

Shabbat Tazria Shalom



by Phyllis Chesler

According to Nehama Leibowitz, “The laws of purity and impurity elude our grasp. The impurity of the mother recorded in the beginning of the Parashah is particularly perplexing.”

Agreed—at first glance, the alleged “impurity” of our newborn Jewish mother is puzzling, perhaps beyond our understanding. Here, a Jewish woman conceives and gives birth to a son “eesha ke tazria, v’yaldah zachar” (12:2)

Like Chava, and with God's help, she has created a human being, i.e., participated in a sacred human rite of passage, but one fraught with danger, pain, and glory: "kaniti eesh et ha Shem" (4:1). She might even have come close to death. However, she has done exactly what she's expected to do—bear blessed children. And, like Chava, she will do so in pain "b'ezev teldai banim." (3:16).

Some commentators are troubled by the Torah viewing a woman as "ritually unclean" for either seven days if she's given birth to a boy or for fourteen days (for a girl), and by her banishment for either 33 or 66 days before she can approach the kohein to "atone" for her. Atone? What was her sin? Did she cry out against God during labor? Did she curse her husband? Did she vow never to have another child? Were these her sins? Or, did she so fear Death that she lost all faith in God's ability to save her? Worse, was her pain so great that she even welcomed Death? Remember, Rivka was so physically tormented during her pregnancy that she asked God (25:21-22) "eem kain, lama zeh anochi"—if this is so, why did I long and pray to conceive?"

These are all possibilities. But, as for me: It seems that the Torah is giving an exhausted, elated, or possibly depressed mother Time Off, time to return to herself, time to continue bonding with her baby, perhaps time off from other responsibilities. Nu, why not?