

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אִשָּׁה כִּי תִזְרִיעַ וַיִּלְדָּה זָכָר... וְאִם נִקְבָּה תִלְדַּ וַיִּקְרָא יב-א-ב, ה	<b>And God spoke to Moses saying:</b> <i>Speak to the Children of Israel, saying:</i> <i>A woman—when she produces-seed</i> <i>and bears a male...</i> <b>Now if [it is] a female [that] she bears...</b> Lev. 12:1-2, 5
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The rules relating to childbirth, purity and impurity are some of the most complicated in the Torah. For us, they seem remote. An interesting way to approach this subject is to consider that in the biblical world view life and death are radically distinct categories. Unlike the pagan world view, which sees birth, life, death, and rebirth as a

continuous circle in which life commingles with death, and both realms have their dominant deities, in the Bible, God is the single and only force of life, there are no other gods. Most importantly, any place where those two realms come into close proximity with one another, there is the need for strict separation. This is expressed in the language of purity and impurity. A dead body, for example, puts all those who are in close proximity to it in various states of impurity. Why? Because a corpse signals the boundary of life and death. That's a dangerous boundary. A parturient woman is con-

sidered impure because, having just given birth, she too exists at a boundary: between death and life: with the new life emerging into the world and the "death" of the pre-natal existence of the fetus in utero. While today, we have a rather precise understanding of embryology, down to the cellular level, the rabbis had their own traditions of how a fetus takes shape. While they had ideas about how tissues, limbs and organs developed, they were more concerned with how a person becomes a moral creature and what takes place in the womb to make that happen. Here are some of their teachings.

נדה ל' ב:י"ח-כ"ה דרש רבי שמלאי... ונר דלוק לו על ראשו וצופה ומביט מסוף העולם ועד סופו... ואל תתמה	Niddah 30b:18-25 § Rabbi Simlai taught... <b>And a candle is lit for it (the fetus)</b> <b>above its head,</b> <b>and it gazes and looks</b> <b>from one end of the world to the other...</b> <b>And do not wonder</b> how one can see from one end of the world to the other, as a person can sleep here, in this location, <b>and see a dream</b> that takes place in a place as distant as Spain [ <i>beAspamyā</i> ]. <b>And there are no days</b> <b>when a person is in a more blissful state</b> <b>than those days</b> when he is a fetus in his mother's womb...
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**A candle is lit for it.** Like every person who has an ounce of curiosity, R. Simlai is trying to imagine what takes place in the womb. Today we have ultrasound. Where would the idea of a candle come from? Perhaps a verse like, *נֵר ה' נְשַׁמֵּת אָדָם—the candle of God is the soul of man* (Prov. 20:27) or perhaps a very ancient and basic meditation technique in

which one imagines the flame of a candle. If that is the case, the fetal state is a state of deep meditation. **It gazes and looks from one end of the world to the other** suggests to us that the fetus is contemplating all of existence. While it is located in the finite zone of the mother's body, it is imagining an infinite realm beyond that body and residing in a protracted dream state. Perhaps that is R. Simlai's reaction to the mystery of gestation and childbirth. This is not embryology in any scientific or literal sense, but poetry. It's an attempt to articulate the sublime awe in seeing a newborn, and to express the infinite wonder one beholds in the face of an infant.

ומלמדיו אותו כל התורה כולה וכיון שבא לאויר העולם בא מלאך וסטר על פיו ומשכחו כל התורה כולה	<b>And they teach the fetus</b> <b>the entire Torah while in the womb...</b> <b>And once the fetus</b> <b>emerges into the airspace of the world,</b> <b>an angel comes</b> <b>and slaps it on its mouth,</b> <b>causing it to forget the entire Torah</b>
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**And they teach.** Who are they? Why, the angels, of course! What could be a more perfect world to the rabbis than the world of the *beit midrash*, a world of deep and profound learning, in which all the only activity is, to paraphrase the penultimate proverb of Pirkei Avot, *turn everything over and over because everything is there.* (Avot 5:22). In contemporary tellings of this vignette, the angel is not quite as violent and slapful as he is here. Rather he, or sometimes she, gently places a

finger on the top lip of the infant leaving what is called the **philtrum**, the little indentation under the nose. And the underlying meaning of this is that *learning is recollection*. Imagine then that when we emerge from the womb, *into the airspace of the world* we have forgotten everything that we ever knew. That would be a good reason to cry, wouldn't it? Torah is re-acquired over a lifetime as a



process of recollection. The joy of Torah study, in this imagined telling, is the joy of being reacquainted with knowledge that you once had. This could be a rabbinic reframing of Platonic idea of *anamnesis*: that learning is the recollection of innate knowledge acquired before birth. But some would argue that this text is not saying that. The key here is: **and they teach the fetus**. It's not the **knowledge of Torah** that is coming back to the child through its lifetime, but **the experience of learning**. In this retelling, the child comes into the learned already primed to be a life-long learner.

<p>וְהִצְרוּעַ אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ הִנְגַע בְּגָדָיו יִהְיֶה פְרָמִים וְרֵאשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פְרוּעַ וְעַל שָׂפָם יִעֲטָה וְטָמֵא טָמֵא יִקְרָא. וַיִּקְרָא יג:מה</p>	<p><i>Now the one with tzara'at that has the affliction, his garments are to be torn, his head is to be made-bare, and his upper-lip is to be covered; Tamei! Tamei! he is to cry out. Lev. 13:45</i></p>
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**Tamei! Tamei! he is to cry out.** In a world governed by concerns of contagion and purity, the Torah places the onus on the afflicted individual to warn everyone else to beware of his presence, lest they come into contact with him, and contract impurity or get sick. It's interesting that the Torah has the afflicted individual call the word **Tamei!** (*I am impure!*) twice. Why? While one may think this is very far removed from our world, it speaks to a deeply

rooted human sensibility that we see in our very own world in our very own time. While life has more or less come back to normal in this post-pandemic period, social distancing protocols are still observed in some places. Most, if not all, healthcare facilities still mandate masking. And, like the leper's double warning **Tamei! Tamei!** the wearing of a

mask conveys a bivalent meaning. On the one hand it announces to people you are next to: **Beware! I may be infected, so I am protecting you!** On the other hand, it also says, **You might be infected, so... Beware! I am protecting me!** The rabbis had this to say about the leper's double warning, **Tamei! Tamei! Impure! Impure!** -

<p>וְיִטְמָא טָמֵא יִקְרָא.". צְרִיף הַלְוִדִיעַ צִעְרוּ לְרַבִּים, וְרַבִּים מִבְּקָשׁוֹ עָלָיו רַחֲמִים. מוֹעֵד קָטָן ה.</p>	<p><i>"And he shall cry: Impure, impure"; this teaches that the leper must inform the public of his distress, and the public will pray for mercy on his behalf. Mo'ed Katan 5a</i></p>
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The rabbis take the leper's warning to an entirely different place. How would you expect people to react to a leper? They would gawk and stare and move out of their way out of their fear of coming into contact with them. But here the rabbis try to instill a different behavior. They want people to pray for the afflicted not to move away. The leper cries out twice not only to warn others of their proximity to impurity, but to elicit their compassion. Imagine then what kind of attitude the rabbis were trying to cultivate. When we see an accident, should we gawk? When we hear an ambulance should we feel fear? In those situations, rather than concealing our faces in fear, we should reveal our faces in prayer on their behalf.

**A Portion of Megillat Ha'atzma'ut with Trope - Israel's Declaration of Independence with Cantillation Signs**

<p>בְּאֶרֶץ־יִשְׂרָאֵל הָם הָעָם הַיְהוּדִי: בְּהָ עֲצָבָה דְמוּתוֹ הַרוּחַנִית הַדְתִית וְהַמְדִינִית בְּהָ חֵי־חַי קוֹמִמְיוֹת מְמַלְכֻתִית בְּהָ יָצַר נִכְסֵי תְרַבּוּת לְאֻמִּים וְכָל־לְאֻנּוֹשִׁים וְהוֹרִישׁ לְעוֹלָם־ כָּל אֶת־סִפְרֵי־הַסִּפְרִים הַנִּצְחִי:  לְאַחַר שֶׁהִגְלָה הָעָם מֵאֶרְצוֹ בְּכַח הַזְרוּעַ שֶׁמֶרְגְּלָה אֲמוּנִים בְּכָל־אֲרָצוֹת פְּזוּרָיו וְלֹא־תָגַל מִתְפַּלָּה וּמִתְקַוָּה לְשׁוּב לְאֶרְצוֹ וּלְחַדֵּשׁ בְּתוֹכָהּ אֶת־חֵירוּתוֹ הַמְדִינִית: מִתּוֹד־לְשׁוֹר הִיסְטוֹרִי וּמִסְרֵתִי זֶה תִּתְרוּ הַיְהוּדִים בְּכָל־דּוֹר לְשׁוּב וּלְהֵאֱמָץ בְּמוֹלָתָם הַעֲתִיקָה:  וּבְדוֹרוֹת הָאֲתֵרוּנִים שָׁבוּ לְאֶרֶץ בְּהִמּוֹנִים וְנְחֻלּוּצִים מְעַפְיִלִים וּמְגַנְזִים הַפְרִיחוּ נִשְׁמוֹת הַחַיִּי שִׁפְתָם הִעֲבִיט בְּנוֹ פְּרָרִים וְעָרִים וְהִקְיֵמוּ יִשׁוּב גְּדֻלַּת־וְהוֹלָךְ הַשְּׁלֵיט עַל־מִשְׁקוֹ וְתַרְבּוּתוֹ שׁוֹחֲרֵי־שְׁלוֹם וּמְגֻן־ עַל־עַצְמוֹ מְבִיא בְּרַבַּת הַקְדָּמָה לְכִלְתוֹשְׁבֵי הָאֶרֶץ וְנוֹשְׂא נִפְשׁוֹ לְעַצְמָאוֹת מְמַלְכֻתִית:</p>	<p><i>ERETZ-ISRAEL was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.  After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.  Impelled by this historic and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland. In recent decades they returned in their masses. Pioneers, ma'pilim [(Hebrew) - immigrants coming to Eretz-Israel in defiance of restrictive legislation] and defenders, they made deserts bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving community controlling its own economy and culture, loving peace but knowing how to defend itself, bringing the blessings of progress to all the country's inhabitants, and aspiring towards independent nationhood.</i></p>
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The question of how to commemorate Israel's independence within a religious framework arose the moment the state was declared. At the conclusion of the reading of the declaration, Ben Gurion called on Rabbi Yehuda Leib Fishman (later Maimon) to recite the Shecheyanu. Over the years various rituals have been added, including the recitation of Hallel, Al Hanism, and special Torah and Haftara readings. Various haggadot have been written as well. In recent years a new ritual has emerged: the public reading of Megillat Ha'atzmaut. Cantillation trope was added to the Megillah, and this year, a major public reading sponsored by the WZO, will take place at the Egalitarian Kotel on Sunday, April 23, 11 a.m. EST. **You can register to watch it online at [www.the-megillah.com](http://www.the-megillah.com).** I will be chanting it as part of a community-wide commemoration at EBJC, Tuesday 4/25 at 7 p.m. With a great internal fissure taking place currently in Israel, the reading of the founding document of the State of Israel has taken on a great urgency. Here's how one organization, Bina, describes this moment:  
בעת הזו, כשאנחנו נפגשים כמעט מדי יום עם הקרעים והמחלוקות בחברה הישראלית, אנו מבקשים לחזור אל מגילת העצמאות. למצוא בין מילותיה את היכולת להתרומם מהמשבר ולמצוא את הדרך ליצור שיחה וניגון משותף בין דעות שונות מתוך כבוד ואחריות גדולה לחברה הישראלית.  
*At this moment, when we confront the rifts and conflicts within Israeli society almost on a daily basis, we seek to return to the Scroll of Independence. To discover in its words the ability to rise above this crisis and, out of a great respect and responsibility towards Israeli society, to find a way to create a shared conversation and a common melody of different opinions. Shabbat Shalom! שבת שלום!*