



# Light of Torah

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## Purification after pregnancy

Our reflections on Leviticus continue with the theme of ritual purity. Particularly jarring to contemporary ears are the opening verses of chapter 12 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)*

*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 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.’

The burnt offering is less problematic. Abravanel,<sup>1</sup> 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?”<sup>2</sup> 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...”<sup>3</sup>

Whereas Rabbi Levi focuses on procreation as a holy wonder, the other midrashic source dwells on the 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.

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.

### Reflection

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, 1996); Scripture: NRSV.