



5 reflections on giving birth

Do mothers experience elements of both 'greatness' and 'smallness' in the act of giving birth? Today's Torah discussion is a great one to take up with a group of mothers. Why not share this leaflet with your local mother's group? And for another perspective on the same topic, engage the fathers as well.

Here is what one mother of three said:

1. "There was a moment during the birth of my first child when I thought, 'I'm going to die. My body is about to rip in two and I will die.' It was scary. It was scary the second time too, but I knew I'd make it through."

2. "In an affluent society that medicates so readily for every ache and pain, it is confronting to experience the raw, primitive, physicality and pain of giving birth. It's incredible how the body takes over, it knows what to do."

3. "My second child became dangerously ill after birth. The realization of how easy it is to lose

your child... that as a parent I am not all-powerful... well, the preciousness and fragility of life really hit home."

4. "At times you feel totally powerless before your child. There is a sense of: 'I don't know how to do this!' Fathers often feel this. Mothers who have difficulty breastfeeding sometimes feel like a failure."

5. "When I was finally alone, resting, quiet, my baby girl asleep beside me... it was a beautiful moment of intimacy. I remember looking at her, marveling at this little life, and realizing how 'small' I am compared to a miracle of such magnitude."



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah is a ministry arising from the Catholic community. In the spirit of Vatican II's call to Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Light of Torah encourages Torah reflection in homes and parishes, drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions.

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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Leviticus 12:1—13:59

Tazria:
'at childbirth'

Why reflect on Torah?

In 2011 the release of Pope Benedict XVI's book, volume 2 of *Jesus of Nazareth*, attracted media attention for its implications for Jewish-Christian relations. Reportedly, the Pope's analysis of the Gospel passion accounts makes clear that an authentic biblical reading does not hold the Jewish people responsible for Christ's death.

Tragically, the 'deicide' charge has permeated Christian attitudes for most of Church history. The Second Vatican Council officially rejected this view as incompatible with Christian faith. Pope Benedict's book is significant in that it is likely to make more widely known this Vatican II teaching that: "*neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion.*" (Nostra Aetate, n.4)

One way to correct a negative tendency in the church is to do the opposite, something positive. *Light of Torah* seeks to foster in Christians a positive awareness of Judaism, of how much we can learn from the Jewish people specifically in the study of shared sacred texts.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 12:1—13:59

This Torah portion continues the theme of ritual purity. Particularly jarring to contemporary ears are the opening verses that declare a woman who has just given birth to be in a state of ritual impurity:

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the children of Israel, saying: If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days ... (Leviticus 12:1-2)

Tasting Torah

When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering.” (Leviticus 12:6)

Judaism holds procreation as a blessing and a mission. Why, then, should a mother, having just given birth, be declared “unclean”? At the conclusion of her purification period, the Torah calls for both a ‘burnt offering’ and a ‘sin offering.’ In particular, commentators have puzzled over the insistence on a ‘sin offering.’

Touching Torah

The burnt offering is less problematic. Abravanel,¹ suggests that this was a way for the mother to “*cleave to her maker, who had performed wondrous things for her, in delivering her from the pain and danger of childbirth.*” In other words, this sacrificial action is one of praise and thanksgiving. But why the need for a sin offering when the mother has committed no sin?

In the *midrash* we find an explanation with contrasting approaches. On the one hand, Rabbi Levi marvels at the wonders of pregnancy and birth: “*Human beings entrust to [the Creator] a drop of fluid in privacy, and the Holy One, blessed be He, openly returns to them completed and perfected human individuals. Is this not a matter for praise?*”²

Depthing Torah

By contrast, in the *midrash* we also find: “If you had seen from what impurity and dross [a man] came, you would not have been able to look at him! ... From whence do you come? From a fetid drop...”³

Whereas Rabbi Levi focuses on procreation as a holy wonder, the other *midrashic* source dwells on the miserable insignificance of human beings compared to the majesty of the Creator. The latter has echoes in the Book of Isaiah. There the prophet witnesses a heavenly vision with angelic voices proclaiming “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts (Isa. 6:3).*” And how does the prophet respond? “*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips (Isa. 6:5).*”

Perhaps then, this is the sense in which the Torah speaks of the impurity and sin offering of a woman after childbirth: she is profoundly in touch with both the greatness and power of the Creator and the ‘smallness’ and ‘weakness’ of the human who is created.

Doing Torah

Our reflections suggest that the ‘sin offering’ closing the mother’s purification period need not be interpreted as atonement for sin, but rather as an expression of the ‘gap’ in perfection between human beings and their Creator.

- In your life, in what ways are you aware of God’s greatness, and your smallness?
- What is the difference between awareness of one’s human fragility and poor self-esteem?



A Gospel connection

Note the reference to pigeon and turtledove in Leviticus 12:6.

As Christians reading the story of Jesus’ birth and infancy, we are reminded that Jesus grew up in a Jewish family that was faithful to Jewish traditions.

Read Luke 2:21-24 and compare the details of purification with those in Leviticus 12.

1. 15th c. Torah scholar. Cited by Leibowitz, 177.
2. *Vayikra Rabbah*, Tazria XIV, 2-3.
3. *Konteres Aharon, Midrash Yelamdenu*. See Leibowitz, 179.

Bibliography: *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* (NY, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, (NY, 1993); Scripture: *NRSV*.