



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

27 Tazria—Sacred Seeds of Life

Text

ויקרא יב

א וידבר יהוה אל-משה לאמר. ב דבר אל-בני ישראל לאמר אשה כי תזריע וילדה זכר וטמאה שבעת ימים כימי נדת דוֹתה תטמא. ג וביום השמיני ימול בשר ערלתו. ד ושל שים יום ושלֹשֶׁת ימים תשב בדמי טהרה בכל-קֹדֶשׁ ל'א-תגע ואל-המקדש ל'א תב'א עד-מל'את ימי טהרה. ה ואם-נקבה תלד וטמאה שבעים כנדתה וששים יום וששת ימים תשב על-דמי טהרה. ו ובמל'את ימי טהרה לבן או לבת תביא כבש בן-שנתו לע לה ובן-יונה או-תר לחטאת אל-פתח אהל-מועד אל-הכֹּהֵן. ז והקריבו לפני יהוה וכפר עליה וטהרה ממקֹר דמיה ז'את תורת הי' לדת לזכר או לנקבה. ח ואם-ל'א תמצא ידה די שֶׁה ולקחה שתי-תרים או שני בני יונה אחד לע לה ואחד לחטאת וכפר עליה הכֹּהֵן וטהרה. {פ}

Vayiqra 12

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ² Speak to the Israelite people thus: When a woman at childbirth bears a male, she shall be *t'meah*-impure for seven days; she shall be *t'meah*-impure as at the time of her menstrual infirmity. — ³ On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. — ⁴ She shall remain in a state of blood purification for thirty-three days: she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary until her period of purification is completed. ⁵ If she bears a female, she shall be *t'meah*-impure for two weeks as during her menstruation, and she shall remain in a state of blood purification for sixty-six days.

⁶ On the completion of her period of purification, for either son or daughter, she shall bring to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. ⁷ He shall offer it before the Lord and make expiation on her behalf; she shall then be pure from her flow of blood. Such are the rituals concerning her who bears a child, male or female. ⁸ If, however, her means do not suffice for a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. The priest shall make expiation on her behalf, and she shall be pure.

Context

Parashat Tazria begins with the rituals for *tahara-purification* after childbirth. The rest of the parasha instructs about how the priests are to diagnose, observe and deal with skin afflictions—swelling, rashes, discoloration, and with eruptions in cloth in order to maintain the purity of the people and the sacredness of the *Mishkan*.

Explorations

Parashat Tazria opens with a discussion of the status of women after childbirth in relation to the sacred space. The Torah first describes the progression of her status from *tumah* to *taharah* after the birth of a boy. (The terms *tumah* and *taharah* are difficult to translate – *tumah* is a status that disables proximity to, and contact with, the sacred realm while *taharah* is a process that enables, or prepares for, contact with the sacred realm.) After the birth of a boy, a woman is



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t'meah for seven days, and on the eighth day, the boy is circumcised. According to [Chezkuni](#), the circumcision is on the eighth day because then the parents are re-joined and joyous after a week-long ritual separation following the birth and bleeding. She then remains in *d'mei taharah* (the blood of *taharah*) for 33 days until she enters the sacred space of the *Mishkan* bringing her two offerings. Her status changes from the first seven to the last 33 days--during the first seven, she is considered to be *t'meah*, particularly in respect to her spouse and her surroundings. During the last 33 days, she is prohibited from contact with sacred things that pertain to the *Mishkan*; she transitions toward re-entering the sacred domain.

Embodying a sacred process of Creation, a woman becomes *t'meah*; *she is* excluded from the sacred space of the *Mishkan*. In describing the birth of a girl, the Torah states that the mother is *t'meah* for 14 days after which she remains in the blood of *taharah* for 66 days before entering the sacred space of the *Mishkan* to bring the same two offerings—*sin* and burnt offerings.

Gender issues in this Torah passage are evident and troubling. The talmud considers,

What sin could this woman possibly have committed that should require her to offer a sin-offering and a burnt-offering after giving birth to a child? When a woman is in the throes of childbirth, she experiences terrible pain, fear, and sometimes life-threatening conditions. This can cause her to wish that she had never become pregnant and swear to herself that she will never do so again. Of course, once the delivery is past and her health is restored, she forgets all about her negative feelings and the oath she made under duress. She continues to lead her life as before. Her offerings atone for the oath she uttered under duress and has no intention of adhering to them, once calm has been restored. *Niddah 31b*

These attitudes that attribute pain and recklessness to birthing women contribute to a negative construction of female gender.

The period of *tumah* and the blood of *taharah* are doubled after the birth of a girl. The Torah thereby emphasizes sex differences from the moment of birth. The emphasis on sex difference constructs gender at the very outset of life.

The Torah sets up two parallel gender-segregated systems. Our parasha begins, “[A woman who conceives seed and gives birth](#)” (Vayiqra 12:2). The absence of the father from this text reflects the absence of men from involvement in childbirth and reproduction. Isolating childbirth as a female experience excludes men from this powerful, embodied sacred enactment of Creation, life-giving, and nurture. On the other hand, the Torah particularly excludes post-partum (and menstruating) women from the domain of the Tabernacle, and women from its sacred work in general. Parashat Tazria focuses attention on the labor of life-giving and nurture. The life-giving process of childbirth directly replicates the divine Creation of humanity while the *Mishkan* manipulates the materials of Creation. Much of the sacred service institutes the ritual sacrifice of life—animals and birds. This cultural division of roles socializes women to nurture life and men to take life. In our post-Tabernacle world, life-giving and sustaining endure as potential forms of sacred work. Though they are of utmost significance to all of humanity, they are mainly restricted to women, while men perpetuate war and sacrifice, too-often desecrating the sanctity



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of life.

Questions for Discussion

Our culture also inculcates gender constructions and assumptions from the outset of life. At the birth of a baby, people immediately ask, “Is it a boy or a girl?” Evaluate advantages and disadvantages to constructing gender difference in our societies. Consider the effects of gender differences on opportunities, expectations, mobility, earning, roles, status, behavior *et cetera*.

Regardless of your stage of life or partnership, how might you take a more active interest in the procreation of humanity – and involve men? Educate about the sacred processes of pregnancy, birth, and the months that follow. Discuss opportunities to involve men in these processes. How might you support expecting, new, and veteran parents in your community and make sure that they are not isolated during the intense first months of care-giving and onward -- in your synagogue and in the homes of members of your neighborhood and community.

Here are some reading suggestions for positive and empowered birth:

- ***The Complete Book of Pregnancy and Childbirth*** by Sheila Kitzinger, Camilla Jessel, Nancy Durrell McKenna, *a globally recognized resource book on natural pregnancy and childbirth.*
- ***Active Birth*** by Janet Balaskas, *an accessible overview of joyous labor.*
- ***The Birth Partner*** by Penny Simkin, *for anyone attending a birth in a supportive role.*
- ***Birth Reborn*** by Michael Odent, *expresses some of the ecstasy and profound intimacy of pregnancy and birthing.*

Discuss the im/possibility of connections between the dwindling importance and status of rituals that once channeled men's efforts and power toward the sacred realm and the proliferation of male competitiveness, aggression, war, and destruction in our societies and in the global order.

What effects might more men engaging in life-giving and caring have on the overwhelmingly male institutions of life-taking, particularly violence and war?

How can we better empower men's roles as significant partners to the procreation of life? How can men engage ever more fully in the miraculous opportunities, responsibilities, and revelatory perspective of pregnancy, birth, and nurture, education, and caring for the vulnerable?

Study Links

Here are a few videos of natural childbirth at home:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI5-jx_vcp4

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBdlug0KMLc&feature=grec_index

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXdD4XKaQt8&NR=1>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wu7XPsj1AZY&feature=related>

[This](#) is a Chabad woman's response to the question “Why the difference in the laws of ritual



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purity between the birth of males and females?”

[Here](#) is Michel Odent's controversial view about men *not* attending births, and some feedback. Evaluate to what extent the grounds of the argument reflect the poor condition of marriage relationships and men's lack of familiarity with and commitment to birth.

[This video clip](#) introduces a critique of contemporary medicalized birthing practice.

See this site about the teaching and practice of [Birth for Joy](#).

This is the mission statement of [Joy in Birthing](#),

Our purpose is to inform, inspire and empower parents to consciously participate in the miracle of conception, pregnancy and natural childbirth. Using new and age-old wisdom, we are committed to assisting families in achieving the birthing experience they desire and helping babies to be born gently and safely. We strive to usher in generations of human beings who will be an inherently positive and peaceful presence on the planet.

Summary of Issues

The Torah's definition of the sacredness of the *Mishkan* excludes people in particular transitory states involved with life-giving, particularly childbirth. This exclusion solidifies a gender-segregated social order that occupies women with giving life and men with sacrificing life.

Methods & Observations

Reading the Torah through the lens of gender exposes how cultures construct gender-segregated structures in the social order.

Contact

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