

Matters of Life and Death – Tazria

Harav Yehoshua Pfeffer

Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: “Speak to the children of Israel, saying: ‘When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male, then she shall be contaminated for seven days, as during the days of her separation infirmity shall she be contaminated. On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.’” ((Vayikra 12:1-3.))

The first law taught us by the passage, which is the ritual impurity of a woman after she gives birth, requires scrutiny. The fundamental ingredient of all forms of ritual contamination is death. The severest of all forms of *tumah* is death itself, to which the Rishonim refer as *avi avos ha-tumah*. ((This expression is found in the liturgy for Parashas Parah, and is mentioned by Rashi in a number of places.)) Other forms of impurity, such as *niddah*, *zav* and *zavah*, *neveilah*, and so on, are all in some way related to death; they are offshoots of the most fundamental *tumah* of actual human death.

No phenomenon is more associated with life than the wondrous process of giving birth. Which act can embody life more than that of bringing new life into the world? Yet specifically here, in the most dramatic act of life, the Torah imposes spiritual defilement, an impurity specifically related to death. Why is this so?

On the Eighth Day

Additionally, the inclusion of the instruction to perform *bris milah* on the eighth day of a baby’s life, which interrupts the passage of a mother’s days of contamination and purity, seems misplaced. The instruction of the *pasuk* is not required to teach us the actual Mitzvah of *milah*; we already know it from the instruction given to Avraham Avinu: “You shall circumcise for yourselves every male.” ((Bereishis 17:10.)) The command given to Avraham is the only source quoted by the Rambam in enumerating the Mitzvah. ((Sefer Hamitzvos, Mitzvah 215.))

Although a further *pasuk* is required to teach us that the circumcision must be performed on the eighth day of the child’s life, the location of this additional instruction in our Parashah is perplexing. What connection is there between the impurity of the mother, which our Parashah describes, and the obligation to circumcise the son? Why, furthermore, was this chosen as the fitting place to inform us of the obligation to perform *milah* on the eighth day?

All Within a Seed

To reach an explanation of the matter, we open with a further observation. The *pasuk* which describes the birth of a male child uses striking terminology: “When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male ...” If a woman gives birth, the fact of her prior

pregnancy is far too straightforward for the Torah to mention. Clearly, the redundancy means to imply some hidden lesson. Furthermore, the word *Tazria*, which literally refers to the seed, or the female egg from which the baby is formed, is not an ordinary form for becoming pregnant. What is the meaning of this unusual term?

The secret of seeds can be gleaned from the short words of the *pasuk*: “Light is sown for the righteous.” ((Tehillim 97:11.)) Our world, a world of darkness and concealment, cannot contain the brilliant light of Torah. Chazal thus teach that the reward of *mitzvos*, which itself is the light of Torah, is absent from this world, ((Kiddushin 39b.)) reserved entirely for the World to Come. Yet, although the light cannot be revealed, it is not entirely absent; it is present in the potential form of a seed.

Somehow, the delightful taste of the eventual fruit—and not merely of one fruit, but of an entire tree’s worth of fruit, for all the years of the tree’s existence—is latent within a single seed. Hidden in the kernel, the taste of the fruit cannot be discerned; the seed belies nothing of the colorful, intricately textured, and delicious product it conceals. Nevertheless, it is all there, all present in a small, unassuming pit. The same is true of the light of Torah. While we remain in this world, we cannot see its majestic brilliance; we cannot taste its superlative taste. Yet, the light is present, sown in the Torah that we were given, latent in the *mitzvos* we perform; it is present in the *esrog* we hold, in the *tefillin* we wear, and in the *matzah* we eat.

The Torah describes that Adam, the first of men, was placed in Gan Eiden “to work it, and to keep it.” ((Bereishit 2:15.)) Chazal explain that this includes the entire infrastructure of *mitzvos*: *to work it* refers to Positive Commandments, and *to keep it* refers to Negative Commandments. ((See Or haChayim, Bereishit 2:15, quoting from Tikkunei Zohar.)) All the *mitzvos* were thus expressed in terms of working the land, of performing the positive labors so that seed matures into tree, and protecting it from all harm. This is what the performance of *mitzvos* is all about: to perform the labors of this world, so that the light sown within *mitzvos* will develop into our portion in the World to Come.

Born Out of the Kever

In order to transform a seed into a fruit-bearing tree, or in order to extract the light of *mitzvos* from their worldly residence, much work must be invested. The light is present, yet it is trapped in the earthly entity that contains it, and can only be released through the labors of Torah and *mitzvos*. By means of the *mitzvos*, applied to the physical entities of the world, the kernel is removed of its chaff, inner good separated from external evil. The layers of darkness are stripped off the pure light, preparing it for the brilliance radiance of the World to Come.

The same process must take place for a new birth to be achieved. Before he finally emerges, the fetus must go through a nine-month transformation period, making the transition from the potential of a seed to the human life-form that is ultimately born. The process of transformation is itself a process of separation; for the new life of the fetus to

shine forth, it must be separated from the forces of evil that surround every worldly entity.

The result of this process is the time of impurity that follows every birth. Specifically with respect to the ritual contamination of birth, the *pasuk* describes the birth in terms of the initial seed that prepared it. Because the birth of a newborn baby implies a process of development from the potential of a seed to the final revelation of a child, it follows that there must be some degree of *tumah*.

The act of birth, to be sure, is the ultimate act of life; to be born, however, life must be separated from that which is not life. In the tongue of the Gemara, the portal through which a baby is born is called the *kever*—the grave. After a person dies, his body is placed in a grave so that his physical vessel should decompose, leaving only the spirit to return to its celestial abode. Just as the gateway to the Afterlife is a grave, so the gateway to life in this world is a grave; before we live, there are extraneous elements that must die, cast away from the life of the fetus. This contact with death, in the defining moment of life-giving, causes the *tumah* of birth.

Arising After Seven Falls

This contamination lasts for seven days, corresponding to seven external layers which are removed from the inner life of the fetus. The *pasuk* teaches that the kingdom of Yisrael is only established after the death of seven kings of Edom: “These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom before a king reigned over the Children of Yisrael.” ((Bereishit 36:31.)) Edom embodies the external side of Yaakov, the element that must be stripped off; before seven kings of Edom rule and die, the king of Yisrael cannot arise.

The same is true in a personal sense. The *pasuk* teaches that “Seven times may the righteous one fall, but he will arise.” The foolish, explained Rav Hutner, ((Letters.)) believe that he arises *in spite* of having fallen seven times. The wise understand that his eventual arising is only possible after falling seven times. He falls, but he is not overwhelmed; each time he picks himself up, he defeats the force of evil that knocked him down. After seven times, the evil is vanquished; he arises, and stays upright.

In the seven days following the birth of a male, ((For a female, the process of purification lasts for fourteen days, twice the duration of the purification period for a male. The basic explanation for this is that a male, even after the seven days of purification are complete, must continue to toil throughout his life in striving to rectify evil. A female, however, possesses a degree of inner completion superior to her male counterpart, such that she does not require the toil of *mitzvos* that a male must accomplish. To reach this closeness, fourteen days of purification, double the period of the male, are required following the birth of a female. See Likutei Torah of the Arizal, Parashas Tazria, in a footnote.)) the extraneous elements of the newborn’s inner life are removed; each day implies a further separation of life from death, of light from darkness. After seven days, the process is complete.((See Likutei Torah of the Arizal, Parashat Tazria, in a footnote, where the correspondence of the seven days of contamination with

the seven kings of Edom is mentioned.)) On the eighth day, the element of evil which continues to cling to his person must then be removed. This is achieved by the *mitzvah* of *milah*, in which the Orlah is cut away. Following the permanent removal of the foreskin, the stage of Periah allows the inner light of man to shine forth, the inner light of Torah which is present within each Jewish soul. ((See Sefas Emes, Shemos 5655; Tazria 5657.))

Fittingly, the instruction to perform *milah* on the eighth day of the child's life is given in the passage of our Parashah, which relates to the process of birth and its aftermath. After the seven days of separation—seven days of contamination through contact with death—the inner purity of the Jewish child is ready to be revealed.

The Final Birth

The *pasuk* describes the future kingdom of David as a flourishing sprout: “Behold, days are coming—the word of Hashem—when I will establish a righteous sprout from David.” ((Yirmiyahu 23:5.)) Thus we pray daily: “The sprout of Your servant David may You speedily cause to flourish.” The name of the Mashiach, according to one opinion in the Midrash, ((Eichah Rabba 1:51.)) is *Tzemach*—a sprout or plant: “Behold, there is a man, his name is Tzemach, and he will flourish in his place; he will build the Sanctuary of Hashem.” ((Zechariah 6:11.))

The seed of the Mashiach, and with him the glory of the future Kingdom of Hashem, is planted among us. To reach it, however, we will have had to invest much toil and strain, and to have undergone much hardship. The trail that a seed must traverse before the final product is reached is tough: it must disintegrate into near nothingness, ((For produce whose seed decomposes; see Yerushalmi, Bikurim 8b, where Chazal list examples. See also Mishnah, Terumot chap. 9; Gemara (Bavli) Nedarim 57a, 60a.)) begin a new life as a sprout, and break through the crust of the earth. Such, indeed, was the case of our national creation from Mitzrayim, which the *pasuk* describes as a literal birth. ((*Upon your birth, on the day that you were born ...* (Yechezkel 16:4.)) Planted in Egypt, like a lonely seed decomposing in the ground, the process that brought us to our final birth was grueling and arduous.

So too is the process of the final Redemption—*acharia ke-reishis*. ((Kedushah of Mussaf for Shabbos, Nusach Sefard. The *pasuk* states that the final Redemption will resemble the first exodus from Mitzrayim: “As in the days when you left the land of Egypt I shall show you wonders” (Michah 7:15).)) The harsh years of our long *galus* are hard to bear; the birth pangs of recent times, as we near the time of Redemption, have brought us pain that words cannot describe. Furthermore, like the death of the Egyptian firstborns upon our redemption from Mitzrayim, and like the death to which the *tumah* of the birthing mother attests, the birth of the New Age will be accompanied by great death. The *pesukim* of Yechezkel and Zechariah promise a war the likes of which the world has never seen. ((See Yechezkel 38; Zechariah 14)) It will be a tumultuous time, on a hitherto unknown scale.

Following the hardships of birth, however, after seven days of *tumah* have been counted, the eighth day arrives: the day on which the force of evil is forever removed from the body of Yisrael, and the inner light of Kedushah shines forth. When the last war is over, “then I will not hide My countenance from them again, for I will pour out My spirit upon the House of Yisrael.” ((Yechezkel 39:29.)) Our prayer is that we should be spared the pain of Chevlei Mashiach, and that the time of the final glory should be upon us speedily, in our days.