

PARASHAH: Tazria (She conceives)
ADDRESS: Vayikra (Leviticus) 12:1-13:59
READING DATE: Shabbat
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

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Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amin,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

This is **Parashat Tazria**. In regular years **Tazria** is read with the upcoming Parashah of **M'tzora**. Due to the nature of this week's discussion I must rely heavily upon the wisdom of the Chazal (our sages of blessed memory), as well as notes compiled during my various researches. I must admit that this particular topic is beyond my professional expertise. Please pardon my limitations. Our Sidra begins with the laws concerning a woman after childbirth:

"When a woman at childbirth bears a male, she shall be unclean seven days... --On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. --She shall remain in a state of blood purification for thirty-three days; she shall not touch any consecrated thing" (Lev. 12:2-4).

The verse, "On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised," is marked in the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation as a parenthetical remark: it indeed appears to be out of place, for the verse before it and those after it all concern the unclean state of the woman and the process of her purification. Why then is the commandment to circumcise a son placed smack in the middle of the laws concerning the woman at childbirth?

Several answers to this perplexing question have been suggested:

An explanation which does not stray too far from the plain sense of the text can be found in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (*Targum Yerushalmi*), who renders verse

4 thus: "And on the eighth day she shall be permitted to her husband and as for the son, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." That is to say, the eighth day, which is the day of circumcision, also marks the first day of the mother's 'clean' period, for as we know the thirty-three days that follow the seven unclean days in the case of the birth of a son [the seven days, as verse 12:2 makes clear, are equivalent to the seven days of ritual uncleanness in the menstrual period] are days of ritual "cleanness" during which marital relations are permitted. (So too the sixty-six days following fourteen unclean days after the birth of a daughter.) The Torah, according to the Targum, seeks to draw a connection between the mother's ritual purity and the commandment of circumcision, essentially saying as follows: On the eighth day, when the days of purity of the mother commence, on that very day the son shall be circumcised.

This was apparently how the *Tanna* R. Simeon bar Yohai understood the order of the verses, as we are told in the Talmud (*Niddah* 31b): "Disciples asked R. Simeon bar Yohai: Why does the Torah command circumcision on the eighth day? He said to them: so that not everyone be rejoicing while the mother and father are sad." Rashi explains that until seven days have elapsed, she is forbidden relations with her husband, but from the eighth day onward she is permitted. Hence the reason for circumcision on the eighth day is that this is the first day of the mother can resume relations with her husband.

A different approach, based on the symbolism of seven and eight, is taken by R. Samson Raphael Hirsch. What is the connection between the mother's unclean state and the commandment of circumcision? The seven days of the mother's impurity as a result of birth symbolize the coercive force of the laws of nature ['seven' being the natural week], over which a person has no control and in which a person has no liberty or free choice. The commandment of circumcision, in contrast, is an expression of moral liberty and free choice. A person can rise above his natural being ['eight' symbolizing one above the natural] and by way of the commandment of circumcision can reach a higher state, supernatural as it were, thereby endowing himself with the sanctity of the Jewish people. Birth and its concomitant impurity thus relates to the commandment of circumcision as follows: the natural state of the mother, impure after childbirth, and of the son, as yet uncircumcised, are both "upgraded" and improved by circumcision on the eighth day.

Indeed, the Sages viewed the commandment of circumcision as bringing about perfection and improvement. Circumcision symbolized the obligation and ability of human beings to improve themselves and the world they live in. The following selection from **Midrash Tanhuma** on this week's reading (*Parashat Tazria*) makes that point:

Once the evil Tineius Rufus asked R. Akiva, "Whose deeds are finer? Those of the Holy One, blessed be He, or those of flesh and blood?" He answered, "Of flesh and blood are finer." Tineius Rufus said, "But can a

human being make Heaven and Earth and the like?" R. Akiva responded, "Do not give me an illustration of something that is higher than the creatures and over which we have no control, but give an example of something that pertains to human beings." He said, "Why do you circumcise yourselves?" R. Akiva answered, "I knew you would ask me about this particular thing, therefore I prefaced my words by telling you that the deeds of flesh and blood are finer than those of the Holy One, blessed be He." Tanneius Rufus said to him, "If He wished males to be circumcised, why do they not come from the womb that way?" R. Akiva responded, "As for your argument, why males are not born circumcised, the answer is that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave commandments to the Jews for no other reason than to refine them by means of their observance."

What conclusions have we reached, if any? Messianic author Marvin R. Wilson gives us this insight concerning purification in the time of Yeshua:

By the time of Jesus, bathing in water was an established part of the purification process following menstruation, but nowhere in the Bible is there mention of the menstruant bathing in water. Instruction on purification through the use of the mikveh (ritual bath) by menstruants may be traced to the time of the sages. An entire tractate of the Mishnah, Mikvaot, is devoted to immersion pools. To this day, for Jewish women committed to halachah (religious law), immersion in the *mikveh* is considered obligatory before marital relations can resume.

According to Leviticus 12:1–8, because of the bleeding associated with childbirth, a woman is ceremonially unclean after giving birth, just as she is unclean during her menstrual period. The uncleanness is for seven days if she bears a boy (vs. 2), and for fourteen days if she bears a girl (vs. 5). The mother must wait thirty-three additional days after a boy and sixty-six days after a girl to be finally "purified from her bleeding" (vss. 4–5). At the end of her time of uncleanness, she is to bring a sacrifice to the priest (vss. 6–8).

The synoptic gospels record an account of Jesus coming into contact with a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years (Mt. 9:20–22; Mk. 5:25–34; Lk. 8:43–48). Whatever the cause of her loss of blood, the Levitical restrictions (esp. 15:19–33) rendered her ritually unclean, and likewise anyone and anything she might touch, thus making her an exile among her own people. The moment the woman touched the cloak of Jesus, however, she was healed by the power of God, and her defilement removed. The New Testament is silent about whether the woman's actions rendered Jesus ceremonially unclean and about her obligation to bring the prescribed offerings following cessation of her discharge (cf. Lev. 15:28–30).

The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership provides us this final analysis:

The beginning of Parshat Tazria describes the law regarding a woman after childbirth. She first goes through a period of ritual impurity, then through a period called "blood purification." Both of these time spans are twice as long after bearing a daughter as after bearing a son. This discrepancy is profoundly disturbing. Even more troubling is the requirement that, after her purification period, the woman bring a burnt offering and a sin offering to the Temple. Why a sin offering? Isn't childbirth a mitzvah? How has the woman sinned?

Perhaps the Torah anticipates that when a woman gives birth she may well be overwhelmed by her accomplishment. She feels so proud of what she has done that she takes full credit for the glory of new life! In so doing, she ignores the major role played in the miracle of reproduction by God, whose hand is seen in all such "natural" wonders. Her lack of humility and failure to acknowledge God's role are her sin.

Then why doubled periods of impurity and purification for a daughter? One possibility is that giving birth to a virtual copy of herself, a girl who will someday also be able to create life, increases a mother's pride and so requires a longer punitive period. Another is that the period of impurity after bearing a son is interrupted by the brit mila, circumcision (Lev. 12:3). This powerful ritual reminds the proud mother of God's role in the birth and in the continued life of her son. Since ancient Judaism had no covenant ceremony for daughters, a longer impurity/purification period was required.

Modernity has taught us to recognize the absolute covenantal value of Jewish women, and the resultant development of covenant rituals for newborn daughters enables them, like their brothers, to remind us of God's presence in the world.

Chapter 12 provides the background to a well-known incident recorded for us in the B'rit Chadashah (Renewed Covenant). In Luke's gospel account, we find Yeshua's Torah-observant parents making fulfillment of this very mitzvah.

"When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." (Luke 2:22-24, NIV)

Did Yosef or Miryam question the validity of applicability of these instructions? If they did, we certainly don't hear about it in the Torah. I'm sure that curiosity and speculation were part of their human experience as well. Yet, we could learn a great deal from those who do not feel the need to know why everything is just so.

Tamei! (Unclean!)

Chapters thirteen and fourteen discuss the topic of what is commonly called leprosy. The exact Hebrew word "tzara'at" is used over twenty times in these two passages alone. The word is used to describe an infectious skin disease. In most cases, the skin disease renders the afflicted person "tamei," that is ritually impure. The instructions given to the priests is to examine the individual, and if found unclean, they were to leave the commonwealth of the camp (vs. 45, 46).

An interesting side note to this pronouncement is that anyone coming in contact with the "unclean" was himself rendered "unclean." Similarly, this type of disease, if chronic, was seldom if ever completely healed. There are isolated individuals, such as Na'aman in our haftarah portion (2 Kings 4:42-5:19), that were completely and miraculously healed. Yet, one of the signs (among many signs) that was said to follow the genuine promised messiah, was the healing of tzara'at (read Matthew 11:2-6; 12:22-23; John 9:1-41). Why wouldn't the uncleanness of the afflicted render the messiah unclean?

The proof that the coming messiah was a genuine and not a phony was demonstrated not only that he would heal the afflicted individual, but that he himself would not become defiled! In Yeshua's example given in Mattityahu 8:1-4, our LORD instructed the former leper to go to the priest as a "testimony unto them" (KJV). This was done for at least two reasons: (1) in obedience to the very mitzvah found in our current parashah, vindicating Yeshua's adherence to the Torah of Moshe, and (2) to authenticate the miracle—thus proving his claims to messiahship! In every single instance where he healed the afflicted, or raised the dead, his holiness did not decrease! His state of clean never diminished! On the contrary—disease and death always fled from his presence (reference the quote above by Marvin Wilson)! Surely he was The Messiah for those days! Surely he is The Messiah for us today!

Thus we learn in at least these two instances (the one involving Yeshua's parents, and the instance with the leper) that HaShem's masterful instructions, as outlined in the Torah, demonstrate their usefulness on a grander scale than just for those participants of the pre-Common Era community. His specific instructions—every minute detail would serve as historical and prophetic fulfillment of the life and ministry of the greatest Cohen Gadol (High Priest) that the Nation of Isra'el would ever know!

Thanks be unto our Heavenly Abba that as spiritually afflicted individuals, we no longer have to remain outside of the camp, sometimes—in the case of the individuals of the TaNaKH—indefinitely!

When our unclean encounters the holiness of the Prophet from Natzeret—our disease must flee! We have no need to go about crying, “Tamei! Tamei!” (Unclean! Unclean!) Rather, we have the freedom to proclaim, “Tahor! Tahor!” (Cleansed! Cleansed!)

The closing blessing is as follows:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v’chay-yeh ‘olam nata-b’tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O’ LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat shalom!”

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