

# **A Blessing With Blood**

## **A D'var Torah on *Parashat Tazria* (Lev. 12:1 – 13:59)**

**By Brendan Howard**

*"Ishah kee tazria v'yaldah zachar...."*  
*"When a woman conceives and gives birth to a son...."*

When the Torah introduces rules and rituals for childbirth in *Parashat Tazria*, it is concerned with the ritual impurity of the blood. It ignominiously groups childbirth with the impurities of gruesome skin diseases and unnatural growths on clothing and animal skins. Because of the issuance of blood — a sometimes ritually pure substance, as when splashed around the altar, but sometimes ritually impure, as in drinking the blood of animals or menstruation — a birthing woman is considered ritually impure.

After a woman gives birth, she is unclean “as at the time of her menstrual infirmity” for seven days (if she gives birth to a boy) or 14 days (if she gives birth to a girl). This is a time when she would stay at the outskirts of camp, to which all those who were ritually unclean were consigned. After that period, she would then be in a state of “blood purification” for 33 days (for a boy) or 66 days (for a girl), during which she could resume relations with her husband, but must avoid touching “any consecrated thing” or entering “the sanctuary.” At the end of her period of “blood purification,” she brings an offering to the priest and is then ritually clean again.

To many of us, it seems cruel to take the Israelite women of thousands of years ago, having just crossed the threshold from womanhood to motherhood, and separate them from the people, but the idea has its apologists.

Rabbi Helaine Ettinger in her commentary for the portion quotes W. Gunther Plaut: “The law protects women from the importunities of their husbands at a time when they are not physically and emotionally ready for coitus.”<sup>1</sup> The period of time between the trauma of childbirth and the resumption of normal life in sex, social relations and religious obligations, then, respectfully recognizes a woman’s need for some time away.

The commentary from Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno argues that women need the time to regain their focus on holy matters after partnering with God and man to create life: “Although she is physically ready and ritually clean [after the 40 or 80 days], mentally she is not yet geared to concentrate on the holy. Since the sacred demands *kavanah*, intent, she must wait until her thoughts

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Woman’s Torah Commentary* by Rabbi Helaine Ettinger; Jewish Lights; 2003; p. 204.

are sufficiently predisposed to focus on the non-physical, namely, the spiritual and the holy.”<sup>2</sup>

A-ha! So perhaps it’s not a physical need for time away, but a recognition that her thoughts aren’t properly holy enough after the intense experience. The commentary in the Stone Chumash puts it this way: “The creation of human life is the most sublime phenomenon in the universe. By bringing it into being, man and woman become partners with God, Who gives a soul to their offspring. But this new life begins with *tumah*, spiritual impurity, to show people that the mere fact of life is not enough. Life must be a tool for the service of God; otherwise it is nothing.”<sup>3</sup>

Beautiful! A miracle of life! The closest to being God’s partners as man and woman can come, creating life as God did!

But where is that in the text?

The ambivalence of the Torah about childbirth is understandable. In a past age when modern medicine couldn’t turn babies in the womb, couldn’t keep women alive after Caesareans, and couldn’t infuse them with blood, women died. Blood, normally evidence of a wound that kills or hurts, is the stuff of a life-giving moment. Life and death fuse together in a moment where life could come, or mother and/or child could pass away.

So, from the text, we get the fear of death and the treatment of blood and bleeding woman as ritually impure, but where is the blessing?

Man and woman partner with God in the creation of life, and there the Torah doesn’t speak about a moment when everyone stops and gasps and praises God?

Are those prayers hiding in the “wilderness,” as feminist rabbis argue, in the “Red Tent” at the outskirts of the camp? Did the women and impure ones there have warm, welcoming rituals to make new mothers feel the miracle of childbirth, to make the moment and experience holy?

We won’t know, because as happens with so much ancient literature, the stories and words of the women are lost to time — but not always.

*Lifecycles* brings 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century Yiddish prayers from women’s books to light again.<sup>4</sup> Called *tkhines* and collected in books, they can teach us how

---

<sup>2</sup> *Sforno on Torah*; Translated and edited by Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz; Artscroll; 1997; p. 539.

<sup>3</sup> *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*; Edited by Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz; Mesorah Publications, Ltd.; 2003; p. 608.

<sup>4</sup> *Lifecycles (Volume 1): Jewish Women on Biblical Themes in Contemporary Life*; Edited by Rabbi Debra Orenstein; Jewish Lights Publishing; 2000.

women and men can address what is one of the most important moments of their lives. In that compilation of essays and prayers, Chava Weissler translated this from the Yiddish:

“When she comes out of childbed, she says this: Lord of all the world, You hear all the prayers of those who call upon You wholeheartedly, and who fear You. Lord God, I thank You as a Lord that you have caused me to escape from the great, bitter pains of childbirth, and You give me milk to nourish the child, and strength to arise today from the bed to return to the service of Your holy Name ... Lord of all the worlds, accept my speech and my prayer and my calling upon Your holy Name from the bottom of my heart as if they were the [Temple] altar and the offering. Protect me further from all evil, along with all Israel who trust in You. Continue to give me strength, and also to my husband, that we may be able to raise this child and the other [children] easily according to the desire of our hearts. And also give [us] your help that the child may serve Your Name at all times with truth and with love. God our Lord, may this come true in Your Name, Amen.”

Amen.