

# Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Tazria, Leviticus, Chapters 12-13 | April 13, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

## A Funeral and a *Bris*

At the end of December, Staff Sergeant Elisha Yehonatan Lober fell in battle in Gaza. The funeral, held on Mount Herzl, was infused with the profound faith exhibited by the family of the fallen soldier. Israel National News described what transpired:

At the request of the family, the funeral procession opened with the singing of a hasidic tune—the same one which was played as Yehonatan walked to his wedding ceremony.

The IDF representative, Lieutenant Colonel Ido Me'ushar, eulogized: “Today we pay tribute to a true hero. You volunteered, you strived to achieve out of devotion. We have lost such a precious person. There is no comfort in words in the face of bereavement. We will walk in his light and in the way of Yehonatan. Thank you for all you have done and for the man you were.”

This alone is profoundly moving. But perhaps most stirring of all were the words uttered by the widow of the fallen hero, who was seven months pregnant.

Aviya Lober, Yehonatan’s widow, eulogized in tears: “My love. How much you loved this country. When you spoke of it, I was jealous. This war was everything for you. You were so sincere. I begged you not to die. The birth is in two months. You are coming, I’m not going alone,” cried Aviya.

We consider this heartbreaking and stirring story as we approach our *parashah*, which also begins with an expectant woman who gives birth. This opening passage inspires a striking rabbinic commentary that, rightly understood, sheds light not only on the reading itself but also on the Jewish approach to life, capturing the essence of our eternity.

When I discussed *Parashat Tazria* in Bible 365, I began with a quote uttered by an enemy of Israel—Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizballah—who had uttered words that I called simultaneously egregiously evil and enormously insightful. He said: “We have discovered how to hit the Jews where they are the most vulnerable. The Jews love life, so that is what we shall take away from them.”

# Parashah and Politics

Tazria | April 13, 2024

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At the time of recording that episode of Bible 365, I scarcely suspected that a leader of Hamas, Ali Baraka, would soon express the same sentiment after one of the worst attacks on Jews in Jewish history. It was shortly after October 7 that Baraka distinguished between Hamas terrorists and Israelis thus: “The Israelis are known to love life. We, on the other hand, sacrifice ourselves. We consider our dead to be martyrs.”

These statements are expressions of evil, but it is indeed true that deeply ingrained in Jewish identity, and therefore in Israeli society, is the love of life. And as I explained in Bible 365, the laws of impurity, or *tumah*, which are the subject of the next several chapters in Leviticus—and of both this week’s reading and the next—are to be understood as rooted in this Jewish love of life. One who is impure, or *tamei*, is forbidden from entering sacred spheres within the Temple or Tabernacle.

At the heart of these rules is the biblical love of life; any symbolic reminder of loss of life is kept far away from the Sanctuary, the center of Jewish life.

Becoming impure is not forbidden, and indeed is often obligatory, and counterintuitively, even an act or event that leads to the sustaining of life can also produce *tumah*. Thus, at the end of next week’s reading, on most years read together with our own, we are told that a man who has engaged in marital relations is in a state of impurity until he immerses in a *mikveh*, a ritual pool. Similarly, our own reading begins with a discussion of a woman who has given birth, who also experiences impurity. Both have been involved in moments that are at the heart of Jewish family life, but because both have expended the life-giving power within them, at least for a moment, impurity is created. Each must undergo certain purification rituals before entering certain sacred areas of the Temple Mount.

The same rationale for impurity can be given for the form of *tumah* that occupies much of the reading for this week and the next. Called “*tsara’at*,” this condition is usually defined as “leprosy,” but the Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom has shown that this is inaccurate, and that it is something, for Leviticus, that can afflict and render impure not only people but also garments and houses.

What precisely *tsara’at* is, and whether it is a regular biological affliction, or perhaps something supernatural, is uncertain. What is clear, as Milgrom notes, is that it is a reminder of death, loss of life, and therefore a source of impurity. We shall devote next week’s *Parashah* and Politics to the Bible’s discussion of these mysterious laws; for now, we will engage the opening of our reading, which discusses childbirth and impurity, and also includes a single sentence that serves as the source for enormously important teachings regarding Jewish family life:

The Lord said to Moses, Say to the people of Israel, If a woman conceives, and bears a male child, then she shall be impure seven days . . . And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (Leviticus 12:1–3)

In the midst of discussing childbirth, Scripture stresses a commandment with which we are already familiar: the obligation to circumcise a boy, marking his entry into the Abrahamic covenant, on the eighth day following his birth. This sentence, superficially, seems strange, as we have already been introduced in Genesis to the laws of circumcision, in instructions the Almighty transmitted to Abraham. It is not initially clear why the Torah saw fit, in the midst of its discussion of childbirth, to stress the obligation of circumcision once again.



For the Talmud, the repetition here is meant to teach us several laws about circumcision that we would not otherwise have known, all derived from the words, “on the eighth day.” And rightly understood, these laws tell us a great deal about the Jewish vision of life itself.

First: the rabbis stress that the phrase “on the eighth **day**” signals that the marking of the covenant must take place during daylight. Circumcision in the evening is invalid; only after the appearance of the sun’s light on the horizon is a circumcision acceptable.

This is not only a technical regulation, but also, I think, a law that conveys a profound philosophical point. Despite so many dark periods in our history, Jews see in newborn life the dawn of a new day. Through centuries of suffering, even in the worst of times, our ancestors saw in every new link between past and posterity the ultimate ray of hope on the horizon. Jews do indeed love life; and that is why new life has always served as a source of light, especially in the darkest of moments. That is the spiritual symbolism of this legal rule.

Many of you will recall one of the most stirring videos that emerged right after October 7: that of an Israeli reservist, called up to army service, watching via Zoom the circumcision of his eight-day-old son. He pronounced the traditional liturgy over his phone, concluding with one of the most poignant blessings in Jewish life: “Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, . . . Who has kept us alive, allowed us to endure, and enabled us to reach this moment.” The video epitomized what was at stake. Israel’s culture indeed cherishes life, while Hamas and its allies worship death. And for Judaism, it is precisely when father and mother, in love, bring new life into the world that they most imitate the Almighty, Who brought Creation into existence.

It is, alas, this aspect of the moral vision of Judaism that so much of the West has lost. It was soon after Rabbi Jonathan Sacks became a British peer that he issued a warning to Europe regarding its disastrous demographics. As British media reported:

The chief rabbi, who entered the House of Lords last week as Lord Sacks of Aldgate, made his comments in a lecture called Religion in the 21st century hosted in London by Theos, a Christian think tank, on Wednesday night. While Sacks aired concerns shared by other clerics—about religion contributing positively to public life and the dangers of a secular society—he also went further . . .

“Europe today is the most secular region in the world. Europe is the only region in the world experiencing population decline. Wherever you turn today the more religious the community, the larger on average are their families.” . . .

“Europe is dying,” he concluded and compared the situation in the continent today to ancient Greece with its “sceptics, epicureans and cynics.”

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He said: “That is one of the unsayable truths of our time.”

So Rabbi Sacks warned Europe. In contrast, the Israeli soldier watching the circumcision of his son via Zoom reminded us all of the heart of Judaism, and how this love of life, and the Jewish desire to sanctify life, is bound up with Jewish endurance.

And this, in turn, brings us to the second law learned from our *parashah's* repetition of the obligation known already to Abraham. For the rabbis, our text's reiteration that circumcision must take place on the eighth day teaches us that, at least in usual circumstances, the ritual overrides the Sabbath; while the procedure involves what would usually be considered a violation of this sacred day, the holiness of the eighth-day obligation of covenantal circumcision overrides the obligation of the sacred seventh day that is Shabbat.

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This too is not merely a technical legal point; it is also philosophically profound. Shabbat is a celebration of the laws of nature that God placed in the universe. Thus, many begin their Friday evening sanctification of the Sabbath with the verse, “And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). If the covenantal rite overrides the Sabbath, it is because the Jewish covenant is something

that overrides the laws of nature; while the seemingly immutable laws of history would indicate that every nation ultimately disappears, there is an exception. Thus Mark Twain famously reflected:

The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was . . .

These two laws derived from our reading about circumcision enhance each other; the fact that Jews always saw in new life the dawn of a new day reflected who they were, and this sacred value helped ensure their own endurance in the most difficult of moments, miraculously challenging the natural laws of history.

Two months after Elisha Lober's funeral, his son was born. The same publication that described the father's burial tells us about the son's circumcision:

Hundreds participated this morning in the *brit milah* (circumcision) ceremony for the son of combat soldier, Staff sergeant (res.) Elisha Yehonatan Lober, who fell in battle in the Gaza Strip.

Grandfather, Chagai Lober, was the *sandek* (the person who holds the baby during the circumcision). . . . Speaking to Arutz Sheva - Israel National News a day before the *brit milah*, Chagai Lober said, “I don't



## Parashah and Politics

Tazria | April 13, 2024

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think this is a family celebration—it's a national celebration. Yehonatan gave his life for the nation and in a way he and the baby belong to the nation. This *brit milah* ceremony has national significance, beyond the obligation we all owe to the family of Yehonatan and Aviya, whose enemies killed him, hoping to extinguish the wonderful light of the Jewish people, but they did not succeed. We continue to thrive. Do not despair and do not stop giving birth and celebrating *brit milah* ceremonies. There is public significance to this event and we are going to celebrate it publicly.

Thus did the father of a fallen son hold his grandson and find, in the midst of sorrow, a patch of daylight in this dark time. Thus did this man resplendently reveal how the celebration of life lies at the heart of a people's endurance. The article concluded by recounting the words with which the bereaved father who had been blessed with a grandson addressed his fallen son:

You who were born to be a dreamer and not a fighter, you my son. Since Simchat Torah you have become a fierce warrior, ready to go out to battle.

You didn't look for anyone to blame in the government or the army. You didn't look for the Left or the Right, but you knew that the enemy was the evil terrorists, who are able to shoot an elderly Holocaust survivor point blank.

Chagai Lober then spoke of Jewish unity:

I want to say that Yehonatan is no longer just my son, he is your son. Before Simchat Torah we all went through a difficult time. We felt that our beloved nation was falling apart. The damned enemies came and reminded us that we are one nation and forced us to speak to each other and fight side by side.

So said a bereaved father at the circumcision of his grandson. To mark life following death, to celebrate a *bris* and light in darkness, embodies the very values of a covenantal people, one that will never die.

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### **Additional Resources**

Israel National News on Elisha Lober's Funeral, "Staff Sergeant (Res.) Elisha Yehonatan Lober Laid to Rest," December 27, 2023. [Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Europe's Birth Rate, "Falling Birth Rate Is Killing Europe, Says Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks," *Guardian*, November 5, 2009. [Click here to read.](#)

Israel National News on the *Bris* of Elisha Lober's Son, "Brit Ceremony for Son of Fallen Soldier Yehonatan Lober," March 7, 2024. [Click here to read.](#)

