

Our parashah, which in non-leap years is read together with Parashah Metzora, deals chiefly with skin afflictions that can also affect clothing. Diagnosing, i.e., determining ritual purity, is the responsibility of the *kohen*, the priest. It is important to understand that he does not act as a shaman in order to effect a cure, and his only “prescription” is a seven-day period of quarantine, a measure we remember well from the earliest days of the recent pandemic. The majority of our parashah deals with his diagnosing various types of skin and clothing ailments, but its name derives from the opening chapter, which deals with ritual purity surrounding childbirth. From our vantage point, these laws seem outlandish, and they also reflect deep-seated misogyny, which still persists in many parts of the world. Why should a woman become impure upon giving birth, and why is her time of impurity twice as long for a daughter as for a son? The title of our parashah, *tazria* (she conceives), gives us insight into the ancient world’s understanding of human bodily functions. It is based on the Hebrew root ט-ר-ז, which means to sow. Medieval commentator Ibn Ezra citing Genesis 1:11 (seed-yielding vegetation sprouting) explains: “... because in her reproductive function [a woman] resembles the earth. ... The sages of Greece are of this opinion: that the woman contains the seed, while the man’s sperm is a congealing agent, and that children are congealed from the blood of the woman.” The Talmud sages agree, and Talmud tractate Niddah contains some fanciful notions about female and male anatomical functions and about what determines a baby’s gender. Based on their understanding of genital secretions, Talmudic and medieval commentators propose that if the woman “emits her seed first,” i.e., has an orgasm first, the child will be male. And they offer some explicit advice on how to ensure having male offspring. Misogynic opinions on the reason for childbirth impurity include the notion that menstrual blood and the blood of childbirth are both punishments for Eve’s sin. Niddah 31b states that during the pain of childbirth a woman will impulsively swear that she will never again engage in intercourse with her husband. Hence, she must bring an offering for violating her oath, because she will certainly have sex with her husband again. Considering the time of isolation, Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai teaches, “When it is a male, over which everyone is happy, she regrets her oath only seven days after giving birth, but if it is a female, over which everyone is unhappy, she regrets only fourteen days afterward.” An equally galling opinion in this section based on expressions derived from the roots for male (זכר) and female (נקבה) states that while a man can provide a huge banquet, a woman comes into the world “empty.” On the same subject, Niddah 30 discusses whether formation of a male concludes on the 41st day, while formation for a female concludes on the 81st day. This includes accounts of Queen Cleopatra of Alexandria having female slaves who were condemned to death impregnated and after their execution examining their fetuses. No difference between male and female fetuses was found, but Rabbi Yishmael’s rebuttal, “I bring you proof from the Torah, and you bring me proof from the fools?” ignites a lively dispute that even mentions abortion! “Cleopatra gave the maidservants a purgative medicine to drink before intercourse, which would have terminated any previous pregnancy.” Rabbi Yishmael disagrees, others agree, but they certainly have other reasons for the differing periods of isolation. Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 14 discusses the sages’ awe at the complexity of the human body: “All nine months that the woman does not see blood, which by right she should see. The Holy One of Blessing diverts it upward to her breasts and transforms it into milk so that when the offspring emerges, he will have food to eat. This is especially true if he is a male, ...” These are just a small sampling of the many pronouncements that have been a source of bitterness and frustration for centuries. So now, let’s look for a silver lining. Given that impurity results from contact with death, it is easy to understand how the discharge of the placenta after childbirth renders the mother impure. On another positive note, the purification rituals following the birth of boys and girls are identical, which means that there is at least a modicum of equality. The common denominator is blood, which is associated with life and belongs solely to HaShem. That is why the laws of kashrut strictly prohibit eating it, and it is also why it figures so prominently in Temple rituals. Today we recognize this when we circumcise our infant boys and eat kosher meat. Another important reason for the longer period of isolation after the birth of a girl was concern for the baby’s welfare. In the ancient world, girls were expendable, and in times of need, they were often abandoned and left to die, or even killed right after birth. The longer period of isolation allowed mother and child to bond and ensured that the child was protected. [The Torah: A Women’s Commentary: Beth Alpert Nakhai, *Another View*] And as anyone who has given birth knows, a period of isolation after childbirth allows the mother to rest and recuperate from the ordeal, which was far more painful and dangerous for our ancestors than it is today. Seen in this light, these laws, which stress the sanctity of life, are another powerful illustration of how the precepts laid out in our Torah radically differ from the practices of the surrounding pagan cultures. And although its treatment of women is a far cry from our own Western mores, the Torah’s bold departure from the prevailing norm and the lively discussions it has generated encourage us to continue questioning and learning, which is always the best cure for ignorance.

Shabbat shalom!