

## Parshat Tazria: Imagining the Unknown

**Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler**

*Director of Spiritual Development, Maharat  
 Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2018*

1 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 2 Speak to the children of Israel, saying: If a woman brings forth seed and gives birth to a male, she shall be unclean for seven days; as [in] the days of her menstrual flow, she shall be unclean. (Leviticus 12:1-2)

א וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבֵּר  
 אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אִשָּׁה כִּי תִזְרִיעַ  
 וַיֵּלֶדָה זָכָר וְטָמְאָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כִּימֵי  
 נִדַת דְּוֹתָהּ תִּטְמָא: (ויקרא יב: א-ב)

*Parshat Tazria* opens with a detailed discussion of the purity laws relating to the postpartum woman--how long she lingers in her state of *tumah* (impurity), how she must comport herself during this time, and how she exits her state via a sin offering. This discussion is lodged between the purity laws regarding animals, i.e. *kashrut*, at the end of last week's *parsha*, and the laws of *tzaraat* (leprosy), a condition that compromises one's purity, that follow into next week's *parsha*. Yet, despite this overwhelming context of *tumah* and *taharah* (purity laws), and despite all of the wild perplexities of ascribing sin to childbirth, the *midrash* on our opening verses skirts these issues entirely, choosing an altogether different focus: the nature of pregnancy. The rabbis of *Vayikrah Rabbah* thereby did something truly radical. They transformed a legal conversation about purity and sin into a poetic meditation on the mystery and miracle of gestation and birth.

The form of these meditations is metaphor. *Vayikrah Rabbah* 14 presents no less than 9 different images of the pregnant womb, each one another man's imaginings about that great unknown space. The exercise is rich with theology, anxiety, fear, and awe. Let us explore just a few.

Another idea [on] "If a woman gives forth seed and gives birth to a boy." It is written: "And [who] shut up the sea with doors when it broke forth and issued out of the womb?" (Job 38:8). R. Elazar, R. Yehoshua, and R. Akiva [shared opinions]. R. Elazar said: Just as a house has doors, so a woman has doors, as it is written, "For He did not shut the doors of my womb" (Job 3:9). R. Yehoshua said: Just as a house has keys, so does a woman, as it is written, "and God hearkened to her, and He opened her womb" (Genesis 30:22). R. Akiva said: Just as a house has hinges, so a woman has hinges, as it is written, "And she knelt and gave birth, for her pains [or hinges] had suddenly come upon her" (I Samuel 4:19). (*Leviticus Rabbah* 14:4)

ד"א אשה כי תזריע הה"ד (איוב לח) ויסך  
 בדלתים ים בגיחו מרחם יצא. ר"א ור' יהושע  
 ור"ע--ר"א אומר כשם שיש דלתות לבית כך  
 יש דלתות לאשה, הה"ד (שם איוב ג) כי לא  
 סגר דלתי בטני. ורבי יהושע אומר כשם שיש  
 מפתחות לבית כך לאשה, הה"ד (בראשית ל)  
 וישמע אליה אלהים ויפתח את רחמה. רבי  
 עקיבא אומר כשם שיש צירים לבית כך יש  
 צירים לאשה, הה"ד (שמואל א ד) ותכרע  
 ותלד כי נהפכו עליה צריה. (ויקרא רבה יד:  
 ד)

The womb is a home, for Rabbis Elazar, Yehoshua, and Akiva. It is a place of nurturance, security, and warmth. It is the locus of growth, the foundation of development. But it is, significantly, a house with doors, keys, and hinges. Its entrances and exits are essential. Its ability to open and close, contain and keep out, define it. Pregnancy, so understood, is the ability to hold a fetus while keeping out intruders who would do it harm. It is a process of profound protection, with awareness of the possibility of loss (the door could open) or injury (the lock could be breached). Note too who guards the thresholds of this locked house and who holds the keys. It is not the woman, but God who decides when to open the door. Protective as the womb might be, it is ultimately not in a woman's own control. It is an organ of the body that cannot be willfully controlled by the body. Pregnancy is thus an experience of otherness within one's own body. It testifies to the many ways in which we can be inaccessible

even to ourselves. The womb-home hosts, shields, and lovingly cares for the unborn, just as it reminds its owner of the potential porousness of that glorious, sacred space.

R. Abba the son of Kahana offers another set of images:

Another idea [on] "If a woman gives forth seed and gives birth to a boy." It is written "You bestowed upon me life and care; Your providence watched over my spirit" (Job 10:12). R. Abba the son of Kahana said three things: It is the custom of the world that if a man holds a bag of money and turns the opening downwards, do not the coins scatter? So, too, the fetus dwells in his mother's womb, but the Holy One, blessed be He, guards it so that it will not fall out and die. Is this not, "life and care?" R. Abba the son of Kahana said another [parable]: It is the custom of the world that a beast walks with its body in a horizontal position, and the fetus is placed within the beast's womb in the form of a covered wagon. But a woman walks erect while the fetus is in her womb, and the Holy One, blessed be He, guards it so that it will not fall out and die. Is this not, "life and care?" (Leviticus Rabbah 14:3)

ד"א אשה כי תזריע וילדה זכר הה"ד (שם איוב י) חיים וחסד עשית עמדי ופקדתך שמרה רוחי רבי אבא בר כהנא אמר תלת בונהג שבעולם אם נוטל אדם ארנקי של מעות ונותן הפה למטה אין המעות מתפזרות והולד שרוי במעי אמו והקב"ה משמר שלא יפול וימות אין זה שבח הוי חיים וחסד עשית עמדי. ר' אבא בר כהנא אמר אוחרי בונהג שבעולם בהמה זו מהלכת רבוצה והולד נתון בתוך מעיה כמין שק והאשה זו מהלכת זקופה והולד נתון בתוך מעיה והקב"ה משמר שלא יפול וימות הוי חיים וחסד עשית עמדי. (ויקרא רבה יד:ג)

For Rabbi Abba, the womb is a the quintessential locus of God's *chesed* (lovingkindness), for it holds tremendous value and manifests tremendous supernatural power. It is a treasure trove, carrying within it great riches. The fetus is a highly prized jackpot in the vault of the woman's body. Pregnancy is the process of collecting coins, of generating abundance. Yet, what stands out most for him, is the absolute unnaturalness of this process. It violates core "customs of the world," namely gravity. The coins should scatter, the fetus should fall. But for the grace of God, carrying a baby would simply not be possible. The womb, therefore, is nothing short of a holy site and the pregnant woman's body a vehicle for God's miraculous intervention in the world.

Rabbi Levi begins with a similar reference to the womb as a place of magical transformation. It is an instrument for alchemy, where "a human gives a drop of moisture in private, and the Holy One returns, in public, a full, elevated soul." But he then offers a metaphor that paints a rather different portrait:

R. Levi said: It is the custom of the world that when a person is imprisoned in a jail, no one watches over him. If one comes and lights for him a candle, would he not consider it a great favor? So the Holy One Blessed be He, when the fetus is suspended in its mother's innards, lights a candle for it. This is what Job referred to when he said, "When He lit His candle over my head; [by His light I would go through the darkness]" (Job 29:3). This is the praise, "And to my Maker I will ascribe righteousness" (Job 36:3).

רבי לוי אמר אוחרי בונהג שבעולם אדם חבוש בבית האסורין אין כל בריה משגחת עליו. בא אחד והדליק לו שם נר, אינו מחזיק לו טובה? כך הקב"ה הולד שרוי במעי אמו ומאיר לו שם נר, הוא שאיוב אומר (שם איוב כט) בהלו נרו עלי ראשי אין זה שבח הוי ולפועלי אתן צדק.

The womb here is a dark place, a confining place, a lonely place. It holds the fetus captive, beyond the reach of other human beings, presumably beyond the reach of its own mother. Pregnancy, so conceived, is a process not of maternal involvement and protection, but of separation between a mother and the baby she carries. She provides the walls of the prison, but does not tend to her prisoner. Once again, it is only God who redeems the fearful experience of the unborn by providing a small light to dispel the overwhelming darkness.

This disturbing image of a fetus in an enclosed space, sitting with a light above its head, gets transformed in the Talmud from a prison into a library.

R. Simlai delivered the following discourse: What does an embryo resemble when it is in the bowels of its mother? Folded writing tablets...A light burns above its head and it looks and sees from one end of the world to the other...And there is no time in which a man enjoys greater happiness than in those days...It is also taught all the Torah from beginning to end...As soon as it sees the light, an angel approaches, slaps it on its mouth and causes it to forget all the Torah completely... (BT Niddah 30b)

דרש רבי שמלאי: למה הולד דומה במעי  
 אמו? לפנקס שמקופל ומונח...ונר דלוק לו על  
 ראשו וצופה ומביט מסוף העולם ועד  
 סופו...ואין לך ימים שאדם שרוי בטובה יותר  
 מאותן הימים...ומלמדין אותו כל התורה  
 כולה...וכיון שבא לאויר העולם בא מלאך  
 וסטרו על פיו, ומשכחו כל התורה  
 כולה...(גדה ל:)

No longer captive, the fetus, a baby notebook, gets inscribed as it gestates, illuminated by the light of knowledge that glows above it. The womb is an Edenic paradise. It is an idealized *beit midrash* (house of study), home to unborn *talmidei chachamim* (sages) mastering the entirety of Torah. Pregnancy is essentially about teaching and shaping the mind and soul of the developing individual. Inside of the library of the woman's body, righteous Jews are made. There could be no greater compliment paid to a woman by a rabbi of this time than to imagine her as a walking *beit midrash*.

It is not surprising that a male rabbi sitting in a *beit midrash* contemplating this most "other" of experiences would imagine it as a microcosm of his very own most-valued experience. Indeed, this imaginative act highlights something important about the journey of pregnancy itself: that it is so fundamentally unknowable, even to those who experience it directly, that we tend to project known things onto it. Whether through the multiple metaphors presented by the rabbis of old; or those offered by pregnancy websites of today ("today your baby is a lentil, tomorrow a strawberry, etc."); or even the hazy renderings available through ultrasound, we are desperate to render the incomprehensible comprehensible.

The end of Niddah 30b is a fine reminder, though, that no matter how many metaphors we imagine, and no matter how many pictures of the unborn we (think we) see, the very second that that baby emerges, every illusion of knowingness is "slapped out" of us. And we are left to revel, blessedly, in the mystery and the magic all over again.



*Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler is the Director of Spiritual Development at Yeshivat Maharat, where she teaches Chassidut and Pastoral Torah. She is also a faculty fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. She earned her PhD and MA from the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought and her BA from Harvard University. In 2018 she received semikha from Maharat's Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track.*