

CATASTROPHIC MIRACLES

MIRACULOUS CATASTROPHES:

The Torah of Pregnancy
in Tazria and Toldot

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THE ATERET ZVI PRIZE
IN HIDDUSHEI TORAH

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THE ATERET ZVI PRIZE IN HIDDUSHEI TORAH

The Ateret Zvi Prize recognizes yearly a work of innovative and exceptional Torah scholarship. The prize is endowed in loving memory of Professor and Rabbi Zvi H. Szubin, a lifelong scholar and teacher who uncovered rich insights buried in traditional texts using legal, historical, and linguistic tools—an approach he termed “text archaeology.”

Professor Szubin studied at Yeshivat Hevron and received the *semikhah* of *yoreh yoreh, yadin yadin* from Chief Rabbi Herzog. He served in the Israeli Army for three years, and was deployed during the 1956 Sinai campaign. After completing university and an LL.B. degree in Israel, he came to the United States and received his Ph.D. from Dropsie College. He taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the City College of New York and, ultimately, became the Chair of the Classical Languages and Hebrew Department at City College. Professor Szubin was a supporter of Hadar, in particular its fierce commitment to traditional Jewish values and texts, its unabashed egalitarianism, and its promising efforts to energize thoughtful Jews of all ages.

HERE'S A FIRST story about pregnancy: it's a miracle. Two people engage in the basic human pleasure of sexuality, exchanging biological matter in the process—and then forty weeks later (give or take), a living, breathing, eating human emerges.¹ During gestation, a mother's body transforms to sustain both the fetus' life and her own. Her body reorganizes itself, integrating fetal DNA and growing an entire new organ. Unlike the octopus, who starves herself to death, or the spider, whose babies eat her, human pregnancy is designed to allow the mother-to-be to live and see her baby grow to adulthood. Mother and fetus become fast friends as the fetus kicks, hiccups, and responds to stimuli like touch and sound.

There's also a second story about pregnancy: it's a body-destroying, mind-altering, life-threatening catastrophe. Even a "healthy" pregnancy starts with weeks of nausea, exhaustion, and weakness. This is followed by joint and back pain as the pelvis starts to split apart in preparation for delivery. Swollen feet and ankles, as well as varicose veins, support the new heft and necessary blood flow. Digestive and respiratory challenges arise as the growing uterus shoves internal organs aside. The bulging belly leads to muscle displacement, causing *diastasis recti abdominis*. Then there are the "complications" ranging from the survivable (like hyperemesis, gestational diabetes, preeclampsia) to the deadly. And all of that is just the physical elements. We haven't even gotten to the mind fog, clumsiness, perinatal depression, insomnia, anxiety, and obsessive compulsive behavior. Some of these physical and psychological symptoms never subside. A mother's body and mind cannot truly return to their pre-pregnancy state.

Story #1 and Story #2 are opposites. They are also both true. How do we make sense of this? How do we hold both wonder and terror with honor to the Giver of Life and with dignity to the suffering and endangered individual?

In this essay, I argue that the Jewish tradition makes space for both of these stories about pregnancy. One, based in Parashat Tazria, addresses pregnancy in the abstract, reflecting on the miracle of how pregnancy is supposed to work in theory. The other, based in Parashat Toldot, addresses pregnancy in the particular, acknowledging the catastrophe of how pregnancy often actually works in practice. This duality models an important and potentially life-saving way of thinking about the experience: in the abstract, we can—and even **should**—marvel and wonder, but we may not let those assumptions overshadow particular experiences of suffering.

PREGNANCY IN THE ABSTRACT:

אשה כי תזריע THE MIRACLE OF

In Parashat Tazria, we meet a woman who gets pregnant: "אשה כי תזריע" - If a woman conceives... (Vayikra 12:2).² This woman is a theoretical abstraction. She cannot tell us about her specific emotional struggles or physical pains, for she does not have any. All that matters about this abstract woman is her physiological capability to gestate a child. That may sound flattening and reductive, but since the Torah isn't speaking of an actual person, that reductiveness is the point. Vayikra is functioning here, as it so often does, as a "purity textbook." People with these body parts sometimes get pregnant and give birth, and the main concern is what that person is to do about the impurity that results. Three words introduce our abstract woman and her pregnancy. Six and a half verses

1 Even more miraculously, today there are many ways that babies are conceived. Many mothers do not gestate their own babies, and some people who gestate are not mothers at all but fathers or nonbinary parents. In this essay, I primarily use female-gendered language for the sake of consistency with the Torah sources that I discuss. However, my argument is relevant to people of all genders who gestate.

2 This translation is taken from NRSV (unless otherwise noted, translations through this article are original or adapted from Sefaria). NJPS eliminates pregnancy from the verse and translates the phrase, "When a woman at childbirth"—though it mentions in a note that the literal meaning is "brings forth seed." Jacob Milgrom suggests that "the probability rests with the literal translation,"—i.e., referring to conception (*Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Doubleday, 1991], p. 743). The *midrash* in Vayikra Rabbah aligns with Milgrom and the NRSV, using these words as an opening for discussing pregnancy. By all accounts, however, the extensive impurity described in Vayikra 12 is exclusively a result of the childbirth (ילדה), **not** of the pregnancy. In fact, the Rabbinic tradition recognizes the possibility of a chemical pregnancy which would never bring about the impurity of childbirth at all (Mishnah Niddah 3:7, Talmud Bavli Yevamot 69b). Conception does involve a lesser form of impurity—that caused by contact with semen—but that is discussed elsewhere (Vayikra 15:18).

give a detailed account of her childbirth and the resulting impurity and purification process.

Those three words, *אִישָׁה כִּי תִזְרִיעַ*—our flattened textbook woman—open a midrashic door for wonder and awe about pregnancy. This is where we can tell Story #1 without hesitation or complication. For example, R. Levi marvels at the whole concept:

ויקרא רבה יד:ב

בְּנֶהֱגָ שֶׁבְּעוֹלָם מִפְּקִיד אָדָם אֶצֶל חֲבֵרוֹ אֶרְנָקִי שֶׁל
כֶּסֶף בַּחֲשָׁאִי וּמַחְזִיר לוֹ לִישָׁרָא שֶׁל זָהָב בְּפִרְהֶסְיָא,
אֵינּוּ מַחְזִיק לוֹ טוֹבָה. כִּן הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מִפְּקִידִין
לוֹ הַבְּרִיּוֹת טָפָה שֶׁל לְכַלּוּכִית בַּחֲשָׁאִי, וְהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ
הוּא מַחְזִיר לָהֶם נִפְשׁוֹת מְשֻׁבָּחוֹת שְׁלֵמוֹת בְּפִרְהֶסְיָא,
וְאֵין זֶה שְׁבַח!?

Vayikra Rabbah 14:2

*In the way of the world, when a person leaves
a purse of silver with his friend in private
and the friend returns him a pound of gold in
public, isn't he grateful? Just so, when people
leave a messy drop with the Holy Blessed One
in a private place and the Holy Blessed One
returns to them superior, complete souls in
public, is this not praiseworthy!?*

An initial read of the *midrash* suggests a simple wonder: what other cheap investment grows to such value at such a speed? In pregnancy, God is entrusted with a small amount of biological waste. The deposit grows and flourishes into a full-fledged human!

However, further investigation reveals deeper midrashic creativity. The *midrash* utilizes the language of guardianship, drawing directly on the *mishnah* in Bava Metzia 3:1 about guardianship: “הַמִּפְקִיד אֶצֶל חֲבֵרוֹ בְּהֶמָּה אוֹ בְּכֵלִים - one who deposits an animal or vessels with another.” What does guardianship have to do with pregnancy? The very same word, פָּקַד (“take note”), appears in the Torah with regards to Sarah’s pregnancy: “וְהָ' פָּקַד אֶת” and God took note of Sarah... and Sarah conceived and gave birth” (Bereishit 21:1–2). The *midrash* takes the פָּקַד of Sarah and connects it to guardianship. But, if this guardianship is what enables the miracle of gestation, then it is far superior to any of the four types of guardianship outlined in Bava Metzia. God’s involvement in pregnancy is the most praiseworthy type of guardianship there ever was.

Building off that very same metaphor of investment, R. Abba bar Kahana praises the physiology of pregnancy:

ויקרא רבה יד:ג

נֶהֱגָ שֶׁבְּעוֹלָם אִם נוֹטֵל אָדָם אֶרְנָקִי שֶׁל מַעוֹת וְנוֹתֵן
הֶפֶה לַמָּשָׂה, אֵין הַמַּעוֹת מִתְפָּזְרוֹת!?

וְהַנֶּלֶד שְׂרׁוּי בְּמַעֲזֵי אִמּוֹ וְהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְשַׁמְרוֹ
שֶׁלֹּא יִפֹּל וְיָמוּת, אֵין זֶה שְׁבַח!?

Vayikra Rabbah 14:3

*In the way of the world, if a person takes
a purse of money and places the opening
downward, does not the money scatter!?
And so in the case of a fetus that rests in the
womb of its mother, and the Holy Blessed One
guards it so it does not fall and die, is this not
praiseworthy!?*

Pregnancy seems to defy gravity. Who would ever design a container for the most precious cargo and put its opening at the bottom? Ask any woman who suffers from what in medical terminology is cruelly termed an “incompetent cervix” and she will tell you that the arrangement makes very little sense. And yet somehow, in most cases, it works.

In the same passage, R. Tahlifa of Caesarea has a further inquiry about physiology:

אִם אָכַל אָדָם פְּרוֹסָה אַחֵר פְּרוֹסָה לֹא שְׁנִיָּה דוּחָה
אֶת הָרָאוּנוֹה, הָאִשָּׁה הַזֹּאת כִּמָּה מֵאֲכָל הִיא אוֹכֵלָה
וְכִמָּה מִשְׁקִים הִיא שׁוֹתָה וְאֵינּוּ דוּחָה הַנֶּלֶד!

*Normally, when a person fills up on food, it
pushes the food he ate previously out the other
end. But this woman, no matter how much she
eats and how much she drinks, it doesn't push
out the fetus!*

R. Tahlifa wonders: how does it all fit in there? When a pregnant woman uses the bathroom, how does the baby manage to stay inside? Pregnant women in their third trimester often ask themselves the same question. The wonder is only compounded after delivery, since “pushing” and defecating turn out to use the very same muscles.

The Rabbis ask basic questions of the physics and biology of pregnancy with a refrain: “Is this not praiseworthy?” When contemplated in the abstract, their perspective is spot on. Their wonder cannot be chalked up to the fact that, compared to us today, the rabbis were limited in their scientific knowledge. Truth be told, the more I myself learn about the biology of pregnancy, the more utterly astonishing and miraculous I find it.

The Rabbis show us great wisdom by choosing Tazria as the *locus classicus* for their praise and wonder about pregnancy. In the abstract, without an endangered body or soul, pregnancy is indeed miraculous. We can marvel at the beauty of creation and magnificence of the Creator because Tazria's abstract woman feels no pain; she survives to bring a sacrifice (Vayikra 12:6-8), and to enjoy her growing family.

PREGNANCY IN THE PARTICULAR: RIVKAH'S CATASTROPHE

For all the interest that Tazria sparks in pregnancy, it says nothing about the experience itself. In fact, this is surprisingly typical of the Torah. In Bereishit, which features a high concentration of birth narratives, many of the mothers get pregnant and then, as it were, immediately go into labor: ותהר ותלד ("she conceived and gave birth").³ Many others never have a pregnancy at all: it just says ותלד ("she gave birth").⁴

In contrast to all of this abstraction and omission stands Parashat Toldot, which contains the Torah's only description of pregnancy: Rivkah's. Here's how the Torah describes that:

בראשית כה:כב

ויתרצו הבנים בקרבה ותאמר אם-כן למה זה אנכי?

Bereishit 25:22

The children ויתרצו inside of her, and she said, "If so, why am I?"

The term ויתרצו is unusual. Its root, רצץ, appears a dozen or so other times in Tanakh. The major dictionaries of Biblical Hebrew suggest a basic meaning of "crush" or "break," in literal and metaphorical senses.⁵ The specific form of רצץ in the story of Rivkah's pregnancy implies repetition or reciprocity. But what does it actually mean?

Rashi on this verse spells out two key questions:

מקרא הזה אומר דרשני, שסתם מה היא רציצה זו וכתב אם כן למה זה אנכי?

You must admit that this verse calls out for interpretation since it leaves unexplained what this רציצה is and why did it cause her to ask "if so, why am I"?

Rashi goes on to present two possible understandings of the term רציצה: "running" or "competition." Both describe physical fetal activity. To his second question, Rashi suggests that Rivkah wonders why she ever desired and prayed for a pregnancy in the first place.⁶ Here, he seems to be drawing on a *midrash*:

בראשית רבה סג:

"ותאמר אם כן למה זה אנכי," רבי יצחק אומר מלימד שהיתה אמנו רבקה מחזרת על פתחיהן של נשים ואומרת להן הגיע לכם הצער הזה בימיכם? אם כן הוא צערן של בנים והלאוי לא עברתי!

Bereishit Rabbah 63:6

"And she said 'If so, why am I?': R. Yitzhak says: This teaches that our matriarch Rivkah went to the doors of other women and said to them, 'Did this suffering happen to you in your time [being pregnant]? If so, this is the suffering of children. If only I had not become pregnant!'"

The *midrash* describes Rivkah asking other women about her situation, trying to ascertain whether her pregnancy is typical. This speaks to one of the many strange things about pregnancy: "health" feels like illness, making it very difficult to recognize "actual" illness. The Bekhor Shor interprets Rivkah as fearing her pain to be miscarriage. Rivkah has no way to know on her own whether her experience is normal. Note also that the onus is on Rivkah to go around and ask other women.

3 See Havah; Kayin's wife; Hagar; Sarah; Lot's daughters; Leah; Bilhah; Rahel; Bat Shu'a; and Tamar. Sarah urges Avraham to expel Hagar during her pregnancy, but the pregnancy itself is never described directly. We learn only of the effect Hagar's pregnancy has on Sarah.

4 See Ada, Lemekh's wife; Tzila; Milka; Re'uma; Keturah; Timnah; Oholivamah; Ada, Esav's wife; Bas'mat; Zilpah; and As'nat.

5 For an example of metaphorical usage, see Isaiah 58:6: "ושלח רצוצים חפשים" - to let the oppressed go free." For examples of literal usage, see Shoftim 9:53: "ותשלך אשה אחת פלח רכב על-ראש אבימלך ותרץ את-גלגלתו" - but a woman dropped an upper millstone on Avimelech's head and crushed his skull" or Tehillim 74:14: "אתה רצצת ראשי לוייתן" - you who crushed the heads of Leviathan."

6 Rashi on Bereishit 25:22: "למה זה אנכי. מתאונה ומתפללת על הדין."

Apparently, they weren't forthcoming in sharing their experiences when they saw her pain; the challenges and anxieties of pregnancy weren't a common topic of conversation. Amidst Rivkah's suffering and confusion, she regrets it all: "If only I had never become pregnant!"

Sforno on this same verse takes a slightly different tack, perhaps riffing on that same *midrash*:

למה זה התאו קרובי שאהיה אני אם הזרע באמרם
את היי לאלפי רבבה וכן בעלי שהתפלל עלי בזה?

*Why did my relatives so desire that it would be
I who mothers the seed [of Yitzhak] when they
said, "May it be you who will be the source of
myriads" (Bereishit 24:60)? Also, why did my
husband pray for this for me?*

In Sforno's understanding, Rivkah asks, "Why did my family want this for me? Why did society pressure me into procreation if it is **this** miserable?" This reading is where we start to see the real danger in only telling Story #1: the miracle. Everyone wanted this for Rivkah. Everyone prayed for her to get pregnant. Everyone told her that pregnancy was a wonder and a miracle. She believed them. But then, when it wasn't a wonder and a miracle but rather a catastrophe and a curse, she felt abandoned and alone.

Ibn Ezra introduces another element of the story. He too suggests that Rivkah asked around about other women's pregnancy experiences. However, he adds that through this process, she discovered that her experience **was** in fact unusually difficult. In response, she complains: "Why am I going through such a messed up pregnancy?" (Ibn Ezra on Bereishit 25:22). She had been told Story #1, and now not only is she living in Story #2, but moreover, she is in one of the worse versions of it: a life-threatening twin pregnancy.

The Ramban puts forward the most devastating read:

כי אמרה אם כן יהיה לי, למה זה אנכי בעולם,
הלאי אינני שאמות או שלא הייתי

*She said, "If this is what it's going to be for me,
why do I exist in the world? I wish I were dead
or that I had never been born."*

Here, Rivkah's pregnancy is so difficult that she experiences suicidal ideation. She hopes for her own demise.

Having worked our way through the classical *mefarshim*, we may now return to the definition of רצץ as "crush" with a fuller understanding of its significance in this story. Bible scholar Esther J. Hamori writes on the common mistranslation of this verb, "This word does not mean 'they struggled,' as it is frequently rendered; it means 'they crushed,' and in no other text do translators habitually soften it so.... When the twins are crushing one another within her, [Rivkah] is portrayed as being desolate to the point of having lost the will to live."⁷ The Torah describes Rivkah's pregnancy as concentric circles of crushing: the boys within her crush each other, she experiences crushing physical pain as a result of their violent activity, and her emotional suffering in response to it all crushes her will to live. This is Story #2: the medieval commentators debate the details and the extent, but they agree that Rivkah's pregnancy is no physiological wonder—it is a catastrophe.

Unlike most women who experience perinatal mental illness, Rivkah immediately goes to seek help: "ותלך לדרש" - She went to inquire of Hashem" (Bereishit 25:22). Hashem responds to Rivkah's inquiry with a prophecy that explains her children's violent in-utero behavior and foretells their grand futures.

The Ramban (Bereishit 25:23) describes the effect of the prophecy as follows:

הודיע לה שלא תפחד... ועתה ינוחו ותמצא מנוח
והשקט לנפשה:

*He informed her that she should not fear...
and now they will rest, and she will find rest
and quiet for herself.*

By the Ramban's description, prophecy acts as therapy. She hears from Hashem directly about her condition and its causes: "שני גוים בבטןך" - two nations are in your womb" (Bereishit 25:23). Her experience is affirmed and explained, the physiological symptoms are addressed (ועתה ינוחו) and then she can find comfort as well (ותמצא מנוח). Hashem listened to Rivkah's דרישה fully and responded by easing both her physical and psychological distress. Rivkah goes on to carry her twins to term in

7 Esther J. Hamori, *Women's Divination in Biblical Literature: Prophecy, Necromancy, and Other Arts of Knowledge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 52–53.

apparent health: “וימלאו ימיה ללדה” - her days completed to give birth” (Bereishit 25:24).

There are no stories of pregnancy until Rivkah’s. She came into a world where pregnancy is just a historical footnote, often omitted, never described. When her pregnancy is crushing, she doesn’t even have words for it beyond, “Why am I!” So, the *midrash* tells, she went around to the other women, asking for their stories. Having broken the silence, she learns she is not the only person ever to struggle with this. Perhaps she finds out that her pregnancy is worse than most (Ibn Ezra), but perhaps she finds out that pregnancy is often actually just this hard (Rashi, Sforno). Story #2 is not unique: it’s just a story that we don’t like to tell. Once Rivkah breaks that silence, however, she can go and seek help.

BALANCING THE ABSTRACT AND THE PARTICULAR

The differences between the midrashic discussions about the abstract pregnancy in Tazria versus the commentators’ discussion of Rivkah’s particular pregnancy are instructive. Yes, pregnancy in the abstract is fully a wonder and a miracle. At the same time, the actual lived experience is much more varied—and not infrequently catastrophic. There are appropriate times and spaces to tell both stories.

Rivkah was failed by a world that did not tell true stories about pregnancy. But the way her story has been preserved in our tradition serves as an essential corrective. Now, through her, Story #2 has become Torah. The next time someone suffers in pregnancy, she can read about Rivkah and feel hope that there might be help for her as well.

Importantly, in our interpretive tradition of the Rivkah story, nobody tries to tell her Story #1 in the face of her suffering. God, the *midrash*, and our traditional commentators do not dismiss or paper over the pain of her experience. Nobody talks down to her. Nobody tells her how beautiful her experience is supposed to be, or marvels that the babies haven’t fallen out, or exclaims about how incredible an investment pregnancy is. The *midrash* never tells Rivkah, “אין זה שבח” - is it not praiseworthy!?, the refrain from Vayikra Rabbah. Instead, Rivkah merits divine intervention and prophetic care.

Story #1 does have a place, though. Pregnancy, the growth of new human life, is a miracle—and the best place to contemplate that is a biology class or a *beit midrash*, studying the *אשה כי תזריע*, Vayikra’s abstract woman. Sometimes it happens that the lived experience of pregnancy is in fact idyllic dream-fulfillment. The Torah maintains a space for that experience too.

Pregnancy here is a model for just about every human experience. When discussed in the abstract, we can speak statistically, we can theorize, we can make normative statements. But when there’s an actual, real-life person involved, there’s no one way they are “supposed” to feel. A mourner, for example, is “supposed” to feel sad—but sometimes mourners in real life feel relieved or even happy. Graduates are “supposed” to be proud of their accomplishments and excited for their futures—but sometimes their actual experience is terror of the oncoming unknown. A pregnant person might feel like a miraculous partner in creation, or they might feel like death. Or a person might just feel all of it at once. The stories of our lives are messy.

The only way to navigate that messiness is to make space for the particular. Rivkah’s story shows us what is at stake. Finally pregnant after a twenty-year struggle with infertility, the prayers of her whole family have been answered, and Rivkah was “supposed” to be overjoyed. But that wasn’t her experience. Instead, her experience was crushing. Rivkah doesn’t keep quiet because she’s “supposed” to be grateful. Instead, she boldly tells her own story. She actively pursues care, and she finds it. If instead she had been met with an insistent, “אין זה שבח” - is it not praiseworthy!?” then she might not have. The Ramban even suggests that the repercussions might have spelled the end of the Jewish people.

The stories we share determine the limits of our ability to see and be seen, to give and receive care. The bottom line is that our stories must be told with sensitivity, in the proper places and times, with room for the miraculous to be catastrophic and the catastrophic to be miraculous. ♦

