

Short Comments on Tazria - Shabbat Hachodesh - Rosh Hodesh Nisan  
Rabbi Eliot Malomet April 2, 2022 1 Nisan 5782

ויקרא י"ב:ב' דָּבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אִשָּׁה כִּי תוֹרִיעַ  
וְיִלְדָה זָכָר וְטָמְאָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כִּי־מִי נִגְזַת דְּוִתָּהּ תִּטְמָא:

**Leviticus 12:2** *Speak to the Children of Israel, saying: A woman—when she produces-seed and bears a male, she remains-tamei for seven days; like the days of her infirmity of being-apart she shall remain-tamei.* The late Bible scholar, Tikva Frymer Kensky writes: *The ideas of pollution, purity and purification were fundamental concepts of biblical Israel. The desire for purity was so intense that a major social class, the priesthood, was entrusted with the task of determining and giving instruction about purity and im-purity. Pollution, the lack of purity could affect individuals, the Temple, the collectivity of Israel, and the land of Israel itself. Some forms of pollution could be eradicated by rituals; the performance of these purifications and expiations was a major function of the priesthood. The performance of certain deeds, however, could not be eradicated by rituals; Israel believed that the person intentionally committing these acts would suffer catastrophic retribution. Wrongful acts could cause the pollution of the nation and the land of Israel, which could also not be "cured" by ritual. Why is a woman who gives birth (a parturient) classified as tamei and what are the implications of that classification? TFK offers a compelling explanation: In Israelite cosmology it was considered vitally important to maintain the structure of the universe by keeping all distinctions (boundaries) firm. **The boundaries between life and death are crucial and no individual who has had contact with the world of death can be part of life.** Go back to Creation and you can see this playing out. God's first act after creating light is to separate light from darkness. The second act, separate the upper waters from the lower waters. Holy and profane, pure and impure, life and death are discreet entities whose boundaries need to be maintained for life itself to be sustained. Here, in the case of the parturient woman, it may be that, like the person who has touched death, **the person who experienced birth has been at the boundaries of life/nonlife and therefore cannot directly reenter the community.** She therefore must undergo a long period of transition before she can reapproach the*

sacred. This is a profound idea. Birth, the birthing experience, in addition to all of its mystery, is among the most intense, terrifying and even dangerous experiences in life. Given the danger of childbirth in antiquity, and to some extent today, in birthing, a woman can literally come close to death. The life/death boundary is palpable in the physical sense and in the metaphysical sense as well. The woman birthing a new life is pushing back death and because she has subsisted ever so briefly on that boundary line, she has come into contact with death, thus rendering her *tamei*. Birth is an experience of intense liminality. Death is as well. Canadian-Israeli psychologist, Leeat Granek, observes that people in the last stages of life have blurrier boundaries than the rest of us. *That feeling of awe, mystery and power - **the intensity of the mysterious 'here' and 'not here' is the same for birth as it is for death.** Where did these babies come from? And where do the people we love go after they die? We can rationally understand the biological process of gestation and bodily deterioration, but we cannot entirely provide answers to the mysteries of life and death. Birth and death - the great mysteries of life - are mirror images of each other. The actual and metaphysical proximity to death during the birthing process is what places the parturient woman in that liminal space. After a fixed time, she resumes normal life and access to the sacred.* י"ג:ב' אָדָם כִּי־יִהְיֶה בְּעוֹר־בְּשָׂרוֹ שָׂאֵת אֹז־סִפְּחָה אוֹ בְּהֵרַת וְהָיָה בְּעוֹר־בְּשָׂרוֹ לְגִגֵּעַ צָרַעַת וְהוּבָא אֶל־אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן אוֹ אֶל־אֶחָד מִבְּנָיִו הַכֹּהֲנִים:

**13:2** *When a person has on the skin of the body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly affection on the skin of the body, it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons, the priests.* What is the significance of skin and why is the Torah so concerned with skin diseases? Aviva Zornberg: *Symptoms appear on the skin, that sensitive envelope that separates the body contents from the outside world. **The skin is a liminal area,** a space between, in which are registered both inner malaises, physical and emotional, and reactions to the outside world. It is a responsive organ, reacting to food, touch,*

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climate, to attractions and repulsions, fears and pleasures. The Hebrew word for skin is **or**; in these Torah passages, it is often called **or bessoro** (the skin of his flesh). It functions as a porous barrier between inside and outside. The Hebrew **or** evokes alertness, responsiveness, vitality. The pathology of **tsora'at**, in which the skin is bleached of color, **is associated with death**. In other words, skin, a liminal organ, at the boundary of person to the world, is also the boundary between the inside and outside of the body. When an individual experiences skin anomalies, especially the disease of **tsora'at** which renders the body corpse-like in appearance, this individual, like the parturient woman, exists temporarily in the zone of intense liminality between life and death.

#### HaChodesh - החודש

שמות י"ב:ב' הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשׁוּ הַחֹדֶשִׁים רֵאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה:

**Exodus 12:2** *This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.* The tradition designates this passage to be re-read close to or on Rosh Hodesh Nisan orienting us towards Passover, and inspiring us to renew our understanding of the holiday and its laws. Here are two fascinating comments on this verse. Bekhor Shor (France, 12th Century):

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה. רֵאשׁוּ לְחֵירוֹת וְאוֹתוֹ תַעֲשׂוּ רֵאשׁוֹן לְמִנְיַן חֲדָשִׁים כְּדֵי שְׂתַמְנֶנּוּ מִשַּׁעַת הַחֵירוֹת וּבִזְמַת תִּזְכְּרוּ לָכֶם שַׁעַת הַחֵירוֹת וְתִזְכְּרוּ אֵת הַטּוֹבָה שֶׁעָשִׂיתִי עִמָּכֶם וְתִהְיוּ זְהִירִין בִּירְאָתִי וּבִאֲהַבְתִּי וּבִעֲבוּדָתִי:

*This month is the rosh, the beginning of freedom, and for that reason you should ordain it as the first month in your calendar of months, so that you should count time from the moment of your freedom and in so doing you will be constantly aware of the moment of your freedom, and remember the good that I did for you, and so that you should have fervent awareness in your awe, love, and service of Me.* In other words: your calendar is a statement of core values. Here, the core value is the **gift of freedom** for which you ought to be constantly grateful. **All religions count time from their foundational moments.** Christianity counts time from the birth of Jesus. Islam, from the Hijra, Mohammed's emigration to Medina. Buddhism, from the day the Buddha attained nirvana-after-death. Judaism counts time from the month of the Exodus.

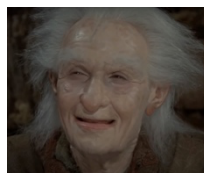
Ovadia Sforno (Italy, 16th Century):

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשׁ חֲדָשִׁים מִכַּאן וְאֵילַךְ יִהְיוּ הַחֲדָשִׁים שְׁלֹכֶם, לַעֲשׂוֹת בֵּהֶם כְּרִצּוֹנְכֶם, אֲבֵל בִּימֵי הַשְּׁעָבוּד לֹא הָיוּ יָמֵיכֶם שְׁלֹכֶם, אֲבֵל הָיוּ לַעֲבוּדָת אֲחֵרִים וְרִצּוֹנָם, לְפִיכֶם רֵאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדְשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה. כִּי בּוֹ הִתְחִיל מִצִּיאֹתְכֶם הַבְּחִירָיִי:

*This month will be to you, the first of months, from now on these months will be yours, to do with as you like. But during the period of your enslavement your days were not yours (ie. they did not belong to you) rather, they were subject to the labor you had to render to others at their will, therefore, this month is first to you in the months of the year, because during this month the reality of your freedom to determine the course of your own life began.* In these two comments we have an invitation to a discussion about **how we count time** and the **meaning of being able to count time**. For Bekhor Shor, the moment Israel attains its freedom is the ultimate reference point of time, the "zero" hour of Israel. Events in the Torah and elsewhere in the Bible are referenced by *the year since the exodus* eg. when Solomon commences construction of the Temple: *In the four hundred and eightieth year after the Israelites left the land of Egypt, in the month of Ziv—that is, the second month—in the fourth year of his reign over Israel, Solomon began to build the House of the LORD.* (I Kings 6:1). For Sforno, counting time has deep philosophical significance. When you are a slave, your time is not your own. It belongs to someone else. Freedom is the ability to govern your own time and choose how to use it without anyone ordering you.

י"ב:ח' וְאָכְלוּ אֶת־הַבָּשָׂר בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא צְלִי־אֵשׁ וּמִצּוֹת עֲלֵ־מַרְרִים יֹאכְלֶהוּ:

**12:8** *They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs.* Herbed, roasted lamb meat, on flatbread is not an uncommon dish across the world. Festive, nutritious, tasty, and relatively fast to prepare, "a nice MLT, mutton, lettuce and tomato sandwich, where the mutton is nice and lean and the tomato is ripe" is, next to true love, "the greatest thing in the world." The meal has a functional purpose. It's the core experience in solidifying the family as the basic unit of the covenantal community. It's not only the greatest thing next to true love, it bonds the people to God in their basic bonding unit: the family.



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