

## **This Week in Torah Tazria**

The Bat Mitzvah stared at me with big eyes that were beginning to fill with tears. She was preparing her *d'var Torah* and was more than a little surprised by the contents of her *sedra*. A teenager who was on the cusp of puberty was reading from Leviticus that things which were natural for a woman although had yet to experience would make her “unclean” or “unacceptable” for a set time each month. On one hand, she was beginning to embrace this part of her life as a woman; but her faith was using words that made her feel—as she said—“dirty” and “worthless.” Then, she had the courage to speak: “I don’t like this at all. Why would God do this to women?”... Then she paused and said: “why would God do this to me?”

Part of me sought that my role as Rabbi was to be the defender of the text; trying to explain the rationale for this. But I thought otherwise—she had a point. She struggled with the concept rolled out in Torah that a woman was “*tameh*” when she menstruated as well as after she gave birth. She was perplexed that the period of “*tameh*” after childbirth was ½ as long for delivering a daughter as it was for a son. The English translation further infuriated this Bat Mitzvah; she wanted us to rewrite that for sure. Thus began an intensive look at status and vocabulary, which was surely less than satisfying on one hand but emancipating on the other.

We began with a confession--- Jewish tradition was male dominated for thousands of years; the first female ordained Reform rabbi was Sally Preisand who got her *s'micha* 50 years ago this June. There is a long tradition that can see certain perspectives as misogynic to be sure. Beyond the ritual impurities that come as part of the reproductive process, there are terms of status which certainly made women feel quite uncomfortable. Take Levirate marriages, *Yevamot*, where a younger brother is supposed to marry his sister-in-law if the couple had not yet bore a child. Take the concept of *Sotah*, which a woman must drink a disgusting concoction in order to prove she has not committed adultery. Take the traditional *Ketubah* where the groom is referred to by name thru-out the document but the bride is described by her status after the opening line. Certainly, there are many, many more examples.

Next came an exploration of the Hebrew terms--“*Tahor*” meaning pure and “*Tameh*” being the opposite. Examining the context, we observed that these were status terms rather than about hygiene and cleanliness. They were transferable to others whether sexually, religiously, or ceremonially—as a result one needed to be conscious and mindful of their own status. In the cases mapped out in *Parashat Tazria*, the presence of blood which had strict sacrificial purposes had to be acknowledged— blood was a life-force and how it was used or consumed was highly regulated. Knowing that menstruation and childbirth involved blood, an understanding [albeit skeptical] was being formed—any time blood appeared, the tradition created the parameters for its usage or created the boundaries for it not to enter the religious realm. For the Bat Mitzvah, she nodded as she understood that the status was not a reflection of her imperfections but how the Jewish tradition viewed the presence of blood.

Then I made a mistake--- we then looked at traditional Jewish commentaries [all male authors, mind you] to see how this belief unfolded. It was a mistake because the custom was “*l’siege et haTorah*” – to build a fence around the Torah, where the Rabbis were stricter than the laws itself in order to prevent any violation of a *mitzvah*. We read RaSHI who saw menstruation as symbol that a woman did not become pregnant as if she failed in the task before her. We read that a woman had to bring a “sin” offering after childbirth because she might have denounced God or said she was never going to have another child when she was in travail. We saw in 12<sup>th</sup> century Spanish sage Ibn Ezra proclaim that these verses needed to follow the laws of *Kashrut* [mapped out in the *sedra* before] as to further explain status as acceptable/unacceptable. We studied RaMBaM who acknowledged that a woman’s blood of either childbirth or menstruation would confuse the integrity of the sacrificial purpose if it was inadvertently mixed together with blood for a *korban*. None of this was helpful for a 13-year-old girl.

Finally, the mother of the Bat Mitzvah spoke. She said to her daughter that society will always label, but women need not accept that label. She encouraged her daughter to defy it—not with hostility or denial, but through introspection. If someone sees her daughter as unworthy or unclean, she encouraged her daughter to prove them wrong. She said that the only status that mattered was the one placed on her daughter by the woman looking back at her in the mirror.

And with that, the Bat Mitzvah began to write her speech by rewriting the translation. She focused on the phrase “*deme toroah*” – a status of blood purification. She spoke not of misogyny, sexism, or inequality. She spoke of being made whole, regardless of how others or a tradition saw her. “*Tameh*” was not dirty but a label she saw as a badge of honor and real strength that made others uncomfortable with being. It was a term she wanted to embrace that was not the opposite of “*tahor*” but a way of complementing it. And her *d’var* focused in on a process of becoming one whom everyone saw as worthy and as beautiful, just as God intended everyone to be.