina Sachs, I am a junior at Francis Parker in Chicago, and I get my period. That got your attention, didn't it. Here I am, a young woman, declaring one of the only things that makes me one, and yet you all seem a little shocked. You may think that I am going rogue from my actual D'var Torah, but I promise this is all part of the plan. Periods - without them, none of us would even be here.

Now, you may be wondering how periods are connected to Judaism, but the Torah actually has quite a bit to say about the menstrual cycle. In fact, tonight's Torah portion is on the first plague: blood – how fitting. In the Torah, the word, Niddah, is used to describe a woman during menstruation before she has immersed herself in the ritual baths, called *mikveh*. The Torah prohibits any kind of sexual activity while a woman is menstruating. In Leviticus it says that “a woman in her (state of) *niddah* impurity should not come close with intent to reveal her nudity [to her husband]”. So, in biblical times, a woman had to be physically separated from her husband, and all men, during her period. Additionally, a woman couldn't even hand anything to her husband because it was considered impure, and the object would have to be “re” blessed by a rabbi. As you can see, Niddah carries a very negative connotation. It could even be translated as “to cast one out” and was also used in the context of sexually transmitted diseases. The early stigmatization of women's periods contributed to the isolation and embarrassment that many women felt. Many different religious teachings and cultural upbringings contribute to this feeling in some way. From the beginning of time, women have been trained that this natural, essential, and remarkable function of our bodies is something that should isolate and shame us.

This reality contributes to a general lack of confidence and even self-loathing that many women have felt and continue to feel.

For one example, let's take a look at Nigeria. This country is just one place among many where both the stigma and knowledge surrounding periods remains more or less the same as it was hundreds of years ago. One of the most shocking and disappointing things I read about while researching this topic is that the number one reason why girls in underdeveloped countries drop out of school is because they don't have access to sanitary supplies, can't afford them, and aren't educated about their bodies. According to UNESCO, 1 in 10 girls will drop out of school because of their periods. In Nigeria, sixty-five percent of women and girls can't afford disposable sanitary pads which means that they must use cloth that needs to be hand washed and dried. Not only do these girls have no access to tampons and pads, but the stigma and lack of knowledge about female anatomy makes it almost impossible for girls to have confidence during their period. As a result, girls choose not to go to school because of period cramps and fear of their blood being visible. Often, after continually missing one week out of every month of school, the girls fall behind, and subsequently, drop out of school. It is so disheartening that simply because of a lack of sanitary supplies, a girl is forced to forfeit her education.

Fortunately, there are organizations all over the world that are working to provide knowledge and supplies to women and girls who don't have access to them. In 2009, a study done by the Ministry of Education in Nigeria found that a greater distribution of sanitary pads coupled with sexual and reproductive health education would increase attendance in school by 3.5 days per month. This is a small yet important step.

Poverty also plays a big role in the life of a woman while she's menstruating. If a woman doesn't have enough money to buy pads or tampons, she has to make them out of a reusable

material. In a place without easy access to clean water, it can be difficult to maintain hygienic sanitary pads which could ultimately compromise a woman's health. But even in places like America, and even Evanston, where clean water is available, poverty takes a particular toll on women. Up until a few months ago, I had never thought about the challenges of being a homeless or impoverished woman in our community. Because sanitary products are not a part of health care, women have to spend extra money to purchase them. Over the course of one year, a woman will spend close to one hundred and fifty dollars on menstruation related products alone. Having no protection during a period or having no way to keep a reusable pad clean is an unfortunate reality for far too many homeless women today.

One of the tenants of Judaism is mitzvah, and as a young Jewish woman I feel strongly that my religion expects me to do more. The more I learned about this issue the harder it became for me to do nothing. Right now, I'm starting small and working on a local level. Last year, I hosted a bake sale at my school where kids and teachers bought baked goods with either money or tampons. I was a little bit nervous about how it would all go over, but I was pleasantly surprised. After only an hour and a half, we collected almost one hundred and fifty tampons and pads and seventy-five dollars. This year I have started a more formal program called Tampon Tuesdays. On the first Tuesday of every month, I, with the help of some classmates, host bake sales, sticker sales, or events that raise awareness and funds for women who can't afford or don't have access to feminine hygiene products. I will be donating the tampons and pads to Maria Shelter in Hyde Park. Concurrently, given the significant challenges internationally, the cash will be donated to Days for Girls International, an international organization that works to provide reusable pads to women and girls as well as educate young women about their bodies and promote education for young women. And, the good news is that other schools are getting

involved - there's a Tampon Tuesday group starting at The Chicago Laboratory school and, hopefully, at the Latin school as well. So far, Tampon Tuesdays has collected over a thousand tampons and pads and has raised over five hundred dollars. The link between Judaism and women's issues is important and meaningful. I welcome the opportunity to talk to you more about this personally later this evening. Shabbat Shalom.