

There is something shockingly fitting about having our first open, in person, Friday evening service of the year on Shabbat Tazria-Metzora, which deals with what happens when someone becomes *tamei*, impure.

We will focus on the case of childbirth that opens this parasha: In the first 8 verses of the parashah, a woman who has given birth is commanded to remain in a state of *tumah*, impurity, for 40 days if she gives birth to a male, and 80 days total if she gives birth to a female. At the end of her period of *tumah*, she brings two offerings to the temple, an *olah*; a burnt offering and a *chatat*, usually translated as “sin offering.” The Priest performs the sacrifices on her behalf and “atones” for her and purifies her.

In just this short summary, no doubt many questions have arisen, but first a reminder: I have discussed this in the past, but *tumah*, impurity is not a morally loaded state. It is the state that anyone is in after touching a creepy-crawly or a dead body, as well as after childbirth. As my colleague and teacher, Rabbi Phyllis Berman wrote this week, “in considering those moments in life when we are completely consumed by something -- a new baby, a new love, a new creative development, sickness, death -- we naturally separate ourselves from the community. Then we can concentrate on that which demands our complete attention. We are “*tamei*” during a time of intense concentration on one aspect of our lives and separation from the other aspects.

At other times, we are able to focus on multiple concerns, balancing them all with relative ease. Then we are “*tahor*”, able to hold multiple identities and tasks in and beyond our home and work lives.”

I also appreciate my colleague, Rabbi Nicole Auerbach’s definition of these states: “As Professor David Kraemer explains, citing Rabbi Eliezer, the term *tahor* is used to mark what is rightfully in our realm; *tamei* designates that which belongs to God.

‘We cannot eat the ‘impure’ animal,’ he explains, ‘because God, its creator, has not granted us the right to do so. Its impurity marks it as ‘out of bounds.’ Likewise, “life and death,” and by extension, pregnancy and birth, “are in the realm of God.” Contact with God’s realm is what renders us tamei. When a woman gives birth, the Levitical system recognizes that she has breached the boundary between God’s domain and our own. It therefore creates ritual means for reestablishing that boundary and bring her back into community.”

Both of these states are normal parts of the human experience. When people were in a state of tumah, however, it meant that they did not approach the temple, or deal with sanctified tools. In other words – a break from certain routines, certain aspects of life. We should be so sensible in our society.

As much as people struggle with the notions of purity and impurity, after the past year, it is increasingly clear that prolonged exposure to death, or even to the fear of death, alters our psychospiritual state – and that society would do well to accommodate that. In a contemporary society that so often profoundly *fails* to even acknowledge, much less accommodate the ways that encounters with death, illness or near-death affect us, we might even read *Tazria-Metzora* as a corrective reminder of how to do better. For not only does this double parashah mandate that people have space to deviate from their normal routines; but it also prescribes the rituals that one undertakes in order to mindfully “Return to normal.” And while the particulars of these rituals will not appeal to us, the concept seems sound to me!

I’m not going to address the difference in lengths of time of impurity between male and female babies in depth – there are a lot of interesting commentaries about it, and perhaps my favorite is the notion mentioned by Anita Diamont in her novel *The Red Tent* – that the period of impurity is doubled for the birth of a girl, because she herself is a potential birth giver, a more significant entity.

But in any case, when the period of *tumah* ends, there is a very particular ritual that occurs to transition the mother to a state of *tahara*, purity, and to mark her re-integration into normal communal interaction. And part of that is to bring a *chatat*; usually translated as “sin-offering.” But what is her sin?

There are two commentaries that I find particularly instructive. In Masechet Niddah, in the Talmud when his students ask this very question, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai explains, “**At the time that a woman crouches to give birth, she impulsively takes an oath that she will not engage in intercourse with her husband** ever again. **Therefore, the Torah says that she must bring an offering** to renounce her oath.”

I don't know how many women have ever said, “I swear I'm never letting you touch me again!” during a particularly difficult contraction, but evidently it was a phenomenon that Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai had witnessed.

Rabbi Pamela Gottfried writes about when she first encountered this interpretation she was offended, but now: “Having sworn in this exact fashion through gritted teeth during an intensely painful contraction and having immediately relented when the nurse placed my newborn daughter in my arms, I understood the texts differently. . . .

... Not only the act of childbirth, but also decades of parenthood, has taught me humility. I contemplate the many times I've hastily uttered, “I'll never do such-and-such to my child.” It would be so much easier to bring a sin offering to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting than to seek forgiveness for broken promises, to atone for oaths made in vain.”

I think this observation is all too relevant for the moment we find ourselves in. How many of us have made vows in this past year of what I might call collective *tumah* about what we will do when it is over – or what we will *never* do again when it is over? So I think there is some grace to this idea that as we transition between different psychospiritual states of being, we find that what we expected or intended to do is not necessarily the same thing that will ultimately feel right to do. And what if we actually marked that change in perspective, that change in intention with ritual instead of a vague guilt, or ignoring it?

I also value Sforno's commentary in this offering, which he says is not about sin at all, but simply about marking the transition from one state of being to another: "for during all the days that she had been excreting blood her thoughts had been preoccupied with the phenomenon of semen, etc, and she had therefore not been in a fit state of mind to enter the precincts of the Temple and offer sacred matters."

Similar to the position of Rabbi Berman that I shared earlier, Sforno suggests that this *chatat* simply marks this moment when the women is fully able to re-engage with all of the aspects of life, including the realm of the sacred.

I think we would do well to think for ourselves as individuals and as a community about what these commentaries imply for the moment we are facing, as we – haltingly, unevenly – emerge from a state of what I might call collective *tumah*. What rituals might we need? What intentions should we set? What vows might we need to release? Like the women who has given birth, our lives are forever altered. There can be no return to the normal as it was before, but we can and should set some intention about what new normal we will create.