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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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PARASHAT TAZRIA

**The Impurity of the Birthing Mother and Her Offering**  
By Rabbanit Sharon Rimon

The *parshiyot* of *Tazria* and *Metzora* deal with the laws of ritual purity and impurity which Bnei Yisrael must observe now that the *Mishkan* stands at the center of the camp, such that the Divine Presence rests in their midst.

The categories of impurity that are addressed are:

- \* the birthing mother (chapter 12)
- \* *tzara'at* (chapters 13-14)
- \* *zav* (a man who experiences an emission) (chapter 15:1-15)
- \* *zava* and *nidda* (menstrual and irregular bleeding) (chapter 15:19 and on)

In this *shiur* we will be discussing the first category: the impurity of the birthing mother.

God spoke to Moshe, saying:

Speak to Bnei Yisrael, saying: A woman who conceives seed and gives birth to a male, shall be impure for seven days; like the days of her menstrual sickness shall she be impure.

And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

And she shall retain the blood of her purification for thirty-three days; she shall touch nothing that is sanctified, nor shall she come into the Sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed.

And if she bears a female, she shall be impure for two weeks as in her menstruation, and for sixty-six days she shall retain the blood of her purification.

And when the days of her purification for a son or for a daughter are completed, she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove as a sin offering, to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, to the *kohen*.

And he shall offer it before God and make atonement for her, and she shall be purified from the issue of her blood; this is the teaching for a woman who bears a male or female child.

And if she is unable to obtain a lamb then she shall take two turtledoves, or two pigeons – one as a burnt offering and the other as a sin offering, and the *kohen* shall make atonement for her, and she shall be purified. (*Vayikra* 12:1-8)

The above unit gives rise to many questions,<sup>[1]</sup> but in this *shiur* we shall concern ourselves mainly with one: **why must a mother bring a sin offering after giving birth?**

The fact that the Torah refers to this sacrifice as a "sin offering" suggests that it is brought as atonement for sin.

In *Parashat Vayikra*, the Torah describes the instances where a sin offering must be brought:

Speak to *Bnei Yisrael*, saying: If a soul should unintentionally transgress any of God's commandments concerning that which should not be done, and perform one of them,

(Or) if the *kohen* who is anointed sins, bringing guilt upon the people, then he shall sacrifice for his sin which he committed a young bullock without blemish, to God as a sin offering.<sup>[2]</sup> (*Vayikra* 4:2-3)

There is also the general principle stating that "a negative commandment whose deliberate violation is punishable by *karet*, is [atoned for], when committed unintentionally, by means of a sin offering." In other words, a sin offering makes atonement for a sin committed unintentionally, where a person who committed that same sin intentionally would be punishable by *karet*.

What is the sin of the birthing mother?

Thus, when we read here that a birthing mother is obligated to bring a sin offering, we are puzzled: what is the sin of every birthing mother, requiring that she bring a sin offering?

The commentators offer various opinions on this question. The first answer, offered by *Chazal* and echoed by some of the commentators,<sup>[3]</sup> is that during childbirth the woman swears that she will no longer have relations with her husband. On account of this "oath" she must bring a sin offering:

The disciples of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai asked him: Why does the Torah command a woman after childbirth to bring an offering?

He answered them: When she crouches to give birth, she determinedly swears that she will no longer have relations with her husband; therefore, the Torah says that she must bring an offering. (*Nidda* 31b)

Ramban explains as follows:

Our Sages taught (*Nidda* 31b) that when a woman crouches to give birth, she determinedly swears: "I shall no longer have relations with my husband." What this means, in essence, is that because her pain drives her to utter this oath, and her oath is not possible to honor anyway, since she is obligated to her husband, therefore the Torah seeks to offer her atonement for that passing mood. The thoughts of the blessed God are deep, and His mercy is abundant, in seeking to exonerate His creatures.

Ramban understands the sin as the uttering of an oath that she is unable to fulfill. However, from the Gemara it would seem that the sin lies in the woman's very thought of separating from her husband or avoiding giving birth to any more children.

This raises an obvious question: how can it be known in advance that every woman, during childbirth, will swear that she will no longer have intimate relations with her husband? This certainly represents a possible situation, but surely it is not necessarily and inevitably true! This being the case, why is the commandment not limited to those women who declare such an oath?

Furthermore, even a woman who makes such an oath during childbirth would probably not invoke God's Name, such that her oath has no validity in any case. Why, then, is her

utterance regarded in such a severe light – to the extent that it requires a sin offering for atonement?

A different explanation for the obligation is offered by Abarbanel:

... Since there is no-one who undergoes pain and suffering in this world without having sinned... and the birthing mother suffers pain and danger while she is upon the birthing stones; therefore, she would bring a sin offering....<sup>[4]</sup>

Abarbanel suggests that the sin has nothing to do with what the woman says or does during the birth. Rather, the pain of childbirth itself testifies that she has somehow transgressed, and the sin offering is meant to atone for this sin.

This approach raises several difficulties. Firstly, taken to its logical conclusion, it implies that anyone who undergoes suffering must bring a sin offering for the (unknown) sin that is the cause of his suffering. However, the Torah makes no such demand. Why, then, is the birthing mother singled out in her suffering and required to bring the sacrifice?

Secondly, we may point out that according to the Torah, a person who is saved from danger is obligated to bring an offering of thanksgiving. Hence, it would seem more appropriate that the woman who has emerged safely from childbirth should bring an offering of thanksgiving, not a sin offering! (Today, a woman who has given birth recites the *ha-gomel* blessing, which expresses the same idea that was represented by the thanksgiving sacrifice.)

A third difficulty with Abarbanel's explanation is that the Torah tells us that the pain of childbirth is not associated with the sin of a particular woman, but rather was decreed for all women at the time of the sin of Adam and Chava.

Indeed, Recanati (commenting on verse 6) asserts that the sin offering is not brought as an atonement for the personal sin of the woman who has given birth, but rather as atonement for the sin of Adam and Chava. The same view is adopted by Rabbeinu Bechaye, who writes:

... We might explain that this sacrifice is not offered for her [the woman's] own sin, but rather for her matriarch [Chava], who was the "mother of all living things"... therefore the Torah obligates her to bring a sacrifice to atone for that primal sin....

Each of the three views cited above (the Midrash, Abarbanel, and Rabbeinu Bechaye) points in a different direction in tracing the sin that entails the bringing of the sin offering. Yet, a fundamental problem of perception confronts us when attempting to identify with any of these explanations. Quite simply, we do not think about childbirth in terms of "sin"; rather, we perceive it as a positive process. Is it not possible, then, that the sin offering brought by the women after childbirth is not the result of sin, but rather for some other reason?

The Sifra comments on our verse as follows:

Wherever a sin offering is brought for a sin, the sin offering is mentioned before the burnt offering. Here, since it is not brought for a sin, the burnt offering is mentioned before the sin offering.

According to the Sifra, there are instances in which a sin offering is not brought in the wake of sin,<sup>[5]</sup> and the offering of the woman after childbirth is one such instance. But if there is no sin, why is a sin offering required at all?

Ramban (commenting on 12:7) suggests that the sin offering is a ransom, of sorts, for the woman's healing and purification:

"...and he shall offer it before God and make atonement for her, and she shall be purified from the issue of her blood" – meaning that she offers a ransom for her soul before God to be purified from the issue of her blood. For a woman during childbirth experiences a sort of soiling, corrupting issue. After she has completed the days of purification, or during the time that the infant develops as a male or female, she brings a ransom for her soul in order to recover from her issue and to be purified, for the exalted God heals all flesh and performs wonders.

### Impurity of the Woman After Childbirth

If we examine the portions of *Tazria* and *Metzora* together, we note that the *metzora*, the *zava* and the *zava* are likewise commanded to bring a burnt offering and a sin offering in order to achieve purification.

And the *kohen* shall offer them – one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering, and the *kohen* shall make atonement for him before God owing to his issue. (15:15)<sup>[6]</sup>

The woman after childbirth is one of the categories of impurity discussed in the *parshiyot* of *Tazria* and *Metzora*, and in each such category we find a sin offering that is brought not because of sin, but rather as part of the process of ritual purification. The woman after childbirth, likewise, undergoes a process of purification, part of which involves bringing the offering.

The concept of impurity is abstract and therefore difficult to define. In the world of pure material, there is no impurity. Likewise, in the spiritual world that is completely cut off from the material world, there is no impurity. Impurity is manifest only in the connection between these two worlds. And what is common to all types of impurity is that they are brought about specifically through death.<sup>[7]</sup> Impurity comes about where there is a separation of material from spirit. It is this parting that the state of impurity signifies.

The process of childbirth is the opposite of death. During birth, a new connection is made between the material world and the spiritual world, and a new life comes into being. Why, then, does this situation cause impurity?

The infant that is born, representing the new connection between material and spirit, is not impure. It is the mother who is rendered impure – not because of the newborn infant, but because of a "death" in a different sense. Firstly, while the infant has begun a new life, the mother has lost a life which, until now, has been contained inside her. Secondly, at the start of the embryo's development, some of the embryonic cells become the placenta, which takes root in the womb and nourishes the fetus during the pregnancy. At birth, the infant – emerging into new life – parts from the placenta. The placenta, which had started off as some of the embryonic cells, and later nourished the developing embryo and fetus and allowed it to grow, leaves the body, and in a certain sense one may say that it is dead.<sup>[8]</sup>

Thus, the birth of the living infant is accompanied by a certain sort of "death," and this is the source of the birthing mother's impurity.

Nevertheless, the impurity of a birthing mother is different from the other categories of impurity. All of the others are caused by a pathological state, while the impurity of this

woman is brought about in a positive and desirable way, through the creation of new life – which itself is the opposite of impurity.

It is perhaps for this reason that the Torah chooses to address the woman after childbirth first, before the other categories of impurity, as Rabbi Elchanan Samet explains:<sup>[9]</sup>

... Had the unit on the birthing mother appeared in between the impurity of *tzara'at* and the impurity of the *zav*, or after these categories, this would imply that birth, too, is an unhealthy or abnormal situation. Not wishing to create such an impression, the Torah discusses the birthing mother first, before we hear about the other forms of impurity that arise from abnormal situations affecting a person's body. From the fact that the birthing mother is mentioned first we learn that a situation of impurity is not necessarily negative....

Thus, a sin offering is brought not only for sin, but also as part of a process of purification. The woman after childbirth brings a sin offering as part of her process of purification.

### Submission to the Powers of the Body

A different explanation for the sin offering brought by the birthing mother is offered by Seforno, commenting on verse 8:

“And he shall make atonement for her” – for so long as her impurity flows, her thoughts will all be directed to matters of the vessels of seed and their action, and she will not be worthy of [entry into] the Sanctuary and its sanctified things, until she brings her atonement and directs herself towards the Sanctuary.

Rabbi Shimon Raphael Hirsch develops this idea further:

“*Tazria*” – [derived from the word] *zera* (seed) – the primary meaning refers to the seed of a plant... The term *tazria* is to be found, aside from here, only in [Bereishit 1:11-12](#). There it denotes the plant's activity to maintain its species, while here it indicates the activity of the mother to form human seed. Hence, this activity is perceived in the purely bodily sense, as a physiological process. Thus, this very expression expresses the significance of the impurity that is involved here. The lofty and noble deed, upon which the future of humankind depends, and in which all the creativity of femininity finds its purpose, is the mother's act for the sake of the human being that is coming into existence. But this is nothing but a purely bodily act. A person is formed, grows, and comes into existence in the same way as a plant... with a lack of freedom... now, the mother at this point [the birth] submits, with passivity and suffering, to the physical power of the laws of nature, and this – in the midst of the lofty process that is the essence of her entire purpose in the world. For this reason, she must now refresh the consciousness of her moral destiny. Only when this sensory impression is over will she return to the Sanctuary with the vow of an offering. With moral freedom she will fulfill her destiny as a woman and as a mother – with all of its difficult moments, with all the suffering.

According to Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch and Seforno, the sin offering atones for submission to the bodily process that is so powerful that it almost leads to forgetting one's lofty spiritual purpose.

But can this situation truly be regarded as a sin?

Seforno and Rabbi Hirsch do not assert that it is a sin. Rather, they perceive it as a situation that is problematic, not ideal, and therefore the woman must make atonement for it, in order to be worthy of returning to the Sanctuary.

### Collision

Childbirth is a very powerful process, and also a complex one. On one hand, it is a process of creation, of forming new life. It is a process in which the mother is God's partner in bringing life into the world. It represents a new connection between body and soul.

On the other hand, this process entails a powerful bodily experience, accompanied by great difficulties. The woman is subject to a mighty physical process that takes control of her, as it were, pushing aside the spirit's control over the body.

In addition to this complexity, there is the paradox discussed above: on one hand, an infant is born, and new life is created. On the other hand, this process involves impurity.

The birth process involves a huge, mighty collision between the material world and the spiritual world. It is no coincidence, it seems, that this collision comes about specifically amidst the process of birth. The creation of man is bound up with the special combination of material body, flesh and blood, and spiritual soul – the image of God. This combination is no simple matter, and it is therefore specifically at childbirth that the two worlds collide with such force. The woman is in the middle of this collision, a partner in this clash.

Perhaps the sin offering is brought for this very collision. During childbirth, the mother is very close to God; at the same time, she is in the throes of a forceful bodily process, and even in a state of impurity. The combination between these two states is out of the woman's control, and hence we cannot speak of any “sin” here. Still, it is a problematic situation, a lack of completion. She is “entering the Sanctuary,” as it were, in a state of impurity, and perhaps it is for this reason that she must bring her sin offering.

In light of what we have said above, let us now revisit the commentaries cited above.

### “Determinedly Swears...”<sup>[10]</sup>

The woman experiences most powerfully the physical strain that her body endures, to the extent that she may sometimes become disconnected from the greatness of the process, and feel herself prepared to forego any further pregnancies.

The Midrash describing the woman swearing that she will no longer have intimate relations with her husband may be understood as describing a situation in which the woman has experienced her travail so powerfully, and the bodily process has so overtaken her experience, that it is no longer possible for her to perceive the tremendous positive side. She cuts herself off from the grandeur of creating life, and does not wish to repeat the experience. Perhaps the Midrash is teaching us that she must bring a sin offering for this situation, in which the body (and its travail) conquers and dominates the spirit.

### “To Atonement for the Primal Sin”<sup>[11]</sup>

The suffering in childbirth is the result of the sin of Adam and Chava:

And to the woman He said: I shall greatly multiply your pain in childbirth; in sorrow shall you bring forth children... (Bereishit 3:16)

Were it not for the sin, childbirth would have been simpler and easier.

In light of what we have said above, we may now perhaps understand why the woman's punishment is specifically that "in sorrow shall you bring forth children." The sin of Adam and Chava was the first sin, the first expression of the disparity and incompatibility between the ideal, Godly world and the human reality. It expressed man's inability to live up to Divine demands completely. In the wake of this sin, it becomes clear that the creation of man is not a simple matter; there is great complexity in this creation that combines body and soul.

From this point onwards, every birth of a new person is another collision between the material world and the spiritual world. This collision manifests itself in the pain and travail of childbirth.

Perhaps the woman brings a sin offering for the sin of Adam and Chava (as suggested by Reanati and Rabbeinu Bechaye), in which case its significance is that it comes to atone for the conflict between the material world and the spiritual world – a conflict that arises from man's inherent complexity and that is expressed so forcefully specifically at his birth.

## Summary

We have examined three different explanations as to why a woman who has given birth must bring a sin offering:

- a. The sin offering is meant to atone for some sin (either her oath that she will bear no more children, or the sin of Adam and Chava, or some other sin that her travail in childbirth led her to commit)
- b. The sin offering is not meant as atonement for sin, but rather represents part of the process of purification. (We explained that the birth process involves a certain "death," and therefore the woman becomes impure)
- c. The sin offering is brought not because of some sin that the woman has committed, but rather because of the necessary and inevitable collision between the spiritual world and the material world – a collision that is inherent to the creation of man. The sin offering atones for the incomplete and imperfect situation in which all mortals exist, and which finds its most powerful expression at the moment of encounter between the body and the soul – at birth.

## The Sin Offering of the Nazir

Just as the sin offering of the new mother requires some explanation, so too the sin offering of the *nazir* is perplexing:

Speak to *Bnei Yisrael* and say to them: when a man or a woman makes a special nazirite vow, to separate unto God...

Throughout the days of his separation he is holy unto God...

And he shall offer his sacrifice to God: one lamb of the first year without blemish as a burnt offering, and one ewe lamb of the first year as a sin offering, and a one ram without blemish as a peace offering. (Bamidbar 6:2,8,14)

A *nazir* is a person who seeks to draw close to God, to sanctify himself, and therefore he separates himself from the pleasures of this world. The Torah describes such a person as

being "holy unto God." Why, then, does he bring a sin offering at the conclusion of the period of his nazirite vows?

Here, too, various explanations have been proposed as to the reason for the sin offering. Some have suggested that the very assumption of the nazirite vow is problematic, since according to the Torah a person should not separate himself from the world.<sup>[12]</sup> Others explain that he takes the nazirite vow because of previous sins that he had committed,<sup>[13]</sup> requiring that he bring a sin offering.

Ramban (commenting on Bamidbar 6:14) asserts that the *nazir* brings a sin offering because he is leaving his special state of holiness and separateness and returning to the everyday life of this world.

In light of our discussion above, concerning the sin offering of the woman after childbirth, we may perhaps suggest that just as this mother has experienced most powerfully the collision between body and soul, so too the *nazir* has felt this collision in his life, and therefore he separates himself, to some extent, from this world. When he completes his vow he returns to regular human life, where he will once again experience this forceful conflict.

Perhaps the sin offering of the *nazir* is similar to the sin offering of the birthing mother in that both of them are in the midst of a positive process, of special Divine closeness, but it is specifically here that they experience most powerfully the collision between body and soul – an inherently necessary collision that testifies to man's complexity. He is a creature with a soul, capable of achieving special closeness to God, but at the same time he has a physical body, which sometimes interferes with or even overwhelms and dominates this closeness.

It may be that this lack of human completion and perfection is the reason for the sin offering of both the birthing mother and the *nazir*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] Why is the *mitzva* of circumcision mentioned here, in the midst of a unit concerned with matters of purity and impurity? Why is the number of "days of impurity" observed after the birth of a son different from the number of days observed after the birth of a daughter? And why is the burnt offering mentioned here before the sin offering, while usually the sin offering is mentioned first?

[2] And further on in the same chapter: "And if the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally, and the matter is concealed from the eyes of the congregation, and they have transgressed one of God's commandments concerning that which should be done, and are guilty..."

If the ruler sins, unintentionally committing one of the commandments of the Lord his God, concerning that which should not be done, and is guilty...

And if a single soul of the common people sins unintentionally, committing one of the commandments of God concerning that which should not be done, and is guilty..." (13,22,27)

"And if a person sins and hears the voice of adjuration, and he is a witness, having either seen it or known of it, then if he does not utter it, he bears his iniquity.

Or if a person touches anything that is impure – whether the carcass of an impure animal, or the carcass of an impure domestic animal, or the carcass of an impure creeping thing,

and [the matter] is hidden from him, such that he is impure and guilty,  
or if he touches the impurity of man, for any form of impurity with which he may become impure, and [the matter] is hidden from him, and he comes to know of it and is guilty,  
or a person who swears, declaring with his lips to do evil or to do good – for whatever a person may express with an oath – and [the matter] is hidden from him, and the matter becomes known to him and he is guilty of one of these...” (5:1-4)

[3] See Ibn Ezra and Meshekh Chokhma

[4] Abarbanel also explains that the purpose of the burnt offering that is brought is “in order to cleave to her Creator, Who has performed wonders for her in delivering her from the pain and danger of childbirth.” The burnt offering, to his view, is the primary sacrifice, and therefore it is mentioned first.

[5] As Malbim explains: “Once the advocate has finished appeasing, the gifts follow.” In other words, where there is sin that must be atoned for, the sin offering must be brought first, and the burnt offering afterwards. Where there is no sin, the burnt offering is brought first. Since the Torah, in prescribing the sacrifices to be brought by the woman after childbirth, specifies the burnt offering first, this represents proof that the sin offering is not required as a result of some sin on her part.

[6] The same instruction appears concerning the purification of the *zava* (15:30). The *metzora*, too, is required to bring both a sin offering and a burnt offering, but in addition he brings a guilt offering, and there is also a special offering that is brought only by the *metzora*. See chapter 14.

[7] Impurity arising from contact with the dead; impurity arising from contact with an animal carcass; *nidda* (menstruation = the ‘death’ of an ovule that had the potential to become an embryo).

[8] It was customary in some places to bury the placenta.

[9] In his VBM article.

[10] From the Gemara in *Nidda* 31b

[11] From Rabbeinu Bechaye

[12] The view of Rabbi Elazar Ha-kapar in *Ta’anit 11a*, as well as the Rambam in his Laws of Knowledge, chapter 3, law 1, and in his Eight Chapters, chapter 4.

[13] This is the explanation offered in *Midreshei ha-Torah*, quoted in *Iyunim be-Sefer Bamidbar* by Nechama Leibowitz, p. 74.

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