

Tazria Leviticus 12:1-5 תזריע

Context: Parshat Tazria is preceded by the dietary laws found in chapter 11. This portion focuses on ritual impurity and includes two different subjects. They include impurity from childbirth and the diagnosis of surface eruptions on the skin, garments and leather goods. Chapter 12 details the first, impurity from childbirth. Chapter 13 will deal with the skin diseases (Elaine Goodfriend, *TAWC*, 637-658).

Commentary: The reason for the longer state of impurity after the birth of a girl is unclear. One proposed explanation is that the baby girl is a potential menstruant and mother, and so a future source of impurity. Nicole Ruane challenges this view in her recent dissertation. Instead, she argues that the text presumes the following worldview: “While it is imperfect that women give birth to boys, it is even even less perfect when a woman bears a girl.” Thus a woman who bears a boy is “rewarded” by having the time of her impurity halved. This possible understanding of birth and of gender would apply to certain priestly writings for which patrilineal continuity is a central concern...Other less likely proposals attribute the longer time following the birth of a girl to the ancients’ notion that male embryos were completely formed in forty-one days and females in eighty-two, or posit that the Torah is accounting to the mother the occasional vaginal bleeding which afflicts newborn females. (*TAWC*, 641).

Questions for Discussion

1. Based on the biblical text, how do you think the Levitical author understood ritual impurity?
2. Based on your answer to number 1, why would ritual impurity be ascribed to a woman after she gives birth to a child?
3. What do you find the most compelling reason for the doubling of the period of purification following the birth of a girl?

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אִשָּׁה כִּי תִזְרִיעַ וַיִּלְדָה זָכָר וְטִמְאָה שְׁבַע יָמִים כִּי־מִי נִדְתָה דֹּתָהּ תִטְמָא: וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי יִמּוֹל בְּשָׂר עֶרְלָתוֹ: וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם וּשְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים תֵּשֵׁב בְּדַמֵּי טְהָרָה בְּכָל־קֹדֶשׁ לֹא־תִגַּע וְאֶל־הַמִּקְדָּשׁ לֹא תָבֹא עַד־מְלֵאת יָמֵי טְהָרָה: וְאִם־נִקְבָה תֵלֵד וְטִמְאָה שְׁבַע יָמִים כַּנִּדְתָהּ וּשְׁשִׁים יוֹם וּשְׁשֶׁת יָמִים תֵּשֵׁב עַל־דַּמֵּי טְהָרָה

God spoke to Moses saying: Speak to the children of Israel saying when a women yields offspring and births a boy she will be impure for seven days like the seven unwell days of mensuration. And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin will be circumcised. For thirty three days she will remain in a state of blood purification. She will not touch anything sacred and she will not come to the sanctuary until she completes her days of purifying. And if she gives birth to a girl she will be impure for two weeks like during her mensuration and for sixty six days she will remain in a state of blood purification .

Commentary: Ramban tried to rationalize this distinction [between the time a woman remains impure after giving birth to a boy versus a girl] by referring to notions, current in his day, about bodily emissions. He insisted that the birth of a female caused a mother to sustain discharges for a longer period of time. It is more likely that the doubling of the initial period of impurity and the waiting period for a female had a different basis. It may have reflected apprehension and anticipation regarding the infant daughter’s potential fertility, the expectation that she herself would someday become a new mother. (Baruch Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus*, 250)

Commentary: Ritual disablement is not a hardship; indeed, she needs the privilege of rest. A male child must be taken away to be circumcised after eight days, but the period of her seclusion goes on until full forty days are accomplished. For the birth of a girl Leviticus doubles the period so that her mother gets eighty days seclusion. The boy child by his circumcision becomes party to the covenant with Abraham in away a girl child can never be. Interestingly, he does not contract impurity by contact when returned to his mother for nursing. The rite of circumcision almost certainly would have prophylactic powers for mother and child. This may be one reason for the doubling of the time of the mother’s impurity after birth of a girl. We should not discount protective powers attributed to the rite. Before modern medicine made childbirth less risky the woman had a high probability of not surviving. (Mary Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature*, 181)