

The Birth of a Child

By: Rabbi Daniel Fridman

In all likelihood, it is impossible to overstate the place of continuity and procreation in our tradition. The simple but profound fact that the charge to reproduce is the very first mitzvah in the Torah sets a tone that is only amplified by the prodigious number of Biblical and Rabbinic sources which reinforce this theme. Thus, it is quite a mystery that the Torah should legislate a sin offering of a single bird for a new mother in the wake of childbirth. Of what necessity is expiation where there is no trace of wrongdoing?

Famously, Chazal offer us an explanation equally wondrous and puzzling. They argue that the sin offering is for a regrettable oath that the woman may have taken, in the agony of labor, to abstain from future conjugal activity so as to escape having to undergo the pangs of a future delivery. On one level, this explanation is perfectly comprehensible, in as much as it solves the initial dilemma. Indeed, there is no sin associated with procreation; on the contrary, what requires atonement is precisely the woman's alleged opposition to future reproduction. Yet, on the other hand, as the Sages of the Talmud immediately object, the sin offering brought by the woman cannot truly be for this type of oath, on a number of grounds. First, what is required in the instance of such an oath is not a sin offering but the standard protocol of release from vows taken under duress that are subsequently regretted. Second, if this offering really originated in such a vow, it would have to come from an animal and not a bird.

In light of these obvious difficulties, it would seem most plausible that Chazal's explanation was intended more in a homiletic sense than a normative one. Our theoretical woman, in the indescribable agony of childbirth, momentarily loses sight of that which brought her to this place. She forgets her own visceral urge toward motherhood, to engage in that most life affirming of all human activities, a desire which first flowered in the most intimate recesses of her being long before she could understand what it was she was feeling. In her distress, she not only forgets the past but the future as well, seemingly oblivious to the joy she will have from this child, with whom she will share a bond unrivaled by all other human relations. Her present agony overwhelms her and obfuscates her deeper, truer thoughts and feelings, leading her to despair, and a reactionary and self-defeating oath. It is precisely this loss of perspective, more than understandable given the circumstances, which Chazal cautioned against.

As we celebrate seventy years since the birth of our precious State of Israel, we might take a moment to consider to what extent, unwittingly, we have become the mother about whom Chazal spoke. Suffering the very real pains and agony of what it means to love Israel, as we do, in a world that is often hostile to

her (as the recent BDS vote at Barnard College, no less reminds us), in a region in which she famous constant and grave threats (as the Iranian presence in Syria constitutes), we sometimes give in to despair and lose our sense of perspective in our own right. We find ourselves thinking about Israel in almost exclusively anxious and gloomy terms. We lose sight of both past and future; of the remarkable resilience of the bond between the Jewish people and the Land, which withstood the strains of two millennia of exile and persecution, on the one hand, and the glorious vision of our Prophets for a redeemed Zion, on the other.

No woman knows exactly how long the pangs of labor will last, or precisely what course the birth process will take. In the moment of greatest pain, there is but one thought of consolation; with God's help, a child will be born. *Yom Ha-atzmaut Sameach.*