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Shabbat Shorts

על שלש עֲבֵרוֹת נָשִׁים מֵתוֹת בְּשַׁעַת לִדְתָן, על שאינן זְהִירוֹת בַּנְּדָה וּבַחֲלָה וּבַהֲדַלְקַת הַנֵּר

"For three transgressions do women die in childbirth: for not being cautious in niddah, challah, and candlelighting" (Mishnah Shabbat 2:6).

Chazal were keenly aware of the theological difficulty we face when sin is linked with bad consequences. But in order for us to engage in the challenge of finding meaning in tough texts like this one, we must be willing to at once grapple with our painful questions and step back from the picture altogether.

True-- this Mishnah is one of the most bewildering and challenging texts in our tradition. And yet we read it every week after Kabbalat Shabbat. Why?

The Tosafot Yom Tov only comments: אין פירוש, "There is no explanation"-- an answer which is quite honest regarding the bewildering nature of the text itself.

But others try to shed some light on our Mishnah-- and as stated above-- we will attempt to do the same. Just as we discussed in the last Shabbat Short on pikuach nefesh in Bameh Madlikin, there seems to be something about these Shabbat Mishnayot we read after Kabbalat Shabbat that get at the core of what Shabbat is all about.

The most common understanding of our text is explained by the Bartenura: לפי בה תלויין בה, "All three of these mitzvot are needs of the home, and she is found at home, so they are dependent on her". Since niddah, challah, and candlelighting are all mitzvot of the home, and the traditional domain of a woman was the home, the Mishnah comes to emphasize the gravity of a woman upholding these mitzvot with the most severe of consequences.

But with this answer, we can't help but wonder that the consequences seem far too severe for the transgression. Maybe regarding niddah, which is a biblical mitzvah, we could understand. But if a woman is not careful in candlelighting-- which is rabbinic-- she will die in childbirth? In challah, when there is no Beit HaMikdash, making it only a rabbinic requirement? And all not for intentional sins, but for simply not being cautious enough in them-- זְהִירוֹת? Plus, what does childbirth have to do with all of this?

There must be more going on here...

And so, we turn to the Talmud Yerushalmi and begin to scratch the surface of a (potentially) satisfying answer. The Yerushalmi explains that Adam HaRishon was the blood, challah, and light of the world, and Chava took that all away from the world by leading him to sin--- by causing the exit from Gan Eden and thereby the reality of death. And so, a woman must keep niddah, challah, and candlelighting in order to repair that loss-- otherwise, she will be taken from this world at the moment when she is a creator-- a creator just like God.

Now (bear with me)-- let's set aside the blame on the woman for a moment, and instead think about the Yerushalmi and our Mishnah as revealing a spiritual message about Shabbat **for both men and women**.

Shabbat is the day when we celebrate God as Creator, when we taste 1/60th of the world to come. And as such it is the day when we cease from creating-- from melacha and creativity. Niddah, challah, and candlelighting are all miraculous and uniquely human ways of creating-- niddah marks the female body's ability to create life, challah marks the ability of people to create food from seemingly inedible ingredients, and candlelighting marks the human capacity to create not only fire and heat, but society as we know it. Each of these mitzvot represents how we as people-- God's creations-- are creators ourselves.

If we are not careful in how we use these capacities to create, we will be destroyed in the process of creating-- in the childbirth (so to say) of our creativity. And so as we enter into Shabbat-- when we step back and see God as Creator-- we read our Mishnah to remind ourselves to be more Godly in how we create during the week. To be careful in niddah (our relationships), in challah (our intake of the world), and in candlelighting (our use and production).

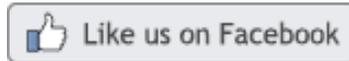
This Shabbat as we accept God as Creator, let's reflect on how we relate to what niddah, challah, and candlelighting represent in our own lives. Are we creators who get lost in our capacity to create-- never moving beyond 'childbirth'? Or do we create goodness and Godliness through our creations?

I love feedback!

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