

Why is childbirth impure?

In honor of Ezra Bezalel Mizrahi, my fourth grandchild, born February 24, 2014 – 25 Adar Alef 5774.

In this week's Torah portion, *Tazria*, we learn about *tumat yoledet*, the "impurity" resulting from childbirth:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying... If a woman... bears a male child; then she shall be unclean for [one week] as in the days of her menstruation... She shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor come into the sanctuary... But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks... Then she shall bring... a young pigeon or a turtledove, for a sin-offering, to... the priest, who shall offer it before the Lord, and make an atonement for her. [Lev. 12:1-7]

What's going on here? If a woman gives birth to a child, the greatest miracle we are fortunate to experience, she becomes unclean? And she is unclean twice as long for a girl as for a boy? And then she has to bring a SIN offering? What, exactly, is her sin?

These are difficult questions. It's easy to condemn the Torah as archaic and irrelevant in our time, and call that passage just the product of a misogynistic patriarchal society. But serious Jews don't have that option. So let us turn to our Sages to enlighten us with answers to these questions.

Let's begin by taking a close look at the Hebrew words "*tahor*" and "*tamei*", usually translated as "pure" and "impure", or "clean" and "unclean". Do they have the same connotation in Hebrew as they do in English?

When a person is "*tamei*" (impure), it simply means that he may not perform certain activities deemed holy, such as those associated with the Temple in Jerusalem, the performance of priestly functions, or sexual relations within marriage. He becomes "*tahor*" (pure) after a certain amount of time has passed and he immerses in a mikvah.

How does a person become "*tamei*" (impure) in the first place? By touching a dead body, human or animal; by touching an idol; by touching diseased skin; by touching certain bodily fluids or excretions; or by giving birth to a child.

This does not necessarily mean one should not do these things. For example, one can become "*tamei*" (impure) by performing the mitzvah of tending to a dead person. This is considered to be a mitzvah of the highest order, because the dead cannot possibly repay their benefactors. One can also become "*tamei*" (impure) by giving birth to a child, or by having a period. All these events are natural or praiseworthy. There is no injunction in Judaism never to become "*tamei*" (impure) under any circumstance. So we conclude that the translation "impure" or "unclean" is underservedly harsh. The word simply means "Not allowed to perform certain actions". No wrongdoing is implied. It is not intended as punishment.

Nevertheless, this passage in our Torah portion is strange and unexpected particularly because the first commandment in the Torah is "*P'ru ur'vu* -- Be fruitful and multiply". So having a child is a mitzvah. It is also a blessing, a reward. Indeed, the Psalmist says:
Behold, children are a heritage of the Lord; and the fruit of the womb is a reward. [Ps. 127:3]

Granted, the commandment to procreate applies only to men, but only a woman can enable a man to fulfill this mitzvah. And one cannot be punished for observance. The Torah says:

All of God's ways are just. [Deuteronomy 32:4]

Therefore, if the Torah declares the woman impure and makes her bring a "*korban chataf*" (a sin-offering), there must be a good reason.

One reason is advanced in the Talmud, in Tractate Niddah:

Rabbi Shim'on ben Yochai's students asked him: Why does the Torah command a woman to bring a sin-offering after childbirth? He answered them: When she crouches to give birth [in great pain], she determinedly swears [aloud or silently] that she will never again have sexual relations with her husband. [This is obviously a false oath], so therefore the Torah ordained that she should bring a sin-offering [to atone for it]. [Niddah 31b]

Ibn Ezra, the sage from 11th century Muslim Spain, speculates that the woman may also have resented God for bringing her pain, whence a sin-offering. But clearly not every woman will utter or even

entertain such thoughts. So why not require a sin-offering only from the women who actually had such thoughts?

Abrabanel, 15th-century Portuguese sage, says that BECAUSE she is in pain, she must have done something wrong, whence the sin-offering. He believed that pain is punishment. But the Torah does not require that anybody who suffers should offer a sin-offering. Why single out the pain of childbirth? One offering that would seem more appropriate in this case is a thanksgiving-offering (*zevach ha-todah*), since the mother was saved from danger, not a sin-offering.

Menachem Recanati, 13th-century Italian sage, and Rabbenu Bechayye, 14th century Spanish sage, suggest that God decreed the pain of childbirth because of the original sin of Eve, and that is why a sin-offering is required. Indeed, the Torah clearly states:

And to the woman [God] said: I shall greatly multiply your pain in childbirth. In sorrow shall you bring forth children... [Gen. 3:16]

But in Judaism, people are not required to atone for the sins of their ancestors. The Torah says clearly:

Fathers shall not die for the [sins of their] children, nor shall children die for the [sins of their] fathers. Every man shall die for his own sin. [Deuteronomy 24:16]

Nevertheless, some teach that the actions of our ancestors cannot fail to affect us one way or another. This is a reality, a fact of life. They conclude that we must be particularly vigilant with our actions and their effect on our children. The pain of childbirth is simply a reminder of that.

Sforno, 16th-century Italian sage, speculates that the new mother's thoughts are concentrated on her pain and on the birth process, so she is not prepared to enter in contact with sacred objects until she turns her thoughts to the holy. The transition period and the sin-offering are a way of effecting *havdalah*, a clear separation of events.

Tz'enah Ur'enah, a 17th century Yiddish commentary, compares the seven-day period following the birth of a boy to the seven-day period of mourning following a death. Both are times of intense emotion, when women in particular must take time off to reflect on ultimate issues.

It has also been suggested that the new mother is tempted to take full credit for the creation of a new life, ignoring God's role. Her sin is then that she becomes too proud to acknowledge that all such miracles come from God.

And why did the Torah ordain that in the case of a baby boy [the woman is clean] after only one week, but in the case of a baby girl it takes two weeks? For the same reason: The period of impurity is doubled for a daughter because the mother is doubly proud to have created a virtual clone of herself, who will one day also create life.

The Talmud has another explanation:

[On the birth of a] male, everybody rejoices and she regrets her oath after one week, [but on the birth of a female], everybody is upset and it takes her two weeks to regret her oath. [Niddah 31b]

It has also been suggested that a baby girl is more fragile and requires more initial focused care (two weeks rather than one), because she will in turn grow up to have children of her own. She is therefore more valuable to the species than a baby boy.

Our passage compares a new mother to a *niddah*, a woman in her menstrual cycle, who is also considered ritually impure. She must not allow her husband to have intercourse with her, or touch her, or touch anything she touched. The Talmud explains:

Rabbi Meir used to say: Why did the Torah ordain that the uncleanness of menstruation should continue for seven days? Because being in constant contact with his wife [a husband might come to] despise her. The Torah, therefore, ordained: Let her be unclean for seven days [and refrain from intercourse] so that her husband shall love her as much as at the time of her first entry into the bridal chamber. [Niddah 31b]

One can also speculate that all this talk about uncleanness or sin during menstruation or childbirth is simply a way to play up to the husband's prejudices about women, to make sure he leaves his wife alone at a time when she needs to rest! She needs time off to recuperate and reflect, even if he doesn't. This is not the only time the Torah makes concessions to the practices and prejudices of biblical times. Slavery, the captive woman, capital punishment and animal sacrifices are other examples. Without these transitory concessions, God concluded that the Torah would not have been

accepted. God's thinking was probably, "If I can't forbid for now, I can at least regulate until they don't want to do it anymore".

All this aside, as we all know, childbirth is a time of intense joy for the family and the best time to wonder at the miracle of creation. The Talmud says:

There are three partners in the creation of man: God, his father and his mother. His [father and his mother supply his body]. And God gives him the spirit and the breath, beauty of features, eyesight, the power of hearing, the ability to speak and to walk, understanding and discernment. When his time comes to depart from the world, God takes away His part and leaves the parts of his father and his mother with them. [Niddah 31a]

Nowadays, the new mother attends a service at the synagogue as soon as she feels well enough to go out, and, since there is no Temple, the sin-offering is replaced by her husband being called to the Torah for an *aliyah*.

Shabbat shalom.