

Why is the Shabbat immediately preceding Pesach called Shabbat HaGadol, the Great Shabbat? True to Jewish form, there are many answers. Here is a small sampling. According to tradition, the 10th of Nisan, the day on which the Israelites were commanded to take a lamb for each household in preparation for the 10th Plague, was Shabbat. The Egyptian creator god Khnum and Amun, the god of Thebes, were both represented by a ram, but through a GREAT miracle, the Egyptians were unable to punish the Israelites for this desecration. Selecting a sacrificial lamb (Exodus 12:3) was the first commandment fulfilled by the Israelites, a sort of Bar Mitzvah to mark the beginning of their transition from childhood to adulthood, i.e., when they became *gadol* (adults). The name also derives from the special Haftarah reading, which includes “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the GREAT and awesome day of the Lord.” (Malachi 4:23) And the humorous answer: This is one of only two Shabbatot when the rabbi must give a sermon, which s/he often does with lengthy abandon, adding a GREAT amount of time to the service.

The main focus of last week’s parashah and ours, which are read together in non-leap years, is the *tzara’at* affliction, which can befall people, clothing, and houses and is associated with *lashon ha-ra*, evil speech. However, the first chapter of Parashah Tazria and the last chapter of our parashah deal with procreation. While Tazria concerns childbirth, Metzora discusses semen and menstruation. As we know, all of these render a person ritually impure and require separation followed by specially prescribed purification rituals. We also know that blood, which is the essence of life belongs solely to HaShem. Indeed, ancient medical science considered menstrual blood “female semen” and integral to conception. Therefore it is not surprising that in Midrash Tanchuma Metzora 1, Rabbi Acha offers some fanciful pronouncements that conflate violating the laws of separation during menstruation and *tzara’at*: “If a man has intercourse with his wife when she is menstruating, the children will be afflicted with *tzara’at*. How? If ... on the first day, the child which is born shall be afflicted after 10 years. ... On the second day, after 20 years. On the third day, after 30 years. ... On the seventh day it shall be afflicted after 70 years, corresponding to the seven days of her menstruation. Moreover, he shall not depart from the world before he has seen his fruit spoiled.” The sages relate this to pleading ignorance of the woman’s condition: “If you have acted with malice aforethought and led astray a high priest, whom Malachi 2:7 calls a messenger of the Lord of Hosts, do not say that it was a mistake. Why? You are leading yourself astray. You are afflicting yourself. Ecclesiastes 5:5: Why should God be angry with your voice and destroy the work of your hands?’ This refers to the children who are afflicted with leprosy.” How fortunate that we know better now! Today, many Jews do observe the laws of menstruation and immerse themselves in the mikvah. The first half of Chapter 15 deals with impurity following seminal emissions, the second half is devoted to menstruation. Verse 18 connects the two: “A woman with whom a man cohabits, whereby there was [a discharge] of semen, they shall immerse in water, and they shall remain unclean until evening.” Yes, intercourse, which causes procreation, also causes impurity! Much has been written about this apparent dichotomy. If we are commanded to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28), how can the very act that creates new life make us impure? In a discussion in Tractate Niddah 41b: “Rabbi Shimon explains: In the case of discharging semen, it is sufficient for her to be like the man who engaged in intercourse with her. Just as the man who engaged in intercourse with her does not become impure until the source of impurity, the semen, emerges outside his body, so too, she does not become impure until her source of impurity, the semen, emerges outside her body. It does not render her impure while it is still inside her body.” Of course there are differing opinions with much repetition, which culminates in an obviously disgruntled Rav Shmuel bar Bisna telling Abaye, “You are all spewing the same saliva. No one is teaching anything new, as you all repeat the same unsatisfactory answer.” The common denominator is life versus death. Only life can generate new life, which is why both menstruation and seminal discharge generate and transmit impurity. In the ancient world, both represented lost opportunities for creating new life. Death is inevitable and irrevocable, which is precisely why corpse contamination is so highly contagious for all who encounter a dead person, as well as for people and objects they touch. Both orgasm and birth represent the tenuous threshold between life and death. Not every ejaculation results in pregnancy, not every pregnancy produces a live baby, and not every baby lives to adulthood. Therefore, even seemingly remote encounters with death such as menstruation and seminal discharge carry a certain amount of corpse contamination and must be treated accordingly. Despite their outlandish notions about the workings of the human body, the ancient sages transmitted a profound message that is as valid today as it was for their contemporaries: Life is a gift from HaShem, but bringing it into the world and nurturing it to maturity is fraught with danger. We dare not take it for granted. Aside from the element of impurity, periods of separation followed by reentry rituals still offer opportunities to reflect and experience gratitude. As Psalm 115:17 teaches: Only the living are able to praise HaShem.