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**A Parsha Weekly by the Friedman Kollel
of Metropolitan Washington**

**Parshas Tazria-Metzora
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The Post-Partum Experience

By Rabbi Eliezer Lachman, Rosh HaKollel

In this week's Torah readings we are taught many of the laws of impurity (tum'ah). One of the most perplexing of these laws is the impurity of a mother upon childbirth (Vayikra 12:1-8). Why does this woman become impure? Is not giving birth an awesome and sublime experience - and one that is highly valued by the Torah? Why does it cause impurity? And how is this mother supposed to understand and react to the fact that she is impure?

As a basic rule, the Torah's concept of impurity is related to death. The highest level of impurity is that of an actual human corpse. Other types of impurity involve the destruction of potential life, such as a woman who discharged menstrual blood (niddah) and a man who had a seminal emission. Tzaraas, about which we read at length this week, is a disease which causes the death of skin cells. It results from the sin of lashon hara, which the Sages state "kills" people (Arachin 15b). An unslaughtered animal carcass is another kind of impurity. Since Hashem is the ultimate existence and the source of all life, all these examples of death or aspects of death are considered "impure" and distant from Him.

But why is childbirth, which is not death but the creation of life, a source of impurity?

The answer is that although childbirth does add a new life to the world as a whole, from the perspective of the mother's body, she has lost a life. When the woman was pregnant, her body nourished, developed and was bound together with the fetus. Upon birth, the fetus is no longer there and there is a huge void, both literally and figuratively, in the mother. The mystical tradition describes how part of the mother's "life" is given to the child and has to be regenerated in the mother. This loss of life on the part of the mother renders her impure.

The state of impurity of the mother is not simply a legal construct, but is a reality that she experiences. It is related to the sense of sadness and loss that the great majority of mothers

feel after giving birth (the "baby blues"). And it is a state that the woman is meant to grow and develop from.

To illustrate this point, Midrash Rabbah here (14:2) expounds upon the verse in Iyov (36:3) "I will raise my knowledge from afar, I will ascribe righteousness to my Maker." The Midrash Rabbah's point, as explained by Chiddushei HaRim, is that when one is "afar" and distant from Hashem, for example when in a state of impurity, one has a unique opportunity to "raise [his] knowledge" and apprehend Hashem's righteousness.

The Midrash demonstrates this principle from the experience of Avraham when he went to offer his son Yitzchak as an offering to Hashem. At that time, Avraham certainly felt distant from Hashem; we are taught that Avraham's normal religious feelings and consciousness left him then. Nevertheless, he persevered and showed that he had a depth of connection to Hashem that was present even when its more overt and conscious manifestations in his psyche were gone. The Jewish people have fallen heir to this accomplishment, and this ensures that we can never be estranged from Hashem, for in our inner core there remains this point of connection with Him.

Similarly, a woman after childbirth experiences the loss of the additional life that she was carrying and of aspects of her own life that were bound up with it. There is a profound feeling of loss and of distance from Hashem. Nevertheless, it is a time when she can gain and crystallize a new sense of her inner self and closeness to Hashem, a sense in which she no longer automatically and internally sustains her baby, but must do so through external actions. Her inner self has individuated from the baby, and now it develops the internal character traits that will enable her to knowingly and benevolently bestow kindness upon the new child.

About the Friedman Kollel

The Rabbi Samuel and Zehava Friedman Kollel, located in Olney, Maryland, offers learning opportunities for Jews of all backgrounds. These include one-on-one chavrusas, public lectures and classes for men and women, as well as after-school structured learning for public school teens. The Kollel operates under the leadership of Rabbi Eliezer Lachman and Rabbi Shaya Milikowsky. For more information or to sponsor an upcoming Capital Torah, please contact Rabbi Elyakim Milikowsky at FriedmanKollel@BetterFamily.org.

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