

Rabbi Joel N. Abraham

### Tazria and Equal Treatment for Men and Women

This week's portion, *tazria*, begins with a proscription for Jewish women who have given birth. In Leviticus, chapter twelve, we are told that a woman who gives birth to a boy is unclean for a week, and then remains in a state of blood impurity for thirty-three days. She cannot go to the sacred precincts of the camp; she cannot touch sacred objects. If she gives birth to a girl, then both of those times are doubled. She remains unclean for two weeks and in a state of blood impurity for sixty-six days.

No reason is offered for this inequity. The Torah simply states that a woman is essentially isolated for twice as long if she has given birth to a girl. It's like exclusion squared - the woman is penalized for giving birth in the first place, and if you didn't get that it was about being female, you get double the penalty if you give birth to a girl. (There is miracle here as well. My mother-in-law, Linda Wolf, loves the teaching that, since a girl child is born with all of her ova, a woman gives birth to her own grandchildren. Thus the double-penalty marks the two generations that are born when a female is born, rather than a male.)

Our Biblical (male) ancestors were made uneasy, if not fearful, by the biological processes that led to the creation of new life. To bleed regularly, not to die, but to be renewed, was disturbing to them. Separation was the answer. The parallel in our modern lives is the unwillingness to discuss issues of pay equity. On average women are paid 77 cents for every dollar that a man earns. Today a woman needs to work until a date in April to catch up to her male counterpart. He earns in 12 months what it takes her 15 months to earn.

Just as our Biblical ancestors (female) were pushed out of the camp and so out of daily conversation, so today many organizations prohibit not only general discussions of compensation, but even individuals sharing their own salaries with others. This aversion to talking about money only serves to foster pay inequity. Imagine how our future descendants will look at our time, baffled that individuals working together were unable to share information about their job descriptions and remuneration, asking themselves, how did they work together with one hand tied behind their backs?

If we could just step back and view the pay inequity situation from outside our own situations, the questions become much clearer. Paying women less than men for the same work implies that we devalue the roles that women play in the workplace and the family. Statements that our clergy colleagues hear, like, "we couldn't afford a male pastor", do not make congregants feel like they have a bargain, but that they have settled for the lesser product. In our capitalist society, money is the way with which we show respect and value. How can we fool ourselves that we value women equally when we pay them so much less?