



RABBI AARON

Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

Childbirth's Pain and Profundity

The parsha begins with a mystifying set of laws concerning a woman who has just given birth. It dictates that if she gives birth to a son, for example, she is “unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly cycle.” She must then wait another extended period of time before coming in contact with holy objects or appearing at the Temple.

At that time she is then required to bring offerings in the Temple. One of them being a sin-offering: “...a young common dove, or turtle dove for a sin offering. [The Priest] shall offer the sacrifice before God and atone for the woman...” (*Vayikra* 12:6-7).

The problem is obvious. We could understand if she had to bring a thanksgiving offering, giving thanks for her recovery and for her child. But that is not what she is commanded. Instead she must bring a burnt offering - normally brought for a

serious offense - together with a sin offering. What though is her offense? She has just fulfilled the first commandment in the Torah, to be fruitful and multiply” (*Bereshit* 1:28)¹

Rabbis and scholars over the millennia have addressed this intriguing question. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik adds his unique perspective (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Vayikra*, pp. 77-78):

The Rav first cited the *Ramban* who quotes the Talmud. The mother seeks atonement after birth for the following reason: “When a woman crouches over to give birth, she bursts out and swears, “I will never have relations with my husband again.” (*Commentary of Ramban* 12:7). While in the pangs of childbirth, the mother swears not to have relations with her husband so that she would never again have to undergo such excruciating pain. She requires atonement since, due to her marital obligations, her oath cannot be fulfilled.

The Rav then cited a very different, ostensibly mystical, interpretation offered

1 Why did the Torah enjoin the woman who gives birth to bring a sin- and burnt offering? Surely a burnt-offering has no place in this context, whilst she did not deserve to have to bring a sin-offering, since there is no iniquity that the woman in childbirth committed to warrant such a procedure! (*Abrabanel* 12:6)

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by the *Kli Yakar*, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (1550-1619) as to why the new mother brings a sin offering. His profound explanation focuses on one peculiar word in the verse; the Torah says that the mother makes atonement ‘*mi’mekor dameha*, ‘for the source of her blood’. The verse could have simply said she atones for the blood, what does *mi’mekor*, ‘the source of her blood’ refer to?

The *Kli Yakar* explains that a woman’s pain of childbirth as well as a woman’s monthly cycle of menstruation is rooted in the sin of Eve in the Garden of Eden in eating from the Tree of Knowledge. The *mekor*, the source of her blood and her travails in childbirth would never have come to fruition without the sin on that fateful day in the Garden. Therefore every Jewish mother, after giving birth, needs to seek atonement for that sin that still persists.

Asked Rabbi Soloveitchik, in what way does Eve’s sin persist?

Let us look at her sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge and propose the following question: If attaining wisdom and knowledge is one of man’s most noble endeavors why, then, did God prohibit Adam and Eve from eating of the Tree of Knowledge? The answer is because God wanted man to exert effort to attain knowledge; effortlessly gaining knowledge violates His will.²

The effort and toil that one puts forth towards any goal is of great value. The process itself is enriching. It is not only

reaching the destination; it is the journey that is ennobling. The mother still requires atonement because she lacks an appreciation for the process that has brought her to this day; a rejection reminiscent of Adam and Eve when they refused the exertion required to attain knowledge. Rabbi Soloveitchik is suggesting that this is symbolic of mankind’s underappreciation of the process we engage in when we set out to achieve a goal. Every step of the way is important. Moreover, this critical lesson, now conveyed to the mother, will hopefully guide the mother in raising her child.

This notion in the context of Torah learning, is known by the phrase - *ameilut be’Torah*. The Rav not only believed in this idea - he lived it. The following anecdote is emblematic of a lifetime of relentless striving and dedication in his Torah study:

Rabbi Mordechai Feuerstein, an eminent student of the Rav, relayed that “one evening during my college years, I accompanied my father who had some documents to deliver to the Rav at his home 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 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 *minyan* this

2 See Rashi on *Vayikra* 26:3 who indicates that Torah study must be accomplished through exertion.

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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 baTorah*." (*Mentor of Generations*, Eleff, p. 264)

Returning to the law of a mother following childbirth, the Rav perceived another striking association between the sin of Eve in the Garden and the need for atonement. As we see in the opening verses of Parshat Tazria, the Torah requires a very lengthy period of waiting until a woman can become purified after childbirth. This also can be traced to the first sin. According to the midrash (*Midrash Rabbah, Kedoshim*), Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge on Friday, and had they waited a few more hours until the Shabbat, the fruit of the tree would actually have been permitted to be eaten. The Rav pointed to the sublime writings of the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rebbe Shneur Zalman of Liadi who expounded on this idea at the opening to parshat *Kedoshim* (*Likutei Torah*): As a punishment for Adam's impetuosity man must wait three years before he can

eat from a newly planted tree (the law of *orlah* found in *Vayikra* 19:23). Likewise a woman must wait many days until her *niddah* impurity is removed and can return to physical contact with her husband.

The Rav commented that a plethora of the mitzvot in the Torah teach us the importance of discipline and the ability to wait. In one of Rav's celebrated articles he explored the Halacha's emphasis on disciplined behavior. There he also cites the powerful example of newlyweds who are suddenly forced to refrain from intimacy with the onset of the wife becoming a *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 be fulfilled, a vision realized. Suddenly the bride and the groom make a movement of recoil.'

The bride and groom must now wait and wait for many days until they are permitted to have any physical contact.

'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, Halacha requires man that he possess the capability of withdrawal. " (Tradition, 1978, 'Catharsis' pp. 45-46) ■



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