

Dear Chavraya,

A study in contrasts greeted us this morning. An April 1st snowfall is its own gift, even if our yearning is for the flowering of spring. Flowers already in bloom, crocuses, purple and white and yellow, green shoots of daffodils in waiting, tinged yellow upon their heads, their promise of fullness but slightly veiled. Their glory no less if bedraggled a bit, shown off now against fresh fallen snow, nature's mischievous wink upon each flake. The transition from winter to spring held back a bit, underscoring the drama in the turning of seasons, from earth's womb life returning, winter and spring meeting upon the cusp.

If at first not discernable, this week's Torah portion is about life transitions, cycles of birth and death within life, seasons of life meeting at the edge of change. *Parashat Tazria* can seem opaque, difficult to enter. If we can put aside immediate discomfort and supposition, there are great gifts to be had, even as there are in a springtime snowfall. The portion begins with rituals of separation and return attendant upon a woman following childbirth. All of the rest of the portion concerns diseases of the skin, and here too, rites of separation and return. The hope of life's renewal is embedded in the name of the *parasha*, *tazria*, from the root *zera/seed*: *isha ki tazria v'yaldah/if a woman has matured human seed and has given birth....*

We are often stopped before we enter the words. There is a different period of waiting following the birth of a son than the birth of a daughter, seven days plus thirty-three days, as opposed to fourteen days plus sixty-six days. In the initial number of days there is a hint of human renewal, of generative organs and cycles within male and female. On the eighth day is the *b'ris* for a son, sexuality circumscribed with the hope of holiness. Of fourteen days upon the birth of a daughter, the possibility of life's renewal, the cycle of ovulation in years to come.

Cycles of birth and death within life that are holy, the words used in Jewish law and tradition to describe this sacred interplay are *tumah* and *taharah*. Like cruel gatekeepers that stand at the entrance to *Parashat Tazria*, the common translation of these words into English as "clean" and "unclean" has kept many from entering. To enter and engage is to affirm and to be affirmed in all of our humanness, not simply to enter the words, but to enter the dance of life itself. The words *tumah* and *taharah* mean nothing of "clean" and "unclean." They refer to states of being that are part of each person's life. In the *tumah* state, one is separate from the day-to-day ways of life, unable to be in two realms of being at the same time, as for a mourner, as for one who has given birth. As at the beginning of *Parashat Tazria*, there are rituals to guide us through each state. The journey of transition from a state of *tumah* to *taharah* flows through the living waters of *mikvah*, birth waters, waters of renewal, *mayyim chayyim*.

In a classic article appearing in the "Jewish Catalogue" some forty years ago, Rachel Adler gives exquisitely beautiful expression to the *tumah-taharah* cycle, never trying to translate the words, but only to introduce the reality we already know. Of the challenge to acknowledge our own mortality and weave its consciousness into our lives, yet seeing in the weaving intimations of immortality, Adler writes of the "paradox:" "How do we reconcile it and make

ourselves whole? Jews solve the paradox with the ritual cycle of *tumah* and *taharah*, in which we act out our death and resurrection.... Since some of the basic human functions and behaviors caused *tumah*, every member of the society regularly underwent the cycle from *tumah* to *taharah*."

As from winter to spring, dormancy to vitality, death to birth and birth to death, Adler speaks of "nexus points," beginnings that point to endings and endings that point to beginnings:

The nexus points are those in which there appears to be a departure or a transfer of vital force. One of the most powerful nexus points, therefore, is childbirth. The infant who passes from the womb into the world undergoes a transition from potential life into life itself. The womb of woman is associated with the womb of earth. Living things grow out of the earth, dead things return to it and are buried in it. Seeds must be buried to bring them to life. The womb is the dark warm place in which we do not live, but live *in potentia*. We think of death as a return to the womb because the womb is the place of birth.

Last night's snow is already melting, the crocuses none the worse. Given the rare opportunity to cycle backward, from spring to winter and back to spring, the transition of seasons is accentuated, standing out as boldly and bravely as the crocus colors upon the snow.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor