



Covenantal Numerology

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From the very beginning, the Torah imbues certain numbers with great significance. The first chapter of Genesis carefully divides Creation into seven days.¹ Seven then becomes the most significant number in nearly all Jewish time rituals—not just Shabbat, but Pesah, Shavuot, Sukkot, as well as the seventh month, the seventh year, the seven cycles of seven years²—all of which are then imprinted with the themes of that first seven: creation, rest, and rejuvenation.

Then there are other numbers that recur at significant moments in the Torah's narrative. The forty days and nights of the Flood, and the forty days and nights Moshe spent on Mount Sinai. The ten plagues and the ten commandments. The seventy members of Ya'akov's household and seventy elders.³

¹ As our Sages say in Mishnah Avot 5:1: "יכול להבראות אחד - והלא במאמר אחד יכול להבראות" - But couldn't the world have been created with one utterance!?"

² The seventh month, the month we know as Tishrei, features prominently in the seven- and seven-times-seven year cycles; see Leviticus 25:1-12.

³ The number forty is explored below. For seventy, see Genesis 46:27 and Exodus 24:1.



An awareness of the Torah's "numbers of distinction" and their significance can help us decode the complex structure of the birth ritual that opens Parashat Tazria, and the mysterious set of numbers it contains.⁴

ויקרא יב:ב-ד

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אִשָּׁה כִּי תִזְרִיעַ וַיֵּלֶד זָכָר וְטָמְאָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כִּימֵי נִדַּת דְּוֹתָהּ תִּטְמָא. וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי יִמּוֹל בָּשָׂר עָרְלָתוֹ. וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם וּשְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים תֵּשֵׁב בְּדָמֵי טְהָרָה בְּכָל קֹדֶשׁ לֹא תִגַּע וְאֵל הַמִּקְדָּשׁ לֹא תָבֹא עַד מְלֹאת יְמֵי טְהָרָהּ. וְאִם נָקְבָה תֵּלֵד וְטָמְאָה שִׁבְעֵים כְּנֻדָּתָהּ וּשְׁשִׁים יוֹם וּשְׁשֶׁת יָמִים תֵּשֵׁב עַל דָּמֵי טְהָרָהּ.

Leviticus 12:2-4

Speak to the Children of Israel and say: When a woman conceives (*tazria*), and gives birth to a male, she becomes impure for **seven days**, like during the days of her menstrual infirmity. And on the **eighth day**, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. For **33 days** she will remain in the blood of purification, and will not touch any holy thing, nor come toward the sanctuary, until she completes her days of purity. If she gives birth to a female, she becomes impure for **two weeks**, like the days of her menstruation, and for **66 days** she will remain in the blood of purification.

The first number here is a familiar one: there is that seven again, always representing a full cycle of creation, and a moment of rest and reflection. That association is certainly apt for the birth of a child.

⁴ There have been many important investigations into the laws and values that emerge from this passage. I will confine myself in this essay only to the questions that relate directly to the numbers involved. For a superb comparative treatment of pregnancy here and elsewhere in the Torah, see Rabbanit Leah Sarna's "Catastrophic Miracles and Miraculous Catastrophes: The Torah of Pregnancy in Tazria and Toldot," winner of this year's Ateret Zvi prize, available here:

<https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/catastrophic-miracles-and-miraculous-catastrophes>.



Then comes the number eight, for the day of circumcision. This verse has the strange feeling of an insertion.⁵ Why is circumcision mentioned here, when it already received a full treatment when Avraham first received this commandment back in Genesis (17:9-14)? The circumcision ritual does not seem directly pertinent to the purity rituals being introduced here.

The rest of the numbers are even more perplexing: 33 days is an odd unit of time. It is no multiple of seven. It does not appear to be a natural cycle. If it were meant to approximate a month, we would have expected it to be thirty (or if anything a little less).

Then the next two numbers appear to be doubling two previous figures: two weeks for a female child where there were seven days for a male child, and 66 days for a female child where there were 33 days for a male child. Do these numbers also have significance? And why would the numbers be different for boys and girls?

A first clue comes when we begin to add up the numbers. This is not an unreasonable tactic, since the days themselves are sequential. While the 33 day period is hard to make sense of on its own, when we add it to the initial seven day period, it comes to a total of forty days. Now **that** we know as a well-established unit of time in the Torah. What does it signify?

The last forty-day period mentioned before this recorded Moshe's second stay on Mount Sinai after the revelation, when he received the second set of tablets:

שמות לד:כח

וַיְהִי שָׁם עִם ה' אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְאַרְבָּעִים לַיְלָה לֶחֶם לֹא אָכַל וּמַיִם לֹא שָׁתָה וַיִּכְתֹּב עַל הַלְחָת אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַבְּרִית עֲשֻׁרֶת הַדְּבָרִים.

⁵ R. Elchanan Samet explores this placement in his essay סדרה, עיונים בפרשת השבוע, "טומאת יולדת ומילה לשמונה", עיונים בפרשת השבוע, סדרה ראשונה, סעיף ג.



Exodus 34:28

He was there with the Eternal for **forty days and forty nights**. He ate no bread and drank no water, and God wrote⁶ on the tablets the words of the **Covenant** of the Ten Commandments.

Note that Moshe's gestative communion with God has resulted not just in another set of tablets with the Ten Commandments, but the record of a "**Covenant** of the Ten Commandments." That word is given special emphasis here in order to make clear: a covenant was formed at Mount Sinai.

Indeed, we find the language of covenant also just after the revelation itself. With the people gathered around the mountain, Moshe offers sacrifices to God and then pours some of the blood from the sacrifices in a basin:

שמות כד:ח

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַדָּם וַיִּזְרֹק עַל הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה דָם הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר כָּרַת ה' עִמָּכֶם עַל כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה.

Exodus 24:8

Moshe took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold, the blood of the **covenant** that God has forged with you all on all these words!"

The covenant forged at Sinai was forged over the words of the commandments, but it was also forged (כרת, *karat*, literally "cut") in blood. Immediately after this, Moshe ascended the mountain, and we are told: "וַיְהִי מֹשֶׁה בְּהָר אֲרָבָעִים יוֹם וְאַרְבָּעִים לַיְלָה - Moshe was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights" (Exodus 24:18). The number forty, then, comes to represent the Covenant of Sinai.

⁶ See Ibn Ezra on this verse, who reminds us that at the beginning of the chapter, God said to Moshe, "Carve two tablets like the first ones and **I will write** upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke" (Exodus 34:1).



Meanwhile, the “blood of the covenant,” here before Moshe’s ascent, will remind us of another covenant forged in blood, that of circumcision:

בראשית יז:י-יב

זאת בריתי אשר תשמרו ביני וביניכם ובין זרעך אחריו המול לכם כל זכר. ונמלתם את בשר ערלתכם והיה לאות ברית ביני וביניכם. ובן שמונת ימים ימול לכם כל זכר לדורתיכם.

Genesis 17:10-12

This is My **covenant** that you shall keep, between Me and you and your offspring after you, circumcise every male. And the foreskins of their flesh shall be circumcised and that will be the sign of the **covenant** between Me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of **eight days**.

That language of covenant is so central to the circumcision ritual (*berit milah*) that we tend to call it not a *milah* (a circumcision), but a *brit* or a *bris* (covenant).

Having noticed the echo between Avraham’s covenant of circumcision and Moshe’s covenant at Sinai, we can now go back to analyze the structure of the male birth in Parashat Tazria, with its surprising inclusion of the law of circumcision on the eighth day. That means we have an initial seven day period—we have assumed this represents a new creation; an eighth day that represents entry into the Covenant of Avraham, the tribal covenant; and then a fortieth day that represents entry into the Covenant of Sinai, the covenant of Torah.

That is a deeply meaningful birth ritual structure—for a boy. But what about a girl? She is not circumcised on the eighth day. Does that mean she does not enter the Covenant of Avraham? Indeed, her birth is marked with a whole different set of numbers. Her mother’s periods of impurity and purification are not 7 and 33 days, but 14 and 66—making a total of eighty.



We have already noted that the numbers for a female child are doubled. So what we really have, it seems, is two sevens and two forties. One of each of those can presumably be interpreted in the same way. The seven represents a new creation, for a girl or a boy. And the forty represents an entry into the Covenant of Sinai, for a girl or a boy. But how do we understand the other seven and the other forty that the ritual for the birth of a female child carries?

Let's begin with the forty. If one forty represents the Covenant of Sinai, what might the other represent? As we noted earlier, the Torah's other significant period of forty days is the length of the rains of the Flood in the Noah story: "forty days and forty nights." When we go back to the Noah story, we find that there, too, a new covenant is given:

בראשית ט:יא

וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם וְלֹא יִכָּרֵת כָּל בָּשָׂר עוֹד מִמִּי הַמַּבּוּל וְלֹא יִהְיֶה עוֹד מַבּוּל לְשַׁחַת הָאָרֶץ.

Genesis 9:11

I will establish My **covenant** with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.

The word "ברית - covenant" (*berit*), appears seven times in this chapter. There is even—as with circumcision—a "sign of the covenant": the rainbow. When that sign is displayed, God says:

בראשית ט:טו

וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם וּבֵין כָּל נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה בְּכָל בָּשָׂר וְלֹא יִהְיֶה עוֹד הַמַּיִם לְמַבּוּל לְשַׁחַת כָּל בָּשָׂר.

Genesis 9:15

I will remember My **covenant** between Me and you and **every living** creature among all flesh, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

The Flood was a destruction of Creation and of nearly all life on earth, so this new covenant represents a restart to Creation and a pledge to preserve life. Indeed, this is essentially a Covenant of Creation,⁷ made not with Noah in particular but with “every living creature.” If anyone represents this covenant, it would be Havah, because she is the “אם כל חי - mother of **all that lives**” (Genesis 3:20). Note that she is given this name just a few verses after we learn that she will have the ability to conceive and bear children (Genesis 3:15).

If we return again to the birth rituals in Parashat Tazria, it seems reasonable to presume that while the first set of seven and forty for the birth of a female child parallels the symbolism of those numbers for a male child (the entry of a new creation into the Covenant of Sinai), the second set represents a **re**-creation, and evokes God’s commitment to humanity to restart and preserve life. The birth of a female, especially, represents the continuity of life, since just as this mother has given life, so the female that has just been born also carries the potential to give life again.⁸ That is the second seven. The second forty, then, represents her entry into the very first covenant God made with humanity, the Covenant of Creation.⁹

⁷ I have chosen this term for the covenant that Noah receives after the flood, though it is not a traditional phrase (as is the “בריתו של אברהם אבינו - Covenant of Avraham”). I could have called it the Covenant of Noah but I wanted to emphasize that it was made not with Noah alone, nor his family alone, but with every living being. I could have called it the Covenant of Life, but that is too broad and does not emphasize the restart to creation that I think is central to this covenant. I am also arguing that this covenant directly parallels the Covenant of Avraham, so I was tempted to call it the Covenant of Sarah, but that is misleading since it was not given directly to her. So I settled on Covenant of Creation, in order to suggest both that God has made a pledge with all of Creation, and that it is especially those with the ability to create new life who have claim to this covenant.

⁸ See discussion in R. Shai Held’s essay on Parashat Tazria, “Living on the Boundary: The Complexity and Anxiety of Childbirth,” published in *The Heart of Torah* and available here:

<https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/living-boundary>.

⁹ In fact, it makes more sense to think of the **first** forty as representing the covenant from the Noah story, and the second forty as representing the Covenant of Sinai, since that follows Torah’s chronology; this would also better



Does that mean that a female child is **not** brought into the covenant of Avraham? This is a question that we might have asked from the moment circumcision was introduced and assigned only to “כל זכר” - every male.”

In fact, the difference in numbers in the birth rituals of Parashat Tazria suggests that a female child enters not into the exact same covenant as a male, but one that is directly parallel. Here our best clue comes not from key numbers, but key words. One word in particular is used seven times during the original giving of circumcision to Avraham: זרע (*zera*), meaning “offspring,” or literally, “seed,” as in:

בראשית יז:

וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וּבֵין זֶרְעֶךָ אַחֲרַיִךְ לְדֹרֹתָם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לִהְיוֹת לִּךָ לְאֱלֹקִים וּלְזֶרְעֶךָ אַחֲרַיִךְ.

Genesis 17:7

I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your **seed** to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your **seed** to come.

This word “seed” appears seven times in this chapter. That makes some sense, not only because it refers to offspring, but also because it describes a ritual that affects the very organ from which the “seed” of life emerges.

Now perhaps we will remember the key word that gave our *parashah* its name: תזריע (*tazria*). This word is based on the same root as *zera* (seed), but it is a verb. We translated it above as “conceives,” but literally, it means something more like “germinates.”

parallel the male child’s sequence, in which entry into the Covenant of Avraham also precedes the forty days that symbolize the Covenant of Sinai.



In fact, in the entire Tanakh, this form of the verb¹⁰ is only ever used in one other context: in its very first chapter. In the creation story, on the third day, we read:

בראשית א:יא-יב

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים תִּדְשָׂא הָאָרֶץ דָּשָׂא עֵשֶׂב מִזְרִיעַ זֶרַע עֵץ פְּרִי עֹשֶׂה פְּרִי לְמִינֵהוּ אֲשֶׁר זָרְעוּ בּוֹ עַל הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי כֵן.
וַתֹּצֵא הָאָרֶץ דָּשָׂא עֵשֶׂב מִזְרִיעַ זֶרַע לְמִינֵהוּ וְעֵץ עֹשֶׂה פְּרִי אֲשֶׁר זָרְעוּ-בּוֹ לְמִינֵהוּ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹקִים כִּי-טוֹב.

Genesis 1:11-12

God said let the earth sprout forth grass and vegetation that **germinates seed** (*mazria zera*), fruit trees of every species on earth that bear the fruit of its species with its seed in it. And it was so. The earth sprouted forth grass and vegetation that **germinates seed** (*mazria zera*) of every species, and fruit trees of every species that had their seed in them. And God saw that this was good.

When a woman acts as a *tazria*, she is performing an act of creation that only God before her has been able to call forth from the earth. The Covenant of Avraham provides the seed that is one half of the equation that gives life to his offspring. Its complement is the Covenant of Creation: the ability to germinate seed, and so to re-create life, as God once did.

All of this provides a symbolic overlay to the two birth rituals described in Parashat Tazria. There is, however, potentially one practical implication that may be suggested by this analysis. Modern Jews often struggle with the question of what kind of birth celebration ritual to have for a girl, in light of all the fanfare that accompanies a *berit milah*. Should it be on the eighth day, or can be it done any time? Should it look just like a *berit milah*, but without the *milah*?¹¹ The structure of the rituals in Parashat Tazria suggest that a girl's "*bris*" might be

¹⁰ This form is called *hif'il*, a causative form.

¹¹ For an excellent review of the possibilities, see the discussion of R. Avi Killip and R. Ethan Tucker in *Responsa Radio* that was recently rereleased and available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/podcasts/how-name-baby-girl>.



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New creation with potential to create new creation

Covenant of Creation

Covenant of Sinai

