YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat Tazria**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch gigi**

**Dedicated in memory of Rabbanit Frieda Heller z"l**

**whose yahrzeit falls on the third of Iyar,**

**by her granddaughter, Vivian Singer.**

**“This is the Law for the Woman Who Gives Birth”**

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**Introduction**

*Parashot Tazria* and *Metzora* deal with three main issues: the laws pertaining to a woman who gives birth, the laws pertaining to a leper,and the laws pertaining to a *zav* (a man suffering with gonorrhea) and a *zava* (a woman who has had vaginal blood discharges *not* during her anticipated menstrual cycle). In order to return to the world of sanctity, each of these four people must undergo a purification process, including the offering of a sacrifice.

Why is a sacrifice necessary? At first glance, it would seem that the sacrifices come to atone when impurity emanates from the body, as an unnatural event, due to sin or other corruption.

This idea well explains the offerings brought by the leper, the *zav*,and the *zava*, but it is still not clear why a woman must bring a sacrifice after childbirth. Giving birth is not a bad event or even exceptional; on the contrary, the process of pregnancy and childbirth is natural and blessed. It is true that the same birth that adds life to the world also involves a reduction of life in the world, in the sense that the fetus that had been in its mother's womb leaves her body, and therefore there is a place for purification after every birth – even in a case of a "dry birth," where there is no bleeding. However, it is not clear why there is a need for a sacrifice, which expresses another step in the process – beyond mere purification, as a means of sanctification.

**The Birthing Mother’s Oath**

*Chazal* already addressed this question:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai was asked by his disciples: Why did the Torah ordain that a woman after childbirth should bring a sacrifice? He replied: When she crouches to give birth, she swears impetuously that she will have no more intercourse with her husband [an oath she will not fulfill]. The Torah, therefore, ordained that she should bring a sacrifice. (*Nidda* 31b)

However, Rav Yosef rejects this explanation, arguing that if the problem were violation of an oath, its resolution would lie not in bringing a sacrifice, but in expressing regret; that is to say, a sage should annul her vow. Furthermore, were this the problem, the woman should bring the regular sacrifice for violating an oath, not a special sacrifice designated for childbirth.

A softer formulation of the idea is found in the *Midrash Rabba*:

Another explanation: "Your desire shall be to your husband" (*Bereishit* 3:16) – When a woman sits on the birthing stone, she says: “I will not have intercourse with my husband from now on,” and the Holy One, blessed be He, says to her: "You shall return to your desire; you shall return to your husband's desire." Rabbi Berakhya and Rabbi Simon said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: Because she wavered in her heart [at the time of her labor], therefore she must bring a fluttering sacrifice [a bird]: "Then she shall take two turtle-doves or two young pigeons" (*Vayikra* 12:8). (*Bereishit Rabba* 20, 7)

Here, the issue is not an actual oath, but a mindset – the inner feelings that accompany childbirth in the wake of the curse: "In pain you shall bring forth children…" (*Bereishit* 3:16).

The objections Rav Yosef raised against the view of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai are no longer difficult, according to the version in the *midrash*, for we are not dealing with a real oath. However, we have not yet reached our destination, for the nature of the post-childbirth sacrifice is still not clear.

**The Wonder of Birth**

Following on the words of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, it seems to me that the uniqueness of the birthing process – which obligates a sacrifice – stems from the wondrous nature of the experience. In order to explain this, we must preface by detailing the wonder of birth.

First of all, in our *parasha*, the Torah emphatically describes birth not as a process, but as an explosive event – "if a woman conceive and bear a male child" (*Vayikra* 12:2). This is apparently the way birth took place at the beginning of creation,[[1]](#footnote-1) and *Chazal* promise it will be true again in the future.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is the ideal situation, but the current reality is not "if a woman conceive, and bear a child," but rather "if a woman conceive, and be pregnant" – nine months of pregnancy, involving grave dangers. Only afterwards does the birth take place, and it also involves not insubstantial dangers, as *Chazal* themselves have remarked, referring to women who "die while giving birth" (*Shabbat* 2:6).

With God's help, we have become stronger since then: in our own days, many of the mysteries of fetal development throughout pregnancy, with all of its complex processes, have been clarified, and ultrasound testing was invented, which allows monitoring throughout the period.

*Chazal* also noted the wondrous nature of pregnancy and childbirth:

R. Simlai expounded: What does an embryo resemble when it is in the bowels of its mother? Folded writing tablets. Its hands rest on its two temples respectively, its two elbows on its two legs, and its two heels against its buttocks. Its head lies between its knees, its mouth is closed and its navel is open, and it eats what its mother eats and drinks what its mother drinks, but produces no excrement because otherwise it might kill its mother. As soon, however, as it sees the light, the closed organ opens and the open one closes, for if that did not happen, the embryo could not live even one single hour. (*Nidda* 30b)

Once again, our awareness of the miracle of birth is much more powerful today, in light of the development of our knowledge about the process and our ability to monitor it.

However, *Chazal* were not content with analyzing the physical danger of pregnancy, and thus also the wonders of the fetus's physical development. Theyalso related to pregnancy from a spiritual angle, and expounded the words of *Iyov*, "Oh that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me" (*Iyov* 29:2), as referring to it. In addition to the physical miracle of pregnancy, they also saw a spiritual miracle – which is expressed in the spiritual training of the child before he enters the world. This is how Rabbi Simlai continues to describe the fetus:

A light burns above its head and it looks and sees from one end of the world to the other, as it is stated: "Then his lamp shined above my head, and by His light I walked through darkness" (*Iyov* 29:3). And do not be astonished at this, for a person sleeping here might see a dream in Spain. And there is no time in which a man enjoys greater happiness than in those days, as it is stated: "O that I were as the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me." Now which are the days that make up months and do not make up years? You must say, the months of pregnancy. [The fetus] is also taught all the Torah, from beginning to end, as it is stated: "And he taught me, and said to me: Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments and live" (*Mishlei* 4:4), and it is also stated: "When the counsel of God was upon my tent" (*Iyov* 29:4)… As soon as it sees the light of the world, an angel approaches, slaps it on its mouth, and causes it to forget all the Torah completely. (*Nidda* 31b)

In this miraculous process, both on the spiritual plane and on the physical plane, the man is privileged to be a partner, but the woman's share in those "months of old" is especially great.

People tend to miss this great miracle, however, in accordance with the human tendency to see God's miracles only in deviations from nature – as the Rambam writes:

How bad and injurious is the blindness of ignorance! If you say to a person who is believed to belong to the wise men of Israel that the Almighty sends His angel to enter the womb of a woman and to form there the fetus, he will be impressed with the account; he will believe it, and even find in it a description of the greatness of God's might and wisdom… But if you tell him that God gave the seed a formative power which produces and shapes the limbs, and that this power is called "angel"… he will turn away, because he cannot comprehend the true greatness and power of creating forces that act in a body without being perceived by our senses. (*Guide for the Perplexed*, II, 6)

The Rambam emphasizes that God created forces in nature that act and develop new life, and it is precisely these laws of nature that are the greatest works of God. He mocks the fools who are impressed when they hear that God "plants" an angel in a woman's womb to create the child, but who are unable to see God's hand in the wondrous laws that make life possible: God gives the union of husband and wife the potential to create life, in partnership with God, who provides the soul and the spirit to man on earth. In short, nature is nothing but a great miracle of creation. The mystery of the creation of life, and especially human life, is great and full of wonder.

Internalizing this insight is important for each and every one of us, but it is even more important for a woman who has just given birth. She is bound by a special obligation to feel the enormous privilege of partnering with God in the creation of a new life that has come into the world.

**The Sacrifice Brought by a Woman Who Has Given Birth**

Now we can understand the role of the sacrifice: The sacrifice brought by a birthing mother is connected to the sin of the simplistic view of "if a woman conceive, and bear a child" – of seeing nature alone, while ignoring the active and creative hand of God.

This is the perception that the sacrifice comes to change, by teaching us that deep down, it is precisely the naturalness of the birthing process that shows the strength of God's powers and the great gift He gives to the mother, allowing her to be a partner in this awesome process.

It is not an angel who creates the child, but rather the woman who gives birth – in partnership with God, and in accordance with the words of the first woman who gave birth: "With the Lord's help I have made a man" (*Bereishit* 4:1). A woman who swears or "wavers" and says to herself that she will not give birth again sinks into the pain of the moment, instead of raising her gaze to the privilege that she was given to bring life into the world. That is why she is required to bring a sacrifice: to draw close once again to God, and to internalize the birthing process as part of a partnership with God and as a wonderful privilege.

*Chazal* note that dwelling on the momentary pain also causes a woman who is in labor to decide not to engage in relations with her husband, so that she will not have to give birth again. Here too God tells her: "You shall return to your desire; you shall return to your husband's desire." This too is one of God's wonders: that there will be passion between a man and his wife, and thus the world will continue to exist forever. Passion is not mere nature, but a Divine creation that assures that life will come into the world. The birthing mother's sacrifice is intended to deepen this recognition of the hand of God in the creation of life on earth, and His allowing man to share in this process.

If so, the sacrifice brought by a woman who has given birth emphasizes the wonders of nature in general, and in particular, the wonders of desire and cohabitation, and the wonders of pregnancy and birth – including the spiritual development of man, which is the essential part of man's partnership with God in creation. This is the deep meaning of the words of *Chazal*: "There are three partners in man: the Holy One, blessed be He, his father, and his mother" (*Nidda* 31a).

The internalization of this wonder is indeed damaged during childbirth, due to the woman’s suffering, and therefore it must be renewed – together with her connection to God – through the sacrifice, which prepares her for renewed contact with sanctity and with the Temple.

What we have here is not only a process of purification, but also preparation for renewed sanctification, for the re-establishment of the relationship between the Almighty and His creatures – for the internalization that indeed, "with the Lord's help I have made a man."

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Tazria- Metzora* 5781.]

1. As *Chazal* formulated it: "They ascended to bed as two, and descended as four" (*Sanhedrin* 38b). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *See Shabbat* 30b. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)