

Parashat Tazria

The “Sin” of Giving Birth

Before delving into the myriad laws of the special skin condition of *tzara'at*, the *parashah* begins with a brief treatment of the *tumah* (ritual impurity) of a woman who has just given birth. After a waiting period of purification, she brings an *olah* (fire-offering) and a *chataf* (sin-offering) for atonement (Leviticus 12:6-7). The age-old question is what sin has she committed that requires a *chataf*?¹ To the contrary, has she not fulfilled the very first commandment in the Torah, to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28)? Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik cited a number of approaches before presenting his own.

One approach does not attribute it to the childbirth per se, but to an incidental sin. The Talmud says, “When a woman crouches to give birth, she bursts out and swears, ‘I will never have relations with my husband again.’”² The Ramban explained that she requires atonement because she cannot fulfill such an oath, on account of her marital obligations.³

Another approach does link it to childbirth, but the sin was not committed by this particular woman. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz in his *Keli Yakar* said that the pain of childbirth and the menstrual cycle are the legacy of Chava’s original sin. The source (מקור) of woman’s travail in childbirth and of the blood afterwards would not exist had Chava not eaten the forbidden fruit. Every Jewish mother must, after having given birth, seek atonement for the vestiges of that sin. This accounts for the wording of the verse: “[the Kohen] atones for her and she becomes purified of the source of her blood (ממקור דמייה)” (Leviticus 12:7).⁴

The End Justifies the Means

In what sense, inquired the Rav, does Chava’s sin persist and require continual redress? To understand this requires examining the sin itself. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge imparted knowledge. One glance at the Book of Proverbs reveals that the acquisition of wisdom is one of man’s noblest pursuits. Why, then, did God prohibit Adam and Chava from eating from the tree? According to the Rav, it is because God wanted mankind to exert itself in the pursuit of knowledge. To be handed it on a silver platter, or easily ingested in prepackaged form, would be a violation of His will. The mother still aglow from pregnancy requires atonement because she lacks an appreciation of the complicated process and exertion that brought her child into the world. In this sense she has recommitted the sin of Adam and Chava, who preferred not to have to work to become wise.⁵

When we set out to achieve a goal, every step of the way is important. The effort and toil that one invests in pursuit of something is itself enriching. Not only the end but the means

¹ See Abarbanel ad loc.

² *Niddah* 31b.

³ Ramban on Leviticus 12:7.

⁴ *Keli Yakar* on Leviticus 12:2.

⁵ *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 3:77–78.

is of value. This critical lesson, learned from the offering a *chatat*, will hopefully guide the mother in raising her child.⁶

The Origins of Man

Nechama Leibowitz, a contemporary of the Rav, was one of the past generation's most outstanding teachers of Torah. She offered her own penetrating insight into the necessity of a *chatat* after childbirth. *Midrash Yelamdenu* says:

“If a woman conceives” – that is in accordance with the verse, “a man that is born of woman” (Job 14:1). [...] If you had seen from what impurity and filth he came, you would not have been able to look at him! [...] Indeed Akavia ben Mahalalel stated: Regard three things and you will not come to iniquity. Know whence you came, whither you are going, and before whom you are destined to give account and judgment....

Nechama Leibowitz argued that this Midrash drives home “the utter insignificance of man before the awe-inspiring majesty of his Maker.” The prophet Yeshayahu beheld that majesty and heard the voice proclaiming: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isaiah 6:3). What was his reaction? “Woe is me for I am undone; because I am a man of *tamei* (impure) lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of *tamei* (impure), lips for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts” (Isaiah 6:5).

After childbirth, the mother is *tame'ah* (impure) and must bring a *chatat* because the miracle of a child growing within her made her deeply conscious of God's greatness and her own human insignificance. She faced the stark reality that “dust, ashes, and impurity” are man's lowly origins.⁷

Enforcing Discipline

The Rav perceived another striking association between the sin of Chava and the enduring *tumah* that lasts weeks after childbirth detailed in *Parashat Tazria*. According to the Midrash, Adam and Chava ate from the Tree of Knowledge on Friday. They could have waited a few more hours until the onset of Shabbat, at which point the fruit would have become permitted for consumption.⁸ The Rav cited an exposition of this from *Likutei Torah* of the Alter Rebbe, Shneur Zalman of Liady. There, he writes that as a punishment for Adam's impetuousness man must wait three years before he can eat from a newly planted tree. Women must count weeks after childbirth until they can become pure and resume physical contact with their husbands on account of Chava's lack of discipline.⁹

⁶ See further *Parashat Bereshit*, “Growth Rings of the Fruit Tree.”

⁷ Leibowitz, *Studies in Vayikra*, 105–107. When reading this insight, it struck me that it was articulated by a woman who, sadly, was not blessed herself to give birth to a child. It was reported by a close student of hers that “all of her achievements notwithstanding, the childless Leibowitz confided that she would have given it all up to have children” (Yael Unterman, “Nehama Leibowitz,” <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/leibowitz-nehama> [accessed July 12, 2021]).

⁸ *Leviticus Rabbah*, 25:2.

⁹ *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 3:77–78.

The Rav commented that many mitzvot teach us the importance of discipline, patience, and delayed gratification. In one of his celebrated articles, he explored Halachah's emphasis on disciplined behavior, and cited the powerful example of newlyweds suddenly forced to refrain from intimacy due to the onset of niddah:

Bride and bridegroom are young, physically strong and passionately in love with each other. Both have patiently waited for this rendezvous to take place. Just one more step and their love would have been fulfilled, a vision realized. Suddenly the bride and the groom make a movement of recoil.¹⁰

The bride and groom must now wait almost two weeks before they may have physical contact again. The Rav goes on to valorize the withdrawal:

The heroic act did not take place in the presence of jubilating crowds; no bards will sing of these two modest, humble people. It happened in the sheltered privacy of their home, in the stillness of the night. [...]

This kind of divine dialectical discipline is not limited to man's sexual life, but extends to all areas of natural drive and temptation. The hungry person must forego the pleasure of taking food, no matter how strong the temptation; men of property must forego the pleasure of acquisition, if the latter is halachically and morally wrong. In a word, Halachah requires of man that he possess the capability of withdrawal.¹¹

Exploring the Rav's Insight

The Rav posited that the process of working towards a goal has inestimable value. Not only did the Rav appreciate the toilsome process for acquiring Torah, *ameilut ba-Torah*, but he lived it.¹² The following anecdote, told by the Rav's eminent student Rabbi Mordechai Feuerstein, is emblematic of a lifetime of indefatigable striving and absolute dedication in Torah study:

One evening during my college years, I accompanied my father who had some documents to deliver to the Rav at his 10 Hancock Road address in Brookline. As prearranged, at 10PM we rang the doorbell, and Rebbetzin Soloveitchik answered the door. My father explained that the Rav had requested the documents we had brought. Mrs. Soloveitchik seemed very subdued and serious.... She expressed her regrets and plaintively explained, "He hasn't left his desk all day. Not even to eat or drink. He came home from the minyan this morning and said he was troubled by a difficult Rashi. He went into his study fourteen hours ago and still hasn't come out." The envelope was left in her keeping and we walked to the car in utter silence, with a heightened conception of *ameilut ba-Torah*.¹³

¹⁰ Soloveitchik, "Catharsis," 45.

¹¹ Ibid., 46.

¹² See, e.g., Rashi on Leviticus 26:3 (quoting *Torat Kohanim, parsheta* 1:2), that the Torah requires its study to be accomplished through exertion.

¹³ Eleff, *Mentor of Generations*, 264.