



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

Parashat Tazria 5774

March 29, 2014

This week's Dvar Tzedek takes the form of an interactive text study. We hope that you'll use this text study to actively engage with the *parashah* and contemporary global justice issues.

Consider using this text study in any of the following ways:

- Learn collectively. Discuss it with friends, family or colleagues. Discuss it at your Shabbat table.
- Enrich your own learning. Read it as you would a regular Dvar Tzedek and reflect on the questions it raises.
- Teach. Use the ideas and reactions it sparks in you as the basis for your own *dvar* Torah.

Introduction

Parashat Tazria opens with a passage that makes many contemporary readers bristle at its seemingly obvious gender discrimination. Describing a woman who has just given birth, the text relates that not only is she impure, but the length of her impurity doubles for a daughter in contrast to a son. While the gender-based distinctions in the text may arouse anger or confusion, they provide an opportunity to reflect on the topic of gender and they may also offer insights into how gender plays a role in our own lives and in the lives of people around the world.

The text describes the status of the woman who has just given birth as follows:

Leviticus 12:2-5

... When a woman at childbirth bears a male, she shall be unclean seven days; she shall be unclean as at the time of her menstrual infirmity. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. She shall remain in a state of blood purification for 33 days; she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the Sanctuary until her period of purification is completed. If she bears a female, she shall be unclean two weeks as during her menstruation, and she shall remain in a state of blood purification for 66 days.

ויקרא יב:ב-ה

... אִשָּׁה כִּי תִזְרִיעַ וַיֵּלֶדָה זָכָר וְטָמְאָה
שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כִּימֵי נִדַת דְּוֹתָהּ תִּטְמָא : וּבַיּוֹם
הַשְּׁמִינִי יְמוֹל בְּשָׂר עֶרְלָתוֹ : וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם
וּשְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים תֵּשֵׁב בְּדַמֵּי טְהָרָה בְּכָל קֹדֶשׁ
לֹא תִגַּע וְאֵל הַמִּקְדָּשׁ לֹא תָבֵא עַד מְלֵאת יְמֵי
טְהָרָה : וְאִם נִקְבָּה תֵלֵד וְטָמְאָה שִׁבְעַיִם
כְּנִדְתָּהּ וּשְׁשִׁים יוֹם וְשֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תֵּשֵׁב עַל
דַּמֵּי טְהָרָה :

Guiding Questions:

- Why do you think a woman who just participated in the most life-affirming act of birth was deemed “unclean” or “impure” and prohibited from entering the Sanctuary?
- Why do you think the length of impurity is twice as long for the birth of a daughter as for a son?

Contemporary Bible scholar, Baruch Levine, suggests an interpretation of Leviticus that contextualizes the biblical attitude towards birth and purity in the milieu of the ancient Near East:

Baruch Levine, The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus¹

Although the new mother was a source of joy to the community, and her new child a blessing, she generated anxiety—as did all aspects of fertility and reproduction in ancient society. The childbearing mother was particularly vulnerable, and her child was in danger too, since infant mortality was widespread in premodern societies. By declaring the new mother impure, susceptible, the community sought to protect and shelter her.

In ancient times, concern for the welfare of the mother and child was most often expressed as the fear of destructive, demonic, or antilife forces. . . . It is reasonable to assume that similar anxieties were current among the ancient Israelites as well.

. . . Thus, chapter 12 presents a seemingly paradoxical situation: new life but also a new threat to life.

. . . It is more likely that the doubling of the initial period of impurity and the waiting period for a female . . . may have reflected apprehension and anticipation regarding the infant daughter's potential fertility, the expectation that she herself would someday become a new mother.

Guiding Questions:

- What do you think of Levine's interpretation of the impurity of the new mother and the different lengths of impurity for daughters and sons in premodern societies?
- In what ways might there continue to be "apprehension and anticipation" today upon the birth of a daughter? In what ways might these feelings be the same or different for the birth of a son?

In many parts of the world today, the birth of a daughter can continue to precipitate both "apprehension and anticipation," not because of her potential fertility, but because of the challenges she may face as well as the potential she holds to improve her community and family. The following text, from two different sections of a World Bank report about gender and development, highlights both of these realities.

Engendering Development Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources, and Voice, 2001²

Gender discrimination remains pervasive in many dimensions of life—worldwide. This is so despite considerable advances in gender equality in recent decades. The nature and extent of the discrimination vary considerably across countries and regions. But the patterns are striking. In no region of the developing world are women equal to men in legal, social, and economic rights. Gender gaps are widespread in access to and control of resources, in economic opportunities, in power, and political voice. Women and girls bear the largest and most direct costs of these inequalities but the costs cut more broadly across society, ultimately harming everyone. (Page 1)

* * *

How do women's contributions to household income affect household expenditure patterns? In Cote d'Ivoire increasing women's share of cash income in the household significantly increases the share of the household budget allocated to food . . . It also decreases the shares devoted to alcohol and cigarettes. In Brazil it is the same story. At the margin additional income in the hands of women results in a greater share of the household budget devoted to education, health, and nutrition-related expenditures (Thomas 1997). (Pages 158-9)

Guiding Questions:

- What aspects of gender discrimination are highlighted in the first section of the text? What other challenges can you think of that girls and women face?
- The first section of the text suggests that while inequality most directly affects women, society as a whole suffers as well. How do you think this plays out?

¹ Baruch Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 249-50.

² Mason, Andrew D.; King, Elizabeth M. 2001. *Engendering development through gender equality in rights, resources, and voice*. A World Bank policy research report. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2001/01/891686/engendering-development-through-gender-equality-rights-resources-voice>



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

- The second section of the text describes the effects of increasing women’s contributions to and control over household income. What do you think this demonstrates about women’s potential to improve their own families and their communities and societies?
- How does this text (both sections) help you think about the “apprehension and anticipation” that might surround the birth of a girl? How does it help you think about the role of gender in international development?

Conclusion

As reflected in the opening of *Parashat Tazria* and in the World Bank’s report on gender and development, the birth of a girl can be a moment of great anxiety—because of the many dangers and threats to the lives of women and girls around the world—and also a moment of great hope—because of the ways in which women are such successful drivers of development as they invest in their families and make great sacrifices to ensure better futures for their children. As we read *Parashat Tazria* this year, let us commit to diminishing the threats to women and girls and to investing in their capacity to lead their communities to prosperity and peace.

This week’s Dvar Tzedek was originally published in 2013.

©2014 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

Inspired by Judaism’s commitment to justice, **American Jewish World Service (AJWS)** works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world.

45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org • www.ajws.org