Ki Teitzei

Whenever a Jew who is not known to be a nice person achieves something significant in the public realm, you may hear another Jew say "He's a *mamzer*, but he's our *mamzer*." In other words, we don't forget the fact that the person is not a paragon of virtue, but we put it at the back of our minds because of the overriding pride we feel in a Jew's success. (We can talk about whether that is a good idea another time.) The word *mamzer* is used in that context as the equivalent of the English word 'bastard,' here meaning someone despicable. The Torah does not define its use of the word, but like the modern word 'bastard,' 'mamzer' relates to the circumstances of a baby's conception, not how that person will behave later in life.

This week's parshah prohibits a *mamzer* from taking part in communal affairs. While the term is not defined, in early rabbinic sources, a *mamzer* is understood as someone born out of an adulterous or incestuous relationship, a person whose very being is evidence of transgressions so serious that they carried a penalty of death. Accordingly, *mamzerim* were prohibited from marrying, unless they married someone in the same status, another *mamzer*.

In our time, the incidence of *mamzerut* has declined markedly, not because people are so much more chaste, but because the discomfort that category has caused led to its abandonment, in ways formal and informal. There is evidence that many traditional rabbis in the 20th century hinted that a *mamzer* should go where they were not known, and marry without mentioning their status. The Conservative movement has officially declared *mamzerut* inoperative in all circumstances.

We no longer penalize those whose birth story is not one of pride, but we have retained the word that tells that story. The term *mamzer* is the last remnant of a biblical and rabbinic culture that has changed and, in changing, left its original meaning behind. When we use the word now, it is not the Torah's *mamzer,* or the rabbis' *mamzer*; it is our *mamzer*.