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"The Sacred Placenta in Rabbinic Literature and Consciousness: Towards a Jewish, feminist placenta-inspired theology"

Raquel Skosovske 1 March 2007
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Name of Advisor: Dr. Joel Gereboff

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The Sacred Placenta in Rabbinic Literature and Consciousness:

Towards a Jewish, feminist placenta-inspired theology

B'sumi anan l'vusho, v'arafel chatulato

When I made the cloud its garment and the dense fog
its swaddling cloth

Job 38:9

Raquel Shira Kosovske
Thesis towards fulfillment for requirement for Rabbinic Ordination
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Los Angeles, CA

Dr. Joel Gereboff, Advisor

1 March 2007
Ta'anit Esther 5767

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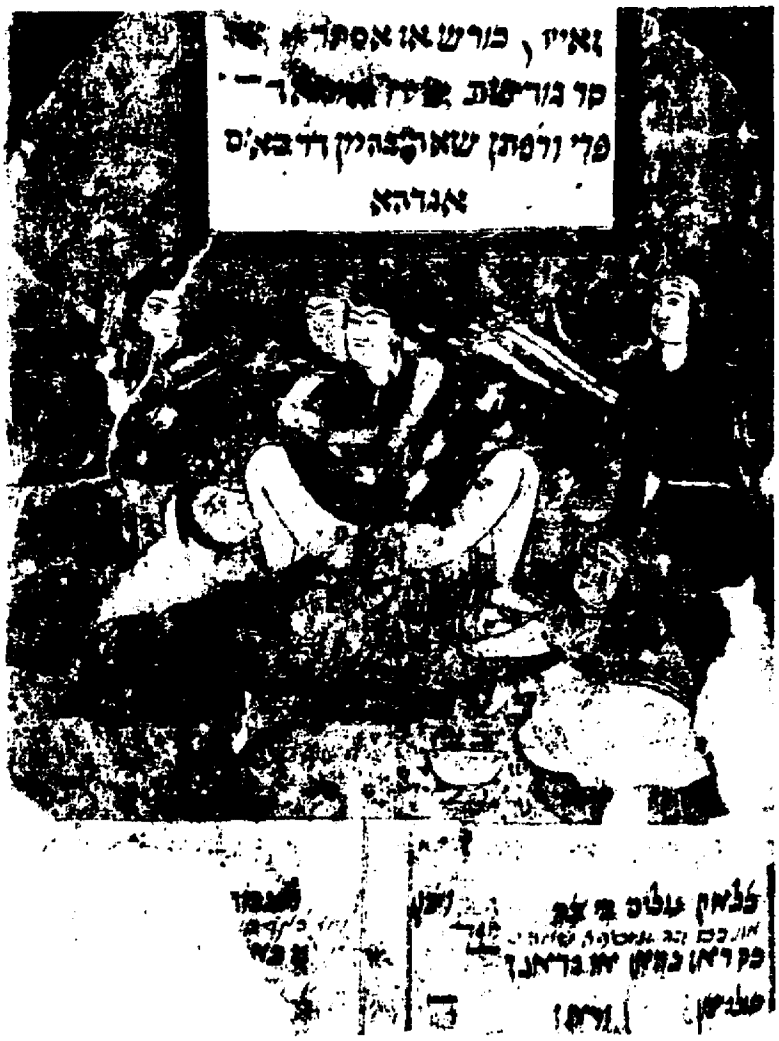
The Sacred Placenta in Rabbinic Literature and Consciousness: Towards a Jewish, feminist placenta-inspired theology



Queen Esther gives birth to Cyrus. *Ardashir nama.*
Midwife's assistant ready with bowl for placenta in foreground.

Judeo-Persian illuminated manuscript, late 17th-early 18th c.
Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, Ms. 40919 f. 154r.

Preface

The subject of this thesis has long been an obsession of mine. It began in an epiphanal moment when I saw the placenta of my nephew Raffy and profoundly encountered the Divine. "You don't happen to know what happened to the placenta?" I asked on my best friend's behalf, while she was recovering from her c-section and being with her baby for the first time. The nurse (a male nurse) led me from the nurses' station to a small storage closet in the corner of the hall, where he reached up to a shelf and pulled down what looked like a cole-slaw container. He donned gloves and poured the placenta into the pink plastic tub that is standard hospital issue. Across his hands lay the most beautiful and astonishing thing I had ever seen. I literally lost my breath – a reaction I would never have anticipated. The round, thick organ was bright red, as if alive, as if it were the face of the moon staring up at me; and on its face was a thick tree of life – a seven branched tree of purplish-blue and white veins, rounded and as if reaching up off their surface in a pulsating vitality. All I could think was that *this was it*: the Tree of Life.

My feeling that the encounter with Raffy's placenta was with the Tree of Life (that the placenta is the Tree of Life, the one we refer to as Torah, as *eitz chayim*, embodied again and again as G-d manifests through pregnancy and birth) was intuitive and profound. *There had been something else in there. The baby was panim el panim, face to face with this tree.* I had no idea what Judaism had to say about this other than this connection and awareness of the placenta as a manifestation of the Divine was *not* common knowledge and *not* part of any Jewish teaching or

tradition that I had ever heard of – not that I knew everything, but enough to know this was not an established element of Jewish theology or rabbinic thought. Yet it was so obvious, right there – this incredible placenta.

I was propelled for a long time in a state of radical amazement and awe. I wrote about seeing the placenta, I told everyone I could. I calligraphied Raffy's birth announcement in the image of the placenta as a full moon with the tree of seven veins reaching up inside. I wanted to tell everyone about it, about the placenta as being part of the G-ddess, (not separate from G-d but a mother-force or understanding of a powerful creative force known as G-d), and specifically I wanted to tell everyone in Judaism about it. I was inspired by Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, who visited my friend in the hospital and spoke about *Serach*, the one surviving Israelite who is named as going both down into Egypt and up again to the desert – Rabbi Lynn spoke about her not as a midrash but as someone real, that she appeared as an eagle flying over the Israelites accompanying and leading the to the Sea, like a doula – one who assists the birthing woman with encouragement. She spoke about *Serach* as though she was real, and I thought, I too have a perspective aching to burst out from inside me. This deep longing was part of the reckoning of soul that led me to apply to rabbinical school, in order to deepen myself as a spiritual journeyer and acquire the skills needed to read rabbinic texts in order to see what our tradition had said about the placenta, and to be able to use what I find to bring holiness and awareness of G-d's presence, the primacy of birth and the power of women birthing to our conscious and manifest image of G-d.

In Jerusalem two years later when I began rabbinical school, I remember sitting in a café telling a new classmate of this incredible encounter, about the thick tree of life facing the child, "*There's*

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In Jerusalem two years later when I began rabbinical school, I remember sitting in a café telling a new classmate of this incredible encounter, about the thick tree of life facing the child, "*There's*

something else in there..." I naively talked about the placenta frequently, to the astonishment of my Hebrew teachers and classmates and often uncomfortable laughter – I too didn't know how to embody this search in a serious way. I remember on Purim that year in Jerusalem, davenning and reading megillah with the group Women of the Wall at the Kotel; I was dressed all in red, with a pillow stuffed under my shirt – a pregnant woman in a red shirt, red scarf around my head, thick red knee-socks, and red glitter around my eyes. At the last minute before I ran to the taxi already beeping outside that early morning, I finished my costume by tying long strings of red sewing thread into the white *tzitzit* of the *tallit* I wore around my neck.

A woman of Women of the Wall, Haviva Ner-David, author of *Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey Toward Traditional Rabbinic Ordination*, then studying to be the first Orthodox-ordained woman rabbi, asked me about the tallit. "It's a birthing garment," I retorted. "I got it from Tractate Niddah, Masechet Argemon," I made up on the spot, "where Bruriah says birthing women should wear red *tzitzit* rather than *techelet* (the traditional and increasingly popular blue-dyed fringes)...you know, for the *placenta*," I said flippantly (I thought I was so funny) still not finding my inner true voice. Haviva's jaw dropped, "Really??" she said, her eyes bulging out of disbelief, and I knew in that split second before she realized I was just kidding, she was thinking, How have I not come across this?

Now on Purim 5767 I am conscious of this holiday's themes of turning what is on the inside out, and making the world topsy-turvy in the costumery of self that often leads to greater and more serious truth-telling. I am aware of how far this formal journey coming to closure, a journey of soul-intimations yearning to study sources about the placenta and sift through them in a cavern

like panning for the gemstones we used to try to find on field studies in the fifth grade – occasionally there was a glint of shiny purple or emerald in the stone: some mica or else an amethyst, or an emerald! My journey in the last years has been propelled by wanting to learn how to better navigate, or begin to navigate and dialogue, with rabbinic Judaism: how much more there is to go. This is a journey in taking the world very seriously, in trusting and understanding my own creative process, intuitive knowledge, serious text study, and belief system as much as a thesis. And I have found some emerald chips in rock – not all of them appear in this thesis. But I will write about those too.

This thesis began with a query into what the rabbis said about the placenta, *the sacred placenta*, in the hopes to Jewishly, textually validate, authenticate or augment a more subtle, much less documented tradition across cultures of women burying their placentas in some form that honored the placenta as a vessel of the Divine. While there is a Jewish tradition of burying the placenta, it is largely unknown and certainly we have not crossed that barrier where it is part of the liturgical and ritualistic norm to give expression to the liminal experience of giving birth, particularly in the liberal world. Religious hospitals in Israel, I have recently learned through a correspondence with a religious midwife in Jerusalem, bury the placentas, and are reluctant to return them to new mothers. Liturgy that would be received in the Orthodox community is needed as much as in the Progressive and Egalitarian world.

I also anticipated a chapter based on prior research I have done that would analyze the rabbis' use of breastfeeding as a metaphor for G-d and Divine nurturance between the Jewish people,

G-d and Torah. If the rabbis could make dazzling, foundational metaphor out of nursing, then they certainly could have done it for the placenta, had they understood it better perhaps. Or else, we can use their own paradigm of G-d nursing the people Israel with Torah ourselves and apply it to the creation of literature and theology of the placenta.

In the end I have focused on exploring rabbinic texts, and I have benefited greatly from my advisor Dr. Joel Gereboff who excitedly saw through my hazy first-thesis proposal, and said, "Everyone is talking about birth these days... but what is this you wrote down here about 'placenta theology'?!" Joel pushed me to expand my horizons academically, to clarify metaphors and the jumble of ideas I hesitated for so long to put down on paper. He spent a great deal of time being patient and nurturing to me while I balanced and crossed over into new motherhood and attachment parenting/nursing as it clashed with my personal creative or intellectual output capabilities. Also, without a flinch Joel supported and delighted in my nursing an infant in the Beit Midrash at HUC during his Talmud class. In fact he insisted I nurse in class rather than skirmish away to the women's lounge – and once settled in the room he demanded I sit fully at the table and not hide away in the back, baby on lap. This is a metaphor for how he has encouraged me to bring this thesis to bear. He and I both know this is a work in progress and I am grateful to have the serendipitous opportunity and honor to work with him on this project.

Finally, on the eve of turning in this thesis, we received the devastating news that Leah Fishbane, a former member of my davenning and extended community suffered a brain tumor, and was

being taken off life support machines. She has an incredible vivacious daughter, Aderet, turning four this Sunday, and we learned that Leah was seven weeks pregnant. How do we place this?

> *B'sumi anan l'vusho, v'arafel chatulato*
> When I made the cloud its garment and the dense fog its swaddling cloth
>
> Job 38:9

I want to honor Leah's sweet vivacity and her gentle, clear presence and hope that like her I can live my life fully, finding the time and balance with my child, in happiness and in community. May her memory be for a blessing.

> *Alufeinu m'subalim ein peretz v'ein yotzeit, v'ein tzva'chah bir'chovoteinu*
> Our legions are suffering, there is no breach and there is no going out, and there is no loud cry in our streets.
>
> Psalm 144:4

CHAPTER ONE
Searching for the Placenta in the Bible

Let my womb be my *silîtu*/placenta!

Babylonian prayer to Ishtar[1]

Into the water world of women
You pull me under
And I am a jeweled fish
Pursued by your hunger
Again and again
Your mouth is upon me
To feed.

...
I dream of your hands, calling me
"Mommy, Mommy,
You are still my placenta."

Did I believe birth would sever you
from my body,
Your hunger pulls me under
...

Tzippora Price, "Into the Water World of Women"[2]

Biblical precedents, literal and figurative

The Bible includes one direct reference to a placenta and one implied reference. Both are literal references and very negatively charged. Although no other obvious references to the placenta exist elsewhere in the whole of the Bible (either literal, implied or metaphoric), this does not

[1] Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (Cuneiform Monographs 14) (Brill Academic Publishers: The Netherlands) 2000, pg. 144, footnote 205.

[2] Poem "Into the Water World of Women" by Tzippora Price, *Mothering* magazine, no. 131, July-August 2005, pg. 53.

mean that illusions are not found or were not occasionally inferred by the rabbis, or that modern midrashists cannot look for placenta images or motifs in the Bible, as is explored throughout this thesis.

The first appearance of a placenta in canonized Jewish literature and the only direct reference to one in the Bible is found towards the end of the Torah itself, in Deuteronomy 28:57, in a context of punishments and curses on the Jewish people:

> And regarding her placenta going out from between her legs,
> and her children which will birth, she will eat them...

A more indirect inference of a placenta is indicated in Ezekiel 16:4:

> And as for your birth, on the day of your birth, your navel-string was not cut,
> nor washed with water for cleaning, nor salted with salt, nor swaddled in a swaddling cloth.

Ezekiel describes how he saves this female child from gratuitous, vile neglect, until she betrays his benevolence and becomes a prostitute. Both of these verses and surrounding chapters describe and evoke extremely negative events and feelings.

The Ezekiel writer of 16:4 alludes to the placenta still attached to the newborn child whose "navel-string was not cut" but stops short of naming it, perhaps because its presence was simply assumed. It is unlikely that the writer was unaware of fetal physiology to the extent of not knowing about the placenta's attachment – to what is the cord connected if it remains uncut? If the umbilical cord is not cut, then the child remains attached to the placenta even after it is

delivered. The child might be what some people today affectionately have termed a "lotus baby," one whose cord is deliberately not cut from the placenta until the cord dries up and falls away from the cite of the navel naturally.[3] Some ancient and modern communities have had traditions of not cutting the cord for at least a few minutes or longer, until it stops pulsing, allowing any remaining blood to drain from the placenta into the baby's bloodstream. Marten Stol describes a practice one anthropologist observed in a village of Palestine about a hundred years ago:

> The cutting of the navel cord is delayed, and the reason given is chiefly that mother and child shall first rest and that the new-born child is so wretched and tired that it shall first 'drink power' from the afterbirth which is also called comrade or a sister. [4]

The implication in the Ezekiel passage, however, is far from such a nurturing, holistic approach. Rather than "drinking power" as observed in the village of Palestine, this newborn was drained of power – she was not properly cared for at birth and was abandoned, as though the midwife or the mother herself left the child to die, like an animal rejecting her young.

---

[3] See Sarah J. Buckley, "Lotus Birth - A Ritual for Our Times," *Gentle Birth, Gentle Mothering: The wisdom and science of gentle choices in pregnancy, birth, and parenting* (Queensland, Australia: One Moon Press) 2005, pp. 40-43. Not severing the umbilical cord at birth was observed among chimpanzees in the wild, leading a pregnant woman named Clair Lotus Day to decide to try this practice herself in 1974. This practice spread and was named after her, hence "Lotus birth" (although the idea of a lotus flower as image of the placenta fits as well). Buckley writes, "Lotus birth is the practice of leaving the umbilical cord uncut, so that the baby remains attached to his/her placenta until the cord naturally separates at the umbilicus – exactly as a cut cord does – at 3 to 10 days after birth. This prolonged contact can be seen as a time of transition, allowing the baby to slowly and gently let go of his/her attachment to the mother's body."

Buckley, an MD, also describes her personal experience with this practice as a mother and strong religious feelings towards it. She writes, "Lotus birth has been, for us, an exquisite ritual which has enhanced the magic of the early post natal days. I notice an integrity and self-possession with my lotus-born children, and I believe that lovingness, cohesion, attunement to nature, trust, and respect for the natural order have all been imprinted on our family by our honouring of the placenta, the Tree of Life, through Lotus Birth."

[4] Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*, pg. 144, footnote 199, in which he sites Granqvist, 93.

In describing the lack of proper care, Ezekiel 16:14 teaches us about the traditional newborn care-taking routine, which consisted of cutting the cord, washing, salting, swaddling. In fact, this exact list appears in the Talmud in BT Shabbat 129b, only in reverse order, as acts that are so important that they are permitted on the Sabbath, even when it means breaking Sabbath injunctions or calling for a midwife in another place to come and perform these things. Another passage relates some details about tying or cutting the cord and how to stimulate an indifferent mother's compassion(even if on animals):

> Mishnah: There is no performing the acts of a midwife on animals on Yom Tov! But we are are feasting. And we are performing the acts of a midwife for a woman on Shabbat, and calling "*chochmah*/wisdom" [idiom for a midwife] for her from one place to another, and breaking the Shabbat for her, and tying the umbilical cord. Rabbi Yosi says: Even cutting [the cord]! And all the needs of Brit Milah we are doing on Shabbat.
>
> Gemara: ...Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, We *m'rachmin*/cause compassion to be stimulated on a pure animal on Yom Tov. How is this done? Said Abaye. We bring a block of salt and we rest it inside her uterus, in order that she recall her suffering and she will have compassion on it. And we are pouring the waters of the *shilya* over the back of the *vlad*, in order that she (the indifferent mother) will smell his smell and have compassion on it.
>
> BT Shabbat 128b

It is possible that Ezekial did not state the placenta and only mentioned "and your navel-string was not cut" because he was referring not just to "cutting" but to washing or caring for the cut-cord such as by salting it or cleaning it. BT Shabbat 128b refers to another salting practice at birth separate from the umbilical cord, that of using it stimulate the mother to be more compassionate and care for her newborn properly.

One Near Eastern tradition practice as recently as a century ago in traditional Jewish communities in Iraq used "sesame oil, ashes and salt as an ointment for the navel."[5]

Whether the care-taking routine intimated in Ezekiel and described in the Talmud was a hygenic practice or a spritiual one, it remains clear that from a traditional perspective a child who is not cleaned, washed, "salted" and swaddled is not yet a full human, it has not been properly ushered into the world of civilization. Without these actions, the wet, bloody, crinkled, other-worldlike, indeed animal-looking, creature that emerged from the mysterious, dark womb is not transformed into a pink human being, warm and inviting, who captures the heart of its parents forever. Nonetheless, while salting in a rural or ancient society might serve medical reasons, the washing is primarily a ritual act or one of socialization, for the child is born clean.[6] Swaddling keeps the baby warm, but the baby can also be placed directly onto the mother's chest for warmth as it learns to regulate its own body heat. Swaddling, as we will explore further in this thesis, also is an important symbolic act of recreating the tight, cozy space of the womb for the infant, and it is this idea that the rabbis most related to the placenta.

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[5]Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*, pg. 143 and footnote 191. E. A. Drower, *Iraq* 5 (1938), 110.

[6] When I once asked Reb Zalman Shachter-Shlomi, the founder and spiritual leader of the Jewish Renewal Movement, what he thought about the placenta, he paused and smiled, and then said, "Every child born is the Messiah." I asked what he meant, and he replied gleefully, "The vernix!" The vernix is the natural layer of whitish cream that covers the child's skin in utero protecting its skin from being in too much water. The child is usually born with vernix covering much of its body, often mixed up with other bodily fluids. Cleaning the baby at birth usually involves wiping its skin of the vernix, although some people prefer to leave as much of it intact as possible, since it provides rich emollients for the baby's skin.

Reb Zalman (as he is affectionately called) asserted that the vernix acts as the anointing oil that anoints the Messiah. Pausing before cleaning the vernix or postponing some of the cleaning also helps people realize and experience the wonder that this child has been literally floating in water for nine months.

Sheila Kitzinger adds in *Ourselves as Mothers: The Universal Experience of Motherhood* (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company: USA, 1995, pg. 118) that the vernix "protects the skin inside the uterus, but the removal of this at birth does more harm than good. Cleansing of the newborn has ritual significance rather than hygienci validity."

The symbolic act in the Ezekiel story of *not* cutting the cord keeps the infant at bay, as if still a fetus, not fully ensouled, and as if an aborted fetus, in the sense of maternal abortment (and abhorrence). By describing what you should *not* do with regarding the placenta (i.e. not cut the cord promptly and eat the placenta) in Deuteronomy 28:57 and Ezekiel 16:14, we can infer that the placenta is a life-giving force, in its close proximity to the fetus, but only on the inside. On the outside of the womb it has no place in our realm of vision; it decays, it has no power to protect and nourish the baby alive, and it elicits a repellent, visceral reaction in socialized or literary contexts. The Deuteronomy verse goes even further to envision a cannibalistic state where the mother devours the placenta and her children. The image also presents a wild animal state: the implication is that she devours the flesh, devoid of soul, without cooking or consuming it with grace. Associating the placenta with this carnage certainly encourages or fosters an attitude of disgust toward the placenta, especially because no other text exists in the Torah (or Bible) to counter it. We will look later to Torah commentators who slightly fill in this gap.

The Torah's placenta

> And regarding her *shilyah*, the one going out from between her legs
> and her children which she will birth – for she will eat them,
> out of utter lack, in secrecy, in dire straits and utter hardship
> which your enemy will distress upon you, within your gates.
>
> Deuteronomy 28:57

The whole of Deuteronomy 28 is a concentrated description of people, both men and women, pushed to despair, reaching the outer limits of their humanity, culminating in verse 57 above – perhaps the worst fate of all. The prior verse (28:56) describes "tender fathers" starving their families and eating their young, and things get worse in 28:57 only by the image of the even

more tender (now turned desperate, starving or mad) birthing woman who devours her infants and placenta.

Deuteronomy 28:57 is constructed from a series of parallelisms and additional phrases. The verse begins "And her placenta *which goes out* from between her legs." This very subject and its fairly crude description (coming out from between her legs) might be considered shocking. (The vision here is almost like an alien climbing out from some mysterious "place" in as opposed to a woman pushing out a child and placenta.) But as literature the phrase itself quite remarkable: it has many of the components that make for some of the best biblical literary paronomasia and parallelism. Typically in a biblical parallelism (*tikbolet* or chiasm), two phrases mirror each other as they subtly deepen or inform each other.[7]

> *U'v'shilyatah ha-yotzeit mi'bein raglehah/*
> And regarding her placenta the one going out from between her legs

The first part of 28:57 includes rhyme (*u'v'shilyatah/raglehah)*, assonance (letter *yud*, vowel *ah* and *ei* sounds), three chiasms and includes a sharpness of juxtaposition in a "taut line of four words" which Roland E. Murphy describes in *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* as being Hebrew literature at its most masterful.[8]

We can bracket the phrases of this verse in three ways:

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[7] For further discussion of biblical parallelisms, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books: USA) 1981, pg. 97.

[8] Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Doubleday: New York) 1990, pp. 6-7.

1) And her placenta//the one going out from between her legs

2) And her placenta the one going out//from between her legs

3) And her placenta//the one going out//from between her legs

In 1) above, the placenta stands on one side, while the remainder describes it. In 2) "from between her legs" explains or parallels the placenta-the-one-going-out. In the third delineation above, each section stands alone comprising three separate units: each unit is a different way of defining the placenta (by its name, by its active, birthing action, and by the place from which it comes). The second half "which goes out from between her legs" seems redundant in the Torah world where words are scarce and repetition is cause for attention, but it is important as the only placenta description in the Torah.

The unit including "going out from between her legs" is important because it is both emotionally charged as well as packed with information conveyed to readers (including common folk, men, women and even knowledgeable readers or experts) who might not have been familiar with the word for placenta, its origin or even its existence at all. "From between her legs" tells the reader that the placenta is somehow related to birth, and without telling us its color or size, we can immediately deduce that it is something made of flesh and blood and no bigger than a newborn. Despite the grotesque image of a mother eating her placenta and young, the phrase itself "the one that goes out from between her legs" is fairly descriptive and neutral; it does not necessarily convey or reflect attitudes of disgust, queasiness or confusion regarding the placenta which often prevail in popular culture.

Ha-yotzeit /"The one going out" draws from the most common root used in the Torah to describe a baby leaving the birth canal.[9] Philip argues that the use of this root here proves that "'giving birth' to the afterbirth is an organic part of childbirth."[10] *Ha-yotzeit* then is another subtle indicator that the placenta is "birthed" and is part of normal or "organic" delivery. The remainder of the verse "from between her legs" then sounds crude or superfluous in comparison. The formal "*ha-yotzeit*," cast in the first person feminine present form, serves to describe the placenta as an active feminine agent, literally "She who is going out," or "She who is birthing!"

One glaring omission appears in this passage about the placenta – it does not name the placenta's essential, important function, such as "and her placenta which was inside the womb enabling the baby to live" or "which has helped feed, form and sustain the fetus." Words we might expect such as womb, umbilical cord, blood, sustenance, sustaining the baby, fetus and mother are all absent. Also missing is any indication of what the placenta looks like, such as a descriptive phrase regarding color, shape, texture, likeness or viscosity. These aspects are almost always forefront when encountering an actual placenta (although there will be some attempts to describe these things later in rabbinic literature).

What was the attitude towards the placenta in this text? It is unclear from this tautly written text whether the placenta was abhorred or revered in its time. But eating it certainly changes a holy act into vulgarity, hence the idiom "*m'raglehah*/from her legs" adds to the interpretation that the placenta was viewed as a vulgar or vile object by the general culture.

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[9] *Ha-yotzeit* appears in this verse without the usual "*aleph*" making this an unusual or perhaps "older" form of the word "to go out."

[10] Tarja S. Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity*. Studies in Biblical Literature, Vol. 88 (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.: New York) 2006, pg. 87.

If the *worst* and most vile curse that can be given (the dénouement of chapter 28) is that mothers would be so starving or mad as to devour their own babies and placentas, then that might imply these two items were considered on par as the culture's most precious commodities. The greatest taboo would be to eat the living child and its placenta. Rather than being revered, these things would be violated. Thus, this passage might prompt us to try to understand how the placenta was actually viewed *positively* or as sacred by the culture in which it was written. However, it could also be argued that the "most disgusting" thing the writer could imagine was to eat the placenta, a taboo with great negative emotion.

The grammar in this citation might give us some information regarding the biblical mindset about the placenta. The word "*shilyatah*" appears in the possessive feminine – *her placenta.* From a Hebrew syntax here the placenta belongs *to the mother* as opposed to *the fetus.* Technically, however, the placenta belongs more *to the fetus* since it grows out of and is attached to the fetus, or with it, to feed and support it during the pregnancy. Its role is to take *from the mother* and provide for the fetus. The placenta is literally "in the middle" or between the mother and the fetus, which relates to the Torah's (and other sources') confusion about the placenta. To whom does it belong? The distinction of "*her* placenta" may seem incidental but is important to issues of categorization and attitude; also, words are never considered random or superfluous in the Torah.

The viewpoint that the placenta belongs to the mother is represented in later Talmudic reckoning as discussed below. In BT Shabbat 134a, Abaye relays that his mother (probably a midwife) told

him about the practice of rubbing "the mother's placenta" on the baby to help it breathe better, or if the baby is too thin or too fat. More commonly in rabbinic sources, the placenta is referred to simply in the singular, with no possessive ending. Ancient and rabbinic culture did not fully understand the medical role of the placenta, but our verse even displays confusion about the order of birth. In Deuteronomy 28:57 the placenta precedes the birth of the child, reversing the order of birth:

> And with her placenta the one going out from between her legs
> as well as her children which she will birth – *for she will eat them.*

Additional considerations arise from confusion and difficulty classifying the placenta, which will make it a compelling subject to explore in rabbinic literature. For instance, once it is delivered or "born" (or when the cord has been cut), is it to be treated like an inanimate object or a dead organism? Some cultures treat the placenta as a regular organ or muscle, such as the liver, and believe it is edible and highly nutritous. If one is found in a kosher slaughtered animal, is it edible or considered just another organ inside the mother? How do the different renderings of the placenta belonging to the fetus or the mother affect the conceptualization (biblical as well as Talmudic as well as modern) of the placenta, or of the source of creation?

It obviously does not make sense that a woman, who has survived and championed the difficulties of labor, producing live children, would then turn around and destroy them.[11] Clearly

[11] Although, would a woman murder her own child to save it from a worse fate such as torture and then death at the hands of oppressors, such as Nazis? Possibly yes. Certainly there are reports of this occurrence. A scene in the Roman Polanski film *The Pianist*, inspired by real events, shows a woman lamenting after she smothered her infant to death in an attempt to quiet the child while the Nazis were liquidating the Warsaw Ghetto. It is unclear whether she did this inadvertently or partially intentionally. While waiting long hours for the transport to begin, she goes mad, crying out "Why did I do it?" over and over.

the verse implies she would have to be in a state of insanity. This unnatural image of a mother devouring her children is a universally horrific image not isolated to this verse.[12] This offensive image of a mother eating her young is established as a literary motif echoed throughout Jewish tragedy literature, beginning with Eichah 2:20:

> *Im tochalnah nashim piryam*/If the women will eat their 'fruits,' their cherished babes...

This verse is used liturgically in Eliezer HaKalir's seventh century *kinnah* (liturgical dirge *piyyut*/poem) entitled, "*Im tochalnah nashim piryam...Al'lai li*/"If women could eat their own 'fruit'.....Woe unto me!"[13] However, Eichah 2:30 and this liturgical poem do not include the image of women eating placentas.

Midrash also tells that the Israelite men initially stopped sleeping with their wives in order to prevent pregnancies that would end in sure death of the male children. This behavior was decried by the rabbis who portray the women as ethical warriors who seduce the men back into sexual relations.

[12] It is also not limited to Jewish culture either. If surrounding cultures that were opposed or threatening to Judaism had a practice of eating the placenta, then it would make sense that this verse provides such a strong taboo (much like arguments are made that the Akeidah is a story about *not* sacrificing one's child to a deity, as a statement against what surrounding cultures were doing.)

[13] Eliezer HaKalir, *Im tochalnah nashim piryam...Al'lai li*/"If women could eat their own fruit.....Woe unto me!" *The Complete Prayers for Tisha B'Av*, Art Scroll Prayerbook Series, Series (Mesorah Publications Ltd.: Brooklyn) 2001, from the morning service for Tisha B'Av, *Kinnah* Number 17, pp. 232-234.

In this acrostic liturgical poem, each line begins in the pattern of *Im tochalnah nashim*, but the verb and subject change. The appropriate Hebrews letter neatly fit into scheme at the fourth letter of the line, fitting into the archaic (but elegant) feminine plural form of the verb (i.e. "*tochalnah*"). Each verse ends with the refrain, "*Al'lai li*. Oh Woe unto me!" The repetition of "*Al'lai li*" twenty-two times re-creates an experience of being completely lost, wallowing in self-pity. The poem contains grossly over-exaggerated accounts of mothers eating their babies in a city where pounds of baby brain" (literally "nine *kab*") are being heaped on market scales, etc.

The feminine plural ending is particularly beautiful to the ear but uncommon throughout the Bible. Here however, it is used ironically to convey horrific images. The feminine plural ending also drives home the subject matter: that *women* or *mothers* were "forced" to resort to killing their own babies out of desperation. Deuteronomy 28:57 is constructed with a similar intention – the soft feminine endings of *u'v'shilyatah, raglehah* and *banehah* create a feminine ambiance and an expectation of nurturance and comfort, a sensibility that is doubly offended when the mother not only kills, but sordidly eats them.

The placenta in parshanut

Do the rabbis comment on the placenta in Deuteronomy 28:57? Is the placenta a reference point used in other rabbinic Torah commentary, known as *parshanut*? Parshanut that cites the placenta is scarce. However, the few citations are incredibly interesting and valuable, offering a rabbinic view of the placenta that is purely associative, imagined, allowing the rabbis creative space to utilize the placenta as a metaphor or image.

Translations also are a kind of commentary, and here we find that at least two translations deal with this verse very differently. Targum Onkelos leaves out the word "*shilya*" altogether. Yonatan ben Uziel's Aramaic translation on the other hand increases it: "*U'vish'fir shil'y'tal*/And in the 'amniotic sac-placenta'." This conflation mirrors what we see in ancient Babylonian texts where *silîtu*, the Babylonian and Akkadian word for placenta, was sometimes clearly refered to the amniotic sac and other times as the placenta.[14] Yonatan ben Uziel solves the question of which one it is by combining the two. As we have pointed out, both the sac and placenta are connected and could be viewed as two parts of a whole. Furthermore, *shil'y'tah*, although it sounds and appears to be a Hebrew grammatical construction of "*shilya shelah*/her placenta" might really just mean "a placenta" and be a very close corruption of the Akkadian *silîtu*. BDB supports this by suggesting an Arabic and Aramaic version of *shilya* simply as "*shil'y'ta*" which so far sounds the closest to the Akkadian.[15]

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[14] Marten Stol. *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*. pg. 144.

[15] "*Shilyah*." BDB (7688) pg. 1017.

Ibn Ezra explains that *shil'y'ta* "is the place of the fetus in its resting in its mother's belly." This is very similar to what Rashi says in his commentary on the word *shilya* in BT Brachot 4a when he says, "And it is a kind of clothing that the *vlad* rests inside of." Ibn Ezra also points out that "from between her legs" is just a modest expression.

Eating the placenta and RaDaK's whelping bear

Deuteronomy 28:57 mainly plays upon the taboo against eating the placenta.. The verse begins with the direct object "and with her placenta" and ends shockingly with the revolting image of the mother eating both the placenta and her children, under enemy siege. As we have already stated, this verse is not concerned with what the human placenta does (or did in this case) or with what it looks like, but with what humans should not do with it.

Surprisingly, eating the placenta turns from taboo into an exact opposite illustration, one of ultimate maternal care, in animals. Let us look examine the commentary of R' David Kimchi (RaDaK) as he explains the following prophetic verse from Hoshea 13:8:

> I will meet them like a bear bereaved of its her whelps...
> and there I will devour them like a lion!

Kimchi notes incongruence in the subject who starts off as a bereaved bear but then switches animals and ends up "devouring like a lion." Why is the animal metaphor inconsistent? Does the object, the bear cubs, stay the same despite the change of species? Are the bear cubs being

devoured by the lion or is the lion devouring her own cubs? On what plain do bears and lions mix?

Kimchi describes the birth of a bear cub:

> ...for the birthling is completely covered at its birth ***ba-shilya 'avah m'od***/by a very thick (or dense) placenta, and the bear licks the placenta and cuts it up ever-so-slightly so that it won't disturb the birthling...

Kimchi might be confusing the placenta and the amniotic sac, since a bear cub is probably not born literally *covered* with the placenta. Ancient sources commonly conflated the placenta and amniotic sac, not differentiating between the two.[16] From where did Kimchi garner this account of a bear giving birth? It is more likeley that he had access to farm animals or dogs and cats. In fact, his description more accurately describes how a female dog whelps a litter of puppies. Puppies are born one at a time with their individual amniotic sac still intact, i.e. "completely covered by a very thick" (dark) membrane. The mother dog carefully chews the sac open with her teeth, chews the cord, eats the sac, cord and placenta, and then she licks everything clean (fur, the ground, herself, the puppy) which stimulates proper breathing and circulation for the new pup. By then she delivers another puppy, and on and on. This might be what he intended when he cited the placenta in the first half of his description.

His explanation continues:

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[16]*Silîtu* in some Babylonian texts seems to translate better as amniotic sac, creating the possibility that the confusion of what the word really means (sac or placenta) predates biblical and rabbinic literature related to the *shilya*. See Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*, pp. 83, 117, 125.

> And she works at this a great deal, until she passes over all the flesh and the birthling comes out, and since she struggled a great deal on it, she is even more saddened of spirit when they [the lions or others] kill it.

Kimchi uses the example of a bear tenderly eating the sac and/or placenta to show that the animal *cares* for its young, so much so that it makes sure not to savagely eat the sac/placenta and risk hurting the seconds-old cub. An ancient genre of Babylonian omen texts likewise included tales of a mother animal who eats her young or the afterbirth which is refered to as *silîtu*, the most probable Akkadian forerunner to the word *shilya*.[17] The Deuteronomy 28:57 text may have been in reaction to Babylonian texts which extol the a mother animal eating both placenta and young as positive omens. Perhaps the verse invokes that belief and belief system in order to debunk. Kimchi as well seems keenly aware that animals do eat the placenta/sac, and sometimes their young when under siege. He interprets that if "she struggled a great deal on it [eating the placenta], she is even more saddened of spirit" if it gets devoured by lions. Thus for Kimchi the site of the bear eating its youngs' placenta does not revulse him. Rather it is a site of maternal devotion.

Kimchi's description may be the only rabbinic voice to describe the placenta's viscosity. He uses the word "*'avah*" which has a thick, dark, heavy or dense quality. In biblical Hebrew, *avah* describes thickness of shields, compactness of soil, the thickness of molten sea.[18] BDB also suggest a reference to "*b'av heh-anan*/the thickness of the clouds" in Exodus 19:9. *Avah* can also mean to swell up or be swollen. This "*avah*" adjective describing of the placenta (and/or sac) is one of the most realistic, and it is not found anywhere else in rabbinic literature. It seems

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[17]Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*, pg. 144.

[18] "*Avah*," BDB (5666, 5672) pg. 716.

fairly clear that this is Kimchi's own addition to the rabbinic understanding of placenta, and that he probably had some first-hand knowledge or experience.

In a sense, it does not really matter if Kimchi is using "*shilya*" to mean the amniotic sac or placenta. His main poinst occurs when he explains that the bear eats the "*shilya*" very gingerly and painstakingly until the cub can get out, and because the mother bear so troubled herself, she would be "even more bitter, *marat nefesh yoteir*" if the cub is killed than if she had been rough and uncaring with it in the first place. Kimchi's awareness of animals' eating placentas sheds light on the significance of the Deuteronomy curse: in the wild, mother animals are expected to eat the placentas (for nourishment, to hide the birth from other predatory animals, to clean up efficiently, and through licking to stimulate breathing in the cubs), but humans are portrayed as only eating the placenta when under attack or when they have returned to a wild, uncivilized state. Since some cultures do encourage eating of the placenta, we have to understand this also from the biblical and rabbinic perspective that sought to differentiate Jewish behaviors from other nations. In fact, this differentiation is not so far-fetched given the curses described above of the woman devouring her placenta and her children. This accents its negative emphasis amongst the list of curses.

<u>Ibn Ezra and the wonderous splitting open of the double-*shilya*</u>

"And the first one came out all reddish like a mantle, with hair; and they called his name *Esav*."
Genesis 25:25

This very famous Genesis verse includes some incongruencies, including why (in the middle of Rebekkah's giving birth to Esau) it says "and they called him" rather than *va-tikra sh'mo*/"and she [Rebekkah] called him" or "and he was called" or the like. Another incongruency is that his well-known birth description states he was "all reddish" and covered in a hairy mantle or had hair like an "*aderet*," but then the verse ends with "and they called his name *Esav*." The name *Esav* seems completely unrelated to the birth description, as if something is missing here. Typically, important (and sometimes unimportant) babies are named in the Torah (and elsewhere) for some aspect of their birth circumstances. Isaac is named "Yitzchak" because Sarah laughed, Rachel and Leah's sons' names are almost all explained in the verses that tell announce their names, etc. Names in the Bible are extremely significant and also declare essential aspects of the child's personality or challenges in the story line. Jacob's name is immediately explained, "And afterwards his brother came out and his hand grabbed *ba-akev*/on the ankle of *Esav* and his name was called *Yaakov*..." (Genesis 25:26)

Another question that arises from this text concerns time. Was Esau named immediately at birth or later? Is he named for something in the birth description (the appearance of redness and being covered with hair like a cloak)? If he was fully emerged when he was named, the distinguishing thing about him would seem to have been "And he was being grabbed by a little hand holding his ankle!" So we are left with trying instead to connect "all reddish like a mantle of hair" to his name, *Esav*. Ibn Ezra's commentary relates directly to this question in a remarkable and unique way:

***Vayikr'u sh'mo*/And they called his name:**
The ones who saw him. And it is possible that its meaning [the name "*Esav*"] [comes from] a "*ma'aseh b'fnei atzmo*"/an occurrence unto itself, for this *leidah*/birth was a great wonderment! For it happens that every human being is born with a shilya that covers it, but here the two *shilyot* opened simultaneously!

Ibn Ezra immediately answers who "they" refers to: "The ones who saw him." He leaves the timing of when "they" saw him unanswered. However, it appears that he implies "they" refers to the ones who saw him at the birth, since the rest of the commentary points toward the red-colored *aderet* being part of the wonderous, unusual event of two placentas "splitting" or bursting open over him at once![19] But does Ibn Ezra directly equate the redness and the *aderet* to the *shilyot* covering Esau? This is unclear from his statement, although it would certainly strengthen his argument considerably. If he does mean this, then why does he not explicitly site the "*admoni*/reddish" and "*aderet sei'ar*/cloak of hair" in relation to what he envision were the two *shilyot* "covering" the infant?

This scenario alone would be enough to make this note by Ibn Ezra remarkable. He is the only commentator to express awe at the placenta as well as invoke the image of a double *shilya* or the word "*shilyot.*" He uniquely focuses not on the infant being born, but on the experience of the labor and birth. He re-visions the story to be a story about actual birth, i.e. a woman pushing out twins, with blood, fluids, placentas, people helping and seeing a child emerge out of her body. Ibn Ezra's sensitivity here is also unique in rabbinic literature that cites the placenta or even

[19]"The ones who saw him" first would probably have been the midwives or women attending the birth. However *vayikr'u* is in the masculine plural and not feminine plural as was the case when the women of Beit Lechem named Ruth's baby in Ruth 4:17 using virtually the same naming formula as used in Genesis 25:25 for *Esav*: "*Va-tikrena lo ha-sh'cheinot shem ... va-tikrena sh'mo Oved.*/And the women neighbors called him a name... and they (fem.) called his name Oved."

touches upon the birth stories of the Bible. He is similar to a woman, a *yoledet*, still in the early days or weeks following giving birth – filled with the story of the birth, telling about the specifics of the labor, referring to the birth itself as "a great wonderment."

Although the Talmud addresses twins and the complications of discerning the twins' respective placentas, Ibn Ezra expresses awe and wonder towards the birth. And his remark shows that even for regular twins, this singular "*leidah*" (labor or birth) is a great and wonderous event.

Ibn Ezra's excitement of this birth directly connects to his real question, the meaning of Esau's name. Ibn Ezra conjectures that the name *Esav* comes from "*asu'i*" or something that is made or done, also something that happened. He interjects a story about the actual birth and about birth in general: "For it happens that every human being is born with a *shilya* that covers it, but here the two *shilyot* opened simultaneously!" The first half of the statement is an odd assertion that every person is born with a *shilya* covering him or her. The idea of the *shilya* as a garment (clothing) or swaddling cloth is a primary motif found in the Tosefta Brachot 2:14 and in Rashi's note on the placenta in BT Brachot 4a.[20] But these images refer to the placenta as a garment protecting the fetus within the womb, and Ibn Ezra describes the placenta covering the child as it is born. Since the placenta is usually delivered minutes after the infant is born it is possible that Ibn Ezra is thinking of the *shefir*/sac rather than placenta per se. Yet, humans are rarely born with the sac still surrounding or covering them (as we discussed earlier in the section on RaDaK's whelping bear).

[20] See chapters 2 and 3 for discussions of these texts.

We turn back to the term "*ma'aseh b'fnei atzmo*" which is critical to Ibn Ezra's commentary and find that Strickman and Silver's English translation is very ellucidating:

> ***Vayikr'u sh'mo*/And they called his name:**
> Those who saw him called him thus. The name *Esav* (from "*asu'i*") possibly connotes a unique occurence ("*ma'aseh*"). This birth was extremely wonderous. Every human being leaves the womb in a placenta which covers him. (Note: Thus Jacob and Esau were each in a separate placenta. The fact that Jacob and Esau's individual placentas opened simulataneously made their birth exceptional.) However, in this instance the two placentas opened simultaneously. (Note: This is obvious since Jacob was born grasping Esau's heal.)

"*Ma'aseh*" is an occurrence or happening, but *b'fnei atzmo* turns out to be a euphemism for unique, i.e. something that "faces itself alone" Ibn Ezra is playing upon the word *ma'aseh* as being related by its vowel *ayin-sin-hey* to Esau's name which could easily share that root as well. Strickman and Silver note that "*Esav*" is the same letters as the word "*asu'i*" or something that is made. Why is Esau's birth a "unique occurrence"? Now we can go back and re-read Ibn Ezra: "*Esav*" refers to the wonderous *ma'aseh/happening* at his amazing birth when two *shilyot* burst forth and "opened" at the same time. There was no time lag and his brother Jacob followed so closely behind him because of this happening of the wonderous splitting open of the double-*shilya*. And in Ibn Ezra's eyes, it was an incredible, beautiful, amazing site. I cannot help but envision the splitting of the Red Sea here as a manifestation of this image of the double-*shilya* splitting open for the multitudes to be birthed.

The placenta delivered at the end of the Torah

Finally, much attention is given to the order of things in the Bible, specifically to the final charge given to Israel from Moses at the end of the Torah – what his parting words were, why they in particular were chosen to say to the Israelites and to finalize the collective story, etc. So we have to take considerable note that the Torah's sole placenta comes towards the end of chapter 28 of the last book of the Torah five chapters before the end. Perhaps we might step outside the story itself and see that, as far as the birth of the Jewish people is concerned, after a long, arduous struggle akin to a difficult, days-long labor, they are near the end; the placenta (the last stage of labor) is delivered: Moses is in a frenzy; the Israelites are about to be cut off from their womb-like, direct connection with G-d and hence there is great fear and confusion.

Beyond the *shilya* – the umbilical cord and the *shefir* and in the Bible

Interfacing between the *shilya* and the walls of the mother's uterus is the amniotic sac, or the *shefir*. The *shefir* is the membranous skin that is sealed around the fetus and placenta, allowing the fetus to float in amniotic fluid and grow in a sterile environment – the membrane is permeable only by the highly developed system of tiny veins and arteries of the chorion (outer) side of the placenta.

The navel of the earth

Between the *shilya* and the fetus is the umbilical cord, biblically known by the words *tabur* and *shor*. The words for navel or umbilical cord have extremely positive connotations throughout the Bible which should be examined in relationship to the placenta. The fact that the "umbilical cord" is referred to by the site where it connected to the baby or its navel (which is a scarification after the tube closes up and the cord stump falls away) and not referred to as "the placental cord" tells us a great deal about how the placenta has been ignored or not acknowledged in traditional Western thought.

The bible views the cord and navel as the place of connection or centeredness, but rabbinic Judaism sometimes additionally views the cord as the essential feeding/cleaning tube for the fetus, even while ignoring the role of the placenta in making this happen. For instance, Tosefta Niddah 4:10 states, "*Ha-tibur*/The umbilical cord is a connector in the human, up to a handsbreath, to receive uncleanness and to impart uncleanness." In passages about the development of the fetus in relationship to the navel, there is a disagreement. The Yerushalmi Talmud records, "It is taught (in a tannaitic teaching): Abba Shaul says, 'A person is formed from the navel, and roots are sent out here and there.'"[21] In another passage, "R' Eliezer says,

[21] PT Niddah 3:3 (50d); Abba Shaul's statement is reiterated in BT Yoma 85a and BT Sotah 45b. For analysis of these texts, see Gwynn Kessler, *The God of Small Things: The Fetus and its Development in Palestinian Aggadic Literature*, PhD dissertation (Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America: New York) 2001, pp. 49-51.

'From the navel.' From the place that the fetus develops." R' Akiva says, "'From the nose.' From the place that one recognizes the face."[22]

Tabur in the Bible connotes the center as well the highest place, such as the mountain named Tabor, and twice it is used euphemistically as *tabur ha-aretz*/"the navel of the earth" (Ezekiel 38:12 and Judges 9:27). *Shor* means navel-string but may be related to Arabic words for vulva and secret part.[23] *Shor* relates to the words *sheirah* or *shar'sheret* for bracelet, chain or rope (like the pure golden chains attaching the ephod in Exodus 28:14).

Shal'shelet ha-kabbalah, the placental chain of tradition

Shal'shelet, which sounds like *shar'sheret* and is listed along with it in BDB,[24] also means chain, as in the traditional "*shal'shelet ha-kabbalah*/the chain of priestly/rabbinic tradition." *Shal'shelet* may be derived from a combination of *shar'sharet* (from *shor*) and *shilya*. In this light we might radically consider *shal'shelet* as "the placental chain."[25]

Shor also appears to have an idiomatic relationship to the word *shoresh* for root, as in the root of a word or the root of a tree – "involving firmness, permanence... the place of treading,

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[22] PT Sotah 9:3 (23c); their positions are cited and summed up again in BT Sotah 45b.

[23] "*Shor*," BDB (5270) pg. 1057.

[24] "*Shar'sharah*," BDB (8333) pg. 1057.

[25] Another word related to *shal'shelet* and *shilya* is *sh'lil*, a rabbinic term sometimes used to refer to the *shilya*, *shefir* and/or *vlad*. Also, note how the words for umbilical cord/navel, placenta and amniotic sac relate to one another: *shor*, *shefir* and *shilya* become *shar'sheret*, *shal'shelet* and *sh'faforet*.

footholds."[26] *The umbilical/placental cord as the first roots to the tree of a human being.* The image of the "tree" on the inner side of the placenta, which is not accounted for in rabbinic or biblical literature or imagery, might have the slightest of appearances here in the word-development of *shoresh* from *shor* – the placental tree, that which midwives refer to as *the tree of life.*

And certainly the verb *sharat* meaning to minister or to serve has exciting etymological connections and religious possibilities to *shor* – the umbilical cord connected to the placenta is the first ministering agent serving the fetus in formation, which could be compared to the *c'lei ha-sharet*, the "vessels of sacred ministry" in Numbers 4:12. II Chronicles 24:14 simply uses "*ha-sharet*" to refer to the Temple. The womb has been compared to the Temple, or the "holy of holies," and as we will see in early rabbinic sources, the placenta is likened to the words for garment or curtain like the curtain of the ark. These images allow room for the development of a placenta metaphor related to the Temple or religious meaning.

As we saw in Deuteronomy 28:57 and Ezekiel 16:4, the placenta and attached umbilical cord are envisioned in negative contexts and as negative objects, even though we just seen that etymologically these things are venerated as holy, pleasing, beautiful, important objects or actions that serve G-d or exist positively in nature. This too is reflected in biblical literature. Thus in contrast to the distain associated with Ezekial 16:4's "*shar-rech*," (the word used in for the uncut navel-string) we can find the same word *shar-rech* is portrayed as beautiful and

[26] "*Shoresh*," BDB (8328), pg. 1057.

luscious, in Song of Songs where it refers to the navel itself, the place where the placenta and umbilical cord were attached to the fetus:

> *Shar-rech* /Your navel is like a round goblet that never lacks blended wine!
> Song of Songs 7:3

This colorful image of "blended wine" (one might imagine deep burgundies, sensuous merlots) filling up the "round goblet" (which is compared to a young woman's navel and belly) is almost the exact opposite of the Deuteronomic image of the placenta, negatively evoking darker shades of red and purple-black placental and umbilical veins and parturient blood of impurity. The shades are similar but wine evokes sensuality and gourmet finery; devouring flesh on the other hand evokes shades related to decay and death. The discord between the Bible's literary eloquence in Song of Songs regarding the belly button versus the contempt with which Deuteronomy and Ezekiel portray what was once attached to it is striking.

Song of Songs 7:3 relates to the navel as a female embodiment of beauty. But Proverbs 8:4 cites a navel on a man, in a comparable passage that also equates the navel as the essential place of the man where spiritual Torah, like "fine wine,"[27] is physically located. Where Deuteronomy chapter 28 was an assaulting list of blights that would befall the people if they did *not* keep G-d's laws, Proverbs chapter 8 serves as a soothing promise and healing prayer to the Jewish people, describing the bountiful rewards of obeying G-d's laws and taking G-d's Torah, "*Torati*/my Teaching," into our hearts:

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[27] Proverbs 3:10. "And your barns will be filled with sustenance and your vats will burst with new wine." New wine overflowing their storehouses is a metaphor for plentifulness in the womb, which compares the similar metaphor in Song of Songs 7:3,blended wine spilling over from its round goblet. Both are located at the navel. Proverbs 3:10

rif'ut t'hi l'sharecha/She will be healing to your navel
v'shikui l'atzmotecha/and marrow for your bones.

Again we see that the "colors" associated with the navel (marrow is generally dark purple) are experienced positively, while the actual placenta in Deuteronomy 28:57 is perceived negatively.

Thus "navel" and "placenta" are not interchangable in biblical literature although they are intricately connected, just as the two terms evoke different responses in later rabbinic literature where the discord is further established. "Placenta" seems to conjure up feelings or attitudes about its position of middleness, confusion and queasiness, while "navel" connotes centeredness, familiarity and beauty. The middleness of *shilya* makes it something dangerous, akin to anything which crosses boundaries between any two subjects/beings/realms that should have their own separate integrity. This applies to categories of kosher animal, pots, grafting plants, interbreeding animals, etc. as well as menstrual blood flow itself. The placenta holds such an ambiguous, complex place in the category of "middleness."[28]

In contrast, an example where navel is held not as "middleness" but as "centerdness" is in *shar-rech*/"your navel" in Song of Songs 7:3 which becomes the rabbinic "epi-center" or most

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closely follows the citation of the navel in 3:8. 3:9 also speaks of the firstfruits – the agricultural fruits are compared with firstfruits of the womb as a literary motif.

[28] One rabbinic text that seems particularly to draw on the rabbis' regard for the "middleness", confusion and queasiness factors of their relating to the placenta is an aggadic story found in BT Bechorot 8b about the placenta of a mule. This story also articulates humor and making fun of the placenta (while it makes fun of the Athenian).

> [The wise men of Athens posed a riddle to Rav Yehoshua ben Chananya:] "When salt rots how do you preserve it?"
> [Rav Yehoshua answered,] "With the placenta (*silta*) of a mule."
> [The Athenians were taken aback. The result of a cross between a horse and donkey, the mule, for all its virtues, is a sterile freak of nature.] "Where can you find a placenta of a mule?"
> [Rav Yehoshua responded,] "Does salt ever rot?!"

important place. The rabbis interpret the feminine navel here as metaphor for the Sanhedrin being the "center" of Israel. Concurrently, the land of Israel (or Jerusalem) is the "navel of the world" (or universe!).

> "*Your navel is like a round goblet* – " (Song of Songs 7:3) This is the Sanhedrin. Just as this child (*tinok*) all the while that it was in its mother's womb only survived through its navel, so too Israel cannot do anything without their Sanhedrin!
>
> *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 7:3,1

> "*Your navel is like a round goblet that never lacks blended wine.* "Your navel – " This is the Sanhedrin. Why did they call it "navel?" Because it sits in the navel of the world. [Why] *agan*/"goblet"? Because it shields (*magein*) the whole world..."
>
> BT Sanhedrin 37a

The second quote here undermines the Sanhedrin as the center; it is only the center because it is in Jerusalem, "the navel of the world." These texts are in dialogue with each other but necessarily in agreement. Shir Hashirim Rabbah above reveals a predominant rabbinic view of fetal development that the fetus developed from its navel. This passage also correctly states that the fetus survived *through* its navel – implying that it is nourished through the navel and attached umbilical tube and placenta, though because the cord and placenta are not explicitly stated, we cannot be sure that was their understanding.[29]

[29] For a more in depth study of rabbinic views of the navel and fetal development through rabbinic literature, see Gwynn Kessler, *The God of Small Things: The Fetus and its Development in Palestinian Aggadic Literature*, PhD dissertation (Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America: New York) 2001, pp. 49-50.

The *shefir*

While the umbilical cord or navel is refered to in the Bible, and the placenta is at least minimally cited or alluded to in the Bible, the amniotic sac called *shefir* (or bag of waters holding the placenta, cord and fetus) is never explicitly cited. However, the same word *shefir* is found three times where it connotes the name of a place ("Shefir") or means "beauty."[30] Many words share the same root as *shefir*, but none refer literally to the amniotic sac. This absence poses as anomalous since the amniotic sac is such an important and visible part of birth.

The midwife Shifrah

One plausible literary reference to *shefir* is the name "Shifrah," one of the two Egyptian midwives, Shifrah and Pu'ah, of Exodus 1:15.[31] The midwives' names are not explained in the text (the way biblical names are sometimes explained) yet it stands to argue that Shifrah is

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[30] Micah 1:11 reads "Cross over [feminine singular] to you all, *yoshevet shefir*/you sitter of Shefir, of nakedness and shame." "*Yoshevet shefir*" could be a euphemism for a female fetus in the womb or a pregnant woman, but this is my projection. The full phrase "*yoshevet shefir 'eryah-voshet*" indicates nakedness or socially assigned "embarrassment" from a natural state of nakedness. However, "Shefir" is understood here as the name of a place or city and "*yoshevet*" is used throughout the chapter to mean "one who dwells in" followed by a city name. Curiously though, this passage relegates "Shefir" to the feminine and (not surprising) is derogatory, referring to the fallen area of Shomron as a woman and harlot, using with birth-related roots and imagery!

In direct contrast the word *shefir* is used twice in Daniel, 4:9 and 4:18. Both times the phrase is "*'of'yeih shefir*," translated something like "her leaves of beauty" and is extremely positive.

[31] See also Exodus 1:15-16 for a possible placenta reference in this story, "When you deliver the Israelite women and you look upon *ha-ovnayim* /'the birth-stones,' if it is a boy then you will kill him, and if it is a girl, then she shall live!" A.D. Kilmer draws a symbolic meaning of the "brick of birth" as a placenta: "I believe that we have overlooked a deeper meaning and significance of the unbaked clay brick, in that it appears to have been likened to placental material. That is, the fetus may have been thought of as the product that developed in and from the malleable, clay-like placenta." Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*, pg. 119, fn 119.

derived from *shefir*, a birth object that she as midwife would have been intimately familiar with. However, rabbinic tradition primarily word-played upon Shifrah to show that she was really Yocheved (and Pu'ah was Miriam) who offered comforting actions toward the Israelite women in labor. This view also explains "*m'yal'dot ha-ivriyot*" as "Hebrew midwives" rather than the alternative "[Egyptian] midwives of the Hebrew women."

Many commentaries relate her name to the verb *shafar* meaning to please, smooth or beautify, but they do not connect the word to *shefir*/amniotic sac! Exodus Rabbah, for example, explains Shifrah's name saying "*she'shafrah ma'asehah*/for her deeds were pleasing before G-d." Another interesting word play is by Baal HaTurim who explains Shifrah's name with a quote from Job 26:13, "With the *ruach*/spirit of the heavens is her *shifrah*/loveliness."[32] He explains that Shifrah would revive dead babies (playing on the word for spirit, *ruach*) with a "*sh'faforet* of a reed" (playing on the word *shifrah*).[33]

The conundrum posed by rabbinic tradition's focus on Shifrah's name as being "to please, smooth, beautify" and as proof that she is really Yocheved, couples with the lack of attunement to the high probability or possibility of Shifrah's name being connected to *shefir*, leads me to examine the entire place of birth vocabulary and birth understanding (anatomy, women's experience, etc.) by the writers of the Bible and the literary history surrounding the Bible which

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[32] The connection of Shifrah's name to a Job quote here is relevant later in this thesis in the discussion of the preponderance of womb-vocabulary in Job in Chapter 4 and the rabbis' keen usage of it for matters related to birth, *shefir* and *shilya*.

[33] Baal HaTurim provides an alternative explanation playing on the same verse: "The Holy One of Blessing *shafar*/"smoothed out" or made the heavens fair/lovely."

followed it (including through modern). For instance, the name Pu'ah does not appear to have a birth-derived name, and rabbinic tradition primarily explains her name as derived from words such as *no'fa'at*/"blowing bubbles" in midrashim that establish that Pu'ah was really the young Miriam, blowing bubbles to entertain the babies while her midwife mother Yocheved (referred to as Shifrah) was tending to the new mothers. Rashi describes Pu'ah here as being Miriam "because she *po-'ah*/cooed and spoke and calmed the vlad, in the way that women calm a crying baby (BT Sotah 11b)." However, one could easily argue that the verb *pey-ayin-hey* meaning to bleat or groan (which BDB suggests is an onomatopoetic word) is a stronger derivative of her name than is cooing or blowing bubbles. The focus on the groans of the mother rather than the calming techniques on the soft cries of the baby would be a better understanding of the actual work of midwifery – assisting women in labor as they bleat or groan as well as caring for the new infant who, like a newborn lamb or other animal, makes cries that could be called a bleat or groan – and the midwife's name, yet tradition does not establish the connection. Furthermore, Isaiah 42:14 already makes the connection, by invoking birth with this very verb *pey-ayin-hey* when, as a man-warrior roaring in war, G-d is "straining Himself to deliver Israel"[34] with the words "*ca-yoleidah* ***eph-'eh*** *eshom v'eshaf yach'dav*/like the birthing woman **I will groan**, I will breath deep, and I will pant at once." It is this verse that Rashi cites to explain that Pu'ah is the language of crying.

[34] As explained by BDB, *pey-ayin-hey*, (6463) pg. 821, where he cites Isaiah 42:14. BDB (6464), pg. 821 also cites Genesis 36:39, city of "*Pa-'u*," same root. But BDB does not cite Exodus 1:15, the midwife Pu'ah. Shifrah and Pu'ah are also not listed in the comprehensive phonetic listing of Biblical names in the back of the Koren Bible (Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.: Jerusalem) 1984. We have to ask very seriously why are Shifrah and Pu'ah's names and their etymologies or symbolic meanings related to birth so commonly overlooked?

Thus it appears that if certain birth functions or experiences were more widely understood, or better understood by the male writers and ancient exegetes of our sacred texts, that on a deeper level, Shifrah and Pu'ah's saving action in the Exodus chapter one story could be understood as being *like* the function of the *shefir*: the midwives embodied the essence of the amniotic sac when they literally encircled the babies and mothers, kept them alive and protected them emotionally and physically from the Pharoah's death call, which was the sound of *pu'ah*, the sound of the venomous viper ("*eph'eh*," same root), a creature who sting causes groaning and agony – instead the midwives transformed the groaning and senseless brutish agony of Pharoah's decree into the groaning-with-a-purpose life-giving sounds coming out of the Israelite women's throats in labor.

On nouns, verbs and motifs of birth in the Bible

Although the Bible has only one or possibly two passages relating directly to the *shilya* (and none citing the *shefir* as amniotic sac), a consistent although selected vocabulary for birth and birth anatomy exists, particularly in the birth stories of the Torah.[35] A discussion of the *shilya* in the Bible and ensuing rabbinic literature minimally requires a survey of the context or backdrop of the birth-nouns, verbs and motifs used in the Bible, which abound liberally in both literal story-telling motifs as well as in metaphors or symbolic, meaningful word-plays. High on this list are:

[35] A more comprehensive analysis of the womb-vocabulary and the amniotic motif specific to the book of Job and its relevance to placenta (*shilya v'shafir*) imagery in rabbinic literature is found in Chapter 4.

rechem or *beten*/womb, used both literally and as a metaphor for compassion (*rachamim*);

harah for conception, pregnancy and birth as well as parent, teach, mountain;

tzirim/labor contractions and pain used metaphorically for the struggles of the Jews;

mashber which refers to both the breaking of the amniotic waters during labor as well as crisis (BDB notes this word means "place of breach, i.e. the mouth of the womb");

m'yaldot or midwives;

shadayim or breasts and nursing.

Additionally, there are repeated words which Robert Alter refers to as *leitwart* and motifs[36] such as in stories of the birth of twins, birth of the first-born, struggles with infertility, midwives and mothers dying or wailing in birth.

A more in depth analysis of this subject would reveal that many of these motifs and metaphors are applied to men and/or about G-d, , including images of G-d as a midwife such as in Psalm 22:10-11, or Moses as nursing father in Numbers 10:12, "*ha-omen et ha-yonek*/the foster-father wetnurse of the suckling child." An example relating to the *shefir* and *shilya's* role in the formation of the fetus is found in Psalm 139:13-15, where a masculine G-d is addressed and praised for wonderfully designing the poet as a fetus inside his mother's womb: "*t'su-kaini b'veten imi*/you spread a sukkah over me in the belly of my mother" and "*asher asiti va-sater, rukamti b'tach'tiyot aretz*/when I was made in secret, I was 'embroidered' in the lowest parts of the earth." "*Rukamti*" is an important word here because the image of embroidering, fashioning

[36] For understanding of the *leitwart* motif and its function in biblical literature, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books: USA) 1981, pg. 97. For instance, he points out the "small but revealing differences in the seeming similarities, the nodes of emergent new meanings in the pattern of regular expectations created by explicit repetition."

or forming the fetus is essential in rabbinic terminology with the category of "*shefir merukam*"[37] which has a range of meanings including a sac delivered containing fetal matter or a sac connected to the placenta.

In her book *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity*, Tarja J. Philip explains that this body of birth vocabulary is found "in the form of literal and figurative uses of the roots and phrases common to birth stories and birth similies."[38] Philip categorizes this vocabulary by subjects,[39] including stages of conception, pregnancy and birth (*hey-reish-hey*), words for womb (*beten, rechem* and *m'iy*) and the one reference to *shilya*. The root *yud-lamed-daled* is the most common occurence in birth stories, but other root forms repeat in these stories, such as *pey-reish-yud* "to bear fruit" (used for men only), *nun-pey-lamed* and *shin-kaf-lamed* for miscarriage, and *bet-kaf-reish* for a first birth. Words for delivering a baby are *mem-lamed-tet* (used once, for unnaturally easy birth where the baby "slipped out"), *gimel-yud-chet* (burst forth with water), and the most normative and common verb *yud-tzadee-aleph*, an action which Philip describes as "the child's change of place from the innards of the mother to the outside world, and it also closes the process that started when the child's father "came to" its mother."[40] Since the

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[37] Mishnah Niddah 3:3 and Tosefta Niddah 4:10 attempt to define this term, albeit differently. See also the Sifra where *shefir merukam* appears twice (and *shefir* not all) in Sifra Tazria parshata 1 on Leviticus 12:2 and Sifra Tazria perek 4.

[38] Tarja S. Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity*, pg. 82.

[39] See Tarja S. Philip, "The Vocabulary of the Birth Stories and Birth Images," *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible*, pp. 82-88.

[40] Tarja S. Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity*, pg. 87.

shilya is also described as "going out" from its mother in Deuteronomy 28:57, Philip argues the use of this root proves "'giving birth' to the afterbirth is an organic part of childbirth."[41]

Conclusion

Although the *shefir* and *shilya* are under-represented in biblical texts, they typically come together during delivery, which is consistent with and might explain the frequent pairing of "*shefir* and *shilya*" in later rabbinic legal discussions and at least one important rabbinic pairing first found in the Tosefta. This leads us to examine the placenta in early rabbinic sources.

[41] *Ibid.*

CHAPTER TWO

The Placenta in Early Rabbinic Sources

> There does not exist a work from Jewish antiquity devoted exclusively to medicine; nor even a compendium of natural history, such as that of Plinius. The Torah and the Talmud are primarily law books, and medical matters are chiefly discussed only as they pertain to the law... There is, therefore, no 'Medicine of the Talmud,' which might perhaps be compared to the medicine of Galen or of Susrutas. There is no Jewish medicine in the sense that we speak of an Egyptian or a Greek medical science.
>
> Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*[42]

> They bury the placenta, so that the offspring will not be chilled, for example with dishes of oil, a garment or a basket of straw.
>
> Tosefta Shabbat 15:3

> We cut the navel-string and we hide the placenta so that the infant may be kept warm. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: Princesses hide [it] in bowls of oil, wealthy women in wool fleeces, and poor women in soft rags.
>
> BT Shabbat 129b

From the lone *shil'v'tah* to the manifold *shilya* in Rabbinic Sources

The rabbinic word for placenta, *shilya*, is cited throughout rabbinic literature hundreds of times (possibly over 600!) with a variety of different spellings. The most common spelling is שליא *shilya*. The Babylonian Talmud (with 75 occurrences), Mishnah (13 appearances) and Tosefta (13 appearances) all prefer שליא *shilya* with the Aramaicized ending in *aleph*. Occasionally

[42]Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, from Introduction, pg. 4; discussed in Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press) 2000, pp. 134-135.

placenta appears with the more Hebraicized *hey* ending, spelled שליה *shilyah*, as it appears to be spelled in the Leviticus 28:57 construct ובשליתה *u'v'shil'y'tah*/"and in her placenta." However, the Leviticus word could also be a slightly different word, שליתה *shil'y'tah*. The Yerushalmi Talmud (14 citations) augments the word with a *yud*, as שיליא *shiliya* (2 times), שיליה *shiliyah* (2 times) and most commonly שילייה *shiliyyah* (12 times). These pronunciations are probably the same. In BT Bechorot 8b we find סילתא *silta* in an aggadic story composed in Aramaic.[43] The metathesis of the letters *shin* and *samech* here may be explained as a more direct carry-over or near transliteration from the Akkadian word for placenta "*silítu*."[44]

Etymology of שליא *shilya*

Shilya is attributed to the shared Akkadian, Babylonian, Uggaritic and Hittite word *silítu*. Marten Stol suggests that the Akkadian *silítu* in Babylonian myth was the uterine membranes (amniotic sac) rather than placenta. In the Atram-hasīs myth the mother goddess "opened the *silítu*" (probably punctured the amniotic sac) "to make the amniotic water flow for the first time in history."[45] However, in Hittite and Uggaritic myths *silítu* means placenta.[46] A prayer-poem to

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[43] BT Bechorot 8b, see full text in Chapter 1, footnote 28.

[44] Tarja S. Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity*, pg. 87.
See also "*shilyah*" BDB (7688) pg. 1017, where an Arabic and Aramaic version is indeed suggested as "*shil'y'ta*," suggesting that the Deuteronomy 28:57 citation was indeed simply "*shil'y'tah*" and not the feminine possessive construct of "*shilyah shelah*" (feminine possessive) as it is voweled in our masoritic text of Leviticus.

[45] Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*, pp. 83, 125.

[46] Marten Stol, pg. 117.

Ishtar states, "Grant me a child and heir, let my womb be my *silîtu*" and in Babylonian omen texts a mother animal eats her young or the afterbirth which is called *silîtu*.[47]

A Hebrew search of *shilya* shows many related words whose etymological connection is very rich. Related biblical Hebrew words which share the same roots include *shalah*, *shalu*, *sh'li*, *shalev*, *shalvah*, all words that mean quiet, ease, prosperity, relaxation and tranquility. Certainly the sense of ultimate calm one imagines that the fetus experiences floating in the womb throughout its development might inspire these words from the sense of what the *shilya* (whether it is understood as placenta or amniotic sac) provides. The word "*sheli*" or "mine" might even be suggested in the notion of *shilya* as the most individualized object related to a person. The verb *shalah* which means to draw out or extract – certainly an action related to the birth of the child and placenta. Job 27:8 reads *Ki yeishel Eloah nafshol*"For Elo-ah drew forth his soul." A modern understanding inspired by the Jewish Renewal movement hears *shilya* as "*shel Yah*" or "of G-d." However, I have not found any of these Hebrew word associations expressed in rabbinic literature.

A uniquely rabbinic vocabulary for birth, or the womb spilling, spinning out...

Shilya, shefir, sandal, nefel, shlil, vlad, shefir merukam. The inimitable birth vocabulary of rabbinic literature rolls off the tongue in a linguistic style both beautiful and calming, even when it is enjoined in a detached "legalese" inherent to the style and topic of halachic material. Unlike

[47]Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* pg. 144, and footnote 205. See also my discussion In Chapter 1 about R' David Kimchi/RaDaK's commentary on Hosea 13:8 of a mother bear eating the placenta, and her young being eaten by a lion.

biblical material examined earlier, the rabbinic birth vocabulary focuses solely on the rabbis' own lexicon which is limited to the contents of the pregnant/birthing womb. This vocabulary is only concerned with parts of the human fetus in formation within the mother's womb *as seen after an unsuccessful* delivery. In early texts, it is rare to find contemplation about how the fetus is formed. Later texts (both Talmuds, Leviticus Rabbah 14) are much more interested in formation itself. The rabbinic terms sometimes have dual meanings, neither of which are ever defined, but can usually be understood in context. Only the *shilya* is described in a few unexpected analogies and by one prooftext.

The primary vocabulary in the Mishnah and Tosefta translates as *shilya* - placenta, *shefir* - the amniotic sac, *sandal* – a flattened, misshapen fetus or embryo, perhaps in the shape of a raven or something inhuman, *nefel* – the "fallen" embryo or fetus that is aborted, *vlad* - a fetus or "birthling" as in Genesis 11:30 "And *Sarai* was barren; she had no *vlad*." *Shefir merukam* literally means "embroidered" sac, and probably means an amniotic sac still connected to the *shilya* or some type of formed body. *Ha-mapelet* or the woman who miscarries and h*a-mapolet*, the abortion itself (less frequent), are also used in formulaic regularity, such as "*Ha-mapolet sandal oe shilya u'shefir merukam v'ha-yotzei m'chutach*.../the abortion of a *sandal* or *shilya* or *shefir merukam* and the one that comes out in pieces..." (Mishnah Bechorot 8:1)

Not surprisingly, rabbinic womb-words are nuanced. *Vlad*, related to the word *yeled*, is vowelled *valad* but referred to commonly as *vlad*, and it means fetus or "birthling"(my translation) yet it is also a euphemism for a valid birth. If a birth is not considered "a valid birth" (i.e. in the case of an early stage miscarriage, or when fetus and placenta are not found but a sac with unidentifiable

parts is) then the woman sits out the days of impurity as a *niddah* but not a *yoledet*, such as in Mishnah Niddah 3:3:

> One who aborts a *shefir* full of water, full of blood, full of pieces – do not assume [the existence of] a *vlad* [i.e. a valid birth]. If it was *merukam* [i.e. formed, with limbs of an embryo or some shape] she will sit out [the days of impurity] for both a male and female [child].

Here also the word *merukam* as a "formed fetus" seems derived from Psalm 139:15, *Rukamti b'tach'tiyot aretz*/"I was formed in the lowest parts of the earth." The "lower (or innermost) parts of the earth" could be analogous to a woman's reproductive organs and system, but as connected to "the earth" it is a positive analogy. Woman (or the womb) is compared to earth, and the fetus being formed is fashioned by G-d. Gwynn Kessler illustrates how *shefir merukam* elsewhere means "a sac containing an articulated fetus."[48] Tosefta Niddah 4:10 asks, "What is the *shefir merukam*?" and Abba Shaul answers with a description of something having the appearance of "a locust, its two eyes like two droppings of a fly."

We also learn other related words, such as *mei shefir*, the amniotic waters and *mashber*, the breaking of the amniotic waters, or literally crisis – the moment adjacent to life and death, as well as the less-cited *shlil* for embryo or fetus in the womb.[49] This "knitting" together of a beautiful vocabulary underscores even the most practical discussions about the placenta. Like the language of the Mishnah, often described as an abstruse and concise literary form unto itself, the womb vocabulary of the Mishnah describes halachic issues as though verses of a song. The womb words state fact in a world concerned with contamination from bodily fluids and uterine

[48] Gwynn Kessler, *The God of Small Things: The Fetus and its Development in Palestinian Aggadic Literature*, PhD dissertation (Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America: New York) 2001, pg. 319.

flow, but a gloss of the language itself presents a powerful feeling of awe and awareness for these components of creation. Yet rarely is the placenta used as a metaphor – when such intimations do occur they begin to reveal a small cache in a treasure box of clothing waiting to be opened and tried on, almost always leading to our relationship with G-d as our Creator and Mother, warming, nurturing, embracing, protecting.

How the rabbis relate to the placenta

While the rabbis quickly developed a concise, legal vocabulary for the anatomy of a developing or aborted fetus, a vocabulary that is very poetic and richly connected to the Hebrew language, what the early sources do *not* do is define or conjecture about the function of these words, and in particular they do not fully address the *shilya*. Of all their terms, the *shilya* clearly is the most complicated, least understood, most visibly distressing or interesting, and most fundamental to the viability and development of the fetus and the evolution of mammals. However, limited medical knowledge in the 2nd century did not explain this.

Where does their information come from – midwives, doctors, experts (*beki'in*)? The fact that the rabbis (as men) were probably not present at births, and must have relied on midwives' or women's stories, is not relayed here. However, it is possible that the rabbis and/or ritual animal slaughterers were proficient in handling and viewing animal placentas, and information was applied to human development.

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[49] See section on Mishnah Zevachim 3:5 and *shlil* later in this chapter.

The fact remains that the placenta is a soft but muscular organ which the rabbis did not ignore, even though they did not fully understand what it does (in fact scientist today are still figuring it out). Quite to the contrary they made it central to their discussions related to understanding or qualifying birth. Although the Mishnah is self-aware that "there is no *shilya*/placenta without a *vlad*/fetus/birthling" (Mishnah Niddah 3:4), nowhere does it begin to show its understanding that the placenta is the organ through which all nutrients, oxygen and waste pass back and forth between the mother's bloodstream and the developing child. Despite repeated quotes of "*shefir and shilya*" there is no awareness of the absolutely complex and brilliant design of the placenta and membrane, or the tree-like relief mapped onto its surface, all of which prevents the mother and child's blood or bloodstreams from mixing even as oxygen, nutrients, and waste are passed back and forth between cells and bloodstreams.

The rabbis' use only one biblical prooftext (Job 38:29) to allegorize the placenta, although this is a very important theological allegory which is thrice repeated, in Tosefta Brachot 3:4, Leviticus Rabbah 14:4, and the Palestinian Talmud Niddah 3:3. Curiously, rabbinic citations on the placenta never draw on the Bible's single reference to the actual placenta in Deuteronomy 28:57 (except for the commentary directly related to that verse; see Chapter 1). This seems striking after the lengthy exegetical analysis of that verse earlier in this chapter.

Unlike the Bible's paucity of explicit placenta references, the placenta is referred to in rabbinic literature often, as an extremely important object, primarily because of its usage in legal rulings related to classifications and understandings about birth and impurity. The words *shilya* becomes a working vocabulary word for students of Talmud, particularly once one studies

Niddah. It also appears in the first tractate of the Talmud in an aggadic story about King David, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 4. When I spoke about my thesis topic with friends who grew up ultra-Orthodox and had studied many years in yeshivah, I found they are quite aware of the rabbinic vocabulary (*shilya*, *shefir*, etc.) but only from a legal standpoint as they related to the passages they had studied. (Liberal students of Torah are usually shocked to learn of my topic and have no idea what the word for placenta is or that it exists in the Talmud.) While my meager survey amongst knowledgeable, Orthodox-raised friends hardly counts as antidotal evidence, it does support what seems to be an established usage of the placenta in the Talmud from a practical standpoint rather than a metaphoric or theological one. When I spoke with my yeshivah-raised friend Meir, for instance, it became very clear that in all of his training (he still knew passages by heart once I began inquiring or asking him to help me translate some passages), it was never posed to him (or by him) to think about the physical function of the placenta in utero, or what was its symbolic or religious meaning, or even to think of it as a wondrous organ.

Yet upon investigation I have found that the placenta makes some startling appearances in rabbinic literature in the realm of spiritual or ritual considerations. It is as if the rabbis did leave gems of awareness and insight as a trail of light around the placenta, whose importance remains to be explored – or else re-established in our modern times.

Early sources cite the placenta in truncated passages endemic to the style of the Mishnah and Tosefta. The Mishnah's citations are literal, where the Tosefta additionally includes descriptions of the placenta in metaphoric, figurative and highly creative and intuitive similes. Both bodies of

work both establish and limit the *locus classicus* regarding the *shilya* in the Talmud and beyond. Discussions related to the placenta in the Talmud typically draw on or expound on Mishnaic or Tosefta placenta references or rulings on practical halachic issues related to ritual or spiritual practice, which are problematized or clarified by the presence of a placenta. On the rare occasion, a placenta appears in an aggadic story.[50]

One of the most important topics of concern that can be affected by the presence of a placenta is how long a woman is in a state of *tumah* after childbirth. A birthing woman is called a *yoledet* during labor from the time her cervix has fully dilated, which the rabbis simplified (to avoid her having to go through an exam) to the point she "can no longer walk unaided" or if there is uterine bleeding during labor. A *yoledet* does not have sexual relations for 33 days if the child is a boy, and 66 days if the child is a girl. But what happens when a woman has a miscarriage, as was probably very common before the days of good prenatal medicine (and also the result of too many pregnancies), or in the case of twins, if only one twin is delivered fully formed (whether living or stillborn)?

Mishnaic, Tosefta and Talmudic passages are usually adjacent or intertwined with passages related to other birth topics. Most often a placenta appears in relationship to discussions relating to *niddah* and a woman's status after a stillborn or miscarriage, birth customs and Shabbat observance as well as issues related to animals, *kashrut* and animal sacrifice. Examples of pertinent questions on the rabbis' agenda include:

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[50] BT Brachot 4a, "King David's hands" story, discussed in Chapter 4; BT Bechorot 8b, "The placenta of a mule," page 26, footnote 28.

- What is the purity status of parturient (birthing or advanced laboring woman) after a miscarriage? This is extremely important because if it counts the same as a live birth, then she is in the status of *yoledet* or post-partum mother. A *yoledet* does not have sexual relations for 33 days if the child is a boy, and 66 days if the child is a girl

- Does a placenta impart impurity to the person or object that carries it, or to the house that contains it?

- After an early miscarriage when a fetus or fetal matter is misshapen or not visible, does the presence of a placenta (dissolved, crushed) signify the mother is a *yoledet* or *niddah* (menstrual impurity)?

- What is the day of birth (whether live, viable birth or miscarriage) for counting a woman' purity status, if the placenta is delivered partly on one day and partly on the next (or if the fetus is born at 11:59 pm and the placenta delivered at 12:10am)? Does the placenta count as "day of birth" in cases where there is no viable or visible fetus?[51]

- What if a placenta is found inside an animal slaughtered for sacrifice or consumption? What should be done with it? How does it render the status or kashrut of the animal? Can you eat a kosher animal's placenta?

- What acts related to birth can a midwife or person perform on Shabbat if it constitutes breaking Shabbat?[52]

- And finally, of great interest to the application of this thesis, what should or can and cannot be done with the placenta after it is delivered?[53]

The presence of a placenta is a riddle for the rabbis as much as a critical determiner in situations that are unclear, even though or perhaps because the placenta itself is an organ that is unclear. Its classification as something "unclear" or "in the middle" makes it very suitable for topics where the in-between nature of the issue is what puzzles and intrigues the rabbis. An example would be

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[51] BT Baba Kama 11a.

[52] BT Shabbat 128b, 129b.

[53] Burying the placenta is of particular interest to me in order to develop a Jewish placenta burial ceremony. See my discussion of Mishnah Temurah 7:4 later in this chapter. Also see later texts on this topic BT Shabbat 129b; BT Chillin 67a; PT Niddah 3:51 (1); Sefer Or Zarua 81, Hilchot Niddah 345. "We cut the navel-string and we hide the placenta so that the infant may be kept warm. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: Princesses *taman*/hide [it] in bowls of oil, wealthy women in wool fleeces, and poor women in soft rags." (BT Shabbat 129b).

a Talmudic discourse around a mishnah which begins to address a situation where an additional placenta is delivered three days after a *vlad*; how is it medically possible that she would retain the placenta inside her womb for three days (and not hemorrhage to death)? Riddle-like, this situation is ultimately understood as a case of aborted twins, where the fetus of one twin crushed the placenta of the other in utero creating the situation of "*nimok ha-vlad*," causing it to dissolve. Not completely sure of the absolutes of gynecology (or that only one pregnancy can be started at a time)[54] they were still struggling to determine the parts of a pregnancy, based on their limited knowledge viewing miscarried items which were not intact. Unlike a midwife or doctor who would see and examine birth regularly during live births, the rabbis are viewing these items *which have been aborted*, are not fresh from the womb, and involve genetic defects and the like. This point cannot be stressed enough as we embark on a journey to mine rabbinic texts for possible placenta metaphor and to seek out and discover rabbinic attitudes towards the placenta.

A strong argument could be made that the rabbis loved liminality. The birth of a child of mixed or indeterminate sexual identities or genitalia is just such a case. The rabbis demonstrate their fascination with this issue by prioritizing it in both Mishnah Niddah 3:5 and Yerushalmi Niddah 3:5 right after the sections regarding the placenta. The driving force behind their fascination is their desire to properly determine the length of the period of a women's birth impurity. How long does a *yoledet* observe her state of impurity if the child in the case "one who aborts one of indeterminate sex or an androgyne"? Like the "intersex" child, the placenta is a kind of "in between" organ, since the rabbis are not sure exactly what to make of it. However, since they do

[54] Except in the very rare case of a double-uterus, a genetic condition, which the rabbis probably were unaware of anyway.

hold that "there is no *shilya* with a *vlad*" we understand it is extremely important (as a determiner, not because the rabbis valued or understood its medical purpose).

Mishnah Niddah 3:5 for instance states that "one who aborts and it is not known [the sex of the fetus] she shall sit [the days of impurity and purification] for a male and for a female if it was known that it was a fetus. If unknown [whether it was a fetus], she sits [the days of impurity and purification] for a male and a female and a menstruant." The Yerushalmi Talmud 3:5 clarifies the number of days meant by the Mishnah's statements and explains, "Wherever we teach [in the Mishnah] 'she shall sit for a male and for a female' [it means] 14 impure [days for a female] and 26 days [of blood of purification in which the uterine blood is considered pure]. We give her the stringencies of the male [40 days total] and the stringencies of the female [14 days of birth impurity]." However the passage then clarifies that "this refers to her spouse [regarding sexual relations] but for ritually pure [foodstuff and objects] she sits [both the days of impurity and purification] for a female [14 days of impurity plus 66 days of blood of purification during which time uterine blood is considered pure]."[55]

Another issue that would seem to be of utmost importance to the rabbis is that of disposal or burial of the placenta after it is born. Particularly with live births, the issue of what to do with the placenta would seem to rank high in importance. However, the Talmud remains very vague and rudimentary on the topic of burying the placenta. See the discussion of texts related to placenta burial later this chapter, beginning with Tosefta Shabbat 15:3.

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[55] Tirzah Meacham, "Tosefta as Template: Yerushalmi Niddah," *Introducting Tosefta: Textual Intratextual and Intertextual Studies*, Harry Fox and Tirzah Meacham, eds., (Ktav Publishing House, Inc.: New York) 1999, pp. 181-

The placenta in the Mishnah and Tosefta – An Overview

The Mishnah and Tosefta each contain several passages about the *shilya*. These texts typically concern laws of animals, *niddah* and birth impurity. The Mishnaic citations of the placenta appear to have a narrower scope than those in the Tosefta. The Mishnah cites the placenta as it imposes a change of status or affects other subjects, such as when one is found inside an animal during sacrifice or ritual slaughter for food, or when the presence of a placenta affects a woman's state of *niddah* or *taharah* after a miscarriage or stillbirth. The Mishnah's typically terse but colorful, stylized language is definitely reflected in these passages. Essential keystone statements regarding the placenta are established in the Mishnah. For example, two statements almost always re-stated in regards to a placenta come from Mishnah Niddah 3:4:

> *Shilya ba-bayit ha-bayit tameh*/A placenta in the house, the house is impure.
>
> *Lo she'ha-shilya valad ela sh'el hsilya b'lo valad*/[This means] not that the placenta is a fetus, rather that there is no placenta *without* a fetus.

In contrast, the Tosefta's passages express a broader, more metaphoric and creative application of the placenta. For instance, the Tosefta purports that the placenta looks like the craw of a hen and is compared to the "swaddling cloth" of clouds across the heavens in Job 38:9 where G-d creates the waters of the earth and the heavens. Tosefta Niddah 4:9 establishes another keystone statement regarding the placenta and its measurement:

220, pp. 213-214. For in-depth analysis of transgenderism in rabbinic text see also Elliot Rose Kukla. HUC-JIR Los

Ein shilya pachot mi'tefach/There is no placenta less than a handbreath.

The Mishnah never defines or describes the placenta, such as its function, how it looks, what it means metaphorically, or what ought to be with it once delivered after birth. In the Mishnah, the placenta is only discussed in relation to other subjects, such as when one is found during sacrifices or slaughtering animals, or regarding a woman's impurity status after a miscarriage or stillbirth. The Tosefta, on the other hand, includes an important and somewhat complex rabbinic description of the placenta in a rich and interesting passage which becomes the standard base-text parroted in the Talmud and later sources:

> The *shilya* of which they spoke:
> Its beginning is like the thread of the warp, and its head is like a lupine, and it is hollow like trumpets;
> there is no *shilya* שליא less than a *tefach*/handbreadth.
> Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, It is similar to the craw of a hen.
>
> Tosefta Niddah 4:9

This is not only the earliest but it is one of the *only* literary descriptions of the placenta in a primary rabbinic text. We may wonder why there exists such a dearth of material describing what the placenta looks like, how it functions, what it signifies or means, or detailing what should be done with it after birth, considering it is a very common (every human being is born with one) organ with a very unique and impressive physique. Unlike today where a birthing woman can literally never have to deal with the placenta (it is often hurriedly yanked out of her in hospitals, or she might not be unaware she is delivering it due to an epidural, and then typically in the hospital it is discarded immediately as medical waste where it is incinerated), midwives and women in the ancient world had to do something with it themselves. But how

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often did the rabbis see a human placenta? Why did Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel compare it to the craw of a hen?

We must also ask why the Tosefta Niddah 4:9 description of the placenta became sacrosanct in later references as memorized data, when it is an obscure, literary, somewhat mysterious, unclear subjective description. Why does the Tosefta describe the placenta at all, when the Mishnah seems content with naming it without definition or description? The Mishnah assumes knowledge about what the word signifies. Why would the editors of this material preserve these rich descriptions in the Tosefta but not the Mishnah?

Another confusion to the reader is that there seem to be deeper meanings to be derived from the Tosefta's and Rabban Gamliel's brief but packed tripartite literary description of the placenta in Tosefta Niddah 4:9, yet the Talmud and Midrash do not seem to take advantage of this opportunity.

Important placenta mishnayot

Seven pericopes in the Mishnah use the term שליא *shilya*. These include Niddah 3:4, Bechorot 3:1[56] and 8:1, Chullin 4:7, Zevachim 3:5, Temurah 7:4 and Kritot 1:3. Many of these citations relate to animal sacrifices, while Niddah 3:4 deals with human placenta and is the section most

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[56] Bechorot 3:1 includes the Aramaicized spelling "*shilya*" שליא (*aleph* at end) in addition to two references with the Hebraicized spelling "*shilyah*" שליה (*hey* at end).

important and explored in the Talmud. We will briefly explore key elements of some of these mishnayot.

Mishnah Niddah 3:4

> A woman who aborts a *sandal* or a *shilya*, she shall sit [for the period of birth impurity] for a male and for a female. A *shilya* in the house, the house is impure. [This does] not [mean] that the *shilya* is the fetus, rather that there is not *shilya* without a fetus. Rabbi Shimon says, The fetus was mashed [inside the womb] until it did not come out.

The motivating questions which frame this of this mishnah are: how do we render the length of woman's birth impurity if we don't know the sex of the fetus, either because it was a *sandal* or deformed fetus or else only a *shilya* was determined? Why is a *shilya* considered able to transmit impurity as a "dead person" would transmit? And what happened to the fetus that was attached to the placenta, if no fetus came out (whole or in visible parts)? Rabbi Shimon explains it was mashed or "*nimok ha-valad*," introducing another important term.

Mishnah Bechorot 3:1

> ...They have said: The sign of a fetus in a small animal (goat, sheep) is a discharge from the womb [indicating a miscarriage happened], and in a large animal (cattle) it is a *shilya*; and in a woman it is *shefir* and *shilya*; this is the general rule – each one that is known which [already gave birth to] a firstborn, the priest does not [take] anything here; and each one that did not [already have] a firstborn, behold this is for the priest.

This section deals with making the offering of the firstborn to the high priest, whether animal or human. A human firstborn offering is "bought back" via the *Pidyon Haben* ceremony. Because

the Temple was not standing by the time of the Talmud, this section becomes more important because it establishes an important statement of delineation that separates women from large animals *vis a vis* birth: "in a large animal [cattle] it is a *shilya*; and in a woman it is *shefir* and *shilya*." This phrase is commonly cited in the Talmud when trying to establish what constitutes birth for the sake of deciding a woman's birth impurity status. This text is interesting because it also astutely notes that in a human birth, the placenta and sac are connected. It is possible they are also connected in large animals but harder to be seen. We have noted that in ancient Babylonian myth and rabbinic interpretation the word for placenta often means amniotic sac as well as or in opposition to placenta. This mishnah includes the *shefir* or sac with the placenta. One way out of this puzzle might be to understand the terms the way we refer to the Talmud. The Talmud is really the Mishnah plus the Gemara as it expounds on the Mishnah, but the Talmud is frequently referred to solely as the "Gemara." The "Gemara" then subsumes the Mishnah. From this text we might see then that for the rabbis, *shilya* seems to subsume *shefir*, but *shefir* alone never subsumes *shilya*.

Another issue of note here is the inherent objectification going on in this verse which renders it problematic from a feminist reading. Women are listed right after large and small animals. The description of a qualitative birth-discharge for women seems to be used here to offset or define what constitutes birth-discharge for animals.

The end of this pericope states, "R' Eliezer ben Jacob says, 'If a large beast (cattle) expelled[57] a clot of blood, behold this [clot] will be buried, and it is exempt from the law of the firstborn."

[57] Bechorot 3:1; the word used for "expelled" is *shaf'ah*" from "*shefa*" or flow, signifying something that flowed out of the animal, as opposed to the animal giving birth to it.

This statement shows that even though a blood clot from the cow's uterus does not count as a fetus (hence it does not count as her first pregnancy), it still must be buried. Why must an animal's uterine blood clot (probably considered an early miscarriage) be buried, while the same from a human being is not? If even a blood clot from an animal must be buried, shouldn't a placenta – the sign of a developing fetus – be buried as well? These questions are not addressed in the Mishnah.[58]

Mishnah Bechorot 8:1

Mishnah Bechorot 8:1 deals with the laws of inheritance for the firstborn. The mishnah lists multiple categories of firstborn son entitlements and redemption prices (from being dedicated to the priesthood). In particular, this mishnah finds a conundrum posed by the Torah in Deuteronomy 21:17: "For he shall acknowledge the firstborn son of the hated wife [when he has two wives, one beloved and one hated], by giving him a double portion of all that he will find for him, for his is the first of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his." The mishnah tries to identify who might count as the firstborn son entitled to the double portion, but who does not owe the priest the five *selas* redemption fee? The answer is the second twin, where the first was not viable. This introduces a topic the Talmud is charmed with – twins where only one fetus is either viable or formed enough to be distinguished as a fetus.

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[58] See section on Mishnah Chullin 77a below.

The mishnah later states, "An abortion (miscarriage) of a *sandal* or *shilya* and *shefir merukam*, and the one that comes out in pieces, the one after them is the firstborn for inheritance but not he firstborn for the priest." Here the *shilya* is not a signifier for the woman's birth purity status, but of the child's status as firstborn for inheritance purposes and its loss of status as firstborn for the priesthood.

Mishnah Chullin 4:7

This section specifically relates to finding a placenta while slaughtering a kosher animal, and what should or can be done with the placenta. The pericope begins:

> The butcher of a beast who finds in it a *shilya* – one who is "*nefesh ha-yafah*/the pretty soul" [euphemism for not fastidious with rulings] can eat it [the animal]; and it does not contract food-uncleanness nor does it contract carrion-uncleanness.

This implies that the placenta itself is not "unclean." However, a person who is more fastidious with commandments should not eat the animal at all, just in case there is a question of a fetus being present. The next section is important because it relates to the whether a placenta can be eaten:

> A *shilya* that is born (came out) half-way [while the mother animal is being slaughtered] is forbidden as food! [It is] 'the sign of a fetus in woman and a sign of a fetus in a [small] animal.

Here we have a recapitulation of Mishnah Bechorot 3:1 (in reverse order, condensed and conflated) which stated, "The sign of a fetus in a small animal [goat, sheep] is a discharge from the womb [indicating a miscarriage happened], and in a large animal [cattle] it is a *shilya*; and in

a woman it is *shefir* and *shilya*." Now the *shilya* has become the universal indicator of a fetus in mammals (small animals to humans). The passage next concerns disposal of the placenta:

> The animal that aborted a *shilya* – it is thrown to the dogs! But [the placenta of] consecrated animals will be buried. And there is no burying it in the parting of ways (crossroads or junction) and no hanging it in a tree [which is] the ways of the Emorite.

This passage is important to the question of creating a *halachah* about placenta burial. The placenta of the unconsecrated animal is thrown to the dogs but the placenta of the animal consecrated for an offering must be properly buried. We could argue that if a sacred animal's aborted placenta must be buried, how much more so that of a human being? This mishnah also includes the prohibition of burying it at a crossroads or hanging it from a tree as were "the ways of the Emorite." It is unclear if both of these actions were customs of the Emorites or just the second action, that of hanging it from a tree. "*Mipnei darchei ha-emori*" is the principle of not doing things that are like the Emorites or idol-worshippers. Typically these are going to be prohibitions against superstitious practices.

Mishnah Zevachim 3:5

Zevachim 3:5 introduces the word *shlil*, used synonymously for *vlad* in the phrase "*shlil* or *shilya*," which sounds much like the phrase we are more used to, "*shefir v'shilya*." Its application, however, may be more akin to "embryo" in early fetal development. This mishnah is about animal sacrifices that contained a *shlil* or *shilya*. The word "or" is crucial here, because

an *embryo* typically is too small for the placenta to "count" (in rabbinic terms, as far as its size) as a *shilya.*

Shlil is a lovely word for fetus, fitting in with the rushing sounds of *shefir* and *shilya.* Unfortunately it never caught on. It is used once in this mishnah, and eight times in the Talmud, throughout BT Zevachim 35a-b, Chullin 75a and Chullin117a.[59] Rashi uses it the most – 31 times in notes on BT Zevachim and Chullin. *Shlil* still falls far behind for Rashi who uses the more normative fetus word *vlad* 396 times. Rashi defines *shlil* with one word: "*sh'b'm'ayah*/that is in the innards," to his entry "*l'echol shlil*/to eat a *shlil*" in BT Zevachim 35a, which leads us to the disagreeable content of this mishnah, the permissibility of offering animals which were sacrificed outside the court or proper place of slaughtering, when one had the deliberate intention of eating its fetus (*shlil*) or placenta.

The word *shlil* for fetus or embryo 3:5 *sounds* like the flowing quality of blood or fluids back and forth. *Shalal* is to draw or capture, as in the transfer of water – the puddle in the sidewalk is called *shlulit. Shalal* is also booty or gain – a possessive but accurate description of what a child means to a parent. But the root also means to hang down or be loose (floating perhaps in the womb, or hanging loosely in the gravity-less experience of the umbilical cord and attachment to the placenta), as well as to make chain-like stitches or sew something together with fine stitchery – the *shefir merukam* and the *shlil* both share this embroidered imagery, and the *shilya* is likened to the blanket. We have only imagery of a fine quilt work being fashioned by G-d in the womb!

[59] *Shlil* is also used once in Masechet Cutim perek 1.

Tosefta Zavim 5:9 uses *shlal* ever so watchfully as "the embryonic eggs laced together with veins." The human placenta too is laced with veins.

Mishnah Temurah 7:4 – Burying the placenta

> And these are they [that must be] the ones that are buried: [fetuses] of animal-offerings that aborted will be buried, and a *shilya* that was aborted will be buried, a stoned ox [stoned for killing a human], and a heifer whose neck is to be broken, and bird-offerings of the leper, and hair of the Nazir, and the firstborn of an ass, milk [seethed] in meat, and unconsecrated animals that were slaughtered in the court [of the Temple]. Rabbi Shimon says, unconsecrated animals that were slaughtered in the court [of the Temple] will be burnt! and also a wild beast that was slaughtered in the [Temple] court.

Temurah 7:4 consists of a list of organic matter that must be buried. This list is topped by the burial of placentas and miscarried fetuses of animals consecrated as offerings. Rabbi Shimon holds the opinion that the last item on the list, unconsecrated animals slaughtered in theTemple court, should be burned rather than buried.

The focus of Temurah 7:4 for our study is the phrase "and a *shilya* that was aborted will be buried." This statement is generally interpreted to mean "the *shilya* [of an animal]," but the text could just as easily be understood as "[any] *shilya* that is aborted." In fact, this makes much more sense to me given the flow of the mishnah. This passage could be used as a *kal v'chomer* to support human placenta burial. An argument for emphasizing that human placentas must be deliberately buried (and not burnt or anything else) could be made based on this mishnah.

This mishnah introduces an issue that underlies part of my desire to study sources about the placenta in rabbinic literature: burial of the placenta. It is clear in this mishnah that fetus and

placentas aborted by animals meant to be sacrifices must be buried, but is not clear if this passage could also be rendered as "[fetuses] of animal-offerings that aborted will be buried, and a *shilya* **[of a woman or an animal-offering]** that was aborted will be buried." (bold for emphasis) Tosefta Shabbat 15:3 states, "They bury the placenta, so that the offspring will not be chilled, for examples with dishes of oil, a garment or a basket of straw." See the discussion following Tosefta Shabbat 15:3 further in this chapter. All of this information is also reflected in BT Shabbat 129b:

> We cut the navel-string and we hide the placenta so that the infant may be kept warm. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: Princesses *taman*/hide [it] in bowls of oil, wealthy women in wool fleeces, and poor women in soft rags.
>
> BT Shabbat 129b

Midrash Rabbah on Numbers 4:3 states, "[On the day of its birth] its navel-string may be cut and its placenta buried, so that the child may not catch cold, and it [the child] may be moved about from place to place [even when this carrying breaks Sabbath prohibitions]." Here Midrash Rabbah emphasized the primacy of doing things for infants for healing purposes even over Shabbat observances. However, how exactly burying the placenta prevents a child from getting sick is unclear. There seems to be an established belief in the *shilya*'s powers to warm and protect the infant once it is born, including rubbing the placenta on the baby's chest to stimulate breathing, as in the following from BT Shabbat 134a:

> Abaye said: Mother told me, A baby who does not breath easily – his mother's placenta should be brought and rubbed over him from its narrow end to its wide end; and if he is too fat, from the wide end to the narrow end.

Mishnah Kritot 1:3

> There are women who bring a [sin] offering and it is eaten [by the priests], and there are women who bring [an offering] and it is not eaten [by the priests], and there are those women who do not bring. These are the women who bring an offering and it is eaten: [women who had] an abortion like a kind of animal, wild beast or chicken; the words of Rabbi Meir. But the Sages say, [The offering is eaten] only if there is some resemblance to a human being in it (the aborted fetus), the abortion of a *sandal* or *shilya* or *shefir merukam* or the one that comes out in pieces. And also a bondswoman that miscarried, she brings an offering and it eaten.

Leviticus 12:6 details the sin offerings a woman brings to the Tent of Meeting to the priest to offer before G-d on her behalf, at the end of her period of purification following both the birth of a boy or a girl. Kritot 1:3 divides these women and their offerings into three categories, followed by a list of what kinds of things require a women to bring offerings which are to be eaten by the priests. Kritot 1:4 and 1:5 list the requirements of the other two categories. Rabbi Meir says the list includes (or is limited to) women who have miscarried something that looks like a specific animal. But the sages disagree and say it has to resemble a human being, or else there has to be the presence of a *sandal* or *shilya* or *shefir merukam* or fetus that is born in parts – either it broke apart in the womb and was delivered in parts, or else a midwife/doctor had to cut up the fetus in utero in order to deliver it. This latter is a frightening procedure to imagine experiencing in the ancient world (and difficult to imagine undergoing today as well). This example though is cited also in Bechorot 8:1, leading us to ask if it was a common procedure done to save the life of the mother (either in the case of a stillborn, or life-threatening or protracted labor). Finally, we see that the mishnah does not discern between Jews and non-Jewish women (bondswomen) in matters of accepting or requiring parturient offerings. This mishnah might have modern applications for women who seek to ritualize the end of their purification period with some kind

of "offering" to mark the transition back to normal life after the life-altering experience of birthing a newborn or losing a child.

The Placenta in Tosefta

Four pericopes in the Tosefta include the placenta: Niddah 4:9, Brachot 2:14, Shabbat 15:3, Chulin 4:9 and Bechorot 2:12 and. We will examine three of these units which stand out for their unique and profound contribution to the realm of placenta metaphor and theology as well as burial practice.

Tosefta Brachot 2:14 – The keystone *shilya* metaphor

Tosefta Brachot 2:14 interprets Job 38:9 to be G-d's heavenly "swaddling cloth" as a metaphor for placenta.

> Behold, [one] who is standing in the field naked or who was doing his work naked [when it was time to say the *Sh'ma*, behold this [one] covers up with grass or with straw or with anything, and recites [the *Sh'ma*] even though they said, There is no praising by a person sitting naked, for when the Holy Blessed One created the human, the One did not create him naked, as it is said, (Job 38:9) "When I placed the cloud in its garment" – this is the *shefir;* "and the thick darkness its swaddling cloth" – this is the *shiliya.*[60] Behold [one who had] a scrap of clothing or of belt leather for himself around his loins, behold this [one] says [the *Sh'ma*]. Whether this or that, one does not pray until the heart is covered.
>
> Tosefta Brachot 2:14 (2:15 by some accounts)

[60] An additional *yud* is preserved in the word *shilya* here.

This section is the midrashic center of rabbinic biblical illusions to the *shilya.* It is the most important metaphoric rabbinic text we have about the placenta. The topic begins elsewhere, in a field with a person naked and poised ready or wanting to recited the *Sh'ma.* From this place comes the entire discussion about when and how to say the *Sh'ma* – the backdrop for yet another important and profound placenta text as it makes its way into the Babylonian Talmud Brachot 4a (which is explored at length in Chapter 4).

Tosefta Brachot 2:14 contains the only biblical prooftext that is interpreted to be about a placenta. This image and how it is drawn from the Job literature will be discussed at length in Chapter 4.

Tosefta Niddah 4:9

> The *shilya* of which they spoke:
> Its beginning is like the thread of the warp, and its head is like a lupine, and it is hollow like trumpets;
> there is no *shilya* less than a *tefach* (handbreadth).
> Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, It is similar to the craw of a hen.
> And why did they refer to a shilya? And is it not so that there is no placenta without a bit of the *vlad* with it?

Tosefta Niddah 4:9 includes the only rabbinic literary, complex description of a placenta. In this passage, the Tosefta departs from the style of the Mishnah and establishes itself as its own literary creation. We need to remember that the Mishnah never defined or described the placenta's physicality or purpose. The Mishnah also remains relatively sterile, objectifying the placenta and its parts without regard to emotion. The Tosefta's description of the placenta here could not be imagined based on what we know of the Mishnah's somewhat unattractive,

perfunctory experience with placentas (primarily as determinants of birth impurity in cases of abortions or miscarriages or when found inside slaughtered animals). We find in Tosefta Niddah 4:9 a unique, slightly eclectic group of metaphors and descriptions.

The pericope begins "The *shilya* of which they spoke." Already there is a sense that the *shilya* is being unduly objectified, and here we must save it somehow from that fate. The Tosefta writer seems to delight in a creative, interesting array of examples.

An extremely important statement is established here: "There is no *shilya* less than a *tefach*/ handbreadth." This sounds light and descriptive here but it becomes a legal category in the Talmud in cases of miscarriage. If a placenta is found that is smaller than a *tefach* and there is no fetus visible, then the woman sits in a *niddah* state only and not the full number of days as a *yoledet.*

One of the more interesting passages in the Talmud about the placenta relates directly to the *tefach.*

> Rabbi Oshaya Z'ira in the name of the Chevraya taught [in a beraita]:
> חמשה שיעורין טפח ואילו הן: שליא, שופר, שדרה, דופן סוכה, והאיזוב.
> Five things measure a tefach and these are they: the *shilya* (placenta), the *shofar*, the *shidrah* (height of lulav over hadas), the *dofen sukkah* (width of the 3rd sukkah wall), and the *aizov* (hyssop).
>
> BT Niddah 26a-b[61]

[61] See Chapter 3 for section on *Tefach.*

The connection between Tosefta Niddah 4 and Yerushalmi Talmud 3

In addition to Tosefta Niddah 4:9 being important in rabbinic literature for its unique, literary description of the placenta, the whole of Tosefta Niddah chapter four as an entire unit becomes the basis for the structure of the Yerushalmi Talmud chapter three. Tirzah Meacham examines the relationship of the Tosefta material to the Yerushalmi Talmud in her article "Tosefta as Template: Yerushalmi Niddah,"[62] which focuses on Tosefta Niddah chapter four. Meacham summarizes, "Out of the fifteen possible parallels between Tosefta Niddah and Yerushalmi Niddah in this chapter, we find fourteen."[63] Much of PT Niddah chapter three is a word for word or close parallel to Tosefta Niddah chapter four. Only Tosefta Niddah 4:2 has no parallel at all. PT Niddah 3:4 includes a passage that closely parallels Tosefta Niddah 4:9, which Meacham maintains characterizes the "richest collection of amoraic material in Yerushalmi Niddah chapter three."[64]

PT Niddah 3:3:1 is a discussion about what the mishnah means when it says "One who aborts an amniotic sac full of water."

> R. Shimon in the name of R' Yehoshua ben Levi says, Even [if the baraita was referring to] clear fluid, only in humans is the *shefir* [a sign of birth] as it is written (Job 38:9), "When I placed the clouds as its dressing and darkness as its swaddling" – "its dressing" is the *shefir*; "and darkness" is the *shilya*.

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[62] Tirzah Meacham, "Tosefta as Template: Yerushalmi Niddah," *Introducting Tosefta: Textual Intratextual and Intertextual Studies*, pp. 181-220.

[63] *Ibid.*, pg. 217.

[64] *Ibid.*, pg. 219.

The Yerushalmi here lifts the Job prooftext from Tosefta Brachot 2:14 and places it another context. However, the new context is extremely unclear.

Meacham examines each section of the chapters in both bodies of literature, asserting that the time lag between the Mishnah and Tosefta resulted in the Tosefta "accruing" more material than the Mishnah. "These additions and the disputes between the Mishnah and Tosefta were fertile ground both for clarification of the Mishnah and enrichment of the amoraic discussion."[65] She points out the particularly unique and "enriching" Tosefta material from chapter four.

Tosefta Shabbat 15:3 – Burying the placenta

This section includes an important statement about burying the placenta, which is not offered through the Mishnah.

> They bury the placenta, so that the offspring will not be chilled, for examples with dishes of oil, a garment or a basket of straw.

This information is also reflected and developed further in BT Shabbat 129b:

> We cut the navel-string and we hide the placenta so that the infant may be kept warm. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said: Princesses *taman*/hide [it] in bowls of oil, wealthy women in wool fleeces, and poor women in soft rags.
>
> BT Shabbat 129b

[65] *Ibid.*, pg. 220.

Midrash Rabbah on Numbers 4:3 states, "[On the day of its birth] its navel-string may be cut and its placenta buried, so that the child may not catch cold, and it [the child] may be moved about from place to place [even when this carrying breaks Sabbath prohibitions]." Here Midrash Rabbah emphasized the primacy of doing things for infants for healing purposes even over Shabbat observances. However, how exactly burying the placenta prevents a child from getting sick is unclear. There seems to be an established belief in the *shilya*'s powers to warm and protect the infant once it is born, including rubbing the placenta on the baby's chest to stimulate breathing, as in the following from BT Shabbat 134a:

> Abaye said: Mother told me, A baby who does not breath easily – his mother's placenta should be brought and rubbed over him from its narrow end to its wide end; and if he is too fat, from the wide end to the narrow end.

"The impressive (and dangerous) event of giving birth" and rabbinic Judaism

At this point in our discussion we might want to remember how different are these mishnaic and Tosefta passages about birth, compared to what exists about birth in the Bible. Even though birth is amply recorded and focused on throughout the Bible, scholars differ on its content. Scholar Samuel Kottek maintains that "(i)n the Bible the *impressive event of giving birth* is described quite often, factually as well as metaphorically."[66] (italics mine) Yet most feminist scholars argue that eminence ascribed in birth stories in the Bible is usually limited to

[66] Samuel Kottek, "Medicine in Ancient Hebrew and Jewish Cultures" in Helaine Selin, ed., *Medicine Across Cultures: History and Practice of Medicine in Non-Western Cultures (Science Across Cultures: the History of Non-Western Science. Vol. 3)* (Netherlands: Springer/Kluwer Academic Publishers) 2003, pp. 305-324, pg. 315. Kottek notes to see Schapiro, 1904; Preuss, 1978: 381-431.

extraordinary events shown from a limited male perspective[67] and is included for the sake of furthering a story line that usually involves an important male heir being born.[68]

The topic of birth in rabbinic Judaism is related to very differently, and yet the absence of a consistent female perspective might be similar to that lack in the Bible. Kottek notes that in the Talmud, "obstetrics is a widely documented topic."[69] "Obstetrics," however, in the Talmud is derived primarily from a limited scientific basis espoused by Galen (2nd century), not entirely well known, and combined with the Talmudic mindset. Where the Torah is concerned with birth in order to tell human stories that bind together to form the "birth of the Jewish people" story, the rabbinic enterprise related to birth is concerned with determining and classifying those in-between, real or imagined cases of human bodily failure or distress (although it does not address the emotional healing or experience of that distress the way the Bible does) and/or upholding a system of commandments or laws related to a perceived field of transmittable impurity. Ultimately the Talmud's legal discourse is concerned with the purity of the Jewish people and its ability to perform *mitzvot* properly – where and when this enterprise makes its nexus with birth is a pervasive and important topic for the rabbis.

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[67] A note scratched in my college handwriting on a yellow post-it has followed me for years, propelling me to examine Torah stories critically from a feminist perspective and seek out the glaring subtexts and missing subjects. The note says, "Thirteen children between Leah and Rachel (and handmaids) and not one story (in their narrative) about nursing?" I imagine a twenty-something year extended period of nursing mothers would yield many stories about the trials and joys of nursing. This is just one subtext that is missing related to birth in the Bible.

[68] See Tarja S. Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity*. Studies in Biblical Literature, Vol. 88 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.) 2006, for an analysis of birth stories in Genesis.

[69] Kottek, pg. 315.

The Mishnah is the first body of literature to take up the topic which addresses the all-consuming question of what makes a birth "birth" outside of the full delivery of a healthy, living child. This discourse continues today in the anti-abortion and pro-choice movements which are still arguing over when is life "a life."[70] The Mishnah however is concerned with the purity of a woman and her husband as part of a whole framework on sanctified reproduction. Rabbinic Judaism delights in the academic (and some would say the spiritual) discourse surrounding an application of principles in the grey-areas where most of life takes place. Thus, perhaps, the placenta is taken on not because of its meta-spiritual or physical powers as a force of life, but because it is interesting, curious, and most of all a forcefully present aspect of birth. Its messiness and mystery make it the perfect representative of birth.

That the rabbis appear completely captivated by the process of determining and categorizing women's bodies, blood flows, miscarriages, and contents of the womb is not surprising given the high rate of infant mortality and limited medical knowledge that existed in the ancient world. Today we have come to expect routine success in fertility, pregnancy and birth, until one is personally confronted with unexplained infertility, or a child dying in utero at full term from an entangled umbilical cord, or a placental infection threatens the life of a baby during labor, and without an emergency c-section and antibiotics the child would die. We probably cannot fully appreciate today how important was the subject of miscarriages or stillborn births to a community and time when infant mortality and miscarriage rates were common occurrences, and

[70] Although Judaism unequivocally weighs in on the side of a woman having the right to choose whether to continue a pregnancy if her life is threatened, and this includes emotional threat. The unborn child is considered a *rodef* or pursuer (threat to her life) until its head has been born, and the mother's life always takes precedence.

laws were being set forth to determine how best to create a system for stabilizing mental and physical well-being for women and families.

Mishnah Niddah 3:4 begins with the powerful statement, "*Shilya ba-bayit, ha-bayit tameh*/A *shilya* in the house, the house is impure." How can a house be rendered *tameh* from the presence of an organ, as though it were in the category of a dead person? Perhaps the rabbis had an appreciation for the danger also imposed by this strange organ. The placenta after delivery is the remnant of the pregnancy: it is what allowed the fetus to grow and breathe until the moment the child is born and the umbilical cord is cut. But at that moment, the placenta poses a threat to the life of the woman. If it is not delivered quickly, the placenta continues to draw blood from the site where it is attached to the woman's bloodstream inside her body, but with nowhere to deposit it. For this reason, a quick and complete delivery of the placenta is desired after the fetus is born, which is considered the last or third stage of birth. I have found at least two Chasidic birth prayers that ask G-d for a quick and easy delivery of the *shilya* after the child is born.[71] But the Mishnaic sources do not allude to fear, danger or awe regarding the all-important placenta related to the mother's bloodstream or as an image or manifestation of G-d in the ongoing act of creation. The literature simply begins "*Shilya ba-bayit, ha-bayit tameh*/A *shilya* in the house, the house is unclean."

"A placenta in the house, the house is impure" implies that the placenta is somehow "dead" – in the way that a dead body would render a house unclean. Yet as stated before, the placenta was

[71] Dovid Simcha Rosenthal, *A Joyful Mother of Children: A Compilation of Prayers, Suggestions, and Laws for the Jewish Expectant Family* (Feldheim Publishers: Brooklyn) 1982, pp. 34-35. "And may she deliver the *shilya* in its proper time, and may she be healthy and well for your service."

never an independent living body but an organ that grew to meet the needs of the baby, an enabler of life, a connector, a vital organ whose life-span, development and decay are completely times with the estimated time span of a typical pregnancy.

The placenta in the "House"

The verse echoes throughout the Talmud: "A *shilya* in the house, the house is *tameh*." (Mishnah Niddah 3:4) But what is the "house"? We could not really examine this verse without noting it as problematic because of the common reference in the Talmud to a woman or a rabbi's wife as "*bayit*/house" or "*biti*/my house." This might imply she is a metonym for the house/household which is considered *tameh*.[72] We are not sure if the house is *tameh* just because it contains a [delivered] placenta in it (perhaps preserved, newly delivered, waiting for burial or disposal), or if the mishnah means the woman in the house. How can this mishnah substitute an actual baby or fetus with its *shilya* for purposes of contamination when the placenta is never an independent being?

"A placenta in the house, the house is unclean/*tameh*." (Mishnah Niddah 3:4) If a dead body was in the house, it would render the house unclean. But if a person had his or her gall bladder removed, and it was sitting on the table in the house, it would not render the house unclean. If

[72] For a fuller analysis and critique of the common rabbinic metaphor of a woman's reproductive body as a "house" see Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press) 2000.

the liver *of a dead person* was sitting on the table in the house, it would, however, render the house unclean, because it is part of the dead person. Therefore, "A placenta in the house, the house is unclean" runs contrary to the notion of a placenta *as part* of a fetus. If a placenta was a dead fetus it would clearly render the house unclean; but it is not – rather the placenta *is a sign* a fetus was being formed.

We might view the placenta with the umbilical cord as one of the fetus' essential organs. While in the womb, the *shilya* is essential. But once the fetus is born, the child's entire system converts over and the lungs, mouth and gastric system take over what once occurred directly through the umbilical cord and into the child's bloodstream.[73] We have seen this idea as reflected by the rabbis in BT Yoma 45b which states, "One (Rabbi Akiva) thought that the essence of life is in the nose and one (Rabbi Eliezer) thought that the essence of life is in the navel."[74] Rabbi Akiva relates to the breath of life through the nostrils, in the tradition of G-d breathing into the human who was formed by clay, while Rabbi Eliezer relates to the presence of G-d flowing into the human being who is being formed through the navel, in utero. Again, what is this placenta so powerful it can render the house unclean? Is it a life-giving force or one of death and decay? The rabbis in general, as seen in the Mishnah's *shilya* passages, understand the placenta as an object *on the outside* – they relate to it not during birth but in the examination process required for dead fetuses and deformed stillbirths; the Tosefta however views the placenta as the magnificent working organ hovering around the baby floating in foggy darkness in utero, *on the inside*. The Tosefta sees the placenta as a musical instrument which turns life and breath into

[73] Outside the womb, the placenta has no purpose and cannot function (although the many tubes often connected to premature babies in the neo-natal intensive care unit may sometimes seem like a technological "placenta" constructed inside the newborn's *shefir*-like isolette).

[74]This same idea is found slightly differently in Yerushalmi Sotah 9:3 (23c).

music; it sees the placenta as the seeding head of a lupine plant ready to spore; it has the shape of the long esophagus of the hen leading to its stomach, and there is fun and pleasure to be had describing it, because it is in the end something alive, and connected to a child.

The paradigm of G-d forming the human out of inert clay and then breathing life into its nostrils – the breath of G-d, as represented by Rabbi Akiva's view that the essence of life is in the nose – is but one construct to explain creation. But let us be clear: it is a fantasy. The real human is formed in the womb of a real woman and this human is very much alive from the moment it is conceived; it is kept alive and nurtured intimately through a tube going to the center of its body, where two large veins and one strong artery coil together for a few feet rooted in the placenta which feeds them. This being grows in solitude but it is not alone – there is a physical presence, a mechanism if you will, called the placenta that is the machinery that keeps the being fed and it is separate from the fetus although connected. This other being exists only to see it develop before detaches, departs and dies. It stops physically at the place where the human begins – the navel, as Rabbi Eliezer said.

The Tosefta in particular offers us metaphors and understandings of the placenta in a richly spiritual, comforting worldview. The pieces on the threshing floor can become the chief cornerstone, or, to use the Tosefta's own metaphor, the cloud whose garment drapes the earth in protection, strength and loveliness.

CHAPTER THREE:

Unearthing Placentas and Metaphors in the Talmud and Midrash in three sections

I.

Tefach – An Exploration of the Rabbis' Handbreadth and the *Shilya*

Ein shilya pachot m'tefach/There is no *shilya* less than a handbreath.

Tosefta Niddah 4:9

This following text from BT Niddah 26a was the first rabbinic text about a placenta that I became aware of:

> Rabbi Oshaya Z'ira in the name of the Chevraya taught [in a braita]:
> חמשה שיעורין טפח ואילו הן: שליא, שופר, שדרה, דופן סוכה, והאיזוב.
> Five things measure a tefach and these are they: the *shilya* (placenta), the *shofar*, the *shidrah* (height of lulav over hadas), the *dofen sukkah* (width of the 3rd sukkah wall), and the *aizov* (hyssop).
>
> BT Niddah 26a-b

The *shilya* is first on the list of five things which measure a *tefach*. Without knowing what was going on here, I sensed it was something profound. The fact that the placenta even appears amidst sacred ritual items seemed to affirm that rabbinic Judaism ultimately sees the placenta as one of the *c'lei kodesh* or the holy ritual vessels. Understanding this statement draws on other categorical lists in the mishnah/Talmud:

> And there are five [great] things [of the universe] that measure a *tefach* and these are they: the *shofar*, the *shilya*, the *shidrah*, the *dofen sukkah*, and the *aizov*.

Jastrow defines the "handbreadth" as being four fingers joined (Succot 4b), while Succot 7a defines the *tefach* as "a liberal handbreadth " or four fingers not closely joined. This list establishes five things as being the size of the *tefach*, but something else is going on here. This list places each item as a *representation* of the *tefach* – its essence. These things are placed in a category together becoming relationally connected. As a group, their meanings draw on the meaning of the other items. What can be said of these items and their relationship to each other? Like the childhood television game from Sesame Street, "one of these things is not like the other..." the format of these types of listings sends on an endless journey comparing and contrasting the items on the list, searching for likenesses and finding connection and meaningfulness that is not always obvious.

The *shofar* and its religious significance is the most well-known object on this list. It is commonly thought of as much larger than a hands-breath. Three of the items easily cluster together as ritual items related to the fall holidays: the *shofar*, *shidrah* and *dofen sukkah*. Two of the items on the list relate director to the *mitzvot* related to Sukkot. But the *shilya* heads the list which is significant in rabbinic listings – although the meaning of being "first" is not always apparent.

Tefach and *shilya*

The Talmudic discourse surrounding the size of the *shilya* is fascinating. This measure is a standard measure in the Talmud, despite its subjectivity depending on whose hand is doing the measuring. And yet, it is fair to say that a *shilya* does measure approximately the size of an adult person's handbreadth, and both a person's hand and a *shilya* vary according to the person they are attached.

For many of the objects named by the Talmud to be the size of a *tefach*, the notion of "handbreadth" seems a convenient and fairly universal as well as traditional means for measuring something whose size has a certain variance. But the notion of being in the hand calls out. The *shofar* is an object that is held in the hand; the *shidrah* is the distance the *lulov* extends over and beyond the *hadass* or myrtle branches, thus the *shidrah*, like the *shofar*, is also something that is held from the hand, and the *aizov* is the hyssop that is

The *shilya*, however, is something very much related to hands and thus "*tefach*" takes on a unique meaning: literally the shilya is "caught" in the hanbreadth of the midwife or attending physician, or even in the hands of the mother herself. In Brachot 4a we see that King David's hands are "*m'luchlachot*/dirtied" with the blood of the shilya (Brachot 4a). Metaphorically the *shilya's* work may be likened to "the work of the hands" of G-d.

The etymology of *tefach* with regard to *shilya*

The etymology of *tefach*, when we look carefully, goes beyond the "size" of a thing and does indeed relate most to the actions of the hands. Exploration of the word reveals a great deal about what the rabbis (and possibly surrounding culture) thought about the placenta.

The verb *t'fach* means *to close carefully*, as well as *to slap or strike with the hand*, as well as *to srike or forge*. Elsewhere in the Talmud we also see it means "*to clap hands*."[75] The custom of "slapping" or striking a baby if it is not already breathing or crying, to stimulate the child's first intake of oxygen and subsequent cry, is relevant here in order to make a connection between the tefach of the *shilya*'s size and resemblence to this action of the hand: the *shilya* is enclosed carefully around the fetus and inside the amniotic sac, as well as the striking by the hand that frequently accompanies a birth.

The *kal* form of *tafach* means *to drip* or *to be moist*, and the *hiphil* is *hit'pi-ach* which means *to moisten* or *wet*. Both meanings are related to the saturation aspect of the placenta and to the waters associated with birth.

Another possible connection between the *shilya* and *tefach* is their mutual association with clay. More than one Talmudic usage of the verb *tafach* refers to clay. At least one scholar has made a radical connection between the placenta and clay in literary and religious motifs. The word"*ha-ovnayim*" which is used to mean both the pair of birth-bricks in Exodus 1:16 and the potter's

[75] See Jastrow, pg. 546.

wheel in Jeremiah 18:3 relates to the idea of the Egyptian creation god Khnum who sat on a birthing chair next to a potter's wheel creating human beings from clay. Furthermore, Marten Stol notes that A.D. Kilmer "saw a symbolic meaning of the brick, as placenta." He quotes Kilmer:

> I believe that we have overlooked a deeper meaning and significance of the unbaked clay brick, in that it appears to have been likened to placental material. That is, the fetus may have been thought of as the product that developed in and from the malleable, clay-like placenta.[76]

Stol, however, finds some fallacy in Kilmer's assertion, because there is no evidence in the Bible that the related bricks were "unbaked."[77] Stol maintains Kilmer's research is based on a slightly confused reading of an early version of a first millennium Babylonian handbook which records the meaning of different types of malformed births as omens.[78]

Nonetheless, a metaphoric connection between clay and placenta is certainly plausible. Ibn Ezra went almost as far as saying that there is the connection between Esau's name, his appearance as red or ruddy at birth, and the twin placentas "opening" at once in Rebekkah's womb.[79]

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[76]Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*, pg. 119, footnote 119.

[77] Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*, pg. 161, fn 93.

[78] Published as E. Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Ibzu* (Texts from Cuneiform Sources, IV) 1970.

[79] Ibn Ezra commentary, Genesis 25:25, <u>*Vayikr'u sh'mo/And they called his name*</u>: "The ones who saw him. And it is possible that its meaning [the name "*Esav*"] [connotes that this birth] a "*ma'aseh*"/a unique occurence, for this *leidah*/birth was a great wonderment! For it happens that every human being is born with a *shilya* that covers it, but here the two *shilyot* opened simultaneously!"

Related to clay are other usages of *tefach* such as the muddy soil or ground on which water subsided, as well as a pitcher for drawing water for drinking or hand-washing in BT Chulin 139b which uses the word *t'fi-ach*.

And in BT Shabbat 143b *tafach* means "to collect the contents (i.e. oil) of a broken vessel by palming or scooping, wiping up with the palm." One can compare this image to the wiping up of fluids of birth, while the broken vessel might be compared to the womb which has spilled out its contents. Additionally, the palm is often the place that holds the infant – how often do new parents exclaim with wonderment that their baby "fits in the palm of my hand!" The *shilya* itself in essence "scoops" the fetus as its inside, its palm as it were, covers the baby in utero. This image of the *shilya* covering, palming or embracing the infant is rabbinic literature's most common positive image of the placenta. Although this image does not describe the *medical* or *developmental function* of the placenta, it does describe the placenta as the protector and nourisher of the fetus.

With clay in mind, Job 38:14 is relevant because G-d describes the earth "transforming itself" as clay under a seal:

> She will transform herself/overturn like *chomer*/clay under the seal,
> and they will stand like a *l'vush*/a garment.

The clay, the garment called *l'vush* – these are both ancient cultural and rabbinic metaphors for the placenta, swaddling the infant, forming it within the waters.

II.
Leviticus Rabbah 14:4 and the "Womb of G-d"

Ein shilya pachot m'tefach/There is no placenta less than a handbreath.
Tosefta Niddah 4:9

Leviticus Rabbah 14:4 and the *shilya*

"*Ishah ki tazri'a' v'yaldah zachar*/A woman for she conceived seed and birthed a male." This verse from Leviticus 12:2 is a key verse for the levitical laws regarding a parturient's purity status after giving birth. Her status is based on the blood-flow directly related to bleeding from the womb due to giving birth. Leviticus Rabbah 14 expands upon a number of issues related to Leviticus 12:2. However, rather than address purity issues, the midrashim in Leviticus Rabbah 14 render Leviticus 12:2 in many fantastical directions regarding birth, gender and the fetus's formation.

Nine midrashim relating to Leviticus 12:2 are collected in Leviticus Rabbah 14, all dealing with some aspect of embryology, body and/or soul formation or women's wombs. 14:7 deals with circumcision. Only Leviticus Rabbah14:3 and 14:4 include the *shilya*/placenta. 14:8 comes close by addressing the source of the fetus's nourishment and waste in utero: "...its navel is open; its food is that which the mother eats, its drink is that which its mother drinks, and it does not discharge excrement lest it should kill its mother." The mystery of the placenta's role connecting the fetus's umbilicus to the mother's bloodstream seems unknown. And it is noteworthy that the

navel is addressed here but not the thick umbilical cord where the "food and drink" appear to come from. The midrash maintains that the baby in utero does not discharge excrement from its bowels, which is true. What is unclear from the text is whether the midrash is aware that the fetus's waste does travel through the umbilical cord and through the placenta to be filtered by the mother's body. As might be expected in our discussion, Job plays heavily in Leviticus 14. In fact, womb or formation phrases from Job are quoted as prooftexts once each in 14:1, 14:2 and 14:3, nine times in 14:4, and five times in 14:9.

As scholars such as Charlotte Fonrobert[80] and Tarja S. Philip point out, the "nature of the impurity of bleeding from the womb" is of paramount concern to the priestly writers of Leviticus and to the rabbis.[81] Yet, the source of that bleeding, the placenta, (and its site of implantation in the mother's uterus) is not cited or eluded to as being the cause or source of this blood in 12:2 or in any of the surrounding Talmudic literature. Leviticus Rabbah 14:3 and 4 both cite the placenta, but neither addresses its function related to blood flow from the womb at birth or post-partum.

Leviticus Rabbah 14:3 (a lengthy passage) relates to the placenta once, in the context of the grotesque: "R' Eleazar said: ... Now a woman's womb is at boiling temperature, and the embryo is in the womb, and the Holy One Blessed be He takes care of it so that it should not turn into a [miscarried] *vlad* or *shilya* or *sandal*." This notion that a woman's womb is at boiling temperature is rather absurd and medically unfounded, and the reviling image evoked here of the

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[80] Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender.*

[81] Tarja S. Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity*, pg. 3.

shilya is as a discarded, boiled mishap of nature. Leviticus Rabbah 14:3, while built on the life-affirming Job verse, "You have granted me life and lovingkindness, and Your providence has preserved my spirit," (Job 10:12) is comprised of a series of bizarre and even ridiculous postulations about the wonders of the female pregnant body – primarily representing or relating to them uncomfortably as absurdities, and with a great deal of rabbinic fear. [82]

Leviticus Rabbah 14:4, on the other hand, positively portrays the wonders of the female body as an image of the Holy One and reveals awe rather than fear or base curiosity (as found in 14:3).[83] The midrash as a whole synthesizes many birth-related biblical verses, with an abundant emphasis on verses from the two primary womb or birth-related sections in Job addressed below, Job 3:10 and 38:8-11. Leviticus Rabbah 14:4, which appears below, utilizes a number of rabbinic interpretations which compare a woman's uterus to the portals of a house, culled together to create a picture of how a woman conceives, stays pregnant and gives birth. The passage is concerned with explaining the unusual opening of line of Leviticus 12:2 in which G-d commands Moses to speak to all the children of Israel with the words "*Ishah ki tazri'a' v'yaldah zachar*/A woman for she conceived seed and birthed a male." As Tarja S. Philip explains, this phrase "causes hermeneutical and grammatical problems. The root *zayin-reish-eyin* in *hiph'il*

[82] Another example of such fascinating rabbinic postulations in Leviticus Rabbah 14:3 appears in the last section, where R' Meir states that a woman's menstrual blood which normally flows downwards and which is not seen during the nine months of pregnancy, is redirected upwards by G-d who turns it into milk in her breasts – and more milk if the baby is a boy. In fact, however, there is some truth to this: large amounts (ten times that of an adolescent) of hormones are produced by the fetus's kidneys, which travel through the placenta to the mother's body where they trigger hormone production related to developing milk ducts. The detachment of the placenta at the last stage of birth triggers the oxytocin in the mother's body that begins actual milk production. In this way, the "blood" turns into milk.

[83] Except for the final section of the midrash concerning R' Aibo as discussed later on.

(causitive verb form) with a woman as the subject appears only here in the Bible; normally the woman is the object, and the man is the one who has the seed (Num 5:28)."[84]

Here Leviticus 14:4 is translated and divided into seven sections:

> a) Another matter (*D'var acher*) (concerning Leviticus 12:2 which says) "*A woman for she conceived seed*:" As it is written, (Job 38:8) "And [who] shut up the doors of the sea, when it broke forth, and went out from the womb?" [as told by] Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Akiva.
>
> b) Rabbi Eliezer says, Just as there are doors to a house, so too are there doors to a woman, as it is written, (Job 3:10) "For he did not close the doors of my womb."
>
> c) And Rabbi Yehoshua says, Just as there are *miph'tachot*/keys to a house, so too [are there keys] for a woman, as it is written (Genesis 30:22), "And Elohim listened to her, and *patach*/opened her womb."
>
> d) Rabbi Akiva says, Just as there are *tzirim*/hinges (contractions) to a house, so too are there *tzirim* for a woman, as it is written (I Samuel 4:19), "And she bowed down, and she birthed, for her contractions overturned her."
>
> e) (Job 38:8) "When it broke forth from the womb it was born (lit. went out)[85]," alongside the one who was proud to come out. (Job 38:9a) "When I made the cloud its garment" – this is the *shefir*/amniotic sac; (Job 38:9b) "and the dense fog its swaddling cloth" – this is the *shilya*/placenta.
>
> f) (Job 38:10) "And I will break my law upon you" – these are the first three months; (Job 38:10) "and I will set my boundaries and doors" – these are the middle three months; (Job 38:11) "and I will say, 'Until here you will go and no further'" – these are the last three months. (Job 38:11) "And here I will break the glory[86] of your waves!"
>
> g) Rabbi Aibo says, [Rather it should be stated] the 'transgression' of your waves, because this fetus comes out full of excrement and all kinds of nauseous substances, but everyone is hugging him and kissing him, and especially if he is a male, [which explains the rest of the verse from Lev. 12:2] "*A woman for she conceived seed, and gave birth to a male.*"

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[84] Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity*, pg. 113.

[85] Philip, pg. 87. Philip notes that "*yatza*" or "come out" is "the normative verb to describe the child's leaving the birth canal" (Genesis 25:25-26, 38:28-30, Exodus 21:22, Jeremiah 1:5, 20:18 and Job 3:11). "*Yatza*" also describes the placenta being delivered in Deuteronomy 28:57.

[86] "*G'on galecha*" (Job 38:11): BDB offers exaltation, majesty, excellence; "the majesty of your waves!"

Beginning with the verse from Leviticus 12:2, different rabbis and the narrator present a series of eight prooftexts to describe nearly every component of a woman's birthing anatomy and pregnancy.

This midrash presents the female reproductive body and fetus in formation through a series of similes and puns primarily related to the parts of a house or door. The birthing woman in labor mirrors G-d's process of creation. Her body and her womb mirror the Divine womb. Like G-d's womb, the midrash explains so too does a woman's womb possess "doors, keys, hinges or contractions." Here we see the text as informative (conveying practical information about anatomy) while being colorful and entertaining through active and common metaphors. Aside from a possible theological encounter, this midrash serves to teach an attentive audience about how a woman's pregnant body and reproductive system work, although its purpose is not just to teach about obstetrics. Rather, it affirms a woman's ability to conceive and give birth is in the hands of G-d. The eloquent use of biblical literature to relate this point is seen repeatedly, such as in the prooftext from Job 38:11: "And here I will break your glorious waves!" Through this Job verse, the midrash describes a rather messy and unpredictable aspect of birth (the amniotic waters breaking) as "glorious" and locates a woman's birthing experience on par with the experience of G-d who created the universe, revealing the rabbis' reverence for what Israeli medical scholar Samuel Kottek described as "the impressive event of giving birth."[87] Yet at the

[87] Samuel Kottek, "Medicine in Ancient Hebrew and Jewish Cultures" in Helaine Selin, ed., *Medicine Across Cultures: History and Practice of Medicine in Non-Western Cultures (Science Across Cultures: the History of Non-Western Science. Vol. 3*, pg. 315.

same time, this lengthy midrash ends with one other perspective (Rabbi Aibo in section *g*) which reveals a conflicted attitude toward birth, women's bodies and gender.

As the midrash builds, so does the expression of awe for this process. We see that the rabbis were awe-struck by their own constructed biblically-based theology which compares G-d's dynamic, cosmic birth of the universe in Genesis 1 to a woman giving birth. Here, as in it first Job 38:9 citation regarding the *shilya* in Tosefta Brachot 2:14, Job 38:9 informs both a nascent birth-theology and primitive medical knowledge: the bloody placenta delivered at birth is understood as the swaddling cloth across the heavens, and the amniotic sac clothes the infant like the hovering cloud over the earth. The ancient writers envisioned the *shefir* and *shilya* as a sort of pre-partum baby clothing and swaddling blanket – a sweet image although limited scientifically. Neither of these metaphoric images tell us much about the essential functions of *shefir* or *shilya* other than they are conceived as incredibly positive, important, warming or protective, enwrapping bodies part of the fetus's "orbit," compared majestically to the celestial bodies surrounding the earth. The midrash could end here on this dazzling image of the encircling foggy placental swaddling cloth of the earth, but instead it is builds for another stanza to reach its pinnacle in the sixth stanza with the Job verse, "And here I will break the majestic glory of your waves!" as the rabbis appear lost in their excitement and awe at the moment of birth. A moment of reverberating silence, listening to the sudden crash of those waves, takes over the midrash, leaving the reader almost breathless along with its writers. This is the halting and transformational moment of birth, before any cry or humanly sound has entered the room.

And then comes the human voice. Base, ungodly, conflicted, intellectualizing and reactive. A very different picture is revealed in the next and final stanza, where Rabbi Aibo reveals an

attitude of disgust toward the same gushing amniotic waters, excrement and smells associated with birth. This sudden association of the messiness of delivery of the baby (and placenta) comes almost as a deflation of the rabbis' prior exaltation of birth.

> (Job 38:11) "And here I will break the glory (majesty) of your waves!"
>
> Rabbi Aibo says, [Rather it should be stated] the 'transgression' of your waves, because this fetus comes out full of excrement and all kinds of nauseous substances, but everyone is hugging him and kissing him, and especially if he is a male, [which explains the rest of the verse from Lev. 12:2] "*A woman for she conceived seed, and gave birth to a male.*"

For Rabbi Aibo, the normal fluids and materials of the gushing waves of the amniotic waters breaking at birth reveal "transgression," which he connects to Leviticus 12:2, the verse preceding the priestly prescriptions for the birthing woman's days of impurity following the birth of a male and corresponding sacrifices. He presents a murky and nauseating image of birth with which the midrashic redactor draws the midrash to its end. Yet, the redactor also chose not to end this passage entirely on a nauseating image. Instead, he switches to the positive and remarks that despite "all kinds of nauseous substances, ... everyone is hugging and kissing" the baby in celebration, for new life has arrived. Complicating this midrash further is the sexist credenza of Rabbi Aibo, which implies that the celebration is over the child's male gender rather than over new life itself. Where Rabbis Eliezer, Yehoshua and Akiva focused on positive (house) metaphors for the pregnant and laboring woman's body, Rabbi Aibo responded to the assertion from the anonymous voice which glorified the pregnancy and birth through the pivotal and all-important Job verses and their explication in sections *e* and *f*:

e) (Job 38:8) "When it broke forth from the womb it went out[88]," alongside the one who was proud to come out. (Job 38:9a) "When I made the cloud its garment" – this is the *shefir*/amniotic sac; (Job 38:9b) "and the dense fog its swaddling cloth" – this is the *shilya*/placenta.

f) (Job 38:10) "And I will break my law upon you" – these are the first three months; (Job 38:10) "and I will set my boundaries and doors" – these are the middle three months; (Job 38:11) "and I will say, 'Until here you will go and no further'" – these are the last three months. (Job 38:11) "And here I will break the glory of your waves!"

This mixture of revile and extolling, seen in Rabbi Aibo's perspective and the rabbis' inclusion of his voice in this midrash, reveals an awareness of both the uplifting and messy qualities to birth. The *shilya* is like the majestic clouds around the earth, but its delivery can be a bloody mess. That the rabbis projected or inferred this (or vice versa) through the language of Job and especially the verses related to G-d's creation of the world shows their expression of belief in a "Womb of G-d." The rabbinic reading of these verses underlines the cosmogonic importance of Job, which we will explore at length in Chapter 4.

[88] Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity*, pg. 87. Again, Philip notes that "*yatza*" or "come out" is "the normative verb to describe the child's leaving the birth canal" (Genesis 25:25-26, 38:28-30, Exodus 21:22, Jeremiah 1:5, 20:18 and Job 3:11). It also describes the placenta being delivered in Deuteronomy 28:57.

III.

King David's Hands and the *Shilya*:

A Talmudic Event in BT Brachot 4a with Rashi

Consider this intriguing aggadic story of King David:

> Levi and R' Yitzchak ...[one of them] said this: "David said before the Holy Blessed One, 'Master of the world, am I not pious (*chasid*)? All the kings of the East and West sit, faction after faction honoring them, while my hands are *m'luch'lachot*/dirty with the blood, the *shefir* and the *shilya* in order to declare a woman pure for husband!"
>
> BT Brachot 4a

Near the beginning of the meandering stream of the Mishnah and Talmud's first topic – the time when one should recite the *Sh'ma* prayer – King David appears, boasting, as it were, about the piety which comes from his humility. (His boasting does not seem to cancel out his humility, but that is another story.) While the other leaders of the nations of the world sit being honored amongst their legions, he claims, this king of Israel is involved directly with the affairs of the people, handling "blood, the *shefir* and the *shilya*." While such activity hardly befits a king by the standards of the other nations of the world, this "soiling" of hands proves David's superiority as *chasid*/a beloved or pious king of the people.

This aggadic story is the second anecdote in a pair that re-reads Psalm 86:2, *Shamrah nafshi ki-chasid ani*/"Guard my soul for I am pious/loved." In both vignettes, the phrase *chasid ani* is reframed as a rhetorical question – *Lo 'chasid ani*'? "Am I not pious?" The first aggadic story relates directly to the Gemara's subject, the time to say the *Sh'ma*. In the first story, King David

claims piety because he rises early, at midnight, to give thanks to G-d, while the other kings of the nations of the world sleep until three in the morning. The story demonstrates that rising early to praise G-d (or say the *Sh'ma*), by midnight, is the more pious thing to do. But the second King David story, quoted above, careens away from the *Sh'ma* to an imagined King David examining blood and womb-matter for the sake of reckoning a woman's marital purity. Somehow this act has replaced the act of saying the *Sh'ma* as the litmus test for piety, and the topic of time has been altered. "Time" in the abstract is no longer about when to say the Sh'ma, but about how long a woman will be *tameh* after uterine bleeding, whether she is a *niddah* or *yoledet*, before she can resume sexual, and reproductive, activity. In the second vignette, the words of Psalm 86:2, *chasid ani*/"I am pious," refer to King David's near-godliness as shown by his hands-on involvement discerning her status. How (or that) the monarch handles womb-matter – literally the "stuff of life" – is now the determiner for piety, worthy of asking G-d to guard his soul.

This colorful story presents a King David who is expert, fluent and involved regarding that which relates to the fetus and its formation, particularly with respect to three items: *ba-dam u'va-shefir u'va-shilya*, "with blood and with the amniotic sac and with the placenta." Instead of simply ending this image with menstrual blood, the story is dramatized in King David's handling of the *shefir* and *shilya*, both items related to the formation of the fetus, neither of which hither-to-fore have been mentioned or defined in the tractate. Tractate Niddah, where most of the practical discussions about *shefir* and *shilya* take place, is many volumes away (according to the order in which the Talmud was ultimately closed). Yet, *shefir* and *shilya* appear sinuously. The story amplifies something important here while the Talmudic storyline afterwards will leap again in another direction, without picking up on the striking and exaggerated image of David's hands

in the *shefir* and *shilya*. Why exactly is this story here? Why does the surrounding text not acknowledge the sudden interjection of a placenta into the discussion about the *Sh'ma*, or the rather wild leap the redactor/storyteller takes in interpreting Psalm 86:2 to relate to a placenta? Are we to infer that the rabbis were so familiar with these items and terminology that this passage did not give them great pause?

Why is this determination so important to King David, or to the text amplifying his action? An implicit assumption that undergirds the text is that a woman's sexual status for the sake of reproductive union with her husband is of *quintessential importance in the praxis and psychospiritual state of the Jews*. (italics for emphasis) It is so important, in fact, that the story portrays King David himself attending to the matter and fully engaging in it (literally "dirtying" his hands with blood) rather than assigning this task to someone "lesser" than him (such as a servant, woman, rabbi or judge) thus proving his *chasidut*.

Without ever articulating the fact, anyone would expect a midwife to handle placentas as part of the regular course of her work (and possibly even as an encounter with the Divine), but not the king of Israel. An issue to be raised here concerns why a midwife's testimony regarding the presence or size of a placenta would not be enough to count as a determiner of the woman's status.[89] In general, the rabbis (and probably men) did not see or handle the *shefir* and *shilya*

[89] In PT Niddah 3:3:8 we find the following discussion:

> Rav Yehudah asked Shmuel: Since I am knowledgable, [should I] examine the signs of amniotic sacs? He said to him: The head of your head [teacher] will be burned by boiling subjects, will you not be burned even by tepid ones?
> R' Hiyya in the name of R' Yochanon: We do not rely on those women who said [the fetus] resembled a male snail [or] a female snail!

except when there was a need to determine about an ambiguous miscarriage. In those cases, the presence of a *shilya* (even without being able to find a fetus) could determine whether the pregnancy was viable enough to "count" as a miscarriage. As we learn from Mishnah Niddah 3:4, "There is no *shilya* without a *vlad*." The presence of a *shilya* is metonymous for birth and pregnancy. But David's association with these things is still startling.[90] A more beguiling aspect of this aggadic story is that *shefir* and *shilya* appear in the *active vocabulary* of King David as represented by the rabbis! No other story presents a biblical figure talking about examining the placenta. Do the words resound with shock-value, or as part of the elevated, stylized speech of

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R' Yaakov by Zavdi, R' Abahu in the name of R' Yochanon: A woman is believed when she says, "I gave birth..." [or] "I did not give birth." She is not believed when she says, "It was male" [or] "It was female."

We see here that women are trusted on the big issue, whether they gave birth or not, but are not to be believed when they report on the sex of the fetus. R' Hiyya in the name of R' Yochanon is more lenient – if she is comparing the sex of the fetus to a male or female snail (an impossible thing to know), this implies the fetus was so tiny that it probably would have been extremely hard to really ascertain the difference, so we should not rely on her. R' Yaakov by Zavdi and R' Abahu in the name of R' Yochanon are more extreme – it does not matter the size of the fetus or the way she presented it at all: she cannot be trusted to have noted the sex at all.

In her book *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Charlotte Fonrobert addresses the issue of women's testimony in general and regarding birth in her discussion of the many Bavli passages in which Abaye relates information he quotes in the name of his mother, who was probably a midwife. The repeated formula is *Amar Abaye, 'Amrah li Eim...'*/"Abaye said, 'My mother said to me..." Fonrobert argues that Abaye's Mother is a singular case where a woman's voice is heard and respected, not just because she is a midwife (which would have then been seen as inferior "women's work") but because she was knowledgable about many subjects. However, Fonrobert points out that in post-talmudic literature (the Codes, medieval commentaries and Tosafot) she is left out and Rabbi Nathan's testimony on the same subjects is kept in, showing "a process of progresive marginalization of Abaye's mother in rabbinic discourse." See Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press) 2000, Chapter 5 "Women's Medicine in Rabbinic Literature: Between Female Autonomy and Male Control," pp. 128-159; pg. 158.

Another note: Today in modern Orthodox settings, training programs such as Nishmat: The Jerusalem Center for Advanced Jewish Study for Women's Keren Ariel Program have begun to be established to train women in the specific halachah of niddah, etc. so that women can judge in all matters related to uterine blood flow, birth and menstruation. Nishmat designates these women to be "Yoatzot Halacha" (Women's Halachic Advisors). See www.yoatzot.org. "Women preparing to become Yoatzot Halacha are chosen for their extensive Torah scholarship, leadership ability, and deep religious commitment. They devote two years (over 1000 hours) to intensive study with rabbinic authorities in *Taharat Hamishpachah*. They receive training from experts in modern medicine and psychology, including gynecology, infertility, women's health, family dynamics and sexuality." I find the qualification of "deep religious commitment" to be very meaningful and appropriate in comparison to our aggadic story above about King David's chasidut stemming from the same.

[90] Based on later discussions in the Talmud (see Niddah 24b), a rabbi typically is involved with this type of thing, not the king of Israel.

an Israelite people's-king known for his poetic finesse, musicality and symmetry in language? If the latter is correct, as I think is the case, then we have here a compelling argument for an inherent holiness in relationship to the placenta and a profoundly placenta-centric vision of what it means to praise G-d and witness or be part of the cycle of creation.

Rashi's Placenta

Rashi says a great deal about our key birth terms in his comments on this story in BT Brachot 4a:

> ***Yadai m'luch'lachot ba-dam*/My hands are dirty with blood:**
>
> That the women show him menstrual blood [to check] if *tameh* [or] if *tahor*; for there is [a need for] showing [him for him to determine if it is] "pure blood" for a woman.
>
> ***u'va-shefir*/and with the amniotic sac:**
>
> It is the skin of the *vlad* which the bones and the sinews and the flesh are formed within. And there is a *shefir* that the woman 'sits upon it' (i.e. observes) the days of *tumah* and the days of *taharah*, and which is this? The "*merukam.*" And in Masechet Niddah [24b] it is explained. And there is a *shefir* filled with water and blood that is not thought of [as] a *vlad* [for the purpose of] 'to sit upon it' *tumat yoledet*/the impurity of the birthing woman and the days of *taharat* [*hayoledet*]/the purification of the birthing woman.
>
> ***u'va-shilya*/and with the placenta:**
>
> As we have learned [in a mishnah] (Niddah 26a), "There is no *shilya* without a *vlad*." And it is a kind of clothing that the *vlad* rests inside of, and it is called "*vashtidor*" in Old French. And it is taught [in a braita] (BT Niddah 26a), "There is no *shilya* less than a *tefach* (handsbreath)" and "its beginning is like the string of the *eirev*/woof and its end is like a *turmos*/lupine." And they would bring it before him to see if there was a *shiyur*/measure within it, and if it was shown to be thought of [being] a *shilya* which held a *vlad* within it which was 'dissolved,' then she would observe the days of *tumah*/impurity, and *taharah*/purity if not.

Rashi provides a nearly complete compilation of earlier rabbinic conceptions about the placenta, and he adds his own idea of its being a "kind of clothing" (certainly inspired from the Tosefta). Although this type of recitation of all prior, central material is standard in rabbinic discourse, it seems that Rashi is doing it for other reasons. Probably the words, descriptions and functions of the *shefir* and *shilya* were unknown not just to the average student of Talmud but even to the more advanced and knowledgeable readers for whom Rashi was writing. Hence Rashi serves an educational purpose. But something else is going on as revealed by Rashi's atypical length and circuituitous collecting of almost every piece of material on the placenta. Is Rashi unclear about what his question is? Let us look at another example of Rashi's placenta commentaries.

Rashi's other placentas – the example in Chullin 77a

When *shefir* and *shilya* appear in subsequent tractates, Rashi does not provide another long compilation or describe their function or appearance; Brachot 4a is his one compilation of sources and laws about the placenta and amniotic sac. Notably, Rashi uses the word *shilya* approximately 61 times in commentary on the Bavli (54 times as *shilya* and seven times as *ha-shilya*). Generally Rashi is explaining *shilya* as it is used in the Talmud.

The only time that Rashi uses the placenta as an example to explicate something else is in BT Chullin 77b. The Gemara's subject matter concerns the Talmudic category of *darchei ha-emori*/"ways of the Emorites," i.e. doing something similar to practices of idol worshippers, which is forbidden. Abaye and Rava are discussing permitted acts done for the purpose of

refu'ah/"healing." *Refu'ah* might include actual medicine or inert potions but also things like amulets and chanting; however they rule that you cannot do something where '*Ein bo m'shum refu'ah*' i.e. something that is not for the purpose of *refu'ah*, and the reason cited is that it would be considered *darchei ha-emori*. Rashi explains why this phrase '*Ein bo m'shum refu'ah*' constitutes *darchei ha-emori*.

> ***Ein bo m'shum refu'ah*/There is nothing in it of healing:**
> For example, when they are doing something that is not on a 'sick area,' such as burying a *shilya* at a crossroads, and what comes out from these [acts] is similar to *nichush*/divination.

Rashi's example cites a practice of burying a placenta at a crossroads or a junction, a practice attributed to the Emorites (idol-worshippers). This comment is in reference to Mishnah Chullin 4:7 which states:

> The animal that aborted a *shilya* – it is thrown to the dogs! But [the placenta of] consecrated animals will be buried. And there is no burying it in the parting of ways (crossroads or junction) and no hanging it in a tree [which is] the ways of the Emorite.

Rashi only quotes the practice of "burying the placenta at a crossroads," whereas the "hanging it in a tree" seems much more of a suspicious and superstitious act. Carefully read, we see that Rashi does not say one is not permitted to bury a placenta, just not at a crossroads. The reason given is that the foreign practice of burying the placenta at a crossroads apparently had something to do with divination or making an omen – perhaps a belief that the crossroads would

assure good luck and health for a living child or prevent future miscarriages if from one that died or was miscarried.[91]

Because Rashi cites the prohibition of *darchei ha-emori* with doing something with a placenta, we could assume that caution should be exercised when one is burying the placenta so that a supernatural outcome is not anticipated. The commentator Panim Me'irot (1:36) clarifies Rashi's note from a different angle. He understands Rashi as saying you can perform an act for *refu'ah*/healing purposes, but not from a distance. In other words, he explains, you can hang an amulet over a sick person's bed but "not from a tree in order to help a baby sleep better."

Rashi's placenta example in Chullin 77b works to normalize the subject of placenta burial. This can have applications for establishing modern Jewish placenta burial rituals or customs. His illustration emphasizes that there were common and/or existing traditions of burying placentas, and that Jews did not to partake in some of them. Rashi also links the concept of "healing" with placenta-burial, opening up a discussion that we might have today about the purposes of burying the placenta – such as how burial might help the mother, child or family on a spiritual level, since "*refu'ah*" as a category includes spiritual healing and ritual around the closure of the birth process. Putting the placenta into the earth, accompanied possibly with an intention of gratitude or awareness of mysteries or awe of creation, is a natural progression from thinking about the placenta as an organic part of the life cycle.

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[91] This latter idea is taken from Philip Blackman, *Mishnayoth: Order Kodashim, Volume* V, (The Judaica Press, Inc.: New York) 1964; Chullin 4:7, page 204, note 10.

"Like a kind of clothing which the *vlad* rests inside of" – Rashi's metaphoric contribution in BT Brachot 4a

Rashi's comments in Brachot 4a might serve as a primer for the very things he takes for granted in Chullin 77a. In Brachot 4a we see that Rashi deemed the *shefir* and *shilya* important enough to be in need of an overview in order to understand their function in the story about King David. Rashi uses the first Talmudic appearance of these words as an opportunity to teach about the various mishnayot, pericopes and braitas regarding the placenta. Rather than directly address the significance of their inclusion in the King David parable, he tells the reader what the things are. Rashi also inserts other related rabbinic birth vocabulary words such as *vlad* and *m'rukam* into his descriptions of *shefir* and *shilya*, but he does not define or describe these. Rashi aptly describes *shefir* as the "skin of the *vlad* (birthling), which the bones and the sinews and the flesh are formed inside of" while he metaphorically describes the *shilya* is "like a kind of clothing which the *vlad* rests inside of."

Rashi wants us to examine the significance of the *shilya* in this story. As we have noted, "*shefir* and *shilya*" often are cited by rabbinic commentators as one item or attached/interchangeable, just as they are when delivered. Yet Rashi carefully attends to them carefully as separate units. Rashi described the *shefir* as the *or*/skin "which the bones and the sinews and the flesh are formed within." While today we refer to this "fetus skin" as a "sac" or "bag" (sometimes referred to as "the bag of waters"), Rashi's word is completely accurate – the *shefir* is an intact bubble-like membrane, like a bag made of skin, which grows along with its contents, holding the waters inside and keeping them and the baby sterile.

Rashi's word-choice for describing the *shefir* is *or* (skin) which might refer to a leather skeen used for holding water. Like this leather skeen, Rashi explains that the *shefir* is sometimes delivered intact and filled with water (this is typical for certain animals although rarely for humans) and sometimes "*merukam*/knitted" [to something else like the umbilical cord, placenta and/or fetus]. This is medically and visibly accurate. Rashi's explanation of the *shilya*, on the other hand, never tells us its function. The *shilya*, he explains, is a kind of "*l'vush*/clothing which the *vlad* rests/lies down inside of." If we compare the description of the amniotic sac (*shefir*) to the placenta (*shilya*), then the missing component of Rashi's *shilya* description is a parallel phrase saying something functional like "sits inside the *shefir* and nourishes a *vlad* from its mother's bloodstream." There is no mention of the umbilical cord or its function in either description.

Both of Rashi's full explanations for *u'b'shefir* and *u'b'shilya* are atypically *long* and with a number of approaches strung together, leading the reader to wonder what is Rashi's real conundrum. Let us examine his explanation of "*u'b'shilya*/and in the placenta" more closely by dividng it into the following six subsections:

1) Rashi quotes an important mishnah without citing its source: "There is no *shilya* without a *vlad*" (mNiddah 3:4);

2) describes the *shilya's* physical purpose, using a vague, original metaphor: "like a kind of *l'vush*/clothing which the fetus rests in;"

3) defines it with an Old French word: "*Vashtidor*;"

4) quotes a braita about the minimal size of a *shilya*: "And it is taught (*v'tanya*) [in a braita] (Niddah 25a), "There is no *shilya* less than a *tefach* (handsbreath);"

5) freely quotes the strange, oft-cited description of the *shilya* without citing its source: (Tosefta Niddah 4:9) "Its beginning is like the string of the *eirev*/woof and its end is like a *turmos*/lupine;"

6) and finally, Rashi gives a long explanatory sentence in his own words about the *shilya* being brought to King David for him to examine and measure its size, to determine if it would count as a birth: "And they would bring it before him to see if there was a *shiyur*/measure within it, and if it was shown to be thought of [being] a *shilya* which held a *vlad* within it which was 'dissolved,' then she would observe the days of *tumah*/impurity, and *taharah*/purity if not."

The final component to Rashi's explanation here may tell us his real question: Why were King David's hands "*meluchlachot*/dirty," and why did the text use this word (as opposed to "*asuyot*/busy" or another less visceral word)? Why is the "*shilya*" so important in determining a woman's status?

Why does King David report that his hands are "dirtied" with these three things rather than only with *dam*/blood? For one thing, blood alone might be ambiguous and not include the issue of birth as well as the more obvious issue of menstruation. But that does not tell us why "*shilya*" is listed when "*shefir*" is enough to tell us we are talking about a birth. If the point is to say that David is literally "down and dirty" (to use a colloquialism) or directly involved with what is important to the Jewish people while other kings rule from afar and sit reciving accolades, then "blood" would seem to be enough of a reference.[92] If the text wants to point out that King David's involvement was focused on the status of women after birth and not just women in niddah, then *shefir* would also suffice without either of the other two items on the list (*dam* and

[92] One prophetic tradition tells us that the prophet Nathan tells David that he cannot build the Temple because his hands were full of blood – understood as bloodshed and war. This story in Brachot 4a casts a different image on David's hands full of blood – the blood of birth and placentas that is – possibly saying something very profound about David. Perhaps he is not the one to build the Temple because his work is to be more directly involved with

shilya). Rashi's explanation shows why *shilya* is not superfluous after "*shefir*." It appears that it is not just the addition of "and with the *shilya*" that concerns Rashi. Under this heading "and with the *shilya*" he also attempts to answer the question of *m'luch'lachot*, "dirtied." If King David were "examining" women's menstrual stains, he would not need to touch them; in fact, touching the blood of menstruation would be something to be avoided. The size of the *shilya* was critical to determining the woman's status. If it was less than a *tefach*, or as Rashi says, if it was less than a *shiyur*, she was not impure or considered to have miscarried a fetus. Similarly, a *shefir merukam* may also change the outcome. By explaining that a *shilya* may also be at least a *tefach* in order to count as a *shilya* (section 4 above) for purposes of a woman's status, we can infer that King David literally had to measure the *shilya* with his hands, hence his hands were "dirtied" with the very blood of the *shilya*.

Conclusion, or The placenta delivered at the beginning of the Talmud

In Rachel Adler's book *Engendering Judaism*, she begins the epilogue "Seeds and Ruins" with the statement, "At the beginning of the Talmud is a story about ruins." Adler retells the story told on BT Brachot 3a, about R' Yose travelling on a road, when he goes in to an old ruin of Jerusalem to pray. Eliyahu comes to admonish him that he shouldn't pray inside the ruins, but since he already did, the prophet inquires what R' Yose heard. "A *bat kol* (Divine voice)," he replies, "moaning like a dove..." for the sins of her children and their exile. For Adler, the dove is the voice of an alternative rendering of Judaism where the feminine voice is not hidden in an

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the spiritual matters amongst the people as opposed to his *building* the Temple (an arduous task, which we might imagine based on modern experiences, that often pulls a leader away from the spiritual aspects of people's lives.

old ruin and kept from classical prayer. "Gently, gently," Adler explains, "we bring the dove we have freed from the ruin."

> Just as Genesis sets forth a cosmos, Tractate Berakhot offers the seeds of a *nomos*.[93] The seeds that contain the *nomos* of rabbinic Judaism are the blessings, *berakhot*. Their theological content and ritual performances generate and propogate rabbinic Judaism's sustaining institutions, the synagogue and the study house. In contrast to the cosmos of Genesis, which is created out of chaos by divine fiat, the rabbinic *nomos* evolved, as the metaphor of seed implies. Seeds contain both the past and the future. As legacies from the dead, they reproduce the world. As pledges to the future, they change it. Every seed points to some future seed that will both incorporate it and differ from it.[94]

We might add to Adler's poignant application that in addition to a story about ruins, the Talmud begins with a story about a placenta. This placenta is freshly born, covered in blood, and it is brought carefully wrapped up in cloth or a jar to the king of Israel. He unwraps the placenta, places it in his hands, turns it over against the width of his palms and ponders its size. The placenta, he thinks, is a curious thing: it is attached to a cord, which was attached to a fetus, a fetus that in this case was interupted, a life that did not come to be. The veins are thick making a relief of a tree. He imagines he were a midwife, whose hands were able to hold the freshly-born placenta, perhaps still attached to a living, new child. He thinks of his own birth, the cord and *shilya* that connected him to the Maker of heavens and earth, through his mother. Perhaps he continues his psalm which began "*Chasid ani*/Am I pious..."

> *Ki gadol ata v'oseh nifla'ot ata Elohim l'vadecha*/For you are great and the maker of wonders, you are G-d alone!

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[93] Or "the universe of meaning in which we live as Jews." in Rachel Adler. *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Beacon Press: Boston) 1998. pg. 96.

[94] Rachel Adler. *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Beacon Press: Boston) 1998. pg. 209.

...
*Adonai El-rachum v'chanun, erech apayim v'rav chesed ve'emet. P'nei eilai v'channeini... v'hoshi'ah l'ven-amatecha/*Adonai G-d of expansive womb-compassion and mercy, longsuffering, and great in love and truth. Turn to me and be gracious upon me... and save the son of your handmaid.

Psalm 86:2

How many names there are to describe this G-d who is the wonderous fashioner of life! A panoply of names inspired by the awe-some confrontation with the *shilya.* Rashi too enjoined his first Talmudic commentary about the subject of birth with a panoply of rabbinic sources about the *shilya* and a description all his own: *it is a kind of clothing, a garment which the fetus rests inside of.* It is large enough to cover King David's hands but small enough to fit compactly and not get noticed or encountered as *nifla*, wonderous organ; this small story nestled in the midst of a grand chapter on the important subject of reciting Judaism's central prayer, the *Sh'ma*; a small, emotional story easily passed over amidst legal dimensions and besides, it is somewhat off-topic.

Another aggadic story on these pages might help us here: Just before Adler's story about the ruins (on BT Brachot 3a) comes a small sentence, almost an aphorism, again asking the question, "The time of saying the *Sh'ma* – Is when? As soon as a woman tells her husband, and the baby is nursing at the breasts of its mother, to get up and to recite!" As a nursing mother still co-sleeping with my child for the last two and a quarter years, I am intimately aware of a certain 4:30 in the morning, pre-twilight rustling, where my son reaches for me in sleep to nurse, almost like a rooster the way his inner clock consistantly wakes him (and me) at this hour. Our routine includes the moment of dread when I don't want to rouse even slightly from sleep, and I plead with him silently to "just wait another hour when the sun will come up." Moments after he

nurses I hear the first birds chirping outside our window, a confirmation that the night is soon over. I don't need a clock or a discussion about midnight or the difference between blue-green and shades of grey to tell me when the crossing over between day and night, or night and day, has arrived. With eyes closed the nursing mother knows, is told by the child who unconsiously is still connected to the mysteries of creation although no longer through the placenta and umbillical cord. The vignette quoted above seems to affirm there is another way of looking at things and it is related to birth, nursing, connection between feeding, sustaining, time and praying. The metaphor given over in Tosefta Brachot 2:14, "'When I placed the cloud in its garment' – this is the *shefir*, 'and the thick fog its swaddling cloth' – this is the *shilya*,"comes after all in a discussion about what to wear when saying the *Sh'ma*. That passage ends saying, however one covers up, "one does not pray until the heart is covered."

CHAPTER FOUR

Womb of Deep Darkness:

Job's Placenta Metaphor and Rabbinic Atunement

> In the beginning, G-d created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was *tohu v'vohu*/without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the *tehom*/deep. And a wind of G-d fluttered on the face of the waters.
>
> Genesis 1:1-3

> And may the G-d of your father help you, and may Shaddai bless you with blessings of heavens above, blessings of the deep swirling below; blessings of the breasts and womb.
>
> Genesis 49:25

> ...when it gushed from *rechem tehom*/the womb of the deep
>
> Job 38:8 in Qumran Targum

In order to more fully understand and appreciate the importance of the *shilya* metaphor established in Tosefta Brachot 2:14, we need to look to the book of Job, the source of the metaphor and its prooftext. We immediately find there an atypical womb-vocabulary which sets the book of Job apart from any other book of the Bible.

Most books of the Bible that include birth stories mainly focus on the identity of the baby or on its father as opposed to the birthing woman. Job is not entirely different but its tale is set outside the "royal" or patriarchal family. The person Job has no known patriarchal link in the Israelite chain – his story then is compelling for its content which conveys some message, although

generations have drawn different meanings from its layers of story. But in addition to the personal story of having children and suffering (Job's ten children die, much like Naomi's loss of her two sons at the beginning of the book of Ruth), Job abruptly transforms into a unique telling of G-d's creating the world out of primal watery darkness.[95] Where Naomi's story becomes a tale of re-establishing her happiness through her life with Ruth and the continuation of the Davidic line through Ruth's womb,[96] Job's story culminates with a dramatic confrontation and reckoning with the Divine womb (although a tacked on final paragraph tells us, almost incidentally, that Job is restored with a new set of children).

Although the book of Job (like other prophetic and canonical writings) does not specifically use the word *shilya*, the rabbis understood a placenta in the watery-birthing world that G-d describes in chapter 38. It makes sense that this placental underpinning was generated and supported by the rabbis' awareness of the preponderance of womb-vocabulary and birth metaphor in Job.

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[95]This motif is acted out in the Noah story in Genesis 7, the Israelites crossing the Reed Sea in Exodus 15, and Jonah in the whale in Jonah 2 – stories of being dramatically surrounded and enclosed in water, going through an ordeal for a period of time, and then released onto dry land in a newly re-born state. For Noah, the people and animals are re-born to a new change for more peaceful life on earth with a new covenant with G-d, the Israelites emerge as a People, and Jonah gets a clean state and exhibits a better relationship with G-d and his own sense of puprose. Each of these stories recaps G-d's "creation" out of a water-enclosed womb.

[96] The story of Ruth has much to offer aside from its culmination or happy ending which occurs when Ruth gives birth to a child whose name is proclaimed great in Israel, and the grandfather to be of King David. Unlike Ruth, Job's story, which results in his having children, does not appear to have any "need" for a happy ending – Job's progeny are not famous or important to the continuation of the dynasty, etc.

On another note, however, the book of Ruth is really the story of Naomi's restoration, as stated above. Ruth converts in the Book of Ruth, but the rabbis insist that as a Moabite she is genetically and spiritually linked to via Lot to Abraham, whose "chesed" genes which have remained dormant now become her primary attribute. In addition, if her "conversion" didn't really authenticate her enough, Boaz is from the Yehuda tribe, establishing his seed as the progenitor of the Davidic line. And finally, Naomi assumes surrogate or co-mothership in Ruth 4:14-17, making Naomi's biological and spiritual lineage primary. The townswomen proclaim, "*Yulad-ben l'Naomi*/A son was born to Naomi!" (4:17) This is a formulaic statement in the Bible that elsewhere is only used referring to men's paternity after a birth. Also, how significant (and overlooked, brushed aside) is the fact that Naomi nurses the infant that Ruth birthed! "And Naomi took the boy and he drank at her breast, and she was for him *omenet*/a wet-nurse-adoptive-mother." (Ruth 4:16) The only other person who has this title is Moses in Numbers 14:? when he calls himself the "*omen et ha-yonek*/foster-father-wet-nurse of the suckling infant" i.e. the Israelite people. Numbers 14

They certainly related to Job differently from scholars today, and even from how they utilized other sources, in that they duly noted this placental underpinning and birth ambiance. We can explore the book of Job from this viewpoint as a window into reading sacred texts with a perspective that the placenta too is a sacred part of creation that we can be attuned to.

Job's womb-vocabulary and the watery world of formation

The book's structure includes two short narratives of cataclysmic events which serve as the rough edges of the book – in chapter one, Satan and G-d conspire to test Job and he experiences the tragic loss of his fortune, his children and his health, and then these things are replaced for him manifold in the last chapter. In the middle and for most of the body of the book we find extreme emotional suffering in a long series of extended speeches between Job and his friends who come to support or counsel him, and a grand response from G-d "out of the whirlwind" spanning a few chapters before Job's "restoration." A number of these sections invoke the womb and even center around a birth metaphor or image, although the meaning and tones of these birth passages shift throughout the book.

Two important "womb-passages" stand out, included below as selections from chapter three in Job's opening speech and selections from chapter 38 in G-d's eventual response. These two passages frame the book, providing a rich detail of the birth and a formational interface for the rabbis (and us) to work with. (The relevant womb-vocabulary is transliterated in italics.)

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is another passage in the Bible which has a particular and unique birth-vocabulary. See my exegesis on that subject, written in an HUC Bible course with Prof. Adrienne Leveen.

I.

3:1-2, 10-12

And Job spoke and said:
Let that day in which *eevaled*/I was born be lost,
and that night which said *horah gaver*/a man-child is conceived.
...
For it did not shut up *daltei vitni*/the doors of my womb,
nor hide suffering from my eyes.
Why did I not die *mei-rechem*/from the womb,
or perish *mi-beten*/from the belly when I went forth?
Why did knees receive me,
u-mah shadayim ki eenak/and what were these breasts that I should suck?

II.

38:1, 8-11, 14, 16, 28-30

And G-d spoke to Job from the whirlwind and said:
...
And [who] stopped up *bi-d'latayim yam*/the doors of the sea,
b'gicho mei-rechem yeitzei/in its gushing from the womb it went out?
when I wrapped the cloud *l'vusho*/in its garment,
and the darkness its *chatulato*/swaddling cloth?
And I broke my law around it, and I set its boundary and doors.
And I said, "Here you may come and no further,
and here I will break the glory of your *galayich*/waves."
...
It will turn out like clay under the seal,
and they will stand like *l'vush*/a garment.
...
Did you come into *niv'chei-yam*/ the spring-sources of the ocean[97]
u'v'cheiker tehom/or did you walk in the doors of deepest darkness?
...
Is there *av l'matar*/a father to the rain?
u-mi holeed/or who sired the drops of dew?
Mi-beten mi yatza/From whose womb did the ice go out,
and hoar frost of the heavens – *mi y'lado*/who gave it birth?
Like a stone *mayim*/the waters hid themselves,
u'pnei tehom yitlakdu/and the face of the deep forms together.

[97] *Nivchei-yam*/ the 'spring sources' of the ocean: BDB translates *neivech* as spring or in Job 28:16 "sources of the ocean." See note 17.

A dynamic womb-focused world appears in these dual passages, using a selected biblical vocabulary of womb and birth-related words, a world which even evokes womb-words that are absent. In the first selection highlighted above from chapter 3, the subject is the speaker Job refering to himself as a fetus and infant – yet no such word for fetus actually appears. He refers to his infant-self as "*gever*," literally "man." The more obvious word choice here would have been *yeled* or *valad*, as in "And Sarai was barren; she did not have a *valad*/child." (Genesis 11:30) As noted earlier in this thesis, *valad* is used in rabbinic commentary to mean a fetus or infant being born. Yet Job does not use a noun specific for fetus or child. Rather, in 3:2, he uses the word *valad* in its verb form, in "*eevaled*/I was born." Additionally, Job uses the word "*harah*" in conjunction with *gever in* "*horah gaver*" when he bemoans his conception at the end of that verse. 3:2 creates an echo between both halves of the verse utilizing two pregnancy words (*valad* and *harah*) in usual forms. "*Horah*"can refer to conception or pregnancy as well as birth. Here Job talks about his conception as a night he wishes were lost, yet the passage does not delve directly into the womb.

In the second passage above (selected verses from chapter 38), the waters of the womb and the waters of the Divine womb are invoked repeatedly while the actual bodies of the womb are not – there is still no mention of the *vlad* or fetus itself, nor the *shefir* surrounding the baby and containing the amniotic waters or the *shilya* feeding and oxygenating the baby whose thick viscosity is attached through the thin membrane of the *shefir*. But arguably, their resonance can be heard. The author of the G-d speech in chapter 38 brilliantly plays upon Job's earlier repetition of *beten* in chapter three, "Why did I not die *mei-rechem*/from the womb,/or perish *mi-beten*/from the belly when I went forth?" (3:10) to challenge and correct him. The voice of G-d

particularly responds to 3:9, where Job said, "For it did not shut up *daltei vitni*/the doors of my womb…" The Divine voice now thunders rhetorically, "*Mi-beten* ***mi***/From **whose** womb?!" (38:29, emphais mine) For the ultimate answer is "*mi-beten Imi*/from the womb of my Mother" (G-d) who is the cosmic Mother as well as cosmic Father (*av l'matar*, 38:28) – both of whom are the one Womb from which all water-forms go out: rain, dew, ice, the waters of the deep. The waters here circle the earth but there is something else in there helping to form it:

> She will transform herself like *chomer*/clay under the seal,
> and they will stand like a *l'vush*/a garment. (38:14)

The clay, the garment called *l'vush* – these are both ancient cultural and rabbinic metaphors for the placenta, swaddling the infant in the ruddy clay of formation, forming her within the waters and turning over upon itself, in transformation. *Tit'hapech c'chomer hotam.* The verse begins "*tit'hapech,*" a *hit'pa-el* or the imperative of the feminine singular future tense. The root *hapach* means to overturn, but BDB points out that in the *hit'pa-el* it means to "turn this way and that, every way" or "turn over and over," like a fetus circling in utero, or like a placenta and cord wrapping around the baby, and in Job 38:14 it can mean to "transform oneself."[98] It is easy to see that the G-d speech in chapter 38 stands out amongst biblical passages as unique in describing G-d's own labor ("the whirlwind") drenched in amniotic waters, but within are the elements of placenta – the clay, the *l'vush*, the transforming-oneself-into-being organ. Even though the rabbis did not understand the full role of the placenta, they noted its presence here and stated it as early as the Tosefta, Brachot 2:14.

[98] *Hafach.* BDB (2015). pg. 245; *hit'hapech.* BDB. pg. 246.

Scholarship on Job's womb-world

Classical rabbinic literature was extremely conscious of Job's womb-related language and used it creatively through prooftexts when building rabbinic imagery particularly related to birth.[99] It is through the book of Job (38:9) that the rabbis took the dramatic leap of reading a placenta not only into a biblical text but into the creation of the world. However, modern Jewish academic scholarship has not explored or analyzed this fantastic rabbinic midrashic treatment of the placenta in rabbinic imagination stemming from the womb-material and imagery in Job. In fact academic scholarship on Job's womb-vocabulary and/or watery world of creation is scant overall. Compared to the extensive research on other readings of Job, such as a literary trial or Holocaust analogies about the silence or callousness of G-d in the face of unjust suffering (amongst the more popular readings), feminist readings of Job have only recently begun to explore the birth metaphors and womb language throughout the book, or its application to biblical literary theory or theology.

Two works which examine Job's womb-vocabulary are "Job and the Womb" by Lillian R. Klein (1995)[100] and "'Recess of the deep': Job's comi-cosmic epiphany" by Catherine Keller in

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[99] See Leviticus Rabbah 14:3 and 4, explored in this chapter on page ??, for repeated usage of verses from Job 38 and other birth-related Job verses.

Job 38:9 appears in *Tosefta Brachot* 2:14 where 38:9 is interpreted to mean the amniotic sac and placenta – "*b'sumi anan l'vusho*/when I placed the cloud (in) its garment – this is the *shefir*" and "*v'arafel chatulatu*/and the dense cloud (in) its swaddling cloth – this is the *shilya*." This interpretation of Job 38:9 is recapitulated again in the Palestinian Talmud Niddah 3/50 and in *Leviticus Rabbah* 14:4.

38:9 is also utilized in a number of Midrash Aggadah and Midrash Halachah (WHICH ARE THESE?) (*Leviticus Rabbah* 14:4, *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 9:2, *Otzar Hamidrashim. Ma'aseh Breishit U'ma'aseh Merkavah* 14).

[100] Lillian R. Klein, "Job and the Womb," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield Academic Press: England), 1995, pp.186-200.

her book *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (2003).[101] Klein's article calls attention to the systematic design of the womb passages in Job, whose importantce is compared against the dearth and backdrop of negative language assigned to and regarding actual females, particularly Job's nameless wife. Keller's " 'Recess of the deep': Job's comi-cosmic epiphany" in her book *Face of the Deep* addresses the literary structure connecting Job's perjorative womb speech in 3:10-11 to G-d's powerful speech about the primordial womb in chapter 38, with theological implications regarding chaos and creation and a theological innovation centered on the "tehomic" waters of creation.[102] Keller's postmodern work *Face of the Deep* deconstructs Judeo-Christian Western creation assumptions, that the world was created out of "nothing" with "the paternal Word," as she explores a radical revisioning of the creation as "a tumultuous jumble of neglected parts whose creation is material and labored."[103] The possibilities for re-imagining the placenta's role in this theological re-metaphorizing which affirms the female womb as the place of "primal oceanic chaos," are, surprisingly, unexplored in her most complex and fascinating work. However, her work is critical to exploring a placenta theology.

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[101] Catherine Keller. " 'Recess of the deep': Job's comi-cosmic epiphany." *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Routledge: New York), 2003, pp. 124-140.

[102] Catherine Keller's book *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Routledge: New York, 2003) might be the only comprehensive, theological work which explores the relationship of the womb in biblical literature and its foundational inter-relatedness in the corpus of Western thought and material regarding chaos and creation, what she calls the "*tehom*" or "the deep."

[103] Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, back cover.

A survey of womb-vocabulary in Job

The book of Job uses the word womb more than any other book of the Bible, with a focus on the amniotic waters and the womb as a place of creation/formation for both the individual and the world. Yet the placenta and fetus are only hinted. On its way towards establishing the word "womb" as the place where the male G-d literally forms and births the world[104] (in addition to just metaphorically), the book alternates between two words for womb, *rechem* and *beten*.[105] Three passages include a parallel sentence structure (chiasm) using both *beten* and *rechem* (or *rechem* and *beten*) (3:11, 10:18-19 and 31:15). This chiastic pairing of *rechem* and *beten* only occurs three other times in the Bible.[106] Klein describes the treatment of the womb-words in Job as a creation of a "carefully balanced text" in which "the words alternate so consistently that any time *beten* is mentioned, *rechem* follows, and vice versa."[107] This deliberate (and double) structuring emphasizes the importance of the womb-imagery in the text and asks that we take note.

> Why did I not die from the *rechem*/womb,
> or perish from the *beten*/belly when I went forth? (3:11)

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[104] Understanding this point as the real goal of the book of Job comes through my reading of Catherine Keller's analysis in her article " 'Recess of the deep': Job's comi-cosmic epiphany." *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Routledge: New York), 2003. pp. 124-140.

[105] While *rechem* is the word for the reproductive womb (the female body's uterus), *beten* is both the belly/womb or non-reproductive idiom of "belly," (stomach or gut) the source of physical or psychological hunger or strength. In Job, *beten* is used twice to refer to the latter.

[106] See Isaiah 45:3b, Psalms 22:11 and Psalms 58:4.

[107] Klein, "Job and the Womb," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, pg. 197.

Rechem is used five times in Job, typically with a prepositional prefix (*mi-rechem*/from the womb, *ba-rechem*, in the womb), and once one its own.[108] *Mibeten* or "from the belly/womb" appears six times in Job, twice as *mibeten imi*/"from the belly of my mother" (1:21, 31:18). The possessive *bitni* or "my womb/belly" is used fourfold, twice about Job's own paternity (and twice referring to physical hunger). In stark contrast, *rachmi* or "my uterus" (womb) is not used anywhere in the Bible, and specifically, a woman speaker never refers to her own womb this way. But through *bitni* Job possesses a womb of his own – a male womb, as does G-d in chapter 38, when *beten* or "womb-belly" references are carefully replaced with *rechem* or "womb-uterus" (38:8, 38:29) for the Divine womb. And although the placenta or other bodies of the womb are not cited in these latter texts, amniotic waters are. We must imagine though that the pregnant Divine womb, certainly, is (at least metaphorically) complete with all the regular bodies of the female pregnant womb.

On two occasions Job uses *mibeten* to bemoan his very birth (3:11, 10:19), and 10:19 goes so far as to say, *Mibeten la-kever uval*/"From the womb to the grave I should have been carried." Interestingly, *kever* or "grave" is used directly in the Talmud as a synecdoche for womb, while it is used indirectly in the book of Job where he wishes he had been born dead (a stillbirth) and

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[108] *Rechem* without a prefix or suffix is found 11 times in the Bible: Genesis 20:19; Exodus 13:2, 13:12, 13:15, 24:19; Numbers 3:12, 8:16, 13:15; and Isaiah 45:3b, Hosea 9:14 and Job 24:20.

The singular "*rechem*" citation in Job 24:20 is followed with a proverb-like verse about barrenness. Here Job speaks briefly between friends Elifaz and Bildad, then dramatically closes his paragraph with an outcry invoking the *rechem*/womb and its inverse "*avlah*" or injustice – a lack of *rachamim*/compassion, perhaps playing upon the word and associatons with womb:

> A *rechem*/womb will forget him, his sweetness is worm, he will not be remembered more;
> and injustice will break like a tree. (24: 20)
> A shepherd of a barren woman, she will not give birth,
> and a widow will not be made good. (24:21)

gone straight to the grave (*kever*) rather than suffer the deaths of his children in his lifetime. Job's connection between *rechem* (womb) to *kever* (grave) to stillbirth (wishing he had been born dead) correlates thematically with a number of references to *shilya* in the Talmud where the subject is determining the status of a mother after a stillbirth, such as XXXXX (CITE). In these cases, the *rechem* indeed becomes *kever.*

Mining Job's womb-vocabulary for a birth and placenta-centered theology

The careful balancing and placement of womb words and imagery is so deliberate, as rabbinic texts already noticed and built upon, that we must look more closely at its significance to mine the text for intimations of a latent birth and placenta-centered theology . For starters we see that the book of Job's womb-vocabulary works in the context of the book along with other birth-focused literary emphases related to G-d, including the Divine name *Shaddai* or "Almighty-Breast-Nurturer"[109] (used thirteen times in Job, more times than in the Torah itself),[110] a highly

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[109] I am indebted to Rabbi Arthur Waskow for this translation. For a non-academic interpretation of "Shaddai" see Rabbi Arthur Waskow, "The Breasted God," *Vayehi* Torah commentary, *The Shalom Center*, http://www.shalomctr.org/node/303.

Waskow's understanding that the Divine name "*Shaddai*" is related to breast-feeding and the Divine qualities of nurturing and sustaining the earth leads him to a theological crisis related to our current ecological despoliation of the earth. He writes:

> ...But if we look back at the blessing Jacob gives to Joseph, it is inescapable that the poet who wrote those lines meant: Shaddai is the Breasted One. Why else would the quatrain of this blessing so connect Shaddai with *shadai'im*?
>
> And if we look back at all the blessings in which Shaddai is over and over invoked, they are about fruitfulness and fertility. God is seen as Infinite Mother, pouring forth blessings from the Breasts Above and the Womb Below, from the heavens that pour forth nourishing rain, from the ocean deeps that birth new life.
>
> Just as Shaddai came first to open up the thickened cover of the foreskin, uncovering this ancient metaphor may open up for us some blocked-off, thickened coverings on our minds and hearts – "circumcise the foreskins of our hearts," as Torah has it (Deut. 10:16 and 30: 6). We Jews have prided ourselves on avoiding the "pagan" celebrations of the earthiness of earth, but the metaphor of Shaddai could recall for us what we have repressed.
>
> The ancient dichotomy between Jacob's God, Shaddai, who blesses with earthy fruitfulness and Moses' God, YHWH, who liberates from Pharaoh – that dichotomy needs to be transcended. For today it

stylized womb-parlance throughout Job as he cries out repeatedly to G-d, and the complex literary depictions of the genesis of the earth in terms of a human (or mammalian) "amniotic" birth centered around *tehom* as metonym for Divine birth (posited by Catherine Keller).[111] This depiction can be seen clearly in 38:16-17:

> Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
> or did you walk in the recesses of the *tehom*/deep?
> Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
> or did you see the gates of *tzalmavet*/the shadow of death (deep darkness)[112]?

In this couplet, the Divine speaker describes the place of both life and death – the place of formation/creation of the ocean and the world, and the darkened or shadowy place of death – as located beyond an entry or exit-way characterized by doors and gates. These dual descriptions sound very much like the womb and its gateway, the cervix, which opens, closes, seals, unseals, flattens, widens and then closes again throughout the course of the cycle of pregnancy. 38:16 in particular hones in on a viable birth as well as inner-workings of the womb while the fetus is in

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is Pharaonic global corporations that are pouring poison into the heavens and the earth, forgetting that it is one aspect of God's Self – the Breasted One – that we are poisoning, and so condemn ourselves to drink a milk that is laced with poison.

In the Aleinu prayer, we envision a glorious future by chanting the phrase, "*Letakken olam bemalkhut Shaddai.*" In the past we have understood this as: "To heal the world in the Kingship of the Almighty." But now we can draw on "Shaddai" as the Breasted One, and hear ourselves call out: "To heal the world through the Majesty of Nurture."

[110] The Divine name *Shaddai* is used 58 times in the Bible (including ten times in the Torah and thirteen times in Job). This name for G-d is often understood as a name associated with Divine procreative powers or breastfeeding (see footnote 9). The name Shaddai in biblical texts is notable for further research related to my topic.

Academic material on *Shaddai* and Job is minimal – see the scholarly article "'Shadday' in the Book of Job" by Eduard Nielsen in *Living Waters: Scandinavian Orientalistic Studies Presented to Professor Dr. Frede Lokkegaard on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday* (Museum Tusculanum Press, 1990), pp. 249-258.

[111] The book of Job develops a metonym for birth using the Genesis 1:2 word *tehom* according to Catherine Keller in her article " 'Recess of the deep': Job's comi-cosmic epiphany," *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, pp. 130.

[112] Keller, pg. 131. Keller translates *tzalmavet* here alternatively as "deep darkness" rather than the more typical "shadow of death."

formation, "in the recesses of the *tehom*/deep," while "gates of death" in 38:17 might refer to the un-fertilized egg and menstruation or human death (at any point in life as well as death directly from the womb – a stillborn or miscarriage).

Translating these "sources" of the waters of life in 38:16 includes a few possibilities:

> *a.*
> Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
> or did you walk in the recesses of the deep?
>
> *b.*
> Did you come into the spring-sources of the ocean
> or did you walk in the doors of deepest darkness?

For feminists seeking to establish new relational conceptions for G-d such as Womb, Spring, Fountain of life or the like (even G-d as *Shilya* – Source of Nourishment, Tree of Life, Lifeline, Formation), [113] this passage asserts not that G-d *is* a spring or the depth of darkness of creation (perhaps the Womb of the universe), but that G-d has ultimate access to and *possesses* these things, much like a woman contains a womb within her body. However, unlike a woman, the Divine figure holds the power power or has access to the power behind the springs, the womb, the openings and closings between life and death. (One could easily argure that a laboring

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[113] See Judith Plaskow, "God: Reimaging the Unimaginable," *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (HarperCollins Publishers: San Francisco) 1990, pp. 121-169.

Plaskow documents the Jewish feminist project of re-imaging G-d as "lover, friend, companion, cocreator" rather than heirarchical or patriarchal images such as the traditional father or king. She writes, "Images if God as fountain, source, wellspring, or ground of life and being remind us that God loves and befriends us as one who brings forth all being and sustains it in existence." (pg 165) The Divine name *Makor/Ma'ayan* or "spring/wellspring" is especially used by some feminist prayer groups and in some feminist prayerbooks because it transfers easily from "Melech" due to the similarity of the m-sound and its having two syllables. The image of spring as G-d however limits G-d to an object rather than the power or force behind the spring. Nonetheless, Plaskow asserts its value because "(t)his use of natural imagery for God is enormously important in a culture that has trampled on and violated the natural world and that threatens the whole biosphere with ecological and nuclear desctruction." (pg. 155)

woman has access to this power as well, although she is not solely in control of it.) If we compare this "power" to the fetus's formation, we might consider that G-d is behind the release of hormones from the fetus that tells the placenta and the mother's body what to do. Thus, rather than translating "*niv'chei-yam*" as springs or sources of the sea (in *a* above), we can understand the term as the more nuanced "spring-sources of the ocean" (in *b* above) , which Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon points out is related to words for flowing, loins and womb. [114] G-d then is not just the "spring" feeding the ocean but *is* the source of the spring itself. This takes us to the question of the role of the placenta in formation, for a theological examination of the placenta, like that of the "Spring" or "Womb," ultimately must ask is the placenta "G-d" or is it an organ, servant of G-d, or in the words of pioneer choreographer Fanchon Shur, "the intercom for G-d."[115]

What exactly are these "spring-sources of the ocean" in 38:16? If we imagine the womb, then we must imagine the placenta, for it is through the contoured face of the placenta that the mother's fluids are drawn and filtered and the amniotic sac is filled and replenished with water. This "amniotic" invocation of the *tehom* or deep, watery darkness from which the world is created (Genesis 1:2), and which answers Job's original cry for death, may be the book of Job's most significant contribution towards a placenta-inspired theology. Scholar Catherine Keller views this invocation as the essence of the book of Job, in which "shadows of ignorance begin to

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[114] *Nivchei-yam/* the 'spring sources' of the ocean. BDB translates *neivech* as spring or in Job 28:16 "sources of the ocean." BDB then cites K. Budde who suggests possible derivatives of "*nivchei*" from "*niv'ei*" meaning "flowing" and "*mah-bu'-ei*" meaning the "loins" or "womb of." Certainly "flow" and "loins/womb" have particular relevance to the womb (*beten/rechem*) metaphors in Job, particularly in chapter 38. (*Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.: Peabody, MA, 2001, 5033, pg. 614)

[115] Private conversation with Fanchon Shur, HUC-JIR President's apartment, Jerusalem, August 21, 2005. See her website www.growthinmotion.org.

suggest the bottomless mystery not only of death but of life,"[116] but Keller stops short of naming the placenta as being linked to or even being the source of this "bottomless mystery." This *tehom* of which Keller speaks includes not just the whirlwind from which G-d finally speaks in chapter 38, but the entire book laden with painful confusion in which, according to Keller, "chaos materializes, bursting wet from the womb (Job 38)" into what she neologizes as "a chaoplexity."[117] Keller's analysis of Job is not to address whether G-d is all-powerful, unjust or silent in the face of suffering. Rather, she maintains there is a great cohesion in the book's usage of birth-imagery, metaphor, and womb-language, which combine to create an overarching theology that affirms chaos as elemental to the Source of life and embraces (and even celebrates) this difficult complexity *because* the experience of giving birth is the primary act of the Divine, which is repeated again and again in the biorhythms of a life. Keller writes, "For all its maternal resonance, the countertradition attends to the terror of the chaos"[118] rather than the *awe* of its being. And yet, the book of Job is rarely analyzed or understood as a re-telling of the creation narrative or even as a presentation of the life-death-life cycle of Divine creative powers. Rather, Job primarily and historically has been viewed through the lens of a literary trial or doctrine about suffering. And yet, as a story of the "terror of the chaos" of birth and rebirth, Job is born and flourishes but then experiences a living death, only to be "reborn" again with a new life, in the form of revelation from G-d in the whirlwind and a new, restored life. His story only mirrors small and large-scale creation-destruction-creation stories in nature and the Bible, such as the flood of Noah in Genesis 6-9. We might even view the placenta itself as the ultimate life-death-

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[116]Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, pg. 131.

[117] Keller, pg. 192. Keller's "chaoplexity" is a mixture of chaos and complexity.

[118] Keller, pg. 131.

life[119] progenitor because it grows from the embryo into an incredibly strong and unique vital organ, then begins to break down towards the end of the pregnancy or around the fortieth week, and dies upon delivery – but its death, in a healthy pregnancy and delivery, signifies the birth of a human being. It is released from its function in the service of life. It dies but it experiences a rebirth in the life of the child beyond the womb.

Keller's assertion of a fear of "chaoplexity" can be applied to the male-dominated religious culture and literary history's relationship to women's bodies, birth and the unknown aspects of how the fetus develops. Both primary womb-passages of Job cited in this chapter (3:1-2, 10-12 and 38:1, 8-11, 28-30, as *I* and *II* translated on pages 2-3) reveal an enormous amount of terror, awe and confusion regarding the womb. The rabbinic (and general cultural) relationship to the *shilya* also reveals terror, awe and confusion as well. Keller's argument that Job is a masculine confrontation and eventually internalization of the "terror of the chaos" being birth can be seen as an encounter with the *rechem*, the womb – whether the cosmic womb or the womb of birth-mother. The womb itself, despite its being a bodily organ, is a fairly simple and elegant design. When pregnant, the womb stretches to a beautiful shape – round, pear-like, growing to contain life. The pregnant belly is taught and the shape inspires us to think about the baby floating in sublime maternal quietude. It is an ultimate and easy metaphor for G-d's warmth and protection. *Rechem*, *rachamaim* – compassion. In contrast, we have yet to address the physicality of a placenta: bloody, complicated, wet, with many bodily colors (blue and white veins, red blood) – otherworldly and some could argue the stuff of nightmares. A placenta is an organ which only

[119] See Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman* (Ballantine Books: NY) 1996. See Estes' book for a description of this basic "life-death-life" cycle which Estes, a Jungian analyst, asserts exists throughout folktales, dreams and literature.

serves the inside. By "the inside" I mean it is not covered in a layer of human skin that makes it "palatable" to the human eye. The womb, when its work is done, stays inside, and in time shrinks back to its compact size, awaiting another pregnancy and the cycle continues. But the placenta is ejected in a bloody swoosh. When it comes out after the fetus, the viewers are confronted with the raw, incredible workings of the human body and of formation itself. It is pure chaos controlled only by laws of nature or G-d. Women in birth feel them as they are delivered, and both women and midwives encounter "live" or pulsating, fresh placentas at birth: traditionally men were not present at birth and therefore did not encounter them in this way. But, the unborn and forming human being in the womb somersaults face to face with the placenta for weeks and months: it is probably the first and last thing the child sees or faces before it travels the long journey (a few inches) down the birth canal to the light of the world. The alternative relationship to the placenta that this thesis seeks to articulate is one of relational respect and ultimate protection and nurture. The placenta belongs to both men and women, all human beings, as the first physical encounter of being fed and sustained; it is our link to our mother's body, it is the layer before her body and it has something to do with G-d. Keller's assertion that "shadows of ignorance begin to suggest the bottomless mystery not only of death but of life"[120] begins not in ignorance but in fetal memory and imprint. The momentum behind classic literature of the womb seeks to re-member it.

Job encounters this complex, difficult to imagine or comprehend visage not through a re-membrance of the placenta but by calling forth a frightening combination of his birth-mother and "the womb" whenever he uses the phrase "my womb." In one instance, Job uses "my womb" in

[120] *Ibid.*, pg. 131.

reference to his mother's womb, taking complete ownership of his place of origin. "My womb" here is used much like one would casually refer to one's house, as in "my house." His dismissal of his mother's agency regarding her womb might be viewed as mysogenist in the context of the entire book which does not have an actually woman speaker except for six truncated words spoken by the nameless Job's wife (to which he condemns her).[121] In 19:17 Job uses "my womb" in reference to his wife's womb, thereby claiming her womb as his own, when he says, "I am loathsome to the [now dead] sons of *my womb*." Since Job does not have a uterus, we might expect a more figuratively accurate phrase such as "sons of my loins." But the procreative powers of the womb and placenta are in fact the manifestation of egg and sperm, entitling Job (as male) to claim (at least part) of the creation.[122] However, here Klein suggests, "Job alludes to his wife, his 'womb,' as his possession and thereby figuratively claims her womb as his."[123] In both of these texts, Klein maintains, "woman is reduced to a womb."[124]

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[121] Klein, pg. 198. Klein argues, "Although woman has no voice in the central poetic chapters of the book, she is not forgotten; ironically, the men keep talking about her in the poetry. ... the men allude to her more frequently as being an agent of life's grief by *giving birth*."

[122] Some aspects of rabbinic Judaism attributed conception entirely to the sperm or "seed." For a complete analysis of the different rabbinic views on conception and the formation of the fetus, see Gwynn Kessler. *The God of Small Things: The Fetus and its Development in Palestinian Aggadic Literature*. PhD dissertation (Graduate School of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America: New York) 2001. "This dissertaion demonstrates that rabbinic *aggadic* traditions on the fetus set forth a mutual relationship between God and the fetus. These traditions expand upon materials already set forth in the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, rabbinic *aggadic* traditions portray God as the primary creator and caretaker of the fetus – to the displacement of both the mother and father." (from Abstract) See also Appendix B, "*Shefir, Sandal*, and *Shilya*," pp. 312-339.

[123] Klein, pg. 198.

[124] *Ibid.*. Also, we might reiterate an earlier point that while Job refers to his "womb" as "*bitni*/my womb", a woman never refers to her own womb in the Bible. The word *rachmi* or "my womb" is never used in the Bible by either gender.

A male usurpation of the womb is not uncommon in biblical or rabbinic G-d imagery,[125] although Job's literary style is unique. What we must ask then is whether usurpation is negative (reducing a woman to a womb) or can it positively apply an essentially female construct to the universal human experience? Certainly when G-d is referred to liturgically as "*Av Harachamim*" (Father of Compassion, derived from "wombs") or by the Talmudic Aramaic name "*Rachamana*" (Compassionate One) or as the mother-eagle spreading its wings over its young and bearing them on pinions in Deuteronomy 32, the female-birth references serve to elevate the godhead. Yet these examples are incorporated exclusively into the male, both grammatically and imagistically, leaving little room for a female deity or female Divine voice to emerge. When Job usurps the female womb it is not "raise" into a universal human experience, (as I posited above) but into a universal male experience.

One could also argue that this male internalization of "the terror of the chaos" which is birth is what "women"[126] already experience through a combination of biological and psychosocial factors. Thus, this rendering is still a "male" experience trying to comprehend birth on a large-scale consciousness paradigm shift. Keller insists this shift is about re-understanding the word Genesis 1:2 word *tehom* as it appears in Job, securing a link between the literary watery deep-darkness of creation and actual birth from a woman's womb. For Keller, "womb" in Job becomes a synecdoche for *tehom*, which, as we have pointed out, she has called not just deep

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[125] Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*, pg. 88. Adler describes a process of "morphing" where "a flow of diverse images in literary texts," such as in Moses' farewell poem in Deuteronomy 32, for example, [when] God is imaged in rapid succession as a rock, a father, a mother eagle, a birth giver, and a warrior." Adler explains that the problem of "morphing" is that, at least in Bible and liturgy, the "female" characteristics such as "God as mother eagle and birth-giving rock retains grammatical masculinity" leading to an "output" of "totalized masculinity."

[126] I am speaking here in terms of culturally derived "womanhood" rather than every single woman's experience.

darkness but also "the terror of the chaos." Keller also points out an incredible connection between *rechem* and *tehom* made in the Qumran Targum. Rather than the standard "gushed from the womb/*rechem*," the Qumran Targum manuscript records an augmented version of 38:8 which reads "when it gushed from the ***rechem tehom*/womb of the deep**." Here the connection is made between the womb of formation of the fetus and the place of formation of the world.

Classical rabbinic literature's attunement to Job's womb-language

As stated earlier, the classical rabbis honed in on the Jobian preponderance of womb-language. In particular the rabbis focused on the incredible, unusual image of the gushing waters of the Divine womb, particularly surrounding Job 38:8-11, which describes G-d's creation from the waters of the *tehomic* world (to use Catherine Keller's neologism). In both Tosefta Brachot 2:14 and Leviticus Rabbah 14:4, the rabbis identify phrases from G-d's speech in chapter 38 (regarding the creation of the earth and heavens as a description of the fetus in utero) with specific references to the *shilya* and *shefir*. This is a dramatic twist: rather than turn a human birth-story into a metaphor for Divine birth, the rabbis turn the Divine birth into a human birth:

> "When I made the cloud its garment" (Job 38:11) – this is the *shefir*/amniotic sac;
> "and the dense fog its swaddling cloth" – this is the *shilya*/placenta.
> Tossefta Brachot 2:14; Leviticus Rabbah 14:4

The rabbis create a *mashal* from another *mashal* – the "garment" that is analogized through the cloud, and the swaddling cloth that is analogized through the dense fogs become the *shefir* and the *shilya*. The image then extends doubly: the *shefir* is now viewed as the garment on the fetus,

and the *shilya* is seen as the fetus's swaddling cloth. At the same time, we are given the image of the cloud covering concavely across the sky as a Divine *shefir*, and the dense fog hovering around the earth – perhaps the atmosphere or ozone layer itself (this has strong eco-feminist implications and applications) – is the Divine *shilya*. The rabbis move from the macro of universal womb into the micro of a single, average human birth (both considered equally amazing), giving us a theological construct urging to be expanded upon: How are we to consider the heavens in relationship to the earth? How are we to relate to atmospheric layers surrounding the earth now that the rabbis have determined they are the *shilya*, the placenta of the world? Or do the rabbis really go that far? How do these images inform us of the rabbis' spiritual and biological understanding of the function of the *shefir* and *shilya*, and how might this relate to a construct of G-d?

The rabbis' introduction of both the *shefir* and *shilya* into Job's chapter 38 Divine re-telling of the creation of the world causes us to think differently about the Jobian Divine voice as Creator, or specifically as the "birthing Father" or Parent. Here is something new for Scripture: as the "teller of the birth story," the Divine voice in chapter 38 reflects a common experience amongst new mothers – the desire to tell and the telling itself of the story of the birth, including her unique experience of emotions, challenges and difficulties. In her book *Created in Wisdom: The Symbiotic Relationship between Mother and Child: A Jewish Perspective*, Marilyn Tokayer explains that the experience of giving birth claims "an important place in a woman's psyche." She describes her anecdotal evidence:

> I have observed that for better or for worse, women have an overwhelming desire to relate in detail, their birthing experiences. This pertains equally to the mother of one or of twelve, to the woman of twenty as well as the elderly grandmother. The need to

> review and relate these experiences seems to be a universal one. One can conclude that the experience of giving birth, of bringing forth new life and laboring to do so, etches an extremely deep impression in a woman's mind.[127]

Typically this telling transpires among women, and it largely absent from the whole of the Bible. Tarja J. Philip observes and explains, "The (Bible's) birth giving women's experiences are barely reflected, either. It seems that childbirth was a matter for women, but men were those who wrote the texts, and they had only a general picture of childbirth."[128] Further, Philip observes, "No birth story was told in order to describe the birth itself and the birth practices."[129] Mothers in the Bible give few accounts that describe their labor experience. Rather, Philip maintains, birth stories in the Bible contain birth or labor details only when those details are relevant to the greater plot of the story (such as the identical surprise of Rebekkah and Tamar at having twins,[130] or the special attention given to describe which twin was born first).

The book of Job transforms the individual woman's story into the story of the Divine birth. Rather than viewing the book of Job as a story of suffering related to undeserving death and punishment, we have seen that the book is a powerful affirmation of the drama of birth and life. Like the biblical telling of the birth of the Jewish people through the crossing of the parted Red Sea waters in Exodus 15, chapter 38 of Job offers an alternate womb paradigm outwardly different from the creation narrative of Genesis 1. While in Exodus 15, the praise for this drama

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[127] Marilyn Tokayer, *Created in Wisdom: The Symbiotic Relationship between Mother and Child: A Jewish Perspective* (Feldheim: Jerusalem) 1995, pg. 27.

[128] Philip, pg. 88.

[129] *Ibid.*

[130] The phrase "*V'hiney tomim b'vitnah*/Behold, twins in her belly!" appears in both women's stories (Genesis 25:24 and 38:27). In Tamar's case (38:27) "*tomim*" is spelled slightly fuller as "*t'omim*" (additional *aleph* and *vav-cholom*).

comes from Moses and the children of Israel at the Song of the Sea and through Miriam's song and the women's dancing, in Job chapter 38, the expression comes through G-d's telling of the birth of the world and admonishment to Job for not having felt enough awe or praise for this event.

The Doors to the Womb

We saw in Job 38:16-17 that the image of the doors and gates to G-d's intimate knowledge of both the *niv'chei-yam* or "spring-sources of the ocean" and the *tehom/tzalmavet* or deepest darkness/shadow of death can be viewed as a clear metaphor for the opening to the Divine Womb. Leviticus Rabbah 14:4 uses this imagery and more to tell us some about a woman's body and how some aspects of pregnancy work. The midrash helps us examine the importance of using the images in Job 38 of "shutting up the doors" or "closing up the waters of the womb," images also found elsewhere in biblical literature. In the Flood story of Genesis 7:16, the waters burst forth in a kind of reversal of creation back to the *tehom* of Genesis 1:2. "And on this day *niv'k'u kol-ma'ayanot tehom rabbah*/all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens – they opened." (Genesis 7:11) This passage refers to the *tehom* as *tehom rabbah*, calling to mind the Qumran Targum's representation of "*rechem tehom*" for 38:8. The flood passage continues "*va-yisgor et ba-ado*/and he shut him in," describing G-d's sealing up the ark door from the outside. Rashi notes that the word *ba-ado* is unusual. Literally the text is telling us that G-d closed the ark up against the waters. But Rashi explains that "*b'ad*" is always used in Scripture to show something being held up against something else that is like it or

part of it. Before he lists three prooftexts with their sources, he gives an uncited example, "*b'ad kol rechem*" or "up against every womb." Thus, in case we were not aware, this Tehom, Flood and Ark scene is manifest or symbollic of every womb, perhaps the primal Womb. In a reversed arrangement, however, the waters are on the outside are the dangerous threat rather than being the protective waters on the inside. Rashi's explaination envisions G-d sealing up the "cervix" of the ark.

"*B'ad kol rechem*" appears in Genesis 20:18, "For G-d really stopped at every womb/*b'ad kol-rechem* of the house of Avimelech on account of this thing of Sarah the wife of Avraham." Here Rashi comments again:

> ***b'ad kol-rechem:*** before every opening [of the womb]

Here G-d punishes the women of the house of Avimelech with temporary infertility, again a sealing up against life from the outside. In both texts, Rashi seems focused on the site where the womb is shut, closed or sealed. Incredulously, however, Leviticus Rabbah 14:4 makes use of both life-giving and womb-shutting verses of Job (3:10 and 38:8), conflating the two images and verses for us to equate a woman's womb with G-d's and adding in to the mix the essential, protective bodies of *shefir* and *shilya*. This is one of the few cases where the rabbis bring up these bodies to affirm life rather than out of halachic necessity (i.e. a miscarried *shilya* indicates a fetus was formed even if it is not seen, and hence the birthing woman counts as a *yoledet*). Thus we see a vindication of G-d for *not* closing up Job's mother's womb at conception (as Job cries out for in 3:10), as this image is transformed into a life-giving force in Job 38:8 where it is rendered into Divine ecstasy recalling birthing the world. Keller maintains that in chapter 38,

"Job gets the chaos he asked for – wind-storm, monsters and all. His initial desire, 'to throw all creation back into primordial chaos,' is realized. With a twist. Whereas he summoned with his curses a chaos of death, what answers his call is the chaos of life."[131]

The rabbinic reading of Job 38 underlines its dimensions.We are left with a powerful metaphor for a relationship with G-d.

[131] Keller, pg. 129.

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often up to the edge of survival, and physicalizes her teachings both for her self and her students, who are often her friends.

My own longstanding personal metaphor for my creative process and that of my yearning to connect with and be part of a women's poetic, religious tradition (my understanding of the *shalshelet hakabbalah)* has been to go "Under the Red Quilt with Muriel" i.e. Muriel Rukeyser, the poet, whom I consider my spiritual mother. When I did not know what to do, Masha pushed me to go under the red quilt literally: she bequeathed me a red scarf to wrap myself with as I moved about the world; she instructed me to quell anxiety and confusion in favor of clarity and centeredness by sitting under my red tallis for ten minutes in silence every day (and she called me at the end of the ten minutes to say time was up); she gifted me with one of her large red paintings of a kabbalistic symbol, "your Placenta Painting," she said, to adorn my living space and inspire me to do this work.

Masha is a robin who takes broken creatures into her nest and will feed them from her own mouth, until the moment when she pushes them over the edge (perhaps because they are about to unwittingly push her there), and despite the bird's protestations, it realizes it has wings that open up to fly. She gave my dog and me her vestibule of a living room with its bird's eye view of the ocean and her brother's *z"l* red sleeping bag for nearly two months when I shored up in this city for rabbinical school and had no apartment in Los Angeles. When it was time to move on she literally handed me a roll of toilet paper for use in my new apartment down the hall (even as it was still being renovated by the maintenance crew), and said, "The bathroom there works."

Being Masha's friend is not without difficulty: I have struggled to accept her withdrawal from my life at certain transmigrations, much as the protagonist in *The Chosen* struggles with his father's silence and tough love. In opposition to her unbounded generosity in my formation comes the absence of Masha in my life as the woman giving birth to herself as a mother, in the unprecedented joy and meaning that unfolds for me personally, in the most mundane as well as the heights.

Masha is the agent of conception: perhaps the angel of the first forty days – the mystical letter "*Mem*" the kabbalists put forth as the "*Mem* [corresponding to the number 40] [initial] days of the formation of the fetus." Indeed, a few months after my son was born, I had a dream in which Masha was brought on an adorned bier to a great hall of a palace. Throngs of people cheered, while I alone felt there was something very wrong – that she was not breathing. In the dream the letter "*Mem*" appeared three times, as a mantra I figured out to say in order to sustain her and save her, a kind of spiritual breathy resuscitation. Upon waking, I perceived from my unconscious dream that Masha was in psychic trouble, and I needed to step forward as her friend, override my own hurts, and be there for her. When I went to her that week and relayed this dream as we sat with great difficulty over glasses of water on her (once our) front porch in Venice, she happily interpreted the "*Mems*" of my dream as initials to affirm her angelic connections, which she declared had come in my dream to transport me (out of fear) to come to her. She turned my interpretation around, refusing to accept my concern, and said, "What did you come here needing from me?"

Masha, that great "*Mem*" of formation, is the agent of conception. If I can be here in any way in this life to help her, it is to offer her her own place in my and others' and especially her own life, in the place upon the throne of labor and beyond, in the life of the birthling and mother: the place of fruition. And gratitude. Mostly, I offer her my gratitude.

Abba Shaul says, A person is created from the navel, and roots are sent out here and there.

Y. Niddah 3:3 (50d)