**TAZRI-A**

(1st part of triennial cycle)

*Vayikra* (Leviticus) 12.1 – 13:39

*Eitz Hayim* 649-657; Plaut Chumash 827-834; Hertz Chumash 640-645

Chapter 12 in Vayikra (Leviticus) involvesdifficult issues about ritual purity and impurity. However, for my d’var, you only need read the first five verses, which, after the usual words about G/d telling Moses to tell the Israelites, is as follows (*Eitz Hayim*, 650):

When a woman at childbirth bears a male, she shall be impure seven days; she shall be impure as at the time of her menstrual infirmity. On the 8th day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. She shall remain in a state of blood purification for 33 days; she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary until her period of purification is completed. If she bears a female, she shall be impure two weeks as during her menstruation, and she shall remain in a state of blood purification for 66 days.

Why does birth of a boy entail one week of isolation as after menstruation and then 33 days of blood purification, whereas birth of a girl entails double those times: two weeks of isolation as after menstruation and then 66 days of blood purification? That question is the topic of my d’var.

With one exception, nothing in the text even hints at an expla-nation for those divine directions. So let’s start with what we can explain. The two periods of physical isolation after giving birth are not the same. The first, shorter period is identical to *niddah* and precludes contact with any sacred object and any intimate contact with the woman’s husband. The second, longer period is called *temaya*, and forbids the woman from entering the sanctuary or eating sacred food, but permits contact with her husband. But that says nothing about why the two time periods are doubled after giving to a girl compared with giving birth to a boy?

The exception to the absence of any explanation stems from the reference to circumcision on the eighth day of the baby boy’s life coming just after the reference to the mother’s period of *niddah*. Had that period been any longer than seven days, she would not be able to attend the *bris* (the circumcision ceremony). OK, but that “explanation” only makes the doubling of days of blood purification – from 33 to 66 days -- in the case of baby girls even harder to explain. Moreover, despite that remarkable difference, all new mothers, regardless of whether they gave birth to boys or girls, bring exactly the same burnt offerings and sin offerings to the door or the Tent of Meeting after completing their periods of blood purification (see 12:6).

I had always been troubled by this distinction, but, as with other troubling parts of Torah, I just hurried past and went on to other parts of the text. It seems that I was in good company. According to Ellen Frankel (author of *The Five Books of Miriam.*), Rashi, Ramban, and Sforno make no comment at all on these verses of the text. Most commentators on this part of chap. 12, if they say anything at all simply accept what is the most common rabbinic explanation, which is best explained by Frankel (*Ibid*, p. 163):

This double period of quarantine was the Torah’s way of acknowledge-ing that a newborn female child would herself become a mother some-day and would therefore become a source of defilement, like her mother.

My wife Toby expresses a similar thought. She says that a women’s ability to give birth creates a link to the divine, and giving birth to a girl-child makes it that much more awesome. At a very worldly level, Professor Beth Alpert Nakha, writing in *The Torah: A Women’s* Commentary (650).suggests that priests were worried that boy babies would be favoured over girl babies, and by giving the mother control for longer periods of time, they ensure that a girl is nursed and cared for.

Of course, there are lots of other explanations but they are not very credible. For example, one suggests that during the pain of giving birth, women may swear that they will never again have sex with their husbands, and that a girl child will eventually do the same thing, so it takes the mother twice as long for them to retract their oaths. Others are credible but say nothing about why the difference between boy babies and girl babies. For example, Rabbi Plaut writes in his Chumash (826) that the reference to circumcision in verse 3 is only incidental, which eliminates the one apparent explanation that we do have.

Only with the advent of female rabbis and commentators did scholarly work on Chapter 12 get a new look. Ellen Frankel, Elyse Goldstein, and their colleagues were profoundly disturbed by what seemed to be double punishment for giving birth to girls. As one result, we begin to get such publications such as *The Torah: A Women’s* Commentary by Eskenazi and Weiss (2008), and which does deal substantively with Chapter 12 in *Vayikra*.

It is difficult to summarize the thinking of these women but I would say that they offer a young Jew who takes Torah seriously two broad options.

* First, one could reject any distinction between the birth of a boy-baby and the birth of a girl-baby, and go on to treat this (and other) portions of the Torah that exhibit a gender bias as historical anachronisms that no longer apply. Perhaps, as Rabbi Heloise Ettinger suggests, they could create new communal ceremonies for a girl comparable to brit milah for a boy (*The Women’s Torah Commentary, edited by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein*, 2000).
* Second, one could accept that we can’t change Torah and try to make the most of its admitted gender bias and focus on the classical view that, in giving birth, women come into some form of intimate contact with the divine that is not available to men. Therefore, though today seen as equal in ability and potential, men and women *are* different, and we should make the most of those differences.

In short, most modern female rabbis and scholars do not try to find explanations for the different periods of isolation for boy babies or girl babies. Instead, they celebrate them. Frankel concludes, and I will adopt her statement as my conclusion:

We can look at the cup as half empty or half full. . . . Women are only given one week off after the birth of a male to recover and celebrate the new little boy that has entered into lives. With the birth of a female, their impurity grants them two weeks to recover and celebrate the new female force they have brought into the world.

 Shabbat shalom,