

## D'var Torah – Tazria / Shabbat ha-Chodesh

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By Rabbi Maurice Harris

Our Torah portion this week begins with the words *eeshah kee taz-reeyah v'yaldah zachar...*, which means, “In the case of a woman who has conceived seed and given birth to a male...” The passage then goes on to describe the process this new mom will go through in terms of ritual purification following the act of giving birth. After describing the procedure following the birth of a baby boy, it outlines the process after the birth of a girl. When it came to natural human experiences involving blood, bodily fluids, life or death, in the eyes of Leviticus people who have these experiences shifted from being ritually pure to impure, and then would follow specific rituals to re-purify.

Our text says that after the birth of the baby, the mom becomes *tamay*, ritually impure, for a set number of days, and then it describes the ritual purification process she will go through to return to a state of *taharah*, ritual purity. To reestablish her state of purity she goes to the central sanctuary and brings an offering. As is often the case with these kinds of passages in the Torah, there is an economic sliding scale put into the law to make sure that poverty doesn't prevent a new mom from being able to participate.

In our contemporary Eugene culture that values gender equality and looks to feminist values as a source of moral guidance, there's always a collective tightening up within the community when we come to the ancient Levitical laws that legislate and regulate the activities of women. It's hard not to hear the narrator of the text's voice in a male register, and for some in our community, by the time we've gotten to the end of the words, “In the case of a woman who has conceived seed and given birth to a male,” there's not much more they want to hear.

In response to feminist critiques, there are a lot of apologetics for these texts, and, in many cases I think that they make some valid points. In a d'var Torah on this week's parashah by Rabbi Michal Shekel, she quotes from the commentary in the Conservative movement's Hebrew-English edition of the Torah. Those commentators write that we shouldn't assume that the states of ritual purity and impurity directly correspond to good and bad. Here's how they put it:

“[Rather than thinking that God was punishing people with impure status for the act of giving birth,] we might postulate that there are two types of holiness in life, two ways of encountering the divine. There is a natural holiness found in the miracles of pregnancy, birth, and recovery from illness. And there is a stipulated holiness—the arbitrary designation of certain times, places, and activities as sacred. One meets God in the experiences of birth and death, sickness and health. But they are not everyday occurrences. ... We can see the notion of [ritual impurity], then, as growing out of a sense of reverence for the miraculous nature of birth, the awesome power of death, and the mysteries of illness and recuperation.” (from the Chumash)

The point of these commentators is that the Torah's perspective is one that says that when these profound physical and biological events that are part of the human experience take place, they generate spiritual power, and that spiritual power is potent enough to flip a person's ritual status from one polarity to the other. Being "impure" - *tamay* – isn't the result of having done anything wrong in a case like childbirth, or, these same commentators add, when a woman's menstrual cycle occurs. Rather, these events trigger a shift in a person's spiritual and energetic state, and once these events have passed, then the person re-balances by doing the prescribed ritual acts.

When I teach the concepts of ritual purity and impurity – *tahor* and *tamay* in the Hebrew – to our middle school kids, I similarly teach that what our ancestors meant by *tahor* and *tamay* was not the same thing as good and bad. It really is more complicated than that, and in the final analysis I think we do best to read these texts with a mind and heart that stays open to empathizing with our ancestors, while also honoring the challenging questions we bring from our own moral and cultural sensibilities. In keeping with good feminist theory, studying Torah presents us with a classic "both-and" opportunity.

I'd like to turn my focus, however, to something else in the text. Like some of the sages of long ago, as I read this text I wondered what the Torah was hinting at by using the unusual Hebrew word that occurs at the beginning of this parashah and also gives the parashah its name: *tazria*. As I said earlier, the Torah portion opens with God instructing Moses to tell the Israelites, *eeshah kee taz-reeyah v'yaldah...*/"In the case of a woman who has conceived seed and given birth..." Our key word, *tazria*, is the one that translates to "has conceived seed."

I realize this is a confusing English translation. What exactly does it mean that she has "conceived seed?" Ovulated? Or just conceived? It's not clear from the text, which is always a good reason to look more deeply into the meanings associated with the three letter Hebrew root of the word. For those of you keeping Biblical Hebrew score at home, the Hebrew root of *tazria* is *zayin* – *resh* – *ayin*, a root that appears in many times throughout the Hebrew Bible, and that usually refers to the seeds of plants and agricultural matters, but which sometimes refers to human reproduction and to future generations, as in God's promising Abraham with the words, "I will make your seed, *zar-achah*, as numerous as the dust of the earth."

My main question, however, is not so much what the Torah meant by a woman conceiving seed, but rather this: why does the passage in our Torah portion say, "If a woman conceives seed and gives birth..."? Why doesn't it just say, "If a woman gives birth?" Don't we know that a woman conceived first if she gave birth? Full disclosure – sages long before me asked this question too.

So why this seemingly extraneous word? For the rabbis of Talmud and Midrash, this word *had* to be there to teach something, or hint at something. I want to thank Rabbi Joshua Waxman<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> At the time I gave this d'var Torah, I thought this Rabbi Josh Waxman was my classmate from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. As it turns out, this is a different Rabbi Joshua Waxman! He is an Orthodox rabbi who blogs at <http://parsha.blogspot.com/>.

who posted about this question on his blog yesterday and led me directly to an early rabbinic text attempting to explain the reason why the Torah “needed” to include the part about “if a woman conceives seed” in this passage. In one midrash, the sages looked carefully at the sequence of words in the Hebrew – “if a woman conceives seed (we're still not exactly sure what that means) and gives birth to a male.” Through a little rabbinic interpretive play, the sages understand this wording to be suggesting that if a woman sends forth her seed first – that is, how shall I put this euphemistically, if a woman reaches a certain milestone before a man during heterosexual intercourse, then she will give birth to a male. (Did I mention earlier that tonight's service would be a good night to leave the kids at home?)

If a male, on the other hand, sends his seed forth before she does – again, during intercourse – then the midrash claims the baby will be female. There was a popular belief in part of the ancient world that this was how the physical sex of a baby was determined, and, as Rabbi Waxman discusses in his blog, we can see this midrash as an attempt to show the Torah containing a hint about how the natural and scientific world was believed to work.

Now I have to admit, as a contemporary reader, I'm left a bit uninspired by this particular midrashic explanation of why we have this word, *tazria*, because we now know that the science supposedly being hinted at by the Torah isn't correct, and more than that, I'd love to see a more amazing interpretation for why this remarkable word, *tazria*, is there in the text when it really does seem kind of unnecessary.

So I'll close by offering a humble suggestion for another way of looking at what this word might mean when considered more deeply. Remember I said that the word *tazria* only occurs once in the entire Hebrew Bible. If we read this text more dreamily and less procedurally, I'm tempted to ask the question, “what is it metaphorically that happens when a woman gives forth a seed?” Let's leave the biology of sexual reproduction behind for a moment and consider this notion entirely metaphorically.

Women were clearly a dis-empowered class in the ancient Middle East, and Israelite civilization was not an exception to that reality. And yet, even within that system, the Bible tells us about many women whose courage, leadership, and seed-planting made the process of redemption possible. When a woman gives forth a seed, the text goes on to say that there are two categories of growth and flowering that can result – *zachar*, male, and *nikeyvah*, female. Continuing with our non-literal reading, we can look to the Hebrew roots of *zachar* and *nikeyvah* and ask what else those words mean.

*Zachar* is the same root as the word for *zikaron*, memory or lasting legacy. *Nikeyvah* is the same root as the word for vessel or opening, evoking images of passageways. So maybe we can read this passage to say that when a woman gives forth seed – when she initiates something new and life-giving through her actions, her work, her creativity, her writing, her teaching, or even her parenting – when she gives forth such a seed, then she gives birth to something that establishes a lasting legacy, creates a meaningful memory, or that fashions an opening to something new in the world or a vessel that can hold and sustain others. When a woman

conceives seed she engages in a spiritually powerful act, one that is so potent it shifts her ritual status. When the time is ripe and she's ready, she can restore her ritual state to “normal setting” and appreciate the work that she has sewn. It's just an idea to start a conversation, not a fully fleshed out modern midrash – consider it just a little seed I wanted to plant tonight.

Shabbat shalom.