



Why the Difference in the Laws of Ritual Purity between the Birth of Males and Females?

Dealing with the Torah Differentiation between Male and Female

My students always question me, whenever I teach a Torah concept that is unequal for men and women. “Why did the Torah permit a man to marry more than one wife, while a woman was never permitted more than one husband?” “Why is only a man authorized to grant his wife a divorce?” “Why does only a woman require *yibum* (levirate marriage) but not the man?” “Why are only men required to learn Torah for its own sake...” I don’t mind that the list goes on and on ad infinitum, as my own first questioning of Judaism was, “Why does the man thank Hashem for not creating him a woman?” While, there are many answers to all these questions, over my almost 40 years of living a Torah observant life, I have learned to not be bothered by such questions. Since, I am very confident in my Jewish femininity and strongly aware of how the Torah values women, it is easy for me to accept that men and women are different and therefore, different laws apply to them respectably. This concept is best exemplified by the fact that none of my students ever asked, why only the boys get circumcised but not the girls! Similarly, I’m not really bothered by the fact that the ritual impurity caused by the birth of a girl lasts two weeks, whereas for the birth of a boy its only one week. Today, this difference has no practical implication as, “We don’t differentiate between blood and blood” (Talmud). Today, any blood that emerges from the womb is considered impure, whether due to menstruation, sexual disease or childbirth. Thus, a woman after birth, whether she gave birth to a boy or a girl must wait until she stops bleeding completely (usually around six weeks), count “seven clean days” and only then immerse in a mikvah in order to return to marital intimacy. Nevertheless, we need to explain the Torah difference between the impurity period for the birth of a son versus that of a daughter. I’m pleased that most of the classical medieval commentaries address this issue. Yet, in order to shed light on this question, we need to address the concept of why childbirth causes impurity in the first place.

Why Does Childbirth Cause Impurity?

ספר ויקרא פרק יב (ב) אִשָּׁה כִּי תִזְרִיעַ וַיֵּלְדָה זָכָר וְטִמְאָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כִּימֵי נְדָת דְּוֹתָהּ תִּטְמָא:
 (ג) וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי יִמּוֹל בֶּשֶׁר עֶרְלָתוֹ: (ד) וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם וּשְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים תֵּשֵׁב בְּדָמֵי טְהָרָה בְּכֹל קִדְּשׁ לֹא תִגַּע וְאֵל
 הַמִּקְדָּשׁ לֹא תָבֹא עַד מְלֵאת יְמֵי טְהָרָה: (ה) וְאִם נִקְבָּה תֵּלֵד וְטִמְאָה שִׁבְעַיִם כְּנֻדָּתָהּ וְשָׁשִׁים יוֹם וְשִׁשָּׁת יָמִים
 תֵּשֵׁב עַל דָּמֵי טְהָרָה:

“When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male, she shall be impure for seven days; she shall be impure just as at the time of separation when she menstruates. On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. For thirty-three days, she shall remain in a state of blood of purity; she shall not touch anything holy, nor enter the Sanctuary until the period of her purification is completed. If she gives birth to a female, she shall be impure for two weeks, as during her menstruation. For sixty-six days, she shall remain in a state of blood of purity” (*Vayikra* 12:2-5).

How can childbirth – the epitome of purity – cause טִמְאָה/*tumah* – ‘impurity?’ Since birth brings new life into the world, whereas *tumah* relates to death or to loss of potential life, why does birth cause *tumah*?

תלמוד בבלי מסכת תענית דף ב/א אמר רבי יוחנן שלשה מפתחות בידו של הקדוש ברוך הוא שלא נמסרו ביד שליח ואלו הן מפתח של גשמים מפתח של חיה ומפתח של תחיית המתים:
 Rabbi Yochanan said, three keys are in the hands of the Holy One and are not handed over to an emissary. These are the key to rain, the key to childbirth, and the key to the revival of the dead (*Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 2a*).

Since nothing impure emerges from on High, how can impurity arise from childbirth, when it is one of the three keys that are only in Hashem's hands? The answer is that impurity enters only after pregnancy ends. The *Kotzker Rebbe* explains that in every important event, when holiness is strengthened, impure energies are also aroused. Because of the power of pregnancy and birth, to which G-d controls the key, impurities are kept out until the baby is born. Yet, when the holiness leaves, impure energies gain entry. This is like the impurity that overtakes the body once the soul leaves. Similarly, when we excel in some area, especially in something Jewish, there is a danger of being unconsciously overwhelmed by negative energies and subsequently backsliding. Since the female child inherently carries a higher degree of holiness, due to her own biological, life creating capability, a greater void, or *tumah*, remains after her birth. Thus, the greater *tumah* after a baby girl's birth reflects her greater capacity for holiness (due to her creative powers) and necessitates the longer wait to remove this ritual impurity [Chana Weisberg](#).

The Pain and Suffering of the Cycles of Nature

תלמוד בבלי מסכת נדה דף ל/ב דרש רבי שמלאי למה הולד דומה במעי אמו לפנקס שמקפץ ומנח ידיו על שתי צדעיו... ונר דלוק לו על ראשו וצופה ומביט מסוף העולם ועד סופו... ואין לה ימים שאדם שרוי בטובה יותר מאותן הימים... ומלמדין אותו כל התורה כלה... וכיון שבא לאויר העולם בא מלאך וסטר על פיו ומשכחו כל התורה כלה...

Rabbi Simlai questioned, what does the fetus in the mother's womb resemble? A folded notebook with his hands placed on his two sides... and a candle lights for him upon his head and he looks and sees from one end of the world to the other... There are no days that a person dwells in such goodness more than these days... and they teach him the entire Torah... When he comes to the air of this world, the angel comes and slaps him on the mouth and makes him forget his entire Torah... (*Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 30b*).

Life on earth is specifically created by nullifying the heavenly bliss of life inside of the womb. This nullification is revealed through the suffering, the contractions of birth, the cry of the newborn and the blood of birth. Without being slapped in the face to make the baby forget his Torah, he would be unable to fulfill his mission in this world, which is to exert his free will through reconnecting with Torah. The *tumah* of childbirth expresses the lack and sorrow which comes from forgetting the Torah of the womb. Since the expulsion from the Garden, pain and impurity mars the joy of birth and the natural cycle of life. Childbirth expresses this duality of nature. Birth brings new life to the world, but the act is accompanied by blood and great pain. Sometimes it is life-threatening. Physicality is responsible for our impulses, our vulnerability to the forces of nature, to illness, the deterioration of our bodies and our ultimate death. With every birth, we come face to face with the sin of Adam and Chava that caused the debasement of nature, leaving us with the current world where all are subject to the cycle of life. We are all born, and we all die.

Why is the Impurity Caused by the Birth of a Girl Twice as Long as When a Boy is Born?

To shed light on this question we need to go back to the consequence of Adam's and Chava's sin.

ספר בראשית פרק ג (טז) אַל הָאִשָּׁה אָמַר ה'רְבָה אֲרָבָה עֲצָבוֹנָהּ וְהִרְבֵּה בְעָצָב תֵּלְדִי בָנִים וְאֵל אִישׁךָ תִּשְׁוֹקֶתְךָ וְהוּא יִמְשֵׁל בָּךְ: (יז) וּלְאָדָם אָמַר כִּי שָׁמַעְתָּ לְקוֹל אִשְׁתְּךָ וְתָאֲכַל מִן הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לֵאמֹר לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ: אַרְוֶרָה הָאֲדָמָה בְּעֵבוּרְךָ בְּעֲצָבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ:

“To the woman He said, ‘I shall surely increase your pain and your pregnancy; in pain you shall bear children...’ 17 And to man He said, ‘Because you listened to your wife, and you ate from the tree from which I commanded you saying, You shall not eat of it, cursed be the ground for your sake; with pain shall you eat of it all the days of your life” (*Bereishit* 3:16-17).

Chava received a double portion of *עֲצָב/etzev* – ‘pain.’ This is the reason why the impurity and pain from the birth of a female is twice as long as from the birth of a male. Another reason is that the nature of the female is cold and moist whereas the male is hot and dry. Therefore, giving birth to a girl causes more blood and consequently, the process of purification is longer (Tzror Hamor, *Vayikra* 12:2). Kli Yakar explains that since it was a woman who began the process of bringing impurity into the world, by eating from the forbidden fruit, all women need extra purification. The first woman, Chava was the original cause of the impurity of the blood of *niddah*, therefore, when a woman gives birth to a girl, she needs a twofold seven-day purification process: one seven-day purification period for herself and one for her daughter (Kli Yakar, *Vayikra* 12:2).

Rectifying the Breach of Nature

Returning to our original passage from this week's parasha, it is interesting to note that after the birth of a boy the Torah mentions his (*brit milah*) circumcision on the eighth day (verse 3). This seems superfluous since the Torah already commanded circumcision in great detail in *Parashat Lech Lecha*. Furthermore, the period of impurity after the birth of a daughter is not written as 14 days but rather described with the unusual word, *שְׁבַעִים/shevuayim* – ‘two weeks,’ which is related to *שֶׁבַע/sheva* – ‘seven.’ The time of the mother's impurity is thus contrasted with circumcision on the eighth day. Maharal explains that the number seven – connected to Shabbat – expresses holiness within nature, whereas the number eight – connected to circumcision – expresses the extra holiness that we can achieve beyond nature. Through circumcision on the eighth day man enters a covenant with G-d and rises above nature with all its pitfalls. Since the level of holiness it achieves is higher than that inherent in nature, circumcision on the eighth day overrides Shabbat. This also explains why the time period of impurity is shorter following the birth of a boy. The covenant of circumcision shortens its duration because it is a corrective to the physical nature with its inherent pain and deterioration. The corrective for daughters takes place at the covenant of marriage. Since the timing of this covenant is much later it doesn't shorten the duration of impurity after the birth of a girl. The ability of the Jewish people to bring holiness beyond nature to the world will b"H lead to our victory over death and impurity by serving as a corrective for the sin of Adam and Chava. This is reflected in the bracha (blessing) at the covenant of circumcision: “Rescue our beloved from destruction, for the sake of His covenant that He has placed in our flesh;” as well as in the blessing we recite at the covenant of marriage: “Gladden these beloved companions as You gladdened Your creation in the Garden of Eden of old” ([Rabbi Dror Brama](#)). May we merit to celebrate both covenants and thus overcome the impurity of birth, of exile and of death. May we merit to be part of the renewed nation through the revival of the dead and the national rebirth!