YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat TAZRIA**

**Pregnancy, Childbirth, and the Relationship between Man and Beast[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

**Sicha of Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein**

Adapted by Yishai Yesselson and Elisha Oron

Translated by David Strauss

### The Kindness of pregnancy and childbirth

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to the children of Israel, saying: If a woman conceives, and gives birth to a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days; as in the days of the impurity of her sickness shall she be unclean. (*Vayikra* 12:1-2) 

Most people read these verses without paying attention to the great wonder and kindness that they contain.

"If a woman conceives." On the face of it, this is so clear and self-evident to every person, but what a great kindness do we find here! The fact that the union between a man and his wife brings a new person into the world is not so simple.

We encounter the phenomenon of infertility already in the days of the Patriarchs – Sara, Rivka, and afterwards Rachel. It is true that most couples succeed in bringing children into the world after a year or two, but in a significant minority of cases, this is not the case.

Countless nights of weeping and innumerable tears on the pillow are the lot of many couples who have not been blessed with children. We have become so accustomed to the obvious reality that we have almost forgotten the enormity of the miracle and kindness that it involves.

Yitzchak and Rivka underwent twenty years of torment, prayer, and weeping, as Rashi describes at the beginning of *Parashat Toledot:* "He stood in this corner and prayed, and she stood in that corner and prayed" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 21:21). Rachel complained to Yaakov about not having children: "Give me children, or else I die" (*Bereishit* 30:1). Let us not forget the kindness in conceiving a child!

The Torah continues with a description that also might be overlooked: "and gives birth to a male child." The miracle of birth is one of the greatest miracles – if not the greatest miracle – that man has ever known. A human being issues from an odious drop and develops into a creature with the ability to feel and to think, who has traits and hobbies, who feels sadness and joy.

The *midrashim* at the beginning of the *parasha* describe the kindness of pregnancy and childbirth at length. In addition to the very creation of the embryo in its mother's womb, there is another kindness during the moments of childbirth.

According to Rabbinic thinking throughout the ages, the attitude to a pregnant woman, and even more so to a woman giving birth, is that it is a situation in which the woman's life is in danger. In the wake of advances in medical devices and technology, we have come to forget that the woman is in mortal danger.

In the past, many women died during childbirth. We know this already from the matriarch Rachel, who died in childbirth after bearing her second son, Binyamin. That which is so self-evident to us today is actually a series of great miracles and kindnesses that we must remember and gratefully acknowledge each and every moment.

### The law of the beast and of man

From the description of the miracles that are performed for the couple until the time of birth, let us move on to the greatness of man and to the *mitzva* that presents itself after birth – the *mitzva* of circumcision.

*Parashat Shemini* closes with the following verses:

This is the law of the beast, and of the fowl, and of every living creature that moves in the waters, and of every creature that swarms upon the earth; to make a difference between the unclean and the clean, and between the living thing that may be eaten and the living thing that may not be eaten. (*Vayikra* 11:46-47)

We began to learn this law of the beast and of the bird already at the beginning of *Sefer Vayikra*: "This is the law of the burnt-offering;" "this is the law of the sin-offering"; "this is the law of the peace-offering"; etc.

One might have understood that these are a series of verses describing the law of the beast, and nothing more. But if we examine our *parasha*, we find that there are many other "laws": "the law of a woman after childbirth"; "the law of one who is afflicted with leprosy"; "the law of a leper on the day of his purification"; and others, until we reach the verses of conclusion:

This is the law for all manner of plague of leprosy, and for a scall; and for the leprosy of a garment, and for a house; and for a rising, and for a scab, and for a bright spot; to teach when it is unclean and when it is clean; this is the law of leprosy. (*Vayikra* 14:54-57)

The law of man, surprisingly, is found after the law of the beast. We might have expected that the laws governing man, the chosen member of creation, would be explained before the laws governing beasts.

This, however, is not the case. The Torah comes to teach us that even in man, the most sublime creature in creation, there is a foundation of materiality and nature. Indeed, our *parasha* deals with man's afflictions and illnesses, gonorrhea and seminal emissions, pregnancy and childbirth. These situations do not differentiate man from beast; on the contrary, they come from the same natural and physical world, and their source is in the law of the beast.

Man includes within him the law of the beast, but nevertheless he has something unique to him – the law of man. The capacities of thought, emotion, speech, and other abilities distinguish man from beast and bestow upon him advantages over the animal world.

"And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised"

The Torah commands us about the *mitzva* of circumcision in two places. One command is found in our *parasha*; the other was given to Avraham:

And God said to Avraham: And as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you, and your seed after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your seed after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of a covenant between Me and you. (*Bereishit* 17:9-11)

The two commands regarding circumcision come from two completely different perspectives.

In *Sefer Bereishit*,God enters into a covenant with Avraham over the circumcision. Circumcision not only distinguishes man from beast, but also between Jews and the other nations.In *Sefer* *Vayikra*,the command regarding circumcision comes right after the law of the beast, with the rest of the commands regarding the natural processes of the body and their consequences. Circumcision is man's unique quality that sets him above the animal world.

There is a well-known *midrash* regarding R. Akiva and Turnus Rufus:

Once the evil [Roman governor] Turnus Rufus asked R. Akiva: Whose deeds are greater - God's or man's? He replied: Man's deeds are greater. Turnus Rufus asked him: Is man then capable of creating heaven and earth, or anything like them? R. Akiva replied: I was not referring to the sphere beyond man's ability, over which he has no control. I refer to those creations of which man is capable.

He then asked: Why do you circumcise yourselves? R. Akiva replied: I knew that that was the point of your question, and therefore I answered in the first place that man's deeds are greater than God's.

R. Akiva brought him grains of wheat and some bread, and said: These grains of wheat are God's handiwork, and the bread is the handiwork of man. Is the latter not greater than the former? Turnus Rufus answered him: If God wanted you to perform circumcision, why did He not create the child already circumcised while still in the womb? R. Akiva answered: Why do you not ask the same question concerning the umbilical cord, which remains attached to him and which his mother must cut? In response to your question – the reason why he does not emerge already circumcised is because God gave Israel the commandments in order that they would be purified by performing them. Therefore David wrote: "Every word of God is pure" (*Tehilim* 18). (*Tanchuma, Tazri'a* 5:5)

### Indeed, the bread is better, but it starts with wheat, with nature. The same is true of man – the unique covenant that was made with man in general and with the people of Israel in particular sets him apart from the other nations, but nevertheless his source and foundation is in nature. A person who is involved in studying and observing Torah integrates within himself the law of man and the law of the beast.

1. \* This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Tazria-Metzora*. It was not reviewed by Ha-Rav Lichtenstein. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)